



Information note

Using CRVS systems for electoral registration¹

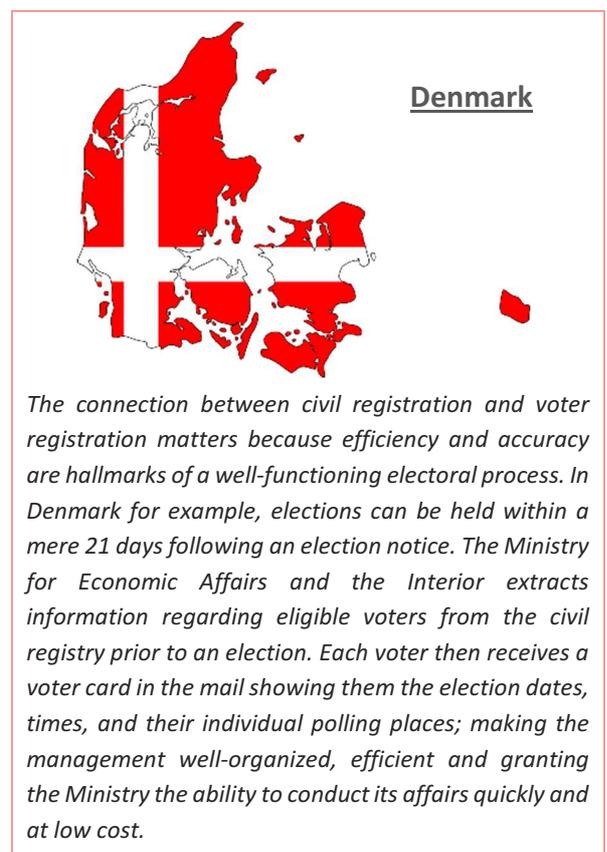
A strong civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS) system is an integral part of efficient governance. Not only can a CRVS system secure an individual's legal identity and the resulting human rights, but high-quality data from well-functioning systems can inform delivery of key governmental services, as well as support the collection of voter registration information.

Why does it matter?

Voter registration systems are categorized as either 'active' or 'passive' regardless of whether they are updated continuously or periodically. 'Active' systems require potential voters to visit registration points for registering or updating changes to personal information, but they can, as is the case in Indonesia, also involve electoral management bodies (EMB) conducting door-to-door registration drives. Moreover, active registration visits can either occur during a specified registration window prior to every new election (periodic), or, initial registration can occur once following eligibility to vote, but still require in-person updates following detail changes effecting eligibility (continuous). On the other hand, in 'passive' systems, EMBs generate voter registries from existing databases such as civil registries, population registries, censuses, driver's license databases or tax records.

Meanwhile, voter registration is a necessary component underpinning democratic processes and at the same time, one of the costliest and most complicated activities undertaken by an EMB leading up to an election. Therefore, voter registration systems need accurate and up-to-date information. Without continuous updates, stand-alone voter registry systems rely heavily on periodic lists which are susceptible either to misuse or errors leading to inaccurate or incomplete voter rolls. In fact, some countries do not have voter rolls to draw from at all, thereby requiring the creation of new lists from scratch for each and every election. Well-functioning CRVS systems with continuously updated addresses from the registration of vital events however, can help address many of the aforementioned vulnerabilities and shortcomings.

Figure 1: Civil registration and voter registration in Denmark



Global status of CRVS used for electoral process.

Globally, 48 countries generate their national voter registries from population or civil registries, while another 22 countries do so through a combination of both the population/civil registry data and the data collected by an EMB.² In the Asia-Pacific region, 9 of the 48³ countries surveyed extract voter registration data from either a population or civil register, while another 8 countries create voter registration lists through a combination of registry data and EMB collection methods.⁴

¹ The information note draws upon a comprehensive list of resources, all of which are either cited in the document or included in the Bibliography section. The information note was drafted by Mr Daniel Swaisgood and reviewed by the Regional Steering Group for CRVS in Asia and the Pacific in October 2017, as well as ESCAP and UNDP staff.

