



# BUILDING CONFIDENCE IN THE VOTER REGISTRATION PROCESS



An NDI Monitoring Guide  
for Political Parties and Civic Organizations

*Richard L. Klein and Patrick Merloe*

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NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTE FOR INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS (NDI)

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Kenneth D. Wollack  
*President, NDI*

## NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTE FOR INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

The National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) is a nonprofit organization working to strengthen and expand democracy worldwide. Calling on a global network of volunteer experts, NDI provides practical assistance to civic and political leaders advancing democratic values, practices and institutions. NDI works with democrats in every region of the world to build political and civic organizations, safeguard elections, and promote citizen participation, openness and accountability in government.

Democracy depends on legislatures that represent citizens and oversee the executive, independent judiciaries that safeguard the rule of law, political parties that are open and accountable, and elections in which voters freely choose their representatives in government. Acting as a catalyst for democratic development, NDI bolsters the institutions and processes that allow democracy to flourish.

**Build Political and Civic Organizations:** NDI helps build the stable, broad-based and well-organized institutions that form the foundation of a strong civic culture. Democracy depends on these mediating institutions – the voice of an informed citizenry, which link citizens to their government and to one another by providing avenues for participation in public policy.

**Safeguard Elections:** NDI promotes open and democratic elections. Political parties and governments have asked NDI to study electoral codes and to recommend improvements. The Institute also provides technical assistance for political parties and civic groups to conduct voter education campaigns and to organize election monitoring programs. NDI is a world leader in election monitoring having organized international delegations to monitor elections in dozens of countries, helping to ensure that polling results reflect the will of the people.

**Promote Openness and Accountability:** NDI responds to requests from leaders of government, parliament, political parties and civic groups seeking advice on matters from legislative procedures to constituent service to the balance of civil-military relations in a democracy. NDI works to build legislatures and local governments that are professional, accountable, open and responsive to their citizens.

International cooperation is key to promoting democracy effectively and efficiently. It also conveys a deeper message to new and emerging democracies that while autocracies are inherently isolated and fearful of the outside world, democracies can count on international allies and an active support system. Headquartered in Washington D.C., with field offices in every region of the world, NDI complements the skills of its staff by enlisting volunteer experts from around the globe, many of whom are veterans of democratic struggles in their own countries and share valuable perspectives on democratic development.

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National Democratic Institute for International Affairs  
2030 M Street, N. W., Fifth Floor  
Washington, D.C. 20036-3306, USA  
Tel +1 202 728 5500,  
Fax +1 202 728 5520  
E-mail [demos@ndi.org](mailto:demos@ndi.org)  
Website <http://www.ndi.org>

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

Acknowledgements ..... iii

Foreword ..... viii

Background ..... 1

Overview ..... 3

**Part One – Understanding Voter Registration ..... 5**

    Who Should Vote? ..... 7

    Voter Registration ..... 10

    Identifying Voters ..... 12

    Creating a Voters List ..... 13

    Verifying Who is Registered to Vote ..... 14

    Proof of Registration ..... 15

    Potential Problems with Registration ..... 16

    Election Day Registration ..... 17

    Tendered or Challenged Ballots ..... 17

    Elections Without Registration ..... 17

    Voter Education and the Registration Process ..... 17

    Selecting and Training Registration Officials ..... 18

**Part Two – Monitoring Voter Registration ..... 19**

    Why Monitor Voter Registration? ..... 21

    Criteria for Voter Eligibility ..... 22

    Voter Registration Framework ..... 23

    Access to Voter Registration ..... 24

    Quality of the Voters List ..... 28

        Field Tests ..... 29

        Computer Tests ..... 32

    Verification of the Voters List ..... 34

    Production of the Final Voters List ..... 35

    Selecting and Training Registration Officials ..... 36

**Part Three – Developing a Monitoring Strategy ..... 37**

    Overall Plan ..... 39

    Finances ..... 40

    Staff and Volunteers ..... 41

    Recruitment and Training ..... 42

    Internal Communications and Transport ..... 43

    Forms and Computers ..... 44

    External Communications ..... 44

    Reporting and Advocacy ..... 45

    Consolidating Organizational Gains ..... 46

**Appendices – Sample Materials ..... 47**

    Forms for Monitoring Access to the Voter Registration Process ..... 51

    Form for Monitoring State-Initiated Voter Registration (Enumeration) ..... 59

    Form for Monitoring the Training of Registration Staff ..... 61

    Forms for List-to-People Field Tests ..... 63

Forms for People-to-List Field Tests .....	71
Forms for Monitoring Claims and Objections .....	75
Report on Computer Tests .....	77
Monitoring Reports .....	81

