

# Guidance for civil society and its supporters on elections with integrity during COVID

This document provides guiding principles that civil society and its supporters can adapt to specific country contexts in order to address concerns about election integrity. It is intended as guidance for civil society, which has an important role to play even as the pandemic poses new challenges; and it is intended as guidance for supporters of civil society, especially donors and international organizations concerned with election integrity.

The document focuses on two areas that need particular attention during the pandemic to ensure the integrity of elections: protecting the franchise, and protecting the integrity of the information environment. These areas are elevated for priority attention because of the potential long-term damage that could otherwise result to democratic institutions. A set of resources with examples from specific contexts and more details on these two issues and others is extracted at the bottom of this guidance.

## A. PROTECTING THE FRANCHISE

The COVID pandemic presents serious dangers for the integrity of the right to vote. Incumbent governments might make use of the crisis to justify delaying elections without cause; or they might hold elections without sufficient preparation and precaution, so that voters have to choose between protecting their health or exercising their democratic rights. This guidance suggests a set of goals civil society and its supporters can advocate for, in order to make voting safe and accessible in the age of COVID.

1. Advocating for adaptations by election management bodies to make in person voting safe and accessible. Common recommendations include the following, though local context should dictate specifics:
  - Providing safeguards such as personal protective equipment (commonly sanitizer, masks and gloves) for both poll workers and members of the voting public;
  - Recruiting enough poll workers and providing them with appropriate health safeguards and sufficient training to support the election process, without imposing disproportionate requirements or certifications;
  - Implementing adequate physical distancing in voting venues;
  - Allowing an adequate number of polling stations to be open, and / or extending voting times and days to ensure different populations are able to vote.
2. Advocating that election management bodies strengthen alternatives to voting in person, where a country has proper legal frameworks and safeguards. Common recommendations include the following, depending on what is appropriate to the context:

- Preparing early for the required changes to conduct a safe election so that there is time to enable reliable and appropriate alternatives, and setting aside enough financing to include or expand alternatives to in person voting;
- Making the process for new or updated registration for and access to alternative voting methods the lowest bar it can possibly be so as not to disenfranchise the public;
- Making special provision for those in quarantine, in health facilities or otherwise especially vulnerable;
- Ensuring that alternatives to in-person voting are not used to promote unaccountable electronic or remote voting systems, and that any alternative is designed and implemented in line with available best practices to preserve the security, secrecy, and verifiability of the vote, including by maintaining a voter-verifiable paper trail that can be reviewed and confirmed by auditors as well as non-expert observers.

## **B. PROTECTING THE INTEGRITY OF THE ONLINE INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT**

The information environment is deeply problematic at the best of times, and is of even greater concern during a time when more election activity has shifted online. The pandemic has brought to light the extent of change that is needed in many countries in order for the information environment to be appropriately regulated and working in service of democracy. This guidance proposes a set of goals civil society and its supporters can advocate to secure the conditions for a fair and open information environment during elections and beyond. This may require action by governments, platforms or social media, as appropriate to each context, and with careful attention to the importance of freedom of expression and an accessible playing field for candidates.

1. Securing accountability of campaign and candidate activity. The following features of an information environment can enable this:
  - Funding for election-related content is made transparent and available, whether it is generated by campaigns, candidates, or third parties in both human and machine-readable formats;
  - There is adequate oversight of digital election campaigning, with clear parameters and accountability for violations;
  - There are mechanisms in place for platforms to investigate, flag and/or act on disinformation content and hate speech by candidates, campaigns, or third parties engaged in a campaign;
  - There are disincentives and restrictions in place to limit micro-targeting of particular audiences based on their race, gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation or any context-specific characteristics that can be used to discriminate against a group.
2. Providing adequate access to credible information. More than ever, the scale, reach and targeting ability of disinformation is a threat that must be proactively addressed in advance of and during elections. The following features of an information

environment can enable this:

- There are mechanisms in place for platforms to investigate, flag and/or act on disinformation that materially affects the integrity of an election, particularly sensitive information about how, where and when to vote;
- Users of platforms have a way to flag and report on mis/disinformation shared in closed groups. Additionally, there are campaigns supporting these efforts and journalist-led efforts to debunk and challenge misinformation that spreads in these spaces;
- Election management bodies have clear and public postures on a variety of media platforms (e.g. in print, online, etc.) and take positive steps to educate the public about voting practices, particularly those that have changed from usual practice as a result of COVID;
- There is timely, high quality information available about any changes to the election process, including additional outreach and resources to assist particularly vulnerable populations.

