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# Building Better Elections

Results of the  
European Electoral  
Management Survey

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# Building Better Elections

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There is considerable variation in the quality of the delivery of elections around the world. One factor that contributes towards this is the design of the electoral management body/bodies (EMBs) that are responsible for delivering elections.

This policy brief presents pioneering data on variations in the institutional design of EMBs in Europe. It also highlights new research findings about ‘what works’ in improving electoral integrity. There is considerable variation in practice across Europe, and worldwide. Eight policy interventions to improve electoral integrity are proposed, which includes greater EMB independence, resourcing, training and management of workplace conditions.

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## Introduction

While many elections across the world are conducted to very high standards, there remains evidence of problems with the delivery of elections in both transitional and established democracies. These problems are important as they can lead to citizens losing their right to cast a ballot, have their confidence in democratic institutions undermined or even lead to wider conflict and political instability.

There are always multiple causes of problems and many solutions. One major factor, however, is the actual design of the electoral management body/bodies who deliver the elections. Are they independent from government? Do they have sufficient capacity? What technology are they using? Are their staff well trained and independent?

It is often said by policy-makers and academics that EMBs that are independent should be used to deliver elections. However, there is remarkably little data about how elections are managed across countries. In turn, there has been very little analysis of ‘what works’ when it comes to Improving electoral management. In this policy we summarise new data on how elections are run in Europe. We also point to new research findings about how electoral integrity can be improved that was generated with this research by combining it with data sources.

For more on the survey, see the Introduction to the Special Issue “Building Better Elections,” In the *International Political Science Review*. Guest Edited by: Toby S James, Holly Ann Garnett, Leontine Loeber and Carolien van Ham. Visit <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512119828206>

## Methodology

To understand the organizational determinants of electoral management body performance and electoral integrity outcomes, pioneering data on variation in the institutional design of EMBs worldwide was collected. The European Electoral Management Survey (EMS) was conducted between July 2016 and October 2017 by Toby S. James, Holly Ann Garnett, Leontine Loeber and Carolien van Ham, and administered with the support of the Venice Commission.

**Figure 1: Participating European Countries (Structural Survey)**



The project both included a structural survey and a personnel survey and included a series of common questions in each survey. The structural survey was completed by one senior official from each EMB. This survey collected data on the organisational design of the EMB, their tasks and responsibilities, the decision-making process, budgets, staff and training.

Where appropriate, multiple EMBs were contacted in each country. In many countries, multiple organizations are involved in the administration of elections. As such, the results presented here represent 27 European countries that responded to the structural survey. See the Appendix for a full listing of countries and organizations surveyed. It is important to note that the sample is not necessarily representative because it is possible that those who are responding are not representative of the population.

The dataset is available for download on Harvard Dataverse: "Comparative Structural Survey Election Management Bodies EMS", <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/1X5FVB>

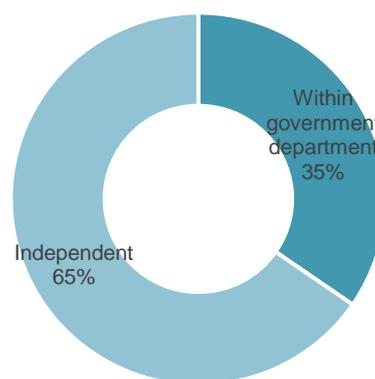
## Key Findings

### Independence

EMBs were asked about their institutional design, as it relates to how they function in relationship to other branches of government, and where they fit within the government bureaucracy. Traditionally, systems of electoral management have been classified according to three categories: independent, governmental or mixed. The independent model, also sometimes referred to as the agency model, sees EMBs as arms-length from the executive branch of government. Governmental models, on the other hand, are often election administrators that work from within a government department or ministry. The mixed model refers to countries where both exist, and each have specific functions or oversight over elections in the country.

In the European Electoral Management Survey, organizations were asked how they saw themselves: as independent, governmental or other. Of those countries that responded, the majority (17) identified themselves as independent bodies (65%), while 9 EMBs (35%) categorized themselves as within a government department.

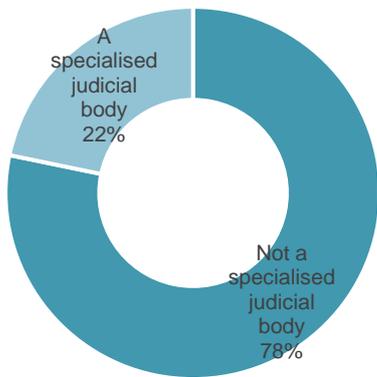
**Figure 2: Formal Independence:**  
Is your organization...