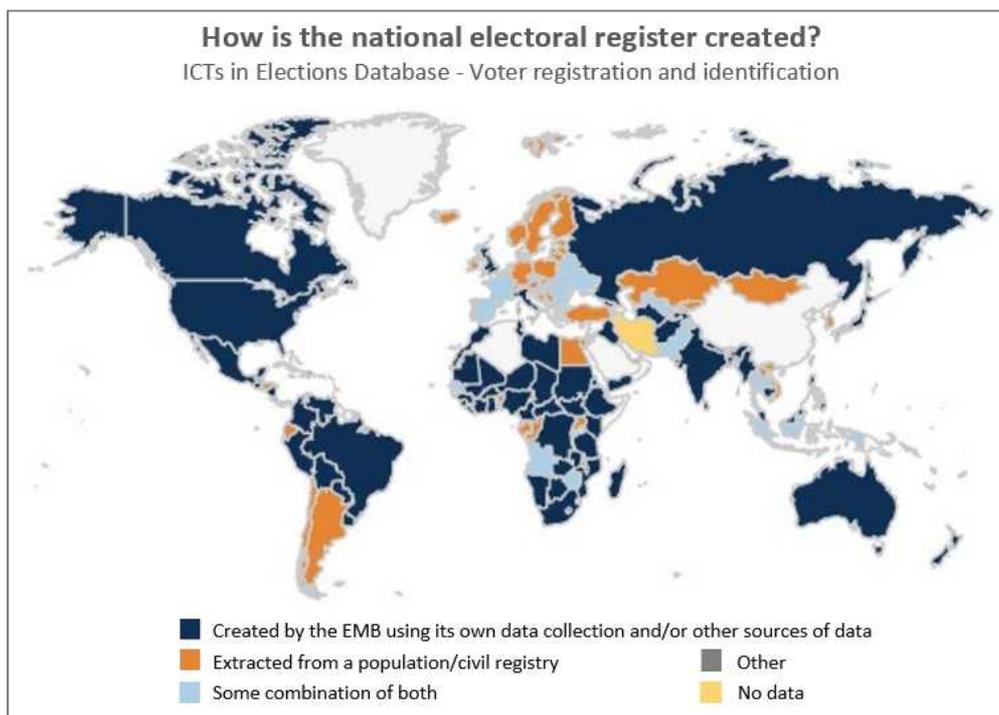
² See International IDEA (Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance), *Data & Tools*, "ICTs in Elections Database", *How is the National Electoral Register Created?*, <http://bit.ly/2w8OqXA>.

³ Notably, as part of the reporting structure of the Regional Action Framework on CRVS in Asia and the Pacific, 7 of the 9 countries extracting data from population/civil registries reported high (97% and above) birth and death registration rates.

⁴ *Ibid.*

And although 79 countries globally (21 of the 48 countries in Asia-Pacific) still create voter lists solely from an EMB's own data collection efforts,⁵ some of those countries face issues regarding accuracy and completeness of the lists, which may undermine the credibility, impartiality and transparency of the elections.⁶

Figure 2: Global picture of electoral management systems



There are significant advantages to using well-functioning CRVS systems.



Countries switching from an independent EMB data collection to a joint-civil registry data collection effort, or a civil registry data transfer system, identified some specific challenges to the process. Among others, the creation of a data sharing platform with clear mandates and policies for who controls the data, where it is stored, how and when it is shared was of concern. Moreover, the amendment of legal frameworks preventing interoperability because of concerns for privacy protection (i.e., information relevant for a civil registry but not for voter registration), as well as strict timing requirements, can both create difficulties with data exchange and timing, and hinder the speediness required by special elections.

However, the advantages identified were significant. For the voter, civil registry can protect their fundamental right to vote without the additional burden of a separate and potentially cumbersome process. Employing civil registry data also decreases voter fatigue by eliminating the necessity of visiting multiple locations to register or update registries when vital events effect their eligibility status.

An oft-cited example is that of a marriage event not only changing a woman's name, but her location as well, and accordingly, the electoral district or subdivision in which she belongs. A civil registry database collecting information on marriage as a vital event can be updated following the registration of her marriage. Consequently, when data is extracted for the purpose of a new election, the EMB can automatically update its voter list to include her new address and district, thereby ensuring her inclusion in future elections.

