

The Makers of Voters: How Sociotechnical Practices Uphold the Right to Vote in Cameroon

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Since 2010, Ernestine E., 40 years old, has held a position in the civil service as an officer working at Elections Cameroon (ElecCam), the body responsible for managing elections. Her office is in an ElecCam branch in Soa, a student town 15 km from downtown Yaoundé, the capital of the country. When I met Ernestine at her workplace in March 2023, she introduced herself as an enrollment agent. At ElecCam, an enrollment agent, or kit operator, is responsible for the biometric registration of citizens in the voter register. There are approximately 2,700 agents spread across the 360 local branches covering the national territory, with an average of 7.5 agents per branch. While some of these agents participate in training seminars organized by ElecCam after their recruitment, others often learn on the job, during the registration process itself. Due to demographic differences and the size of territories, some branches have more agents than others. Ernestine recounts that she began her career at the Mbalmayo branch, another town located 68 km from Yaoundé, where she worked for 6 years before joining her current post. Thus, she has significant and varied experience in this field. I had been introduced by her branch chief, who was in turn referred by a well-placed contact at the General Directorate of Elections (DGE), informed of my research on population registers. I encountered no difficulty in gaining access to this institution, especially since the authorization granted by the branch chief to Ernestine to meet me greatly reinforced the trust in our exchanges. While my account focuses on Ernestine, this does not place her as a privileged or key informant in my investigation. Although she is at the center of the analysis, I must emphasize that her statements align with and corroborate those of other ElecCam agents I interviewed, both at ElecCam headquarters and in other local branches.

In entering this institution, I sought to document how biometric voter registers are managed daily, tracing the logic aimed at ensuring that every citizen meeting the legal criteria can be registered, obtain a card, and exercise their right to vote. Ernestine, as a "street-level bureaucrat" (Lipsky, 1980), explained to me what kit operators do, how agents are deployed in the field for registrations, the reactions of residents, and the constraints on this activity. During a focus group I conducted at the Nkolmesseng branch in Yaoundé's 5th district, six agents shared their experiences, emphasizing the challenges of biometric registration in a context marked by infrastructure deficits and "a deep crisis of identity documents" (Eyenga, Omgba Mimboe, Bindzi, 2022). Thus, the combination of kit operators' accounts and the official statements from some ElecCam officials allowed me to understand the practical realities of registration, characterized by improvisation and negotiation. These practices guarantee the right to vote and ultimately determine the path toward a "society of equals" (Rosanvallon, 2013).

In the field of electoral studies, research on voter registers highlights the tension between maximizing registrations and minimizing electoral fraud. On the one hand, there is the idea that fraud is a problem that requires strict voter identification policies to ensure electoral integrity, and on the other hand, the idea that identification restrictions create institutional barriers that limit participation (Atkeson et al., 2014). Some studies have analyzed vote-buying practices, such as "voter charters" and "international voters," which occur when political machines import foreign voters into their constituencies or offer rewards when they cannot control voters' choices (Socpa, 2000; Verjee et al., 2015; Hidalgo, Nichter, 2016, Bombela Bombela, 2023). Others have explored the relationship between registration rates and participation, analyzing voter mobilization campaigns such as emails or door-to-door efforts aimed at encouraging registration (Nickerson, 2015).

However, a critical legal approach has interpreted voter registration as a limitation on the right to vote, a procedure that classifies those eligible to vote and those who are not, with discriminatory effects such as those affecting underrepresented populations in the United States (Piven, Minnite, Groarke, 2009; Berman, 2015). This critique argues that it is not individual will but the "obstacle" imposed by the state in the form of registration that hinders the exercise of the right to vote. It denounces the restrictive nature of the requirement to register in advance of an election. In this context, a person who becomes interested in an election after the registration deadline would be prevented from exercising their right to vote on election day (James, 1987). While such an approach is relevant, it should be nuanced on two levels: first, in the United States, some states have adopted Election Day Registration (EDR), which allows individuals to register and vote on the same day (Hanmer, 2009); and second, in the African context, the imperative to avoid post-election conflicts has historically led to the view that prior registration is a means to promote participation, control electoral fraud, and more effectively identify the electorate (Elklit, Svensson, 1997; Manuel do Rosário, Muendane, 2016; Debos, Desgranges, 2023; Eyenga, 2023b).

