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Election Integrity: Safeguarding Foundations of Democracy

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Understanding Election Integrity

When evaluating the quality of an electoral process, references to 'free and fair elections' are often made. In this context, what does the term 'election integrity' mean, and how does it relate to other qualifications and established principles of democratic elections?

Election integrity is a broader concept that includes the principles of freedom and fairness of elections but expands far beyond them. As the understanding of democratic processes has evolved and their complexity has continued to increase, election integrity has emerged as a more comprehensive framework both for conducting and assessing elections.¹

It offers a more nuanced and holistic perspective, considering the entire electoral cycle - from pre-election preparations to post-election analysis. Scrutinizing the quality of the process at every stage, election integrity examines the transparency, impartiality, accountability, and professionalism of the election administration and other institutions, while also assessing the system's resilience against manipulation, fraud, and subversion. Moreover, election integrity considers the broader legislative and political context in which elections occur, including campaign finance regulations, media coverage, dispute resolution mechanisms, and the overall political climate.

At its core, election integrity is ensured when a complex tapestry of safeguards and practices enable the holding of elections in a way that is fair, transparent, inclusive, and resilient to undue influence, thereby reflecting the will of the electorate and nurturing its confidence.



One difference between the veneer of democratic legitimacy and genuine democratic legitimacy is electoral integrity. Where elections have integrity, the bedrock democratic principle of political equality is honoured; citizens select their leaders, and hold them accountable.²

In an era of increasing political polarization and attempts to undermine democratic processes, understanding and safeguarding election integrity has never been more critical.³ This paper reviews some of the key contemporary challenges to election integrity and explores the role that citizens, in particular young people and the civil society organizations (CSO), can play in its protection.

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¹ A recent initiative, [Global Network for Securing Electoral Integrity](#), brings together organizations working worldwide to promote, defend, and strengthen election integrity frameworks and practice.

² [Deepening Democracy: A Strategy for Improving the Integrity of Elections Worldwide; The Report of the Global Commission on Elections, Democracy and Security](#), September 2012, p. 12.

³ Among other tools, a Perceptions of Electoral Integrity Index was developed to measure the integrity of elections. See the [PEI 10.0 report](#) covering 586 elections in 170 countries held in 2021- 2023.

Why Does Election Integrity Matter?

Election integrity is important for several key reasons:

Fulfillment of International Obligations and Protection of Rights	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Principles embodied in election integrity stem from international obligations, standards, and good practice in the field of elections. By upholding election integrity, the country demonstrates its commitment to these international norms and to safeguarding the fundamental human rights that they protect.
Legitimacy of Government	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Election integrity is crucial for establishing and maintaining the legitimacy of elected governments. When elections are conducted with integrity, the resulting government can claim a genuine mandate from the people, enhancing its authority and ability to govern effectively.
Public Trust in Democratic Institutions and Processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Election integrity fosters public trust in democratic institutions and processes. When citizens see that their votes have an impact and that elections are fair and transparent, they are more likely to continue to participate in public and political life and accept the outcomes of elections, even when their preferred candidates do not win.
Prevention of Conflict	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Elections characterized by integrity can serve as a mechanism for transferring power peacefully and solving political disputes. Conversely, flawed elections can trigger social unrest and violent conflict, undermining stability.
Fostering a Democratic Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Holding regular elections with integrity helps to establish and embed democratic norms and practices. Over time, this contributes to building a stronger democratic culture where citizens are more actively involved in the political process and increasingly hold their leaders accountable.

Contemporary Challenges to Election Integrity

No election is without flaws. Research and reports from international and citizen observer organizations consistently highlight various challenges that persist across elections worldwide. Common issues include patchy or overly restrictive legal frameworks, lack of independence and impartiality in electoral bodies and public institutions, limitations on voting rights, intrasparent election administration, and weak electoral dispute resolution mechanisms that fail to provide timely and effective remedies. Addressing these serious challenges to the integrity of elections is critical to safeguarding democratic processes.

At the same time, electoral processes are increasingly threatened by new and evolving issues and phenomena, which can complicate or even jeopardize the conduct of elections. These challenges demand ongoing vigilance, methodological innovation, and the development of robust policies and practical solutions to ensure elections remain fair, resilient, and credible.

