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Documents

**Indicators for Democratic Debate –
Informing the Public at General
Elections**

Indicators for Democratic Debate - Informing the Public at General Elections¹

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One possible way for official statistics to become more useful and visible in the public debate is to gear the publication programme towards major events in society, such as local and general elections. In the run-up to the last three elections, Statistics Norway has published statistics and background analyses considered relevant to issues addressed in the election campaign. The response has been overwhelmingly positive and there have been no complaints that Statistics Norway interferes in the political debate or presents biased information.

Statistics Norway has presented statistics considered relevant for the election campaign, *Election Statistics*, in the run-up to the last three elections – in 1999, 2001 and 2003. The 1999 and 2003 elections were local and regional elections, whereas the 2001 election was a general parliamentary election.

Prior to each of the elections, Statistics Norway has published approximately 20 presentations on www.ssb.no. The presentations consist of articles on various topics, together with relevant charts and tables. Like the rest of the material on Statistics Norway's web pages, the articles are free of charge and available to everyone at the same time.

In the three weeks before election day, one or two presentations are published on ssb.no every weekday. Election Statistics is located on a separate web page (only in Norwegian, see below for translations of some of the titles).

Why present Election Statistics?

The main reason for setting up this service is that we strongly believe that official statistics can contribute to election debates being based on sound facts. Democracy works best if one can agree on some basic facts about society, including an understanding of the working of the economy. The debate should, as far as possible, be about goals and the measures required to achieve them. Measuring government performance is, of course, at the very centre of election debates, both at local and central elections.

Statistics Norway publishes approximately 900 new releases on www.ssb.no every year. Many people, including journalists and politicians, find it difficult to find their way around websites, and hence the statistics may not be used as often as they could be. Preparing a special election page is a way of guiding the user to the right place and perhaps also to other statistics of interest (for instance, Statistics Norway has comprehensive statistics on municipality activities, living conditions and macroeconomic performance). It is all about making the statistics accessible.

There is also a more selfish reason behind Election Statistics: to promote Statistics Norway. By showing that our statistics are relevant and important, we show the same for our institution. Finally, these activities also contribute to making the organisation more conscious

¹ Based on a paper for STATISTICS USERS' CONFERENCE, London 13 November 2003. Marianne Tønnesen and Jan-Erik Kristiansen helped me in preparing the paper.

of its role in society in general. This role is clearly stated in the first paragraph of our strategy plan Strategy 2002-:

Official statistics and analyses based on these statistics shall give the general public, businesses and the authorities knowledge of the structure, development and functioning of the society. Such knowledge strengthens democracy and provides a basis for a sustainable economic, social and ecological development.

Who are the users?

The main target group is journalists. Norwegian journalists are active users of statistics, and they pass on Statistics Norway's material more or less unedited to a broad audience or use the statistics as background material for news articles.

Other target groups include politicians who need facts for their election campaigns and the public in general (although most of the general public get statistical information through the media).

With the target groups in mind, articles and charts must be well presented and reader-friendly. The language must be clear and simple, the title and lead must catch the readers' interest and the article must show in what way the statistics are relevant for society and people's everyday life.

What are the topics?

It is difficult to foresee which topics will be of most interest in an election campaign. Before the topics for Election Statistics are chosen, Statistics Norway normally asks the main TV stations and newspapers for their opinion on what will be the main issues.²

With some twenty different topics, Statistics Norway has always covered the main fields of electoral discussions. The topics must be of relevance to the election, and they must be topics on which we can provide good statistics, such as the economy, demography, industry and commerce, living conditions, poverty, education, migration and the environment.

Some examples of headlines of published articles during last year's election campaign:

- "Few pupils in an increasing number of private schools"
- "Long way to go for gender equality in municipal councils"
- "Lower greenhouse gas emissions per inhabitant in cities than in the country"
- "The financial situation of municipalities"
- "Immigrant voting could prove decisive for election result"

How the work is done

Elections in Norway take place in mid-September. The planning of the election presentations starts in April. The Department of Communication is responsible for the implementation, although the statisticians themselves prepare all the articles, graphs and tables.

The Department of Communication and the statisticians find relevant topics and draw up a publishing plan by the end of June. During the summer, the statisticians prepare the presentations. To ensure that they are reader-friendly and accessible to non-specialists, the

² However, before the election last year Statistics Norway was contacted by the main TV station to get our opinion before they started planning their election coverage!

journalists in the Department of Communication edit all texts in co-operation with the authors.

The election articles are published at the same time as Statistics Norway's ordinary daily releases (10 am). The title and lead are presented alongside other releases on Statistics Norway's main web site.

Response and feedback

The response from the media and journalists who use the presentations has been overwhelmingly positive and most articles are referred to in the press on the day of publication.

To avoid any allegations of interference in the election campaign, the topics are selected and the releases announced well in advance. There have been no complaints that Statistics Norway interferes in the political debate or presents biased information.