## FOREWORD

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**E**lections are essential to democracy, and public confidence in the institutions and processes surrounding elections is essential to establishing the basis of authority for any democratic government. NDI's electoral programs promote the integrity of governmental institutions, electoral authorities, news media, civic organizations, political parties and the overall political process of which elections are a part. The Institute's electoral programs also support broad public education and vibrant citizen participation to ensure the genuineness of elections, recognizing that both are powerful instruments for building public confidence, combating electoral fraud and overcoming administrative malfeasance.

This guide addresses ways that political parties and civic organizations can monitor and promote improvements to the voter registration process. International organizations can also make use of the techniques covered in this guide. Voter registration is vital to the public's interest in establishing a government based upon the people's will, and is also vital to those who seek to gain public office. It is a key element for screening ineligible people out of the voting process and for identifying and credentialing eligible individuals so that they may have the opportunity to vote.

Several important public benefits are derived from monitoring voter registration. Monitoring in a non-partisan manner can help to promote confidence that the electorate will indeed be able to exercise the right to vote. This serves to encourage popular participation in the electoral process. Monitoring by political parties can help ensure that their supporters will be provided a proper opportunity to vote, which is essential to establishing the fairness of elections. This assurance encourages political competitors to participate in the electoral process, rather than to seek power through other means.

It is important to stress that there are many aspects of an electoral process that must be conducted prop-

erly for an election to be genuine. Moreover, elections must be considered within a country's broader political context. Publication of this guide recognizes the importance of voter registration but in no way seeks to isolate it from the other factors that must be addressed to ensure democratic elections. *NDI's Handbook on How Domestic Organizations Monitor Elections: An A to Z Guide* and other publications by the Institute outline approaches to monitoring many other elements of the election process.

It is also important to note that competing public interests must be balanced in designing an effort to monitor voter registration. For example, although political parties and civic organizations have a right to verify the integrity of all elements of an election process – including voter registration – in countries where personal security might be jeopardized, certain restrictions on the open publication of particular information on the voters list might be appropriate. In all cases, citizens' right to privacy must be considered. Parties and civic organizations that monitor voter registration therefore must themselves act responsibly with the information they obtain about citizens. Experience around the globe in balancing public interests demonstrates that elections are most successful – and public confidence in the resulting governments is strongest – when electoral processes are transparent and when the “rules of the game” are the result of both inclusive public discussion and broad political agreement.

In addition, political parties and civic organizations must consider that a voter registration process is complex and time-consuming. Not only must the timelines for voter registration set forth in laws and electoral procedures be examined to determine whether there are adequate provisions for various steps in the process, but the monitors themselves must allot sufficient time for their activities so that any shortcomings identified may be corrected. No voter registry is perfect, but if the interests of the electorate and of those who chose to exercise their right to seek public office are to be safeguarded, then monitoring reports and



recommendations for improving the process must be presented in a timely manner.

This guide serves as a roadmap for political parties and civic organizations to monitor the voter registration process. It focuses on issues related to national elections, but most of the information contained within it is also applicable to voter registration processes in sub-national polls.

The guide is divided into four parts. The first part identifies issues that should be considered when approaching the voter registration process. The section includes a discussion of the different requirements to be eligible to vote, as well as a description of the various elements of a voter registration exercise. Techniques for monitoring the voter registration process are presented in the second part, which contains practical information to help political parties and civic organizations undertake monitoring exercises. The third part offers practical suggestions for orga-

nizing, planning, recruitment, training, reporting and advocacy. The final part comprises appendices with sample forms that can be useful in monitoring the voter registration process, as well as sample monitoring reports by domestic organizations.

The guide is not intended to be a step-by-step handbook; rather it is intended both to enhance appreciation for the importance of monitoring voter registration and to help identify a number of approaches that could be used in designing a voter registration monitoring effort suitable to a variety of national conditions. As the techniques for voter registration advance, so too will approaches to monitoring the process. As experience in registration monitoring is accumulated, lessons learned will be shared by those around the world who are working to promote democracy.

Readers of this guide are encouraged to contact NDI with comments, suggestions or requests.