*Percentage of 26 countries that responded to this question.*

Rather than functioning out of the executive, or bureaucratic, branches of government, some EMBs are part of the judicial branch of government, such as a special electoral tribunal, for example. In this survey, only 5 EMBs identified as a specialized judicial body.

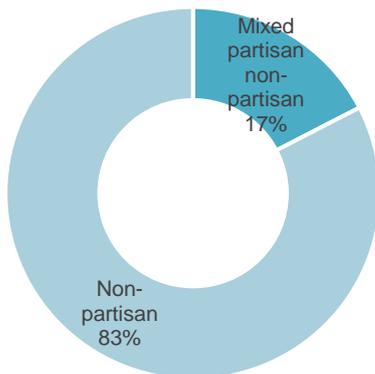
**Figure 3: Specialized Judicial Bodies:**  
Is your organization...



Percentage of 23 countries that responded to this question.

A final dimension of independence is EMBs' inclusion (or not) of political parties in their management boards. There are arguments to suggest that involving political parties in electoral management will lead to better cooperation, as parties can serve as "watchdogs" of their elections. In this survey, the vast majority (19) of EMBs reported they did not include political parties in their organization.

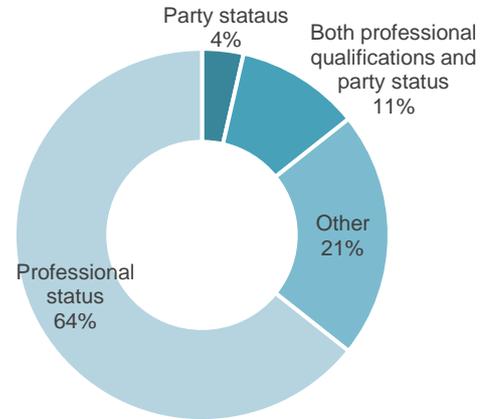
**Figure 4: Partisan Membership:**  
Is your organisation...



Note: Percentage of 23 countries that responded to this question.

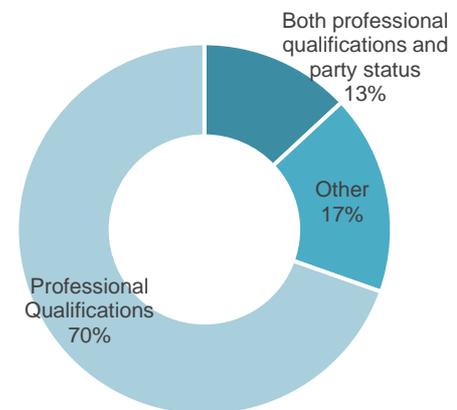
Another dimension of independence concerns the basis of appointment of the EMB chair and board members. In this survey, the basis of appointment for both the EMB chair and EMB board members were predominately their professional qualifications (18 for EMB chair, and 16 for EMB board members). However, a considerable portion of EMBs studied also noted unique procedures for choosing these important actors.

**Figure 5: Basis of Appointment:**  
EMB Chair/President



Percentage of 28 countries that responded to this question.

**Figure 6: Basis of Appointment:**  
EMB Members



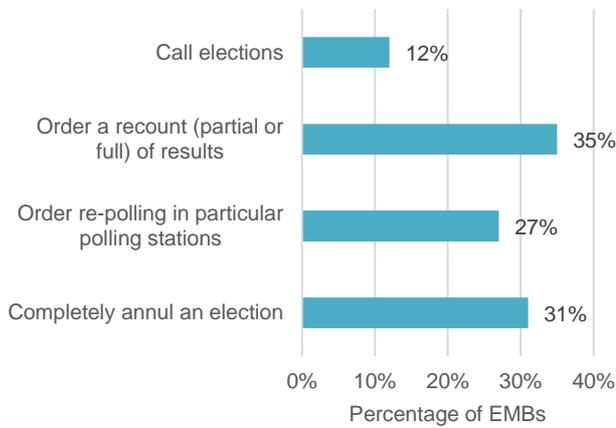
Note: Percentage of 23 countries that responded to this question.

