

Elections in International Democracy Assistance

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ELECTIONS SERVE MANY PURPOSES. At the most basic level, they are mechanisms for choosing representatives at different levels of governance and rewarding them with the legitimacy to run public affairs and make decisions in the domain of public interest. However, elections also have more profound social functions and impacts. At best, the cadence of regular elections cultivates a culture of political and social accountability, maintains social mobility, opens channels for voicing interests of different social groups, and promotes the peaceful resolution of societal conflicts. In nations where political space is captured by authoritarians or exclusive political elites, elections may serve as mechanisms for restoring social balance. It is these benefits that explain why elections have played such a central role in international democracy agenda efforts, particularly during the intense democratization period of the early 1990s following the end of the Cold War.

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However, as we found in our work with the Global Commission on Elections, Democracy and Security, while elections are vital to democratic government, they are not sufficient. Further, practices of incumbents rigging elections, illicit funding or media bias distorting the electoral process, and losing candidates refusing to accept the results risk loss of faith in democracy and political processes. Against this backdrop, in my capacity as Secretary General of the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), I am involved in high-level discussions on the resilience of democratic societies to individually and collectively mitigate risks of democratic backsliding.

In the more than 20 years since we began work in this field, International IDEA has had to continually reassess how to be most helpful to the democracy

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practitioners that we serve. We have learned that elections matter in ways more complex than we could have imagined. This is because citizens and political actors lend meaning to and interpret the unfolding of electoral events, rendering nothing about organizing elections straightforward. The timebound nature of elections makes many actions and decisions irreversible. Procedural decisions have political consequences, as do electoral rulings. Because the stakes are high, tensions run high. It is therefore timely to share some lessons, which, while learned through the particular prism of international electoral assistance experience, are nonetheless relevant for electoral democracy more widely.

This reality has changed the way we understand electoral administration, and consequently the way we work in our knowledge products and in our direct work with practitioners. We now focus less on how to organize elections, and more on how to navigate stakeholder expectations, how to understand and manage electoral risk, and how to assess the robustness of electoral justice systems.

INTERNATIONAL ELECTORAL ASSISTANCE

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How International IDEA came to be and found its niche in democracy promotion in many ways mirrors the evolution of international electoral assistance during the wave of democratization that spread through Southern Europe, Latin America, the Asia-Pacific, Eastern Europe, and sub-Saharan Africa from the 1970s to the 1990s. The enthusiasm of Western democracies to support countries facing or undergoing democratic transitions, particularly in the 1990s, and the financial backing availed for this purpose affected both the landscape and the methods of institutions delivering electoral assistance. Aid became increasingly conditional on governance expectations, and more specifically, on the conduct of “free and fair” elections.

INSTITUTIONAL LANDSCAPE

The 1990s saw the common establishment of electoral units within existing global and regional intergovernmental organizations (IGOs). Their mandate was to organize international electoral observation missions (whether within member states or more broadly) and, in some instances, to coordinate electoral assistance. In parallel, many international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) established international election observation programs, while some developed the technical expertise to provide electoral assistance regionally and globally. This not only provided the standing capability for the international

community to mobilize and respond to calls for supporting democratic transitions, but also facilitated the development of a community of practice in the electoral field with experts and knowledge products bridging a gap between research and practice.¹ One significant example of governments' commitment to institutionalizing support for democracy and electoral assistance was the founding of International IDEA in 1995. Initially founded by 15 member states (it has since grown to 30) from all continents, to this day International IDEA remains the only IGO with the sole mandate to support democracy worldwide.

As my predecessor Secretary General Bengt S  ve-S  derbergh describes, the "will" and the momentum for democratization came faster than the knowledge of how or what to do with it.² For countries transitioning from colonialism or authoritarianism to democracy, it was widely believed (domestically and internationally) that any problem would be resolved as long as periodic elections occurred; there was a simplistic linkage between "free and fair" elections and the successful democratization process that would yield a range of other socioeconomic benefits. Furthermore, the prevailing understanding was that elections were a technical problem to be solved, and as such, that electoral processes—such as logistics, registration, and voter education—could be outsourced or pre-designed per appropriate templates from similar experiences elsewhere.