For the government, the advantages are numerous. For example, EMB's relying upon good quality civil registration data instead of their own data collection can see significant savings in financial and human resources. Where an EMB may need to complete a voter list within a specific time-frame, pulling from existing data can make electoral work much easier than collecting new information all over again.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ See International IDEA (Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (2014), Improving Electoral Practices: Case Studies and Practical Approaches, <http://bit.ly/2vFpit7>.

For instance, in Sweden, up-to-date voter eligibility files are maintained by the Swedish Tax Authority (Skatteverket) and eligible voters are automatically registered. After applying robust privacy protections and quality assurance mechanisms, the EMB can export the relevant information, examine the data, conduct appropriate revisions, and compile the final list. The process allows the EMB to amass voter lists much closer to the election while maximizing its time and efforts on validating nominations, ensuring compliance with electoral legislation and polling.

Finally, quality civil registration can also help deflate voter registries. For example, countries often find it difficult to remove ineligible voters from voter rolls, thereby leaving inflated registries as a result. However, civil registries properly recording deaths and other events can aid removal efforts by providing continuous updates to the EMB.

CRVS systems can ensure accuracy, decrease costs and promote inclusiveness.

Because of the variations in voter registration requirements, underlying legal frameworks, as well as the country communication infrastructures and geographies, there is no comprehensive, universally applicable gauge for comparing voter registration systems among different countries. Instead, voter registration programmes are traditionally examined through three commonly relevant principles: cost, accuracy, and inclusiveness.⁷

According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), “the single most important cost-cutting measure” for electoral management is transitioning to “continuous registration”.⁸ And when considering costs, EMBs largely acknowledge that the nature of voter registration is often the most expensive and laborious part of the election process. For example, one common and costly approach to voter registration is the ‘door-to-door’ canvassing method. Such a method can see EMBs incur large expenses owing to the labour and equipment, let alone the time required, necessary to ensure complete coverage of the population area.

And higher costs are not only associated with periodic registers compiling lists for one election at a time. Even when EMBs maintain continuous registers, they often require larger staff sizes, ongoing professional development for database maintenance, as well as additional IT support and technical expertise. As such, the primary cost saving benefit to the government ultimately stems from the ability of EMBs to forego their own data collection processes.

Independent electoral commissions face a series of challenges in ensuring their sustainability, including the need to fight for adequate budgetary support and staffing. Rather than relying on the civil service, large numbers of temporary staff must usually be recruited and equipment purchased, often through a procurement process that must be conducted under extreme time pressures.

European Commission & UNDP, *Joint Task Force on Electoral Assistance* (2013). <http://bit.ly/2x46Uxb>.

Accuracy of the finalized voter list is likewise bolstered by civil registry data. For instance, when population and civil registries are used for a variety of administrative purposes, not only do governments tend to prioritize up-to-date registries, but citizens can also be personally motivated to keep their information current because inclusion in civil registries can form the basis of granting or denying access to social services.

Finally, CRVS can support the inclusion of hard-to-reach or marginalized communities. In universal civil registration systems with good coverage, registration points tend to be diffused throughout geographical areas, including isolated areas such as remote islands and rugged, mountainous terrains. As a result, this allows traditionally marginalized communities to register or update information without incurring the burden of travelling too far. Given the sometimes-short deadlines between registration and elections, communities living further away from stand-alone voter registration centres are often left out of the picture because of timing and distance.

Conclusion

Given the complexity of voter registration, civil registries not only provide the most current data for voter lists, they provide critical cost-savings for EMBs, all the while supporting inclusiveness, accuracy and election legitimacy. Civil registry data is the most advantageous method of compiling voter registration data, and the best way that governments can ensure they are getting every voter is in the picture.

⁷ See USAID (2011), ed. Michael Yard, “Civil and Voter Registries: Lessons Learned from Global Experiences”, <http://bit.ly/2wS3tcQ>.

⁸ See UNDP (2011), “Comparative Experience in Electoral Administration and the Arab World”, <http://bit.ly/2yqPxGx>



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