Relevant material in addition to Election Statistics

At the start of last year's election campaign, Statistics Norway also launched a new and updated version of its *Municipal Fact Sheet*. Here, approximately 40 key indicators describing Norway's 434 municipalities (in addition to districts in the 31 largest municipalities), are presented. The indicators cover a wide range of topics, such as:

- population map
- population (past and future)
- population structure
- percentage of children in kindergarten
- educational attainment (male and female)
- labour force participation rates and unemployment rates (male and female)
- election statistics (voter turnout and votes cast per party)
- the economic situation of municipalities (income and expenses)
- work force in primary, secondary and tertiary industries
- income per capita (male and female)
- housing
- health and social care

The indicators are presented in maps, tables and charts. When relevant, indicators are compared to corresponding average figures at county level and for Norway as a whole.

Most of the indicators are constructed on basis of data from *StatBank Norway* (Statistics Norway's statistical database). Included in the database are data from KOSTRA (an abbreviation for Municipality-State-Reporting), which is operated by Statistics Norway. KOSTRA focuses on two purposes:

- To provide better information about municipalities (and public hospitals), both for the general public and the media and for central and local government. The information includes the most important public services (social care, health care, education, child care, kindergartens etc.) and public administration. This coherent data collection makes it possible to combine data from many sources, for example data on accounts and data on services and personnel. The focus has also been on comparability between municipalities

in order to enable benchmarking as part of the political management processes. Timeliness is vital. Information is collected in February and the first figures are published in March. Revised figures are published in June.

- More efficient reporting. All data reporting from municipalities are electronic, by use of electronic forms or file extracts. The same data should not be collected more than once, even if they are used for many purposes.

The publishing includes a number of fixed indicators on the municipalities' *priorities*, *productivity* and the *coverage of needs*. It is structured to enable comparisons of one municipality with the average for the comparable group of municipalities, the region or the country as a whole. The database also includes detailed data that enable users to construct their own indicators and tables.

In order to encourage and increase the use of statistics, Statistics Norway last year visited several regional and local newspapers, giving introductions to the technical aspects of the system as well as advising the journalists on how to use (and not to use) the statistics. These in-house training courses have been very popular and will also be arranged in the future.

The role of performance indicators

As described above, Election Statistics, Municipal Fact Sheets and our publicly available statistical database include a number of performance indicators, covering most areas related to government activity. However, it is fair to say that most of these indicators are *input* measures or simple *output* per unit of input measures. At the moment, few indicators measure *outcomes* related to inputs. In addition, there are only a few *composite* indicators. Together with research institutes and Ministries, Statistics Norway is involved in the development of user satisfaction indicators and more elaborate measurements of outcomes, especially in the area of education and health.

The units considered in our database may be a municipality, a school, a hospital or a kindergarten, only restricted by confidentiality considerations. The publication of such data is, with certain confidentiality restrictions, made possible due to a recent policy change at Statistics Norway, but it only applies to units in the public sector. The argument is that since these units are owned and financed by the citizens, the citizens are entitled to information which is necessary to judge their performance.

Statistics Norway has also developed a few composite indicators. Two examples related to *living conditions* and *gender equality* are given below.

Municipal social and health data 2003

Living conditions - still problems in cities and the north

There are still marked geographical differences in living conditions. Many municipalities in northern Norway experience a large concentration of problems, whereas these problems are relatively few in many small municipalities in western Norway.

Gender equality index for Norwegian municipalities, 2002

Hammerfest and Sør-Varanger on top

The gender equality index for 2002 indicates that Hammerfest and Sør-Varanger are the most gender-equal municipalities in the country. Among the counties, Oslo, Finnmark and Akershus are on top, whereas the Agder-counties and Møre og Romsdal are at the bottom.

The inherited weaknesses of all indicators, e.g. their partial nature not taking into account the relationship between them, can only be overcome by more complete and comprehensive analyses based on research. In the presentation of such indicators we are therefore drawing upon research and analysis done in Statistics Norway.

One example is our reports on *the state of the economy, including forecasts* for the next two years and thorough analyses of the effects and direction of *monetary and fiscal policies*.

Economic trends for Norway and abroad

Low interest rates stimulate the Norwegian economy

The Norwegian economy probably passed a cyclical trough during the 2nd quarter this year. The next two years will be marked by a moderate cyclical upswing. In the short term unemployment will continue to rise but is expected to pass a peak early in 2004.

The report is presented four times a year, building on the quarterly national accounts, econometric studies and model simulations. In the election year, the third report of the year is published five days before election day, i.e. on the second Thursday in September. The output is basically a set of economic indicators within the national accounting framework.

Conclusion

Official statistics, including government performance indicators, are indispensable parts of a democratic election campaign. Instead of staying out, the NSIs should be more active than ever during elections. If our statistics are not useful when people are making their most crucial decisions as citizens, when are they?

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