



Automatic Registration Introduction: International Evidence

The impact derived from putting the automatic registration and voluntary voting into practice in our political system would be very high in terms of competition, participation and programmatic offer. As we may appreciate from the compared evidence, there are no technical nor deadline reasons for not developing the current project. Furthermore, there is a whole range of arguments which recommend doing so.

Last September 28th, a bill which enables the automatic registration process was proposed at the Congress. The urgency of this project was a consequence of the statements from the Electoral Service (SERVEL, in Spanish) concerning the difficulty of introducing an automatic registration model, since they do not have the citizens' address available, and they have not upgraded their systems. Therefore, it would be impossible to collect the information during the 12-month period before the next election.

It is thus a very serious issue, since we face a logistic problem which could have been perfectly foreseen by the authority, particularly by the SERVEL, and which was already introduced in the debate in 2004 by L&Dⁱ. So, seemingly, this is being used as an excuse to hinder the introduction of the constitutional order regarding automatic registration and voluntary voting.

As we know, there is a transversal diagnosis indicating that our democracy needs greater participation, representativity and competition. Therefore, a bill which allows more than four million Chileans to become potential voters is a key factor to revitalize our democracy.

The Bill

The Registry Office holds the information about the Chilean's legal residence, but its organizational law stipulates that, on the basis of the its specific functions, its public officials may not disclose documents or information due to its confidential nature; that is, as most State's offices, they cannot share their information with any other office due to data protection matters.

Accordingly, and in view of the excuse of the SERVEL for not introducing the automatic registration – which was set forth by different senators and deputies as the main reason for avoiding the approval of the bill proposed by the government in December of last year -, a project consisting in a unique article, which establishes that the Electoral Service shall have direct access to the electoral data of all the people registered at the Servicio de Registro Civil e Identificación (Registry Office), was sent to the Senate. By electoral data of Chileans and foreigners having legal residence, we shall understand the following: name and last name, national ID number (Rol Único Nacional – RUN), birth date, birth place, citizenship, gender, occupation, and legal residence. The necessary information for determining if a person has lost his/her citizenship, the right to vote or if he/she has been disqualified, are also electoral data.

Finally, the bill establishes that the Electoral Service shall use these data with the sole purpose of carrying out studies and tests regarding automatic registration incorporations; it shall keep absolute confidentiality of all the information and documentation received in view of this disposition, and fully guarantee the protection of the personal data regulated under Law Nr 19,628 concerning Private Life Protection.

Discussion Framework

Among the multiple reasons explaining a lower electoral participation, we have, in the first place, a great number of individuals who are qualified for registering in the electoral registries, but decide not to do so.ⁱⁱ

In this perspective, a first finding about the advantages of automatic registration is that it enables clarifying the concealed abstentionism, that is, the proportion of individuals who, although complying with the citizenship requirements, decide not to integrate the political community from the civic point of view.ⁱⁱⁱ

Under the current registration model, the electoral abstentionism is understood as the difference between the registered population and the population who exercises its right to vote. However, this calculation does not consider a very relevant dimension of the issue related to civic disaffection: Why don't we consider the non-registered individuals as a constitutive part of the disaffected portion? Any system which does not contribute to disclose the participation degree will not contribute to a substantive quality improvement in our democracy either.

A second argumentative line relates automatic registration to a simpler and quicker registration system, which reduces the costs for potential citizens to get integrated to the political community.^{iv} The discussion about the political participation costs has been a long one in the political science literature, but the argument's base indicates that when costs are higher than the eventual benefit of participation, people tend to adopt free-riding positions.^v

A third argument states that the registration procedure must go along with the participative and democratic spirit and under no circumstances limit it, a situation which differs from today's model. In addition to the excessive bureaucracy associated to registration, the latter can be carried out only during a specific annual schedule, and as Navia^{vi} points out, when the electoral campaign periods are officially initiated – which is when people are most inclined to participate due to the high levels of public debate exhibition -, individuals cannot register due to schedule barriers. In this perspective, in an election year there are approximately 104 days available for electoral registration, and during a non-election year the number of days available for registration is around 60. Although term extensions have been allowed in the last years, these measures have only an exceptional character and do not constitute the rule of what should be the logic of an integrated system which fosters participation.

There is hard evidence on the relation between registration procedure and its effects on participation. For example, in studies carried out in the United States, Powell stated that voters' automatic registration boosted electoral participation in 14 points,^{vii} while more conservative estimations ascribe effects around 8 to 12%^{viii} to the automatic registration.