1. Political Corruption, Illicit Influence, Misuse of Public Office and Resources

Although these are not new phenomena, political corruption, illicit influence, and the misuse of public office and resources continue to pose significant challenges to the integrity of elections. Practices like vote-buying, manipulation of electoral rolls, and undue influence on election and public officials are pervasive in some contexts, distorting the fairness and credibility of electoral processes. When public resources and funds are misused to gain an unfair advantage, the principle of equal competition among candidates is compromised.

A key issue related to these challenges is the regulation of campaign finance. When campaign finance systems are weak or poorly enforced, they leave loopholes that allow for evading equality, transparency, and accountability. Insufficient campaign finance frameworks is one of the key integrity vulnerabilities often underscored by international observers.

In this context, paid and sponsored content, especially in online media, has emerged as a distinct challenge, as it may be used to covertly influence voter behavior, to the advantage or disadvantage of some candidates, while bypassing fairness, disclosure, and transparency frameworks. Recent efforts within the European Union (EU), such as the Apr. 2024 Transparency and Targeting of Political Advertising (TTPA) regulation, aim to tackle possible illicit influence by obliging content sponsors, online and offline, to ensure transparency in political advertising. These measures are meant to make it easier for users to know when they are being shown paid or sponsored content, who paid for it, and why it is being shown to them. However, the effectiveness of the TTPA, which will be fully applicable only from Oct. 2025, is questioned by some due to the absence of clear due diligence obligations for online platforms and their impact, including outside the EU, remains to be assessed.⁴

2. Disinformation and Vulnerable Information Environment

Disinformation has emerged as one of the major threats to electoral integrity worldwide. It can manipulate public opinion, leading to mistrust in institutions and election results.⁵ The online space, particularly social platforms, has become a breeding ground for the spread of false information, reaching large audiences rapidly. Combating this requires a multi-pronged approach, including regulation, monitoring, and enforcement, but also proactive communication ("pre-bunking"), civic education, and building citizens' digital resilience.⁶

The EU has responded to these challenges with important regulatory measures, such as the [Digital Services Act](#), in force since Feb. 2024, which mandates tech companies to monitor and remove harmful content. The strengthened 2022 [Code of Practice on Disinformation](#) further outlines commitments of online platforms. Increased attention and pressure have led tech firms to enhance their policies against disinformation.⁷ Many monitoring, fact-checking and de-bunking initiatives have also emerged internationally.⁸

Yet, problems remain. Disinformation tactics grow in sophistication, and social media companies continue to struggle to effectively counter information threats. Challenges stem from limited resources and the resultant focus of monitoring efforts mostly on official sources, leaving what is spread by fake media, sites and accounts often unchecked.

3. Technologies

Technologies are increasingly used in elections worldwide to streamline and speed up processes, improve accuracy, and enhance voter access. This includes increased interest in and experimentation with electronic voting machines, biometric voter identification, cameras, vote tabulation systems, and online voting. However, without thorough planning, testing,

⁴ See [Joint Civil Society Statement: Recommendations on the Implementation of the Regulation on Transparency and Targeting of Political Advertising](#), February 2024.

⁵ [Disinformation and Election Integrity](#), A Guidance Document for NDI Elections Programs, NDI.

⁶ See, for instance, the German Ministry of the Interior's [Working Together to Combat Manipulation](#) briefier sensitizing citizens to the harms of disinformation ahead of the 2024 European elections.

⁷ Among others, [Google](#), [Meta](#), and [TikTok](#) reported having adopted a range of measures related to disinformation, transparency of advertising, and AI ahead of the 2024 European elections.

⁸ For instance, [European Digital Media Observatory](#) unites fact-checkers, media literacy experts, and researchers with the aim of better understanding, analyzing, and tracking disinformation.

gradual implementation, and training, technologies can introduce new issues, potentially undermining election integrity rather than building public trust.

