

19 September 2023

Oral Reply to Parliamentary Questions on the Removal of Names from the Registers of Electors Eligible to Vote at Presidential Election 2023 and Technical Issues with Electronic Voter Registration System during Presidential Election 2023

Questions:

Mr Pritam Singh: To ask the Prime Minister in view of the Elections Department's press statement dated 24 August 2023 regarding the wrongful removal of names from the Registers of Electors after General Election 2020 (a) how many times has this happened in the aftermath of past elections or by-elections; and (b) what steps will be taken to prevent a re-occurrence.

Dr Tan Wu Meng: To ask the Prime Minister (a) how many polling stations experienced technical issues with the electronic voter registration system during the 2023 Presidential Election; (b) whether cyber interference for the technical issues experienced has been ruled out; and (c) what is being done to (i) ensure that all who voted were correctly registered and (ii) prevent a repeat of situations where persons remember voting in the 2020 General Election but which names were not in the 2023 updated Registers of Electors.

Ms He Ting Ru: To ask the Prime Minister regarding voters who were removed from the electoral register due to an error (a) what was the total number of voters affected; (b) whether there was any individual notification exercise to expunged voters in reminding them to add their name back to the register since the last such exercise in 2019; and (c) why was a tally of the number of NRICs scanned and the number of votes collected after the last general election not conducted as a first instance check.

Mr Liang Eng Hwa: To ask the Prime Minister (a) what are the reasons resulting in the names of about 200 Singaporeans not being reflected in the Registers of Electors eligible to vote at Presidential Election 2023 despite voting in General Election 2020; and (b) what are measures taken to prevent such recurrence.

Oral Reply by Mr Chan Chun Sing, Minister of Education, for the Prime Minister:

Mr Speaker, on behalf of the Prime Minister, may I have your permission to answer PQs 1 to 4 by Mr Liang Eng Hwa, Mr Pritam Singh, Dr Tan Wu Meng, and Ms He Ting Ru on today's Order Paper? Thank you, Mr Speaker.

2 Let me first set out ELD's key executional objectives at every election – which is to ensure firstly that only bona fide voters are issued with ballot papers, secondly that no extra ones were put in, and thirdly that all votes cast are counted, so that the election result is determined by the eligible voters for that election.

3 To achieve this, we have put in place a set of procedures that need to be complied with. Let me explain.

4 Upon the voter's arrival at the polling station, the election official will verify his identity and eligibility to vote at the polling station, and then register the voter's attendance via a hardcopy polling station register or the electronic registration system. Thereafter, the voter is directed to the ballot paper issuance counter. The election official issuing the ballot paper is required, by law, to read out the name and voter serial number of a voter before the voter is issued a ballot paper. This allows the polling agents to mark their copy of the register and provide an additional check to ensure that only eligible voters in the register for that polling station are individually issued with a ballot paper. As a result, when the votes are tallied for an election, we can be confident that the outcome is the one decided by the eligible voters for that election.

5 After the end of each election, ELD compiles the list of voters registered to have voted on Polling Day and compares them against the list of voters in the certified Registers of Electors for the election. Those who were not registered as having voted on Polling Day are included in the list of non-voters, which is published after each election for inspection. The non-voter list contains the names of people who have not turned up to vote. The vast majority of them did not vote either because they were not in Singapore or were ill on Polling Day. For these cases, their names were not crossed out in the hardcopy polling registers as they did not turn up at the polling stations. After each election, there would be a few voters who claimed that they had voted even though upon checking, their names were not crossed out in the hardcopy polling registers. Thus, in reply to Mr Pritam Singh's question, prior to the introduction of electronic registration at GE2020, ELD encountered only a few cases of voters who were on the non-voter list who claimed that they had voted.

6 For GE2020, GE2015 and GE2011, ELD recorded about 111,000, 155,000 and 147,000 non-voters respectively. As can be seen, the non-voter list for GE2020 was much smaller, rather than bigger than the two previous GEs.

7 As per every election, ELD published the non-voter list for voters to verify, about 3 months after GE2020. This was publicised via a press release on 5 Oct 2020 which was covered by mainstream media.

8 Ms He asked why a tally of the number of NRICs scanned and the number of votes cast after the last general election was not conducted as a first instance check. Given the much lower number of non-voters for GE2020 compared to the two general elections before, ELD did not suspect that an unusual number of voters had not been recorded as registered. Checking the registration figures at the end of polling day may also not be instructive – and this is because the process to ensure voting secrecy means that we will not be able to identify individual voters, including those who had not been registered accurately and would therefore be listed as non-voters in due course. Furthermore, every voter receives only one ballot paper and the ballot boxes which contain all cast ballot papers are always in the custody of election officials, properly sealed with polling and counting agents able to witness this process and secured while in transit.