For more on the specific organisational design features that shape EMB formal independence such as appointment procedures, budgetary control, and formal competences, see Carolien van Ham and Holly Ann Garnett. "Building Impartial Electoral Management? Institutional design, Independence and Electoral Integrity." In the *International Political Science Review*. Visit <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512119834573>.

The European EMBs studied here were asked about their powers for specific electoral functions. The most common of these powers was to order a recount (partial or full) of results, though still only 9 EMBs noted they had this power.

**Figure 7: EMB Powers**

Does your organization have powers to...



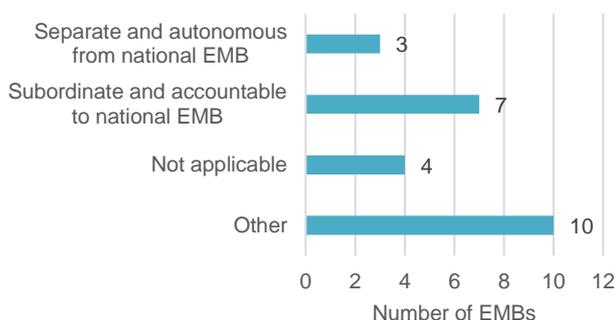
Percentage of 26 EMBs that responded to this question.

### Centralization

EMBs were asked about their relationship with other EMBs at the regional or local level. 7 EMBs reported that these regional or local EMBs were subordinate and accountable to the national EMB. Only 3 EMBs reported that regional or local electoral management bodies were separate and autonomous from the national EMB. However, the greatest number of countries responded 'other' and described alternative arrangements between the local, regional and national levels. For example, Belarus and Croatia reported that regional or local electoral commissions are created for specific elections that report to the central election commission. Belgium and Switzerland, by contrast, reported that their national elections department organises national level elections only, and local elections are managed by the regions. The responses to this question about centralization reveal that there are a wide variety of models of centralization and decentralization in electoral management.

**Figure 8: Centralization**

If regional and/or local electoral management bodies exist in your country, are they...



24 countries responded to the question.

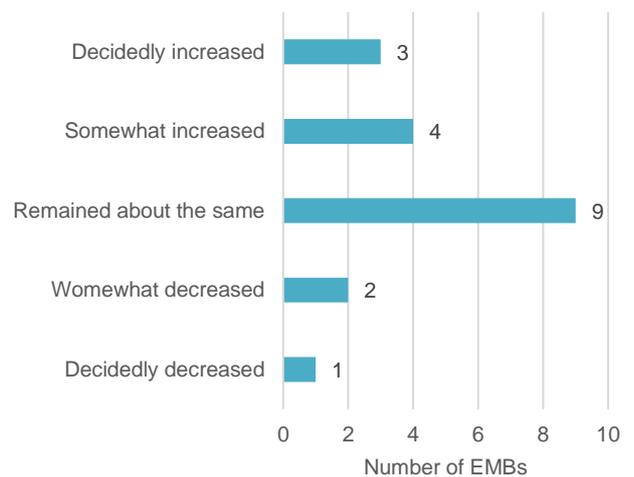
### Budgets

Budgetary data was collected from participating EMBs, however, it is difficult to compare these data directly, since each EMB includes different tasks and activities in their budget.

More comparable between countries is the response to the question of whether the EMB's budget has increase or decreased over the past 5 years. For the European countries studied here, most reported that their budget had remained about the same. Only 3 countries reported decreases in their EMB budget.

**Figure 9: Budgets**

Would you say that over the past 5 years your overall budget has...



22 countries responded to this question. 2 responded they 'did not know', 1 responded the question was 'not applicable'

EMBs may also find other resources through personnel and assistance from other government departments or agencies.

For more on methods of evaluating EMB capacity, see Holly Ann Garnett. "Evaluating Electoral Management Body Capacity" in *International Political Science Review*. Visit <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512119832924>.