From then on, my ambition is to extend research on "voting materialities" (Perrot et al., 2016) and on "the administration of voter registration" (Merivaki, 2021). The aim is to understand, in the Cameroonian context, the modalities of implementing the right to vote by focusing on registration agents and their practices, which are influenced by a variety of infrastructures. Among these infrastructures is the "biometric registration kit," which, while playing a crucial role in rationalizing and enhancing bureaucratic identification experiences (Breckenridge, 2014), reinforces the exclusion of certain categories of people and polarizes debates on citizenship and national belonging (Mbowou, 2019; Awenengo Dalberto, Banégas, 2021). Although this technology was initially deployed in the surveillance sector, it must be noted that since September 11, 2001, its use has spread to civilian populations worldwide to serve the creation of all kinds of population registers (Breckenridge, Szreter, 2012). It allows both the verification that the identified person is who they claim to be and ensures that this person is unique in the database, thus preventing them from being registered more than once (Hobbis, Hobbis, 2017). In the political life of African countries, biometrics has become a device used to project the image of free and transparent elections. It is therefore analyzed sometimes as part of a "moral economy of elections" (Cheeseman, Lynch, Willis, 2020), sometimes as a tool for state legibility (Piccolino, 2015), a contested technopolitics feeding imaginaries of modernity (Debos, 2018), a technology of transparency (Passanti, Pommerolle, 2022), a product of a market (Debos, Desgranges, 2023), or even an agent of material participation

(Eyenga, 2023b). However, there remains a necessary need to ethnographically document the practices of agents who, through biometrics, produce voter registers daily.

To this end, this article focuses on the construction of the electorate as an entity endowed with the legal and social capacity to make political choices (Haegel, 2001). This construction does not directly refer to communication strategies, disinformation, and manipulation used to shape voters' opinions, beliefs, and choices (Oyane, 2022; Bombela Bombela, 2023). It does not question its rationality or its power (Downs, 1957), but rather the sociotechnical conditions under which it is produced and their implications for access to the right to vote. Far from being a simple, predefined entity within a democracy, the electorate is in fact the product of a "multiplicity," an "arrangement" (Deleuze, Guattari, 1987) encompassing bureaucracy, biometric kits, financial resources, regulations, sociopolitical conditions, the media, as well as negotiation and improvisation practices at the heart of population register management. This association of human and non-human, material and immaterial entities (Suchman, 2007) plays a crucial role in individuals' ability to become voters, without their agency disappearing entirely.

From a theoretical perspective, this analysis first draws from the research of Michael Lipsky (1980), Thomas Bierschenk and Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan (2014), and Didier Fassin et al. (2015). These authors have documented how bureaucrats can be confronted with complex realities in the field, forcing them to develop new practices, sometimes outside the regulatory framework, to solve concrete problems and ensure the continuous functioning of bureaucracies. Nevertheless, our study differs from these works by showing counterintuitively that a hostile institutional environment does not always lead to corrupt practices but sometimes results in agents overinvesting in their roles. In Cameroon, it is kit operators who approach users to convince them to register for a vote that is not mandatory. This situation opens the door to reflection on the professional ethos and "habitus" (Bourdieu, 1980) that these agents deploy in such a context. In this regard, the analysis draws on literature on public action in Africa (Darbon, Proveni, 2018), the importation of New Public Management norms, and the development of privatizations (Hibou, 2004) as well as on works on the circulation of ideas, norms, and expert knowledge promoted by international organizations (Dezalay, 2004; Delpeuch, 2009; Nay, 2017).

This article also draws from the literature on the "kit" as an intervention infrastructure, found in work on biosecurity (Lakoff and Collier, 2008) and participation (Marres, 2012; Kelty, 2019; Eyenga, 2023b), to account for how this device plays a central role in what Didier Fassin (2011) calls "humanitarian reason." As a technology that is disseminated, translated, and intertwined in local practices (Rottenburg, Ballim, Kotzen, 2023), the "biometric kit" is an assembly of tools stored in standardized, mobile boxes for quick use in intervention fields. It is designed to ensure that the biometric system can be transported to locations where potential voters are, both nationally and in diplomatic missions abroad. However, it poses enormous challenges, as shown by its use in recent elections in Kenya with expensive but faulty kits (Breckenridge, 2019), leading agents to deploy "agile practices" to continue registrations. These are co-construction, iteration, and improvisation practices that form a new mode of governance adapted to contexts of urgency or uncertainty, based on bureaucratic flexibility and technical acceleration (Eyenga, 2023a).

This text first reviews the political context in Cameroon to understand the stakes around the construction of the electorate (1), then describes the regulations on registration, showing the limits of the legal

framework alone in producing registers (2). It continues by analyzing the actual practices of Elecam agents and the challenges they face in their work (3), before finally addressing the implications of these registration practices on the right to vote (4).

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