WORKING PAPER

EMB Composition in European Comparison

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Election management bodies (EMBs) can be classified according to different criteria; their composition or recruitment is one of them. EMBs are said to follow a “governmental approach” when elections are administered by regular civil servants, a “judicial approach” when judges are tasked to oversee elections, a “multi-party approach” when the electoral body is composed of the representatives of political parties, or an “expert approach”, when political parties designate by consensus a group of experienced individuals known for their independence.¹ International IDEA has used the simplified classification of “independent”, “government” and “mixed” models.² Recent studies emphasize that the organisational structure of EMBs is more complex than their classification, arguing that current typologies fail to capture the full range of EMB designs.³

EMB model ⁴		
Independent	Governmental	Mixed
BU, EE, FI, HR, LV, MT, PL, RO, SV; AL, ME, NM	BE, CY, CZ, DE, DK, GR, IE, IT, LT, LU, SE; UK	AT ⁵ , ES, FR, HU, NL, PT, SK

There are no international standards or commitments with respect to the formulae for the composition of EMBs, although some good practices have been provided.⁶ Many countries, especially those that have experienced transitions from authoritarian rule to multiparty democracy – including in Central and Eastern Europe – have chosen multi-party-based EMBs.⁷ Despite this trend towards the establishment of independent, multi-party-based commissions with permanent staff, in particular in new or emerging democracies, in many democracies elections are still conducted under the aegis of the executive branch, most frequently by the Ministry of the Interior. Austria uses a mixed model, which will be described below.

Many electoral analysts believe that having political party representatives on an EMB facilitates consensus among actors in the electoral contest and enhances transparency, both of which improve confidence in the electoral process. Voters may feel more encouraged to participate in elections if the leaders of political parties play an active role in the electoral process, specifically through representation on the EMB. Yet a political party-based EMB can imperil or cripple decision-making, especially where political parties’ critical interests are at stake. Multi-party-based EMBs also tend to generate dissatisfaction among smaller parties that might be excluded from the EMB.⁸

However, the above-mentioned typologies pertain to composition and recruitment at the top-level, and not at the level of sub-ordinate commissions and polling stations. During recent years, new comparative research has been undertaken to study various aspects of electoral management, including its organisational design. However, comparative data about the recruitment of presiding officers (POs) and polling station boards (PSBs) appears not to be readily available. Toby et al (2019: 301) include “the temporary staff that assist in running polling stations on election-day” among others in the category of EMB personnel, but questions of recent surveys do not seem dedicated to these human resources in detail.⁹

For participating States of the Organization of Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), information about the appointment and composition of polling station leadership and members is partly included in election reports of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR).¹⁰ However, this is a rather complex subject with significant variation, and the OSCE/ODIHR reports do not always elaborate on the exact composition of the polling station committees.

For the purpose of this preliminary research, and to put the findings pertaining to Austria in regional context, the research team looked into the last available OSCE/ODIHR reports (stemming from 2017 to 2021, including some earlier reports where applicable). This comparison includes data of all EU 27 member states, of the former EU member state United Kingdom, and of the EU accession candidate countries Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia. The comparative analysis undertaken resulted in a further distinction to be made between the recruitment of POs and PSBs.

The tables below illustrate that Austria shares its model of appointments of poll workers by political parties predominantly with countries in its eastern neighbourhood, but the results are different for the appointment of presiding officers and the EMB at the top level, indicating the need to conduct further research into EMB compositions and the correlations between various levels.

Presiding Officers				
Party Nominees	Civil Servants	Judges/Lawyers	Voters /Citizens	Mixed options
BU, CZ ¹¹ , FI, HU, PL ¹² , SK, SI; AL, ME	CY ¹³ , FR, DE	GR, HR ¹⁴	IE, IT, RO, ES ¹⁵ , NL SE; UK	AT ¹⁶ , BE ¹⁷ , DK ¹⁸ , EE ¹⁹ , LV ²⁰ , LT ²¹ , LU ²² , MT, PT ²³ , MK ²⁴ ,

For the level of presiding officers, in nine countries they are nominated by political parties whereas in three they are civil servants and in two they are judges or lawyers. In seven countries, the PSB chairs are regular citizens or voters. In Austria, while the POs are usually civil servants, there is also the possibility for ordinary citizens to take this role. Therefore, Austria is listed together with nine other countries that have mixed models.