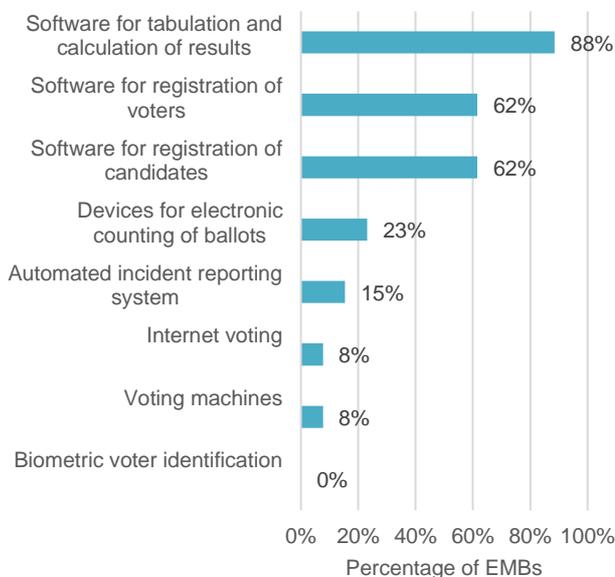
Also see: Toby S. James, *Comparative Electoral Management: Performance, Network and Instruments*, Chapter 12, which shows that budget cuts lead to reduced election quality. Visit: <https://www.routledge.com/Comparative-Electoral-Management-Performance-Networks-and-Instruments/James/p/book/9781138682412>

## Technology

The use of technology for government operations, including electoral management, has increased in recent years. EMBs were asked about the areas of electoral management where technology is used and considered issues of ownership of these technologies.

The most common form of electoral technology reported is software for tabulation and calculation of results. Of the 26 EMBs that responded to this question, only 3 reported not using this form of technology. Biometric technology was not used by any of the countries studied. Also less common were the use of voting machines and Internet voting, which were reported by only 2 countries each.

**Figure 10: Use of Technology**  
In your country, are any of the following devices used in your elections?



Percentages of the 26 EMBs that responded to this battery of questions.

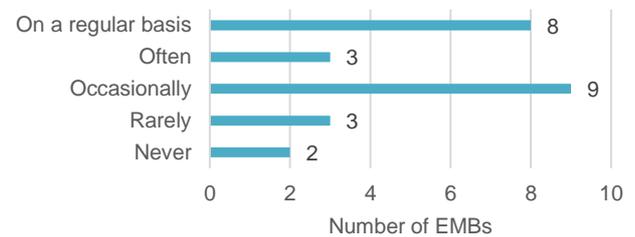
For more on the use of technology, including issues of ownership, see the article “The Use of Technology in the Election Process: Who Governs?” by Leontine Loeber. Forthcoming in the *Election Law Journal*, June, 2020.

## Training

EMBs also reported on the training they provide to their staff members. The European survey finds that that only 44% (12 EMBs of the 27 who responded to this question) of EMBs reported providing training to their staff 'on a regular basis' or 'often'.

**Figure 11: Training Frequency**

How often does your organization conduct training programmes for its staff?

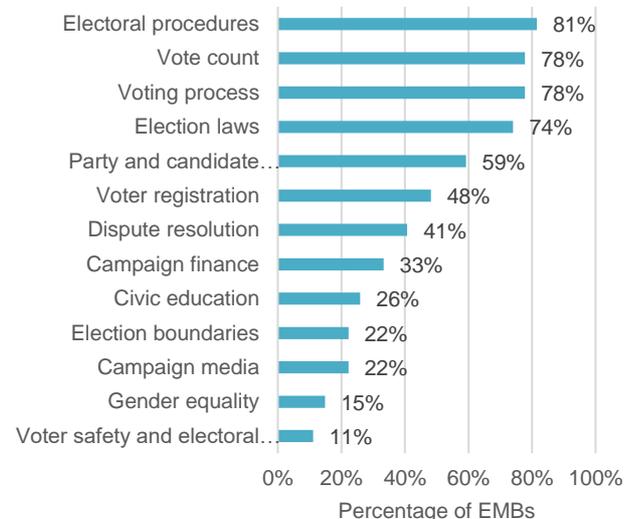


26 countries responded to this question. There is 1 response of 'don't know.'

Of interest is also the training program topics. Unsurprisingly, the most common topics covered were electoral procedures and the voting process. The least common training topics were voter safety and violence issues and gender equality.

**Figure 12: Training Topics**

What topics are covered by training programs?



Percentage of the 29 EMBs that responded to this battery

The issue of training is the focus of the “Building Professional Electoral Management” report by Jeffrey Karp, Alessandro Nai, Miguel Angel Lara Otaola and Pippa Norris. Visit [www.electoralintegrityproject.com](http://www.electoralintegrityproject.com) for more details.

