



Biometric Voter Registration

in Zimbabwe

The importance of the voters' register in Zimbabwe

The voters' register or voters' roll is the national database of registered voters used in an election. The quality of the voters' roll is an important factor in public confidence in the integrity of elections. The voters' roll used in Zimbabwe's 2013 elections contained thousands of names of dead people and double registrants and was marred by under-registration of young voters.¹ To address these problems the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) utilized biometric voter registration (BVR) technology to create a completely new voters' register ahead of the 2018 Harmonized Elections. The BVR method, which digitized voters' fingerprints, made it possible for the election authority to detect duplicate registrants and purge duplicates from the voters' register. Digitization of fingerprints and photographs resulted in a BVR amounting to over 8 terabytes. The size of the database made the speed of the central server in running the de-duplication process a limiting factor. Server speed delayed the ZEC in making the version of the voters' roll that would be used on election day available to the public in a searchable format, as required by Section 21(7) of the Electoral Act. The ZEC was not able to make a machine analyzable version available until June 18, and the ZEC did not release a revised final roll until just days before the election. The political parties' ability to conduct robust verification of the voters' roll was thereby limited.² However, such delays will not be an issue in 2023, when the biometric voters' roll will merely require routine updating, not wholesale replacement

as in 2018. Routine updating of Zimbabwe's voters' roll is largely accomplished through continuous voter registration.

There is a second reason the quality of the voters' register is important in Zimbabwe. According to the 2013 Constitution, the drawing of new electoral boundaries must take place "as soon as possible after a population census", electoral districts should contain equal numbers of voters, and variations of voting populations should not exceed 20%.³ The voters' register as continuously updated will be the key resource for confirming this constitutional distribution of voters across electoral districts.

Implementation of BVR in Zimbabwe

The new biometric voter registration drive began in September 2017 and ended in early February 2018. Due to financial constraints, the ZEC implemented the registration process in phases, which is not uncommon on the African continent.⁴ In the end, the Commission registered 5,695,706 citizens representing 78.8% of the estimated voting age population, with a significant increase in young registrants compared to the 2013 voters' roll.⁵ According to an audit by the Zimbabwe Election Support Network (ZESN), the number of registrants 18 to 22 years of age increased by 372% while those 23 to 27 old increased by 83%.⁶ With

support from technical assistance providers and vendors, the ZEC utilized the new biometric technology reasonably well. For instance, 92,745 names were taken off the final voters' roll of which almost 77% were duplicates.⁷ However, observers and political parties still expressed concerns regarding over-registration in rural areas benefitting the ruling party⁸ and lack of stakeholders' access to timely voter registration data, although stakeholders perceived the 2018 voters' roll to be an improvement over the 2013 voters' roll.⁹



Voter Registration Cycle: The term "final voter register" refers to the register that is used on Election Day. A challenge the ZEC will face is in assuring the franchise of persons who turn 18 during the interlude between when the voters' register is closed and Election Day.

1 Zimbabwe Election Support Network 2013 Harmonised Elections Preliminary Statement, 01 August 2013, Harare.

2 IRI/NDI Zimbabwe International Election Observation Mission Final Report, October 2018, p. 26.

3 IRI/NDI Zimbabwe International Election Observation Mission Final Report, October 2018, p. 26.

4 Astrid Evrensel (Ed)(2010) *Voter Registration in Africa: A Comparative Analysis*. EISA. Johannesburg.

5 The 2018 voters' register represented a slight reduction of voters compared to the 2013 harmonised elections with 5,874,115 registered voters. *EU EOM 2018 Final Report Republic of Zimbabwe Harmonised Elections 2018*, page 15; IRI/NDI Zimbabwe International Election Observation Mission Final Report, October 2018, page 8.

6 See *Zimbabwe Election Support Network Final Report of the 2018 Voters' Roll Audit*, page 7.

7 Other reasons for names taken off the list were incomplete registration information and information from the death register. For details, see *Zimbabwe Electoral Commission: 2018 Harmonised Elections Report*, pages 29-30.