Polling Station Boards				
Party Nominees	Civil Servants	Voters/Citizens		Mixed composition
		randomly selected	volunteering, or recruited & paid	
AT, BU, HR, CZ ²⁵ , FI, PL ²⁶ , RO, SK, SI; AL, ME	CYP ²⁷	BE, GR, ES ²⁸	IE, IT, LU, NL, SE; UK	DK ²⁹ , EE ³⁰ , FR ³¹ , HU ³² , DE ³³ , LT ³⁴ , LV ³⁵ , MT ³⁶ , PT ³⁷ , MK ³⁸

For the level of polling station members, ten countries pursue a similar system as Austria, with PSBs being composed of members nominated by political parties. It is therefore the most common model. Most of the countries using this model are central and eastern European countries, with the exception of Finland. Only one country, Cyprus, relies on civil servants as PSB members, with the possibility to also nominate unemployed university graduates.

Nine other countries rely on citizens as polling station members, but employ different ways of recruitment. Six countries – Ireland, Italy, Luxemburg, the Netherlands, Sweden, and the United Kingdom – recruit citizens/voters as PSB members. Citizens can volunteer for this task, or are specifically recruited and paid. Three countries – Belgium, Greece and Spain – rely on a random selection of voters to staff PSBs. Ten countries use mixed models to staff their polling stations for election day, commonly a mix of nominees from political parties and appointees from the local administration.³⁹

Where to take it from here?

Based on this preliminary desk review of EMB models and PSB types in Europe, a more in-depth study could be developed to undertake research into the classification of election administrations at various hierarchical levels to better understand the empirical realities of election administrations and poll workers in Europe, not the least in the context of ongoing electoral reform debates at European and EU member state level.

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¹ López-Pintor 2000: 20, following Garber 1994 and Harris 1997.

² International IDEA 2014. Compare <https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/electoral-management-design>.

³ James et al 2019: 305; cf. Clark and James 2021

⁴ Based on International IDEA 2014, compare <https://www.idea.int/data-tools/continent-view/Europe/54> (accessed on 27 January 2021). Note that in the recent European Electoral Management Survey, EMBs were asked how they saw themselves, and 17 identified themselves as independent while 9 categorised themselves as within a government department (James et al 2020: 3).

⁵ AT was classified differently in the International IDEA Handbook (2014) and the corresponding database; the classification here is the authors' own.

⁶ Nevertheless, based on context-specific assessments, OSCE/ODIHR has suggested reconsiderations of the rules for the composition of specific EMBs at all or some levels. See OSCE/ODIHR Electoral Legislation Review 2013: 12. As for good practices, see for example section II.3.1 of the 2002 Venice Code of Good Practice on Electoral Matters of the Council of Europe.

⁷ International IDEA 2014: 110.

⁸ International IDEA 2014: 111.

⁹ The ELECT survey of the Electoral Integrity Project and the Electoral Management Survey (EMS) – the inclusion of PBS-related questions needs to be further analysed.

¹⁰ See <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections>.

¹¹ If the parties and candidates fail to provide sufficient nominations for PSB members, the mayors appoint additional members from among municipal workers or volunteers. See OSCE/ODIHR EAM FR 2013, p.6, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/f/0/101126.pdf>

¹² In case of insufficient nominations from political parties (electoral committees), an election commissioner could select PSB members from citizen applicants, See OSCE ODIHR EAM FR 2020, pp.5-7, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/6/2/464601.pdf>

¹³ Civil servants as well as unemployed university graduates, see OSCE/ODIHR EAM FR 2018 p.4f; see <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/9/8/379225.pdf>

¹⁴ Chairpersons, selected by the Supreme Court from judges, lawyers and law students; see: OSCE/ODIHR EAM FR 2019 p. 5-7; <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/d/f/442168.pdf>

¹⁵ PSB members are selected by lottery among all literate voters registered in the corresponding electoral section; see OSCE/ODIHR EAM FR 2012, p. 9; <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/5/0/88222.pdf>

¹⁶ While in most cases the PO is a civil servant, any citizen not affiliated to a party could also be appointed as PO.

¹⁷ Placed in two columns as PSBs and counting offices are headed by judges, attorneys, or civil servants. See OSCE ODIHR NAM Report 2019, p.5f, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/7/f/416432.pdf>

¹⁸ PSBs have between five and nine members and are composed of party nominees and non-partisan volunteers selected by the municipality, OSCE/ODIHR NAM Report 2019, p.5, see https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/4/d/419231_0.pdf

¹⁹ PSB members are proposed by city and municipality secretaries. Political parties participating in the elections are entitled to nominate the remaining VDC members, one per party per committee; See: OSCE/ODIHR EET FR 2019, p.4f; see <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/8/e/424229.pdf>

²⁰ Political parties and groups of at least ten voters have a right to nominate PSB members. Therefore anyone could be appointed as PO. See: OSCE/ODIHR EAM FR 2014, p. 5; see <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/0/9/132416.pdf>