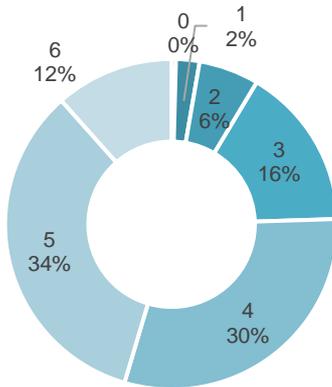
For analysis of the effects of training on electoral management quality see Toby S. James, *Comparative Electoral Management: Performance, Network and Instruments*, Chapter 11. This shows that training reduces stress, makes employees less likely to quit and improves the delivery of the election Visit: <https://www.routledge.com/Comparative-Electoral-Management-Performance-Networks-and-Instruments/James/p/book/9781138682412>

## Personnel Survey

The personnel survey was completed in 18 countries, with 1,218 respondents. While the dataset will not be released for privacy reasons, we provide here some aggregate analysis of the results.

Figure 13 shows that job satisfaction is relatively high among those working at EMBs.

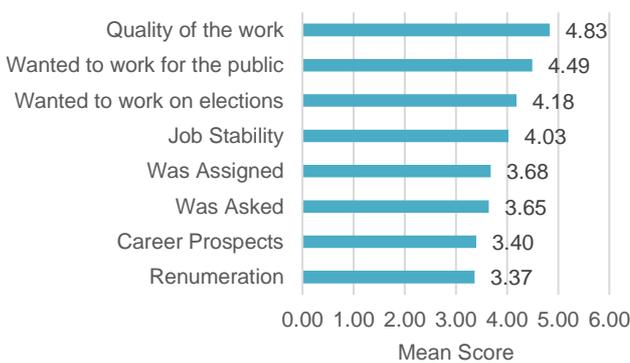
**Figure 13: Job Satisfaction**  
All things considered, how satisfied are you with your job as a whole these days?



Mean responses from 0 (Completely Dissatisfied) to 6 (Completely satisfied).

Respondents were also asked why they began working at the EMB. The most important response from this sample of personnel was the quality of the work, followed closely by a desire to work for the public or to work in elections. Remuneration and career prospects were the least important.

**Figure 14: Reasons for Working at the EMB**



Mean responses from 0 (Not at all important) to 6 (Very important).

Finally, Figure 15 presents a selection of statements about the employee's workload, workplace and job opportunities. Respondents were asked how strongly they agreed or disagreed with each statement.

**Figure 12: Workplace, Workload & Job Opportunities**

Do you agree or disagree with the following statements? (Mean responses: 0- Strongly Disagree to 6- Strongly Agree)

Rank	Statement	Mean
1	When I am on a difficult assignment, I can usually count on getting assistance from my line manager/supervisor	4.36
2	Team working is strongly encouraged in our department	4.31
3	Our line manager/supervisor considers the personal welfare of our group	4.12
4	I am provided with sufficient opportunities for training and development	4.02
5	This department keeps me well informed	4.01
6	I feel like 'part of the family' at my department	3.88
7	Staff are given meaningful feedback regarding their individual performance, at least once a year	3.85
8	I have to work very intensively	3.80
9	Skill and merits decide who gets the job	3.79
10	I feel my job is secure	3.72
11	Employees' concerns with decisions are listened to	3.58
12	Employee input is obtained prior to making decisions	3.49
13	I consider public service my civic duty	3.47
14	I am rewarded fairly for the amount of effort that I put in	3.29
15	A rigorous selection process is used to select new recruits	3.27
16	I have to neglect some tasks because I have too much to do	2.80
17	I am pressured to work long hours	2.67
18	I have the opportunities if I want to be promoted	2.66
19	Different people at work demand things from me that are hard to combine.	2.31
20	In this department those who perform well in their jobs get better rewards than those who just meet the basic job requirements	2.30
21	My workload negatively affects the quality of my life (e.g. family or social activities)	2.28
22	My work mates/colleagues resist change	2.21
23	Personal contacts and networks decide who gets the job	2.03
24	In my job, I am often confronted with problems I cannot do much about	1.86
25	The morale in this department is very low	1.84
26	Some days I feel I cannot continue in this job due to work pressures	1.69
27	I do not feel a strong sense of belonging to my department	1.55
28	I often think of quitting this job	1.49
29	The political contacts and party affiliations decide who gets the job	1.25

Respondents most strongly agreed with statements referring to assistance from managers or supervisors, and teamwork with fellow employees. The statements with the lowest levels of agreement referred to whether the employee thought that political contacts and affiliations decided who gets jobs, and whether the respondent often thinks of quitting. These are positive indicators of the quality of electoral management work.