Richard L. Klein and Patrick Merloe  
*Washington, DC*  
*November 2001*

## BACKGROUND

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All elections have problems. Unfortunately, on election day some people who are eligible to vote may not be permitted to do so, while some people who are ineligible to vote may be improperly allowed to cast ballots. Such problems may be due to human error or deliberate fraud. In either case, they can undermine the legitimacy of an election.

Consider the following scenarios:

1 An elderly woman has been standing throughout the morning in a queue at a polling station. She has been patiently waiting to vote. However, once at the front, she learns that she will not be able to cast her ballot because she lacks identification documents. No voter registration exercise was conducted prior to the elections, and there is no voters list. Even though there are many people in the line who have known the elderly woman their entire lives, the election officials turn her away.

2 It is election day in a border town. Late in the afternoon, a bus full of men arrives from a neighboring country. The bus stops in a highly populated part of town, and the men go to a nearby polling station. No one, including the election officials, recognizes any of the men, but there are a lot of new people in the area. Voter registration was not conducted before election day so there is no list of eligible voters. Even though the men appear to be ineligible, the election officials permit them to vote.

3 A young man has recently left his childhood home in the countryside and migrated to the city in search of work. It is election day, and he and his new friends go together to vote. His friends have no problems, but the young man is told that his name is not on the voters list. He explains that in the last election he voted in the countryside, but that now he lives in the city. The election official tells him that the only way he can vote is to go back to his home village. The young man, however, lacks the money for the bus, and even if he had money the

bus would arrive at his village long after the polling station closed.

4 A young woman shows up at the polls two hours before they close. She has her new voter ID card issued after she registered to vote three months ago. Officials refuse to let her vote because her name is not on the voters list, even though the polling station's number appears on her voter ID card. Afterwards, she takes the time to visit several other polling stations in the area. However, she is unable to find her name on the voters list at any of them, and no one permits her to vote.

These examples illustrate the critical role of voter registration in an election process.

In the first example, voter registration prior to election day could have provided an opportunity for the elderly woman to prove her identity and eligibility to vote, as well as to obtain proper identification. If she has not been permitted to register, then political parties and civic organizations monitoring the process could have helped her. A claim could have been lodged to ensure that her name would have appeared on the final voters list and that she would have been given an ID card for voting.

If there had been a voter registration exercise in the second example, election officials could have checked the voters list for the men's names. If their names did not appear on the voters list, the men should have been prevented from voting. Political party pollwatchers or domestic observers could have requested that election

BACKGROUND

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Voter registration should ensure that those people who are eligible to vote will be able to do so on election day.

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Voter registration should stop those people who are ineligible to vote from casting ballots.

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officials check the voters list to ensure that each person's name appeared. If the men had illegally registered, a transparent voter registration exercise and monitoring by political parties and civic organizations could have provided an opportunity to challenge their eligibility and to have their names removed from the voters list prior to election day.

In the third example, if the voters list had been updated periodically, the young man might have been able to vote at his new residence. Depending on the

registration process, his particulars could have been updated before election day. An effective voter education campaign might have informed the young man of what he had to do to change his place of registration. By

observing the registration process, political parties and civic organizations could have helped identify misplaced persons on the voters lists. The young man could have been informed of the error, and action could have been taken to transfer his name to the correct voters list.

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Inaccurate or outdated registration information can disenfranchise eligible voters.

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In the fourth example, publishing a preliminary voters list should have provided an opportunity for the young woman to verify that she had successfully registered and that she would be permitted to vote on election day. If she had known that her name was missing, she could have filed a claim to have her name added to the final voters list.

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Names missing from the voters list can prevent eligible people from exercising their right to vote.

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Political parties and civic organizations can help educate voters about the need to verify that their names are included in the voters list, and they can also take steps to help identify people who have been dropped incorrectly. Further, political parties and/or civic organizations could have sought the introduction of procedures by the electoral authorities in order to permit individuals in her predicament to vote. However, even the most elaborate procedures cannot eliminate disenfranchisement entirely or prevent all illegal voting, particularly where fraud is attempted. These scenarios highlight the importance for political parties and civic organizations to monitor the various elements of the voter registration process.