²¹ PSB members predominantly represent political parties as PBS comprise of one nominee from each of the Ministries of Justice, Lithuanian Lawyers Association, and local administration, as well as from all parties that won a proportional seat in the last parliamentary elections. See OSCE/ODIHR NAM Report 2020, p.5f; <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/2/f/449398.pdf>

²² PSB chairpersons are appointed by chairpersons of higher election office from among the judges of the respective levels of courts or voters from corresponding municipalities. OSCE/ODIHR NAM Report 2018, p.4; see https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/0/d/389582_0.pdf

²³ If nominated, it is compulsory for any voter registered within the respective parish to act as a PSB member. Also contesting political parties can nominate PSB members, See: OSCE/ODIHR EAM FR 2009, p.10; see <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/7/6/41003.pdf>

²⁴ The ruling political parties and the parties in opposition that won the most votes in the last parliamentary elections each nominate for every election one temporary PSB member and their deputies; the remaining three PSB members are randomly selected from a database of state employees. See: OSCE/ODIHR EOM FR 2020, pp. 8-10; see https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/b/e/465648_2.pdf

²⁵ If the parties and candidates fail to provide sufficient nominations for PSC members, the mayors appoint additional members from among municipal workers or volunteers. See: OSCE/ODIHR EAM FR 2013, p.6, see <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/f/0/101126.pdf>

²⁶ In case of insufficient nominations from political parties (electoral committees), an election commissioner could select PSB members from citizen applicants, See: OSCE ODIHR EAM FR 2020, pp.5-7, see <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/6/2/464601.pdf>

²⁷ Civil servants as well as unemployed university graduates, see OSCE/ODIHR EAM FR 2018 p.4f, see <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/9/8/379225.pdf>

²⁸ PSB members are selected by lottery among all literate voters registered in the corresponding electoral section; see OSCE/ODIHR EAM FR 2012, p. 9; <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/5/0/88222.pdf>

²⁹ PSBs have between 5-9 members and are composed of party nominees and non-partisan volunteers selected by the municipality, see: OSCE/ODIHR NAM Report 2019, p.5, see https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/4/d/419231_0.pdf

³⁰ Half of the members are nominated by the municipal or city secretary, while the other half are nominated by the political parties, one per party per committee; See: OSCE/ODIHR EET FR 2019, p.4f; see <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/8/e/424229.pdf>

³¹ The municipalities appoint 4v members to PSBs, including the chairpersons. Each candidate or political party could designate one additional polling board member. See: OSCE/ODIHR EAM FR 2012, p.6; see <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/7/7/93621.pdf>

³² The PSB consists of 3 members elected by the local government (LG) as proposed by the head of LG who are politically appointed municipal clerks. Each electoral contestant in a constituency can appoint two members to the PSB. See: OSCE/ODIHR EOM FR p.7f, see <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/0/9/385959.pdf>

³³ PSBs have 3-7 members appointed from among voters. Parties are entitled to nominate members; see OSCE/ODIHR NAM Report 2017 p.4f; <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/2/e/333511.pdf>

³⁴ Political parties and groups of at least 10 voters have a right to nominate PSC members. See OSCE/ODIHR EAM FR 2014, p. 5; <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/0/9/132416.pdf>

³⁵ PSCs (...) comprise from five to seven members appointed by the respective MECs. Political parties and coalitions, groups of at least ten voters, and individual members of the municipal council may nominate representatives to the MECs and PSCs. Individual members of the MECs may nominate representatives to the PSCs. See OSCE/ODIHR NAM Report 2018, p.5; https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/f/a/387665_0.pdf

³⁶ Either nominees by the Electoral Commission or of political parties, See: OSCE/ODIHR EAM FR 2017, p.6f; see <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/3/4/348671.pdf>

³⁷ If nominated, it is compulsory for any voter registered within the respective parish to act as a PSB member. Also contesting political parties can nominate PSB members, See: OSCE/ODIHR EAM FR 2009, p.10; see <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/7/6/41003.pdf>

³⁸ The ruling political parties and the parties in opposition that won the most votes in the last parliamentary elections each nominate for every election one temporary PSB member and their deputies; the remaining three PSB members are randomly selected from a database of state employees. See OSCE/ODIHR EOM FR 2020, pp. 8-10; https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/b/e/465648_2.pdf

³⁹ An interesting method of recruitment has Latvia where political parties and groups of at least 10 voters have a right to nominate PSB members. See OSCE/ODIHR EAM FR 2014, p. 5; <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/0/9/132416.pdf>