The thinking around international electoral assistance has evolved significantly from this initial period. International IDEA's body of normative work on elections (handbooks and other resources) emphasizes careful, locally anchored, and bespoke design of any electoral processes. Experienced agencies working in the field of democracy support recognized electoral assistance as a pillar of a broader democracy agenda.³ The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in particular led the way toward more complex development-focused electoral assistance, with attention to capacity building and sustainability. This gradual shift required programming over multiple electoral cycles rather than over a short period prior to election day, with a focus on building professional skills, learning and knowledge sharing, and provision of targeted technical advice.

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EVOLVING ELECTORAL ASSISTANCE METHODS

Electoral assistance methods have diversified and evolved over time, including in the following areas:

1. Election observation: early international interventions date back to the UN observation of Korean elections in 1947.⁴ This and succeeding electoral ob-

servation missions sought to assess or validate that elections were “free and fair.”

2. Provision of legal and technical support: this is focused on the establishment of legal and institutional frameworks for the conduct of elections and resolution of electoral disputes. Technical assistance often relates to design, implementation, and financing of different electoral milestones, such as boundary delimitation, operational planning, utilization of ICTs (information and communications technology), voter information and education, and registration of political parties and candidates.

3. Electoral capacity building: these programs are more forward-looking in terms of sustainability. The aim is to introduce or enhance the knowledge and skills of election professionals needed in the implementation of their mandates.

4. Knowledge resources and tools: the development and dissemination of comparative knowledge resources, such as handbooks and practitioners’ tools—technical guides as well as assessment and analysis instruments—emerged as important methods in the electoral assistance portfolio. This is because they can be designed to balance research and practice, and they can be easily shared through the internet (and hence sent to places that are off limits to international electoral assistance providers) and embedded in local contexts to aid national stakeholders in resolving practical problems.

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The limitations and challenges of these methods vary by context. For example, for transitional elections, international electoral observation (at its best) can improve transparency, defuse tensions, decrease incidents of electoral malpractice, and provide a solid set of recommendations for future improvements. Conversely, electoral observation efforts risk political capture or superficiality when operating with insufficient resources or capacity in highly polarized environments.⁵ Though legal and technical assistance has made elections possible in many countries, in some instances, assistance has established systems or practices that are difficult to sustain without continued international support, such as in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.⁶ The benefits of capacity-building programs are undermined by short term and output driven project financing.⁷ Comparative knowledge resources and tools have been instrumental in bridging gaps between knowledge and practices and have helped to elevate the capacity of both national and international practitioners. Yet, simply shipping books to countries that are undergoing democratic transitions, or even placing instruments online, may have a limited effect. Therefore, many international electoral assistance programs combine these methods.

International electoral assistance as a concept also displayed some limita-

tions when encountering contextual obstacles. These limitations were particularly exhibited in countries recovering from conflicts or where the transition from authoritarianism to democracy did not yield the desired swift socioeconomic benefits. In many of these contexts, such as in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings, the previously achieved democratic gains have been lost. Reasons for democratic backsliding are numerous and structural, rather than related to electoral processes. These reasons include political leaders rejecting election results or failing to hand over power peacefully, voter apathy and distrust in political institutions, and “big money” capturing the state and facilitating corruption, as will be discussed in the next section.

FACING NEW REALITIES

Overall, this technical, normative, and developmental work has paid dividends. In stark contrast to the period when International IDEA was founded, there now exists a knowledgeable, global peer community of election administrators, civil society activists, and organizations who not only organize and observe elections, but also stand up and defend electoral integrity when challenged. This is worth remembering as a counternarrative to the prevailing story of democracy’s decline. From global institutions to local school boards, contestations for power are most often managed in an orderly way. This is a testament to democracy’s resilience.