8 *EU EOM 2018 Final Report Republic of Zimbabwe Harmonised Elections 2018*, pages 16-17.

9 See *ZESN Final Report of the 2018 Voters' Roll Audit*, page 8; <http://www.teampachedu.org/index.html>.

Means of improving continuous biometric voter registration

Continuous voter registration has been the practice in Zimbabwe going back to at least the 2002 general elections.¹⁰ Part IV 17A of the Electoral Act requires the registration of voters in Zimbabwe to be continuous. This means that at any time during the year both eligible first-time voters and already registered voters must have the opportunity to go to the appropriate ZEC permanent offices at district and provincial levels to register or to request a transfer to a polling station close to their new place of residence, respectively. However, in actual fact, very few Zimbabweans avail themselves of this service. Partly this is due to disincentives. Rural dwellers must travel long distances while the mounting cost of public transportation is a deterrent for urban dwellers. Budgetary constraints have prevented the ZEC from overcoming the disincentives by mounting significant voter education campaigns to increase registration ahead of the nine by-elections conducted between July 2018 and July 2019, or voter education campaigns to promote continuous registration more broadly.¹¹ Absent corrective measures, the accuracy of the voters' roll will erode in the years leading up to 2023, thus requiring a comprehensive nationwide top-up registration drive prior to the next harmonized elections, contravening the cost-saving rationale behind continuous voter registration.¹²

There are four factors that affect the quality of Zimbabwe's voters' roll. The first is irregular reporting to the ZEC of deceased citizens by the Department of the Registrar General. The rate of reporting determines the number of deceased people's names on the voters' roll. The larger the number the greater the vulnerability to charges of fraudulent voting in 2023 by persons using the names of deceased people. The second is ID cards, about which the EU Election Observation Mission (EUEOM) reported problems with a

significant number of the IDs used to register.¹³ It is unclear if the source of this problem also rests with the

Department of the Registrar General, which issues the national ID cards, or if it is due to a quality control issue within the ZEC. The second problem impacts the third issue, which is that the software in the ZEC's BVR kits lacks a feature to prevent incorrect entry of ID numbers.¹⁴ Similarly, the data-entry fields for physical addresses permits the same address to be entered in different formats.¹⁵ The ZEC can rectify this third issue by upgrading its BVR kits' software and improving the training of its voter registration personnel accordingly. The ZEC can ensure that more time is devoted to familiarizing BVR equipment operators with the proper set-up of BVR kits and with correct data capture. But these steps can be undertaken only after the issue of incorrectly issued identity card numbers is addressed.¹⁶ If the Registrar General's office publicly discloses how unique numbers are generated for the national ID cards – one of two forms of identity documents accepted for voter registration, the other being valid passports – then the ZEC can upgrade its software and the 137,788 reportedly dubious ID records be properly analyzed.¹⁷ Based on such a public explanation, national stakeholders could then further explore the registration data and determine to what extent their expressed concerns regarding dubious identity cards are legitimate.¹⁸ The fourth issue impacting the quality of the voters' roll involves the ZEC's quality control regime in the field, where the bulk of the registration data is collected. More robust quality control by the ZEC could improve detection of errors and thereby permit corrective measures by the ZEC's provincial and district offices.

Transparency and accountability are key to public confidence in voter registration processes.¹⁹ The ZEC invited stakeholders to observe its testing of the various BVR vendors' solutions as well as operations in the registration centers. Areas for improved transparency would include:

- Observation of data transfer from the registration kits into the national voters' register database and the processes of cleaning voter registration data.²⁰
- Observation of the de-duplication processes and the printing of the voter lists.²¹
- Announcement of voter registration statistics during the various stages of the voter registration process.²²
- Publication of data on corrections, additions and successful challenges stemming from the display of the preliminary voters' roll.²³

10 For details see <https://www.eisa.org.za/wep/zimregistration.htm> (accessed August 19, 2019).

11 Interviews with Zimbabwean election-centric organizations, Harare, July, 2019.

12 These software deficiencies were revealed by the ZEC Secretariat during its internal Provisional Exhibition Manual Workshop, April 28-30, 2018, Lake Kariba.