Compared Evidence

The commented bill points at the same direction as other successful initiatives undertaken in the rest of Latin America, which demonstrate that the automatic registration challenge supported by the Registry Office is not an impossible task; even more so if we consider the technological resources (biometric identity in the ID card – RUT) that Chile has in this matter, and which could allow making the complete voter registration records before the next municipal elections (October, 2012).

Concerning the introduction time, it is interesting to analyze the case of Bolivia in 2009. They took slightly more than two months to introduce an automatic registration reform, and they did not rely on an advanced biometric record such as the one that Chile has right now, and they managed to biometrically register 5 million citizens in 75 days. This was possible through 2,850 registration stations in Bolivia and 150 at international level, with a mean registration time by citizen of 3 minutes.^{ix}

The measure's main impact was the creation of a new, reliable, automatic, national voter registration records, which increased registrations by approximately 40% and managed to register 169,096 Bolivians abroad, obtaining an electoral participation increase of 9 points according to international standards.^x

In the case of Peru, a citizen is recognized as a voter when applying for the National Identity Document (DNI, in Spanish). Since 1995, the electoral register is conducted by the Registro Nacional de Identificación y Estado Civil (RENIEC), an independent organism of the Oficina Nacional de Procesos Electorales (ONPE). During election times, the RENIEC renders the initial voter registration records to the Jurado Nacional de Elecciones (National Election Jury) for its approval, which in turn sends it to the Oficina Nacional de Procesos Electorales (ONPE).^{xi}

If the difficulty is ascribed to the lack of technological resources, in Costa Rica the voters' register is centrally administered by the Registry Office since 1949, through its Electoral Department, which also produces the electoral identification document and draws up the voters' list or voter registration records.^{xii} Likewise, in Colombia, starting 2010 the citizens of statutory age have a unique citizen document which identifies them in all civil, political, administrative, and juridical acts.^{xiii}

Conclusion

The impact derived from putting the automatic registration and voluntary voting into practice in our political system would be very high in terms of competition, participation and programmatic offer, especially when the main criticism to our electoral system focuses on the lack of competition and the uncertainty in the general results of the election (especially the parliamentary one).

As we may appreciate from the compared evidence, there are no technical nor deadline reasons for not developing the current project. Furthermore, as we have analyzed above, there is a whole range of arguments which recommend its application, even though it has to be technically precise.

ⁱ Libertad y Desarrollo. “*Voto e inscripción: ambos voluntarios*”. Public Issues, Nr 676, 2004. Available in www.lyd.org.

ⁱⁱ García, Juan Ignacio. “*Hacia una participación electoral de mayor calidad*”. In Fontaine, Arturo, Larroulet, Cristián, Viera Gallo, José Antonio y Walker, Ignacio (Editors), *Modernización del régimen electoral chileno*. Ediciones PNUD, CEP, CIEPLAN, Libertad y Desarrollo y Proyectamérica. 2007.

ⁱⁱⁱ Aleuy, Mahmud. “*Inscripción automática*”. In Fontaine, Arturo, Larroulet, Cristián, Viera Gallo, José Antonio and Walker, Ignacio (Editors), *Modernización del régimen electoral chileno*. Ediciones PNUD, CEP, CIEPLAN, Libertad y Desarrollo y Proyectamérica. 2007.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v The *free-riding* or *free-rider* concept is associated to someone who benefits from the effort developed by a group of individuals in order to reach a purpose (collective action), but does not meet the necessary costs to execute this action. This is a key factor in the interest group theory. See Downs, Anthony. *An Economic Theory of Democracy*. USA. New York: Harper Editions, 1957; and Olson, Mancur. *Auge y decadencia de las naciones*. Editorial Ariel, Barcelona, 1985.

^{vi} Navia, Patricio. *Participación electoral en Chile, 1988-2001*. In *Revista de Ciencia Política*, Volume XXIV / Nr 1: p. 81-103. 2004.

^{vii} Powell, Bingham. “American Voter Turnout in Comparative Perspective”. In *American Political Science Review*, Nr 80, p. 17-43. 1986.

^{viii} Teixeira, Ruy. *The Disappearing American Voter*. USA, Washington DC, Brookings Institution Editors. 1992.

^{ix} Smartmatic (2009) Biometric Electoral Registration Bolivia.

^x Ibid.

^{xi} <http://www.reniec.gob.pe>

^{xii} <http://www.tse.go.cr>

^{xiii} <http://www.registraduria.gov.co>