This, however, leaves little room for complacency. The new challenges to electoral democracy are out of reach and beyond what a steady and sound professional approach to election administration can counter. These challenges come in both nefarious new guises (e.g., cyberhacking and “fake news”) and familiar ones (e.g., incumbency advantage and vote buying). Simply put, it is the willful thwarting of

a level playing field by political actors. This deliberate game-playing of the established systems for personal political gain is of such propor-

tion that regulatory processes (for example, regulating political finance) put in place by electoral authorities to guarantee a level playing field cannot possibly keep up with it. As UN Secretary General António Guterres puts it, “political leadership” is the new challenge in electoral assistance.⁸

Meanwhile, international electoral assistance is becoming more modest

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in terms of the scope of physical presence in the field and of funding availed to governments and Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs). This is in part because the multi-donor funding baskets commonly used to support important transitional elections have significantly shrunk in the last decade. Also, many EMBs have already benefitted from electoral assistance through several previous electoral cycles, implying advanced organizational experiences and knowledge, as well as a decreased need for external support. Technical interventions are increasingly surgical in execution, meaning that external experts are engaged to support electoral stakeholders making decisions about the design of (specific and targeted) electoral laws, institutions, or processes.

GLOBAL STATE OF DEMOCRACY⁹

International IDEA's "health check" of democracy, based on the analysis of global and regional trends between 1975 and 2015 derived from the Global State of Democracy (GSoD) indices, shows that democracy faces many challenges and that its resilience cannot be taken for granted. If we look at democracy first by taking a narrow, exclusively electoral, and crisp understanding of democracy (i.e., classifying countries as either democratic or not), the number and proportion of countries worldwide that are considered electoral democracies has grown during the period between 1975 and 2016. In 1975, competitive elections determined government power in as few as 46 countries (30 percent), and this number had grown to 132 (68 percent) by 2016.¹⁰

When using International IDEA's comprehensive definition of democracy, the GSoD indices data suggest that substantial global progress was made in four out of five dimensions (representative government, fundamental rights, checks on government, and participatory engagement) from 1975 to 2015, while the global level of Impartial Administration has changed little during that time.¹¹

Hence, while there is much room for improvement in virtually all dimensions of democracy, the situation is better than suggested by increasingly pessimistic views regarding democracy's prevalence and resilience today. The trends since 1975 suggest that most aspects of democracy have improved, and that most democracies have been resilient over time. The majority of electoral democracies established after 1975 still exist, and almost no long-standing electoral democracies have experienced reversals. Moreover, current democratic regressions are generally short-lived and followed by recovery when internal democracy-friendly forces cooperate and resist leaders with authoritarian tendencies.

However, significant challenges remain. One-third of all countries are still under autocratic rule, including major regional powers with large populations such as China, Egypt, Russia, and Saudi Arabia. Moreover, there have been 24 democratic reversals since 2005 in countries such as Mali, Niger, and Thailand. This strongly indicates that some new democracies are not resilient. Moreover, there has been a plateauing of global democratic development in the past 10 years, which may indicate a global decline, although this is too early to determine.

While some countries have recently become electoral democracies for the first time, most of the recent transitions toward democracy happened in countries with previous democratic experience. Based on these developments, it is important to consider that democratization has always involved a mixture of gains and losses.¹²

To better support democracy practitioners in this new environment, International IDEA has adapted its strategy, which, while keeping the best of what we are known for (e.g., normative work, convening practitioners, presenting comparative options), dares to move into areas that are more complex, more political, and more fraught. We move into this new phase of work informed by what we have learned to date.

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ELECTORAL ASSISTANCE: SOME REFLECTIONS

Lesson 1: Elections are societal endeavors.

Elections reflect the society and the historical moment in which they are held—for better or worse. The 1994 South African elections that brought Nelson Mandela to the presidency were characterized by euphoria and a sense of national purpose. That same year, national elections in the neighboring country of Mozambique marked—with a national and regional sigh of relief—the end of a brutal and divisive civil war. In both cases, the technical inadequacies of the election administration were rendered meaningless because of the symbolism and the importance of the event itself.

Meanwhile, in the 2007 Kenyan general election, and again in 2017, technical inadequacies and mismanagement of results became the tinderbox that ignited social crisis. While the problems were ostensibly technical, the dynamics of deep-seated grievances and political power games between political leaders drove events by highlighting and exploiting ethnic divisions for political gain.