13 Interviews with Zimbabwean election-centric organizations, Harare, July, 2019.

14 These software deficiencies were revealed by the ZEC Secretariat during its internal Provisional Exhibition Manual Workshop, April 28-30, 2018, Lake Kariba.

15 *Ibid.*

16 For a discussion regarding problematic ID card numbering, see <http://www.teampachedu.org/index.html> and *EU EOM 2018 Final Report Republic of Zimbabwe Harmonised Elections 2018*.

17 Records with inauthentic ID numbers (2), duplicate ID numbers (81), invalid ID numbers (3,799), with perplexing ID numbers (15,000), statistically improbable surname and ID combination (122,788). *Zimbabwe 2018 Elections: Biometric Voters' Roll Analysis*. Page 6.

18 <http://www.teampachedu.org/index.html>.

19 <http://aceproject.org/ace-en/topics/vr/introduction/vr20>

20 Interviews with Zimbabwean election-centric organizations, Harare, July 2019.

21 *Ibid.*

22 See *Zimbabwe Election Support Network Biometric Voter Registration Observation Report 2018*.

23 For those statistics available see *Zimbabwe 2018 Harmonised Elections Report*, pages 29-30.

Zimbabwe's Voter Registration Model

Voter Eligibility	Citizens of Zimbabwe who have reached the age of 18 years can vote in the constituency where the person has resided for the most recent six months.
Continuous registration	The ZEC is responsible to offer voter registration throughout the electoral cycle. It is currently offered at its permanent offices in Harare, as well as provincial and district offices. On rare occasion, the Commission can offer mobile registration such as the annual Trade Fair in Bulawayo.
In-person registration	Eligible voters must show up in person with a passport or national ID card (expired accepted too), as well as a proof of residency. Alternatively, the applicant can complete and sign an affidavit.
Provisional Voters Lists	The Commission displays printed copies of the provisional voters lists at each polling station. Registrants can also check their details using an SMS-solution or via ZEC's website.
Final Voters Lists	The final voters' roll can be purchased in electronic and paper-based formats from the ZEC. Voters can also verify registration details and find its polling station via SMS, or ZEC's website. However, the election law is mute as to the minimum number of days voters' lists must be made available to the public before election day.

Conclusions

Leading up to the 2018 elections the ZEC's introduction of a new BVR methodology improved confidence in the process.²⁴ The ZEC could continue to garner public confidence in itself and the electoral process by seizing on several opportunities to further improve the voters' register's quality. For example, the Commission is tasked with organizing numerous by-elections and could capitalize on those to update the roll with first-time voters and transfers. The ZEC could furthermore work pro-actively with the Department of Register General to improve reporting of deaths. Embarking upon a more elaborate public communications on the availability of continuous voter registration would also improve use

of the BVR kits for voter registration at ZEC district offices. The ZEC could also bring registration kits closer to the electorate by, for example, sending registration teams to cultural events. The quality of the voter register can further be improved by upgrading the BVR kit software as it is currently prone to errors. Finally, ZEC would

benefit from engagement with the Department of the Registrar General to publicly clarify identity document numbering, as well as improve reporting of deceased voters so the ZEC can delete these names from the voters' roll.

A complete, accurate and up to date voters' roll will not only be instrumental to credible elections in 2023, but also quite possibly will be critical for the delimitation exercise prior to the elections. By improving its continuous voter registration process the ZEC can increase the public's confidence in the voters' register well in advance of the 2023 elections.

²⁴ According to Harvard University's Electoral Integrity Project, electoral experts' perception of the voter registration process in Zimbabwe increased from 15 points during the 2013 elections to a score of 32 in 2018. For details, see Pippa Norris and Max Grömping (2019) *Electoral Integrity Worldwide 2019*. University of Sydney. Page 22 (<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/58533f31bebafbe99c85dc9b/t/5ce60bd6b208fcd93be49430/1558580197717/Electoral+Integrity+Worldwide.pdf>) (accessed 27 June, 2019).