



Safeguarding Health and Elections

Updated Recommendations for the Conduct of Safe Elections Amid COVID-19



International Foundation for Electoral Systems

Introduction

Since its publication on May 11, 2020, the International Foundation for Electoral Systems' (IFES) [Safeguarding Health and Elections](#) has been translated into 14 languages¹ and supported electoral officials and other stakeholders around the globe better navigate the risks of holding elections during the pandemic. The first product of IFES' [COVID-19 Briefing Series](#), the guide has informed risk assessments and helped authorities identify and implement the most relevant preventive measures for different activities throughout the electoral cycle.

The IFES document and its recommendations were developed based on the available scientific evidence at the time of writing. However, throughout the past year, the scientific community has made significant progress in better understanding the SARS-CoV-2 virus and its methods of propagation, which led to updates to some public health recommendations. Over 100 countries and territories have also held elections since the beginning of the pandemic, allowing IFES to draw lessons learned from the implementation of preventive measures in the real world. It is based on these developments that IFES publishes this supplement to our guide, aiming to provide our partners and readers with the most up-to-date information to protect citizens while they exercise their democratic rights.

Updated information

Methods of Transmission	The initial guidance on COVID-19 pointed to two methods of virus spreading: through respiratory droplets and contaminated surfaces (fomites). Further investigation has found that transmission via contaminated surfaces is less common than initially thought , although still possible, which means that adequate preventive measures should still be taken to sanitize surfaces and limit use of shared objects. At the same time, more studies have shown that transmission by inhalation of microscopic droplets that linger in the air longer (aerosols) is likely to be an even more important mode of transmission than originally thought. According to the World Health Organization (WHO) , "aerosol transmission can occur in specific settings, particularly in indoor, crowded, and inadequately ventilated spaces."
Vaccines	In recent months, several vaccines against COVID-19 have been tested and some have been approved and already administered in several countries (see WHO's list). Although the different approved vaccines may have varying levels of efficacy, most have been proven very successful in preventing hospitalizations and deaths. However, it is not yet clear whether vaccinated individuals can still transmit the disease to unvaccinated individuals . This means that vaccinated individuals also still need to take precautions, wear masks and maintain a safe distance from others.

¹ *Safeguarding Health and Elections* is available in Albanian, Arabic, Armenian, Burmese, Dari, English, French, Kyrgyz, Macedonian, Pashtu, Russian, Serbian, Spanish and Ukrainian.

New Variants	<p>Although much has been learned about the SARS-CoV-2 virus in the past year, the surge of new variants has led to new challenges. Two of these variants recently identified in the United Kingdom (B.1.1.7) and in South Africa (B.1.351) have been particularly concerning, as they were found to be more infectious and spread faster. Indeed, these new variants have been associated with an increase in the number of cases in both countries. Another variant first identified in Brazil (P.1) has also been found to have additional mutations that may affect how antibodies recognize it. Several studies are ongoing, and much is still unknown about how widely these new variants have spread and how they might affect existing vaccines, therapies and tests.</p>
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Impact on Elections

Using Better Face Masks	<p>Handwashing and sanitization of common surfaces should remain important preventive measures. Given the much higher risks of infection through large and small droplets and the emergence of new variants that spread even more easily, however, it has become increasingly important to highlight the need for good masks. Voters, poll workers and observers should wear face masks appropriately, covering their mouth and nose. This practice is valid not only on Election Day but throughout all electoral activities, including the work in election offices, public gatherings during the electoral campaign and the transportation of electoral material. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), masks should fit snugly against the user's face and have multiple layers to prevent more droplets from escaping. N95 masks remain one of the most effective options. Masks with a nose wire and mask fitters can also help prevent air from leaking. Wearing double masks – more specifically, a disposable mask underneath a cloth mask – is also recommended.</p>
Improving Ventilation	<p>As smaller droplets or aerosols can remain in the air for minutes to hours, it is extremely important that polling stations and other venues for electoral activities (e.g., results aggregation, press conferences) offer proper ventilation. Small rooms without windows should be avoided, and poll workers should still ensure a limited number of individuals are inside the polling station at any given time. Weather allowing, outdoors and other open spaces should be preferred to minimize risks of airborne transmission. Proper ventilation is also needed in vehicles during transportation of election material.</p>
Enforcing Social Distancing	<p>Given the factors outlined above, election authorities must ensure that poll workers, observers and voters keep a safe distance from each other. Voters should also remain in polling stations for as little time as possible to complete their ballot casting, allowing a quick flow of people in and out of these venues. Unfortunately, enforcing social distancing has been one of the most difficult measures for election management bodies (EMBs). Whether while queuing or going through voting procedures in polling stations, voters have often violated the social distancing requirements, and poll workers have done little to enforce such rules. These experiences highlight the benefits of assigning individuals (e.g., poll workers or, where appropriate, security forces) to monitor and enforce social distancing throughout the entire voting process. Calculating estimates of voting time can also help EMBs plan and employ resources for better flow of voters.</p>

<p>Ensuring Preventive Measures Are for All</p>	<p>The new vaccines against COVID-19 are a huge step toward overcoming this public health crisis. As discussed above, however, much is still unknown about the risks vaccinated individuals might still pose to others who have not been vaccinated. Furthermore, different countries are at different stages of their vaccination programs, and it might still take some time until the world reaches widespread immunity. For these reasons, it is important that <u>all citizens, regardless of whether they are vaccinated, comply with preventive measures in place during all electoral activities</u>. Depending on vaccine availability in the country by the time of elections, authorities might also consider <u>prioritizing giving shots to electoral workers and observers</u>, as appropriate.</p>
<p>Keeping Track of the Latest Scientific Evidence on COVID-19</p>	<p>A number of reputable international and national medical authorities are engaged in extensive COVID-19 research, progressively expanding our understanding of the SARS-CoV-2 virus and its methods of propagation. EMBs should therefore <u>proactively engage with national COVID-19 task forces – where applicable – or other relevant health authorities</u> to ensure their risk assessments and mitigation strategies are based on the most up-to-date scientific evidence.</p>



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