

Open Electoral Data: Too Many Challenges

Submitted on 09 Apr 2014 by Martin Alvarez-Espinar

Open Electoral Data is a [hot topic](#) on the ePSI Platform this month. This type of information seems to be public in most European territories, but not all. Electoral information is more than results and statistics; it also includes data about parties, candidates, funds and processes. Traditionally, elections are widely covered by media agencies, where designers and journalists develop intuitive visualizations, enabling citizens to analyze electoral results almost in real time. This blog post has been written gathering comments and thoughts from the ePSI experts to start the discussion ahead of our [webinar on Open Electoral Data to be held on Friday](#).

Although it may initially seem that there are only problems of interoperability in terms of technology, there are actually many other aspects (legal, organizational and cultural) that make electoral data difficult to open in a standard way.

The wide variety of different approaches towards elections is the main challenge in Europe. Even if all EU countries are ‘representative democracies’, every country organises voting in their own way, based on national laws. Also, the ways that voting results determine who gets elected differ between countries, with proportional representation, weighted votes, district-based and first-past-the-post approaches, minimum percentages for entry in a representative body, single or multiple round systems being adopted in different countries. In fact, there are probably no two countries in Europe that use exactly the same approach. This is certainly a challenge for people and organisations that want to re-use election data, but it seems to be something that we are not able to change, at least not in the near future.

These enormous differences, even within nation states are what make re-use difficult. Electoral processes at different levels of government (local, regional, federal), even elections on the same level within the same country, need to be modelled differently. Many variables have to be taken into account depending on the region – even absentee ballots are not handled in the same way.

One important sector that re-uses election data is the media, with news outlets including a variety of data in their coverage of elections. In many cases, they show tabular data per election district with aggregations on the regional and national level. They also use the public algorithms to calculate the assignment of seats, although the election authority takes the final decision. In many countries, all election results are published by a single national authority, e.g. [The Electoral Commission \(UK\)](#), [Kiesraad \(NL\)](#), [Ministry of the Interior \(ES\)](#), [Der Bundeswahlleiter \(DE\)](#), [Ministry of the Interior \(FR\)](#), and/or by the national statistical office. News outlets and other interested entities (such as election watchdogs and civic platforms) can build re-use facilities based on the formats that are used by the election authority.

These legal and organisational differences are transposed to technology. So, the lack of standardised formats and protocols for representing and transmitting results and other electoral information is also a challenge for the re-users. There is also a need for accurate information and metadata about the status of the polling process (incidents, closing time, etc), that is not always given as open data. Also, common information such as the campaign finance or the regulation of political broadcasting is not always exposed and may be useful for transparency.

Another important aspect is the geo-information, key to representing and visualizing information, but not always available. Electoral districts are usually different from the administrative districts; although these may also vary from one electoral period to another. Thus, publication of the official

geodata shape files of electoral districts for usual election map visualisations could be difficult, as they are managed by different administrative-level public bodies.

For further re-use beyond national boundaries, the European Commission and the European Parliament are organisations that could promote a coordination platform of national election authorities, which in consultation with the main re-users (news services, research organisations, and civil organisations) could determine how to streamline publication and re-use of electoral data across Europe. Development of standards for basic metadata formats (e.g. where to put full party names and their official abbreviations, candidates' names and affiliations, country language), could be the first step to enhance interoperability among different administrations. European elections could act as an example of best practice to enhance re-use in national, regional, and local governments.

If you would like to discuss Open Electoral Data in more detail, join our [webinar](#) dedicated to the topic.

This blog post has been created by the members of the Advisory Board: [Daniel Dietrich](#), [Max Dekkers](#), and [Phil Archer](#).