## OVERVIEW

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The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, Article 21, states that: “everyone has the right to take part in the government of his [or her] country directly or through freely chosen representatives ...” and that “the will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.” This article and similar passages in other international human rights documents, along with provisions of national constitutions, provide the legal foundation for democratic elections. “Universal” suffrage implies that all recognized members of a community have the right to vote. “Equal” suffrage suggests that the vote of each of those members counts the same. Governments, therefore, have an obligation both to ensure that people have an opportunity to choose their representatives by voting and to ensure that illegal voting or other manipulations do not destroy the equality of each person’s vote.

Voter registration is an integral part of an electoral process during which individuals eligible to vote are identified and listed. Election officials must identify all eligible voters and create a list of their names and other information relevant to the voting process – a complex task that requires considerable time and organizational skill on the part of the electoral authorities. The voters list is organized into units that correspond to geographical and administrative divisions, such as blocks and districts; it is then typically divided into sub-lists containing only the names of those people designated to vote at each individual polling station.

Voter registration can serve many purposes:

- ▶ To guarantee that those legally entitled to vote are able to do so;
- ▶ To prohibit ineligible people from voting; and
- ▶ To prevent people from voting more than once.

Thus, voter registration brings individuals into an election process and protects the weight of their vote.

The efficacy of the voter registration process is, in part, dependent upon there being consensus within a society about the qualifications to be eligible to vote. Such criteria should be in harmony with the rights recognized in the country’s constitution and with obligations defined in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and other applicable human rights instruments.

Voter registration can take many different forms:

- ▶ *Periodic* (e.g., prior to each election or every five years) or *Continuous* (all the time);
- ▶ *Individual-Initiated* (people must go to registration centers), *State-Initiated* (officials travel door-to-door), or *State-Created/Automatic* (names are taken from a separate database and no contact is required between people and election officials in order to register); and
- ▶ *Compulsory* (people must register to vote) or *Voluntary* (people have the choice to register or not).

Further, registration may or may not involve certain elements:

- ▶ Providing a receipt or other documentation to people as proof of registration and eligibility;
- ▶ Collecting considerable demographic information about each registered voter; or
- ▶ Using computers to record and store voter registration information.

Where registration occurs, the voters list ultimately contains the names of all known persons who are eligible to vote in a particular election. During the process of creating the voters list certain procedures may or may not be undertaken:

- ▶ Displaying publicly the voters list for inspection;
- ▶ Providing the voters list to political parties and civic organizations for scrutiny;
- ▶ Making additions, deletions, or corrections to the voters list based on filed claims and objections; and
- ▶ Resolving disputes lodged by political parties, civic organizations, or citizens concerning the inclusion or exclusion of particular individuals from the voters list.

In many countries, people who are eligible to vote will not be permitted to cast a ballot on election day if their names do not appear on the voters list, while other countries have procedures that enable such individuals to vote after adding their names to “supplemental lists” on election day or to vote with a “tendered” or “challenged” ballot.<sup>1</sup> In rare situations, elections are even conducted without registering voters.

These factors sketch an outline of the overall voter registration process and point to potential problems that may occur.

Monitoring, therefore, should consider several key issues:

- ▶ Whether the criteria for voter eligibility meet national constitutional requirements and international standards;
- ▶ Whether the process of identifying who is eligible to vote provides a sufficient opportunity for all people to register to vote without discrimination;
- ▶ Whether the procedures for identifying who is eligible to vote are reasonable and conducted properly;

- ▶ Whether the voters list contains only the names of people who are eligible to vote and that this information is current and accurate;
- ▶ Whether people, political parties and civic organizations are provided a sufficient opportunity to scrutinize the voters list for errors or omissions;
- ▶ Whether a sufficient opportunity is provided to people, to political parties and to civic organizations to make claims and objections for names to be added, deleted or corrected on the voters list;
- ▶ Whether claims and objections are processed properly and appropriate changes are made to the voters list;
- ▶ Whether political parties and civic organizations are provided with copies of the preliminary, revised and final voters list; and
- ▶ Whether the voters list used at polling stations is identical to the final voters list, and officials use it properly to permit people to vote.

Monitoring the voter registration process and verifying the quality of the voters list provide mechanisms for political parties to ensure that their interests are respected and for civic organizations to guarantee the rights of individuals. This results in fewer human errors, reduces the likelihood of fraud and builds confidence in the voter registration process, electoral authorities and the overall political system. Monitoring the voter registration process helps prepare political parties and civic organizations to monitor voting, counting and tabulation of results on election day. It also serves to enhance their organizational capacity and further develop their human resource base.

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<sup>1</sup> See page 15, “Tendered and Challenged Ballots,” for a definition.