For more on EMB personnel, see Toby James "Better workers, better elections? Electoral management body workforces and electoral integrity worldwide" in *International Political Science Review*. Visit <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512119829516>.

## Conclusions

Well-run elections are essential for any functioning democracy. However, research shows considerable variation in the quality of elections around the world. It has often been suggested that factors internal to the EMB may at least partly contribute towards this, but the evidence base for this has not always been available.

In sum, this policy brief has presented new data about organisational structures of EMBs and profiled the research that this has enabled. This suggests a number of important policies that EMBs can take forward to improve the running of elections.

## Policy Recommendations

- 1 Give EMBs greater independence from the direct control of government.
- 2 Invest resources in electoral management.
- 3 Consider issues of ownership when implementing electoral technologies
- 4 Ensure staff are provided regular training.
- 5 Give employees within EMBs a greater say in their workplace.
- 6 Address gender inequality within EMB workplaces.
- 7 Ensure that recruitment processes are transparent and meritocratic.
- 8 Measure and manage levels of stress and job satisfaction.

Electoral management is crucial to all democratic countries. This research provides new evidence for election management bodies, international organizations, scholars and policymakers around the globe, in their pursuit of building better elections.

# Participating Countries and Organizations

## Structural Survey

Country	Participating EMB (English translation, see dataset for original name):
Albania	Central Election Commission
Belarus	Central Commission for Elections and Conduct of Republican Referendums
Belgium	Federal Public Service - Directorate General Institutions and Population - Service Elections
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Central Election Commission
Bulgaria	Central Election Commission
Croatia	State Election Commission
Czech Republic	Statistical Office
Denmark	Ministry of Economic Affairs and the Interior
Ecuador	Contentious Electoral Court
Estonia	National Electoral Committee
Finland	Ministry of Justice
Greece	Ministry of the Environment/Election Directorate
Hungary (2)	National Election Commission, National Election Office*
Ireland	Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government
Latvia	Central Election Commission
Luxembourg	Government Centralizing Office
Malta	Electoral Commission
Moldova	Central Electoral Commission
Netherlands (2)	Electoral Council; Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations*
Norway (2)	Directorate of Elections; Municipal and Modernization Department*
Poland	State Electoral Commission, National Electoral Office
Romania	Permanent Electoral Authority
Russian Federation	Central Election Commission
Slovak Republic	State Commission on Election and Control of Funding of Political Parties
Spain (3)	Ministry of Interior, Directorate General of Internal Policy, Deputy Directorate General of Internal Policy and Electoral Processes*; Office of the Electoral Census; Central Electoral Board
Sweden	Election Authority
Switzerland	Federal Chancellery, Political Rights Section
Turkey	Higher Elections Committee

Where multiple EMBs participated, the results from one organization (indicated by \*) was selected to be reported in this study (N: 27 countries, 32 organizations).

## Personnel Survey

Listing of countries for which more one response was received for the personnel survey:

- Albania
- Belgium
- Bosnia and Herzegovina
- Bulgaria
- Croatia
- Denmark
- Finland
- Hungary
- Ireland
- Malta
- Moldova
- Netherlands
- Norway
- Portugal
- Romania
- Sweden
- Switzerland
- United Kingdom

# The Electoral Management Survey Team

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Holly Ann Garnett is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at the Royal Military College of Canada, and cross-appointed faculty at Queen's University, in Kingston, Ontario, Canada. Her research examines how electoral integrity can be strengthened throughout the electoral cycle.

**Leontine Loeber**



Leontine Loeber works at the Council of State as a legislative lawyer and is pursuing a PhD at the University of East Anglia on the topic of election fraud. She has also worked as a legislative lawyer at the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations of the Netherlands, and at the Dutch Electoral Council, where among other tasks, she was involved with organizing elections.

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Carolien van Ham is Professor of Empirical Political Science at Radboud University Nijmegen. Her research focuses on legitimacy and political representation, democratization and authoritarianism, electoral integrity and fraud, and the connection between democracy and human rights.

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