9 Ahead of Presidential Election 2023, ELD publicised that the revised Registers were available for inspection from 15 June 2023 and that the certified Registers which contains updated information from the inspection period were available for inspection

from 21 July 2023. These exercises were carried out to enable Singaporeans to check their details and restore their names to the Registers ahead of the election.

10 From October 2020 to the day of the Writ in August this year, some 32,000 voters checked and restored their names. Similar to previous exercises, there were very few who requested ELD to restore their names due to inaccuracy in the recording of their voting status in GE2020. As such, ELD did not suspect that there were significant inaccuracies in the recording.

11 The list of non-voters had been opened for inspection shortly after the GE2020, and the public were reminded that the registers were available for inspection in June and July 2023 before the Writ for PE23 was issued. Voters need not wait for these periods, but are able to check their status in the registers all year round either through the Voter Services on ELD's website, at any of the over 100 community centres/clubs or by calling ELD. However, there remained some voters who did not check that their names were on the registers. After the Writ was issued for PE2023 and up to Polling Day, 1,093 Singaporeans informed the ELD that they did not receive their poll card even though they said that they had voted in GE2020. For context, this number averages one voter per polling station which had on average 2,400 registered voters in GE2020. Further, ELD's analysis of the distribution of the affected voters showed that there is no pattern across the polling stations and that the 1,093 cases were distributed across more than 500 polling stations.

12 ELD has investigated this and concluded that the most probable cause of the error was that the NRIC details of these affected voters had not been captured properly by the electronic registration system, which was only introduced from GE2020. This is because the proper registration procedure may not have been followed for the affected voters, especially for some of the more crowded stations.

13 Let me explain. A voter's NRIC and poll card are first checked by election officials at the registration counter before the NRIC is scanned to register the voter. When the NRIC of a voter is scanned by the barcode reader, an alert or "beep" sound will be emitted, and a digital screen will flash an "Ok" button, indicating that the voter data has been successfully captured in the system. At this point, the election official should tap the "Ok" button to return to the registration screen so that the NRIC of the next voter can be scanned.

14 If the NRIC of the next voter is scanned when the screen has not returned to the registration screen, the alert sound will still be emitted, as this indicates that the NRIC had been scanned. However, the record of this voter would not have been captured. It is likely that in their effort to clear the queues at some polling stations quickly in GE2020, some election officials might have missed out this step. As a result, the registration of the affected voters was not captured.

15 For Presidential Election 2023, we implemented a new electronic registration system with a simplified process. Election officials need not press any button to return to the registration screen to register the next voter. Therefore, the issue of non-captured registrations as a result of not pressing a button would no longer arise.

16 Dr Tan asked what is being done to ensure that all who voted were registered and Dr Tan, Mr Singh and Mr Liang asked what will be done to prevent a recurrence where those who had voted were inadvertently removed from the Registers. Going forward, besides making a public call for voters to check their status when the non-voter list is published for verification, ELD will institute an additional measure to individually inform Singaporeans on the non-voter list via mail and through SG Notify in Singpass to verify their status, and to restore their names to the Registers if need be. We thank Ms Ng Ling Ling for her suggestion.

17 Dr Tan asked about the number of polling stations that experienced technical issues with the electronic registration system during the recent Presidential Election 2023. Based on ELD's preliminary investigations, there was a 30% average loss in device connectivity in the first hour of polling and this reduced to 16% by 10am. There was no evidence that this was caused by cyber-attacks. Instead, this could have been partly contributed by the surge in the volume of transactions during the morning peak, when about 52 percent of the total number of voters had already voted in the first 4 hours, compared to 32 percent in GE2020.

18 For Presidential Election 2023, ELD had endeavoured to reduce queues and waiting times for the convenience of voters. The number of polling stations was increased by 15% to 1,264 stations, from the 1,097 in GE2020. This reduced the average number of voters assigned to a polling station from about 2,400 voters in GE2020 to 2,150 voters in PE2023. Each polling station also had more e-Registration devices than before, from between two to four devices each, proportionate to the number of voters in the polling stations, with an additional spare device each for contingency. For reference, a polling station with only two e-Registration devices can process at least 6 voters per min on average, which is a 50 percent higher throughput compared to the manual registration rate which does so at an average of 4 voters per minute.

19 I would like to take this opportunity to thank our election officials who adapted quickly and kicked in the contingency measure as planned to register voters using the hardcopy registers, which they had been trained to do. As a result, by about 9.55am, ELD had reported that queues had improved at most polling stations. We would also like to thank voters who had to queue longer during the morning of Polling Day for their patience and understanding.

20 The electronic Registration system seeks to reduce waiting times and automate attendance taking for the benefit of our voters. ELD will continue to enhance the system so that the registration data are captured swiftly and accurately.