In this context, the rise in artificial intelligence (AI) tools that are increasingly used in elections, with good and bad motivations, poses novel challenges.⁹ AI's negative potential lays in the capacity to create and spread false information and to distort voter perceptions through deep-fakes, altered images, voice cloning, or synthetic news.¹⁰ In response, the EU's [AI Act](#) and the Council of Europe's [Framework Convention on AI, Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law](#), both adopted in 2024, as well as emerging voluntary instruments and guidelines aim to tackle these risks while encouraging responsible innovation.¹¹ However, this is a rapidly evolving field, requiring ongoing research and policy updates to ensure effectiveness.¹²

4. Digital and Cybersecurity Threats

The increased use of technology in elections presents additional risks such as threats, attempts of, or attacks on technological infrastructure. Disruptions or shutdowns in service, hacking of voting systems, and data breaches are among the common concerns for voting operations internationally. Globally, many countries report cyberattacks on their election communications, data processing and storage, and voting systems that aim to disrupt or discredit the electoral process.¹³ While systems may be vulnerable to any kind of external interference, in some cases the attempts to abuse information technologies come from domestic actors with interest in the outcome of elections. This includes manipulative measures by state actors or their proxies, such as surreptitious manipulation of information in support of a particular political agenda, or restrictions of access to information sources or internet on the whole.¹⁴ The integrity of digital systems is ensured when they are able to identify, prevent, and withstand any kind of manipulation of its functionalities.

5. Foreign and Malintended Interference

Electoral processes worldwide are also seeing increasing attempts of influence by foreign powers or malicious actors. Often well-coordinated, such covert or overt attempts of disrupting or changing the course of an electoral process, apart from possible malign political, economic or social motivations, commonly aim to sow public doubt, discontent, and ultimately to undermine trust in democratic systems.¹⁵

Protecting elections and countering such external threats has become a priority for many governments. Within the EU, the [European Democracy Action Plan](#) and subsequently the [Defence of Democracy](#) package were developed, giving impetus to several legislative and non-legislative initiatives aimed at protecting the European democratic space and the resilience of elections.¹⁶ Numerous coordination and prevention mechanisms deployed

⁹ [The European Parliament Elections Will Serve as a Litmus Test for the Fight Against Disinformation](#), Wilson Center, May 2024.

¹⁰ [Building Resilience Against Election Influence Operations. Preparing for the European Elections in 2024 and Beyond](#), IFES, April 2024.

¹¹ For instance, a set of voluntary commitments were adopted as part of [AI Election Accord](#) with the participation of several prominent tech firms. See also EU's [DSA Election Guidelines](#).

¹² [Is Election Integrity Integral to the AI Act?](#) European Partnership for Democracy, July 2024.

¹³ [Digital Election Interference, Freedom on the Net 2019 Key Findings: Politicians and Hyperpartisans Use Digital Means to Manipulate Elections](#), 2019.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Op. cit.*, fn 10.

¹⁶ See [Protecting Democracy](#) on a variety of protective measures and initiatives.

notwithstanding,¹⁷ the EU's Special Committee on Foreign Interference has warned ahead of the 2024 European elections of the likelihood of ever-greater and more sophisticated foreign interference and disinformation tactics.¹⁸

The Role of Young People and CSOs in Protecting Election Integrity

For democratic processes to be genuinely representative, it is essential that all segments of the society, including young people and civil society, are actively involved and given opportunities to contribute meaningfully. Their participation is crucial for tackling the diverse challenges to election integrity. Young people bring fresh perspectives and technological expertise, while CSOs can lend an important participatory and human rights perspective. There are several ways how young people actively engaged in public and political life and the civil society can contribute to protecting election integrity:

Get Involved in Political Activities, Campaigns, and Electoral Operations

- Get involved in activities of political parties, including through **youth wings and movements**, as a way of gaining exposure to issues, dynamics and opportunities of political participation. Alternatively, consider experiencing electoral campaigns through activities that might not require formal political affiliation, including volunteer support during campaign events, distribution of campaign materials, social media campaigns, or collection of support signatures for candidates. These forms of engagement can be helpful building blocks for any future active political involvement through candidacy.
- Explore opportunities to work in **election commissions**. To acquire the necessary skills and knowledge to be able to support the organization of elections in line with democratic principles and good practice, benefit from training on electoral operations.

Contribute to Election-Related Monitoring and Reporting

- Organize, support, join coalitions, and/or participate in **election monitoring** activities. Such activities contribute to transparency, ensure that any irregularities are reported, may deter potential malpractices, and build public confidence.¹⁹
- Contribute to **online media and social network monitoring** efforts. Methodologies and tools are available and evolving, look out for what works best in the context.²⁰

Expose and Counter Disinformation

- Establish and/or contribute to efforts aimed at monitoring, analyzing, and **exposing disinformation**. Monitor the efforts of technology companies to develop and implement frameworks to curb the spread of such content. Seek partnerships to leverage available monitoring tools and technologies.²¹

¹⁷ [Council Conclusions on Democratic Resilience: Safeguarding Electoral Processes From Foreign Interference](#) outline measures and mechanisms deployed ahead of the 2024 European elections.