3. Providing appropriate opportunities for international, domestic civil society and political party observation. With travel and movement restricted, special accommodations need to be made to allow observation of elections to continue to take place and to generate valuable information about the integrity of the election. Common recommendations include the following, depending on what is appropriate to the context:

- International observers and donors support domestic observers, including making available resources and training, and connection to best practices as well as international advocacy;
- Election management bodies do not use COVID to prevent election observers being physically present where others in the election process are permitted to gather;
- Election management bodies make available access to decisions and processes, for example through live streaming, not only on election day, but also in the lead up preparations and during post-election tabulation and results management;
- Election observation includes observation of the online environment throughout the election cycle, including observation of how COVID practices are being discussed and shared in online spaces.

**Endorsed by:**

Open Society Foundations

The Kofi Annan Foundation

The International Foundation for  
Electoral Systems

The International Institute for Democracy  
and Electoral Assistance

The Election Observation Research  
Network - ELECTOR

The National Democratic Institute

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### GENERAL RESOURCES

[Elections Held and Mitigating Measures Taken during COVID-19 \(IFES\)](#) *(Regularly updated)*

[COVID-19 implications on election preparations \(International IDEA\)](#) *(Regularly updated)*

[Featured Cases of Prevention and Mitigation Efforts \(International IDEA\)](#) *(Regularly updated)*

[Healthy Elections Project \(Stanford-MIT\)](#) *(Regularly updated)*

[How to hold elections safely and democratically during the COVID-19 pandemic \(The British Academy\)](#) *(August 2020)*

[COVID-19 Briefing Series: Inclusion and Meaningful Political Participation \(IFES\)](#) *(July 2020)*

[Health considerations for election polling locations and voters \(Center for Disease Control and Prevention\)](#) *(July 2020)*

[Policy Brief : Managing Elections during the COVID-19 Pandemic Considerations for Decision-makers \(International Idea\)](#) *(July 2020)*

[Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers to member States on standards for e-voting \(Council of Europe\)](#) *(June 2020)*

[Digital Technologies in Elections - Questions, Lessons Learned, Perspectives \(Council of Europe\)](#) *(May 2020)*

[Elections, digital technologies, human rights \(Council of Europe\)](#) *(May 2020)*

[Safeguarding Health and Elections \(IFES\)](#) *(May 2020)*

[COVID-19 Briefing Series identifying seven fundamental areas of concern for democracy and governance during the pandemic \(IFES\)](#) *(May 2020)*

[Elections and Covid-19 – Lessons learned from the Ebola pandemic \(IFES\)](#) *(April 2020)*

[Elections during COVID-19: Considerations on How to Proceed with Caution \(International IDEA\)](#) *(March 2020)*

[Guidelines and Recommendations for Electoral Activities during the COVID-19 Pandemic \(IFES\)](#) *(March 2020)*

[Guidance on Election Monitoring During the COVID-19 Pandemic \(GNDEM\)](#) *(April 2020)*

### SELECTED CASE STUDIES

[Case Study 1: Holding or Postponing Elections During a COVID-19 Outbreak: Constitutional, Legal and Political Challenges in France](#) *(June 2020)*

[Case Study 2: Political maneuvers and legal conundrums amid the COVID-19 pandemic: the 2020 presidential election in Poland](#) *(July 2020)*

[Case study 3: Running Local Elections During the COVID-19 Crisis: Queensland, Australia](#) *(August 2020)*

[Case study 4: Responding to COVID-19 with 100 per cent Postal Voting: Local Elections in Bavaria, Germany](#) *(September 2020)*

[Case study 5: Managing elections under COVID-19 pandemic conditions: the case of Mali \(September 2020\)](#)

[COVID-19 and Elections: Learning from the South Korea Experience \(ANFREL\) \(June 2020\)](#)

[2020 Sri Lankan Parliamentary Elections: Defending Democracy Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic \(ANFREL\) \(September 2020\)](#)