¹⁸ *Op. cit.*, fn 10. In June 2024, a large-scale disinformation campaign [Operation Overload](#) was uncovered. It was designed to spread pro-Russian propaganda, targeting fact-checkers, media and researchers globally to overwhelm global disinformation research and fact-checking community.

¹⁹ For instance, [Agora Election Observation](#) is conducted by and focus on issues of relevance to youth.

²⁰ See, for instance, the [Guide for Civil Society on Monitoring Social Media During Elections](#) by DRI and NDI, the DRI's [Social Media Monitor Toolkit](#), and OSCE/ODIHR's [Guidelines for Observation of Election Campaigns on Social Networks](#).

²¹ Among other tools, NDI's [Fact-a-lyzer software](#) (p. 7) facilitates social media monitoring and includes manipulation detection features, allowing, for instance, better spotting of influencers and bots.

- Contribute to **fact-checking**, pre- and de-bundling efforts to counter false narratives.²²

Raise Awareness, Mobilize, and Support Access to Information

- Conduct **voter education** to raise awareness about the principles of democratic elections, threats to election integrity, and the importance of participation. This can be done through organized campaigns, taking inspiration from plentiful examples of successful tailored campaigns worldwide,²³ seeking partnerships to amplify the outreach, creation of educational toolkits and downloadable promotional packages, but also leveraging the power of individual posting and sharing by active citizens.
- When identifying longer-term projects and campaigns to support, prioritize those focused on developing **media and digital literacy**.
- In the overloaded information environment, civil society groups and initiatives can support access to **reliable voter information** by helping aggregate education offerings and pointing the public to the best available resources.

Engage in Dialogue, Inform Policy and Decision-Making, Advocate for Reforms

- Support and engage in **participatory formats** facilitating inclusion and dialogue for various groups of the society with policy and decision-makers around the topic of elections. Promote the culture of speaking up, making voices heard, and participation, including by young people, through formats like debates, political contests, mock elections, youth parliaments, cohorts, and assemblies.²⁴
- Engage in **advocacy** with policymakers to promote electoral reforms. Identify key areas and shortcomings, including based on CSO assessments and observations reports. Lobby efforts pertaining to increased youth participation could include the promotion of lowering of the age for voting and standing in elections.²⁵

Conclusion

Election integrity is fundamental to the health and sustainability of democratic systems. However, it faces both longstanding and new challenges that threaten to undermine its principles. Issues like vote-buying, manipulation of electoral rolls, and the misuse of public office and resources continue to erode the fairness of elections. Additionally, the rise of digital technologies has introduced new threats, such as the spread of disinformation, cyberattacks on electoral infrastructure, and the manipulation or lack of transparency around the online content. These evolving challenges require a robust response from all stakeholders, including young leaders and the civil society. As future leaders and active citizens, young politicians and CSOs have a unique responsibility to ensure that elections are free, fair, and credible. By engaging in election monitoring, combating disinformation, educating voters, and advocating for reform, they can help protect the integrity of elections.

²² Relevant EU resources include: [Fakespotting Training](#) by the European Project of the Erasmus+ programme; EDMO's mapping of fact-checking organizations, [EUfactcheck](#), and [EUvsDisinfo](#).

²³ See an example of an [effective cross-sector partnership campaign](#) ahead of the 2024 European elections by the European Youth Forum with Sony Music Group and prominent artists. See also EU's ["Use Your Vote"](#) campaign video (504 million views) and the ["Rock the Vote"](#) campaign in the US.

²⁴ Among a multitude of examples globally, [Albania Youth Debates](#) (p. 25) and [Mock Youth Parliament](#) in Nepal (p. 61) could be drawn upon as successful initiatives facilitating learning and participation of young people in public life and youth-to-politician contacts.

²⁵ See examples of youth-driven campaigns by the [European Youth Forum](#), [National Youth Council of Ireland](#), and [Generation Citizen](#) (US) promoting the lowering of suffrage age.