These examples show the problem with assuming that there is a direct cor-

relation between the technical aspects of elections on the one hand, and how those elections are perceived and given meaning by citizens and the world at large on the other. That is, societies may have different thresholds for (or different abilities to digest) technical flaws, depending on the historical moment.

This means that it is impossible for elections to be purely technical exercises. Elections do not take place in a vacuum. Societal leadership, legitimacy of institutions, buy-in from the political elite, and the struggle for the narrative of the electoral process will influence acceptance of the result. Social perceptions

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about the quality and fairness of the electoral system, the electoral justice mechanisms, and the electoral management bodies will often

matter more than an objective assessment of their relative merits provided by national and international experts. Anyone who has worked on an election will know that stakeholders at every level are viscerally engaged in the idea of fairness (a “level playing field”)—whether it be about services in a minority language, voter registration that misses a certain group, or one political faction seemingly given more exposure in public media.

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For EMBs, this mode of thinking means working more collaboratively. Many EMBs have learned that proactiveness in engaging with political parties and media works better than keeping their distance. Ways to be proactive include convening political parties or media around drafting and adopting codes of conduct, establishing political party liaison committees, and so on. For example, a real understanding of the phenomena of election-related violence requires improved collaboration between electoral, conflict, and security practitioners. These efforts have narrowed the space for misconduct, misperceptions, ungrounded complaints, and rejection of election results as methods for forcing power-sharing deals. Furthermore, many examples of good practices exist whereby EMBs have benefited from turning elections into truly societal events through establishing dynamic collaboration with civil society organizations (CSOs), the education sector, traditional leaders, and domestic and international observers. In India, a National Voter’s Day is celebrated with ceremonies for new voters and other festivities each January to commemorate the founding of the Electoral Commission in 1950.¹³

For electoral assistance design, the importance of legitimacy and perception often means privileging process over event delivery. This can include supporting

an inclusive and informed design process in which pros and cons of different options are weighed against their potential to fuel or mitigate conflicts (polarizations) within respective societies. For example, the composition of the electoral commission can be highly contentious if political stakeholders or the population at large suspects partisan motives. For this reason, careful design of processes to appoint commissioners becomes very important. This is an area where electoral assistance efforts may support informed decision making through the provision of comparative options. In India, commissioners are appointed from senior government administrators; in Australia, the commissioner is a former judge; and the chair in Burkina Faso is the civil society leader. In Spain, commissioners are appointed from a pool of judges and independent experts. In Mexico, the general council of the Institute National Electoral (INE) has 11 members with voting rights and a variable number of members without voting rights. It is the context that determines which composition will best instill legitimacy or erode trust in electoral processes. Whatever decision is made, it will entail disadvantages that must be actively mitigated.

For International IDEA, this means that we need to be creative about how we work and how we convey our message. We need to better understand and develop the relational and qualitative dimensions of election work. We need to define the indefinable: what does an atmosphere of fear look like? How is it prevented? We need to better understand the hard-relational work involved in building and, where lost, rebuilding trust in electoral institutions (such as what occurred in Nigeria). As discussed earlier, elections reflect the society and the historical moment in which they are held—so how do we account for non-conducive historical moments in order to mitigate their echoes in present and future elections?

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Lesson 2: Elections are political—and the stakes are high.

Even the best planned electoral processes, which are well legislated and managed by a capable and impartial administration, will have numerous points of exposure that can be exploited by ill-intentioned actors. In (too) many contexts, political actors have devised methods for the manipulation of elections to achieve political gains. Traditional tactics include vote buying, proxy voting, ballot box stuffing, gerrymandering electoral district boundaries, and destroying electoral materials. As discussed above, modern variants are ever subtler, staying at the cutting edge of what modern information technology makes possible. Moreover, deploying violent tactics against political opponents, electoral and government officials, women, and minority groups—along with terrorizing populations at

large—can be tactics used for gaining electoral advantages, perusing illicit interests, and undermining democracy. These can range from sporadic incidents to open conflicts and large-scale atrocities.

While electoral assistance is not necessarily equipped for working in contexts that are not conducive to democratic changes, some methods exist. Where rule of law is weak, corruption is normalized, and professional ethics are at risk, extra measures must be put in place to mitigate the risk of capture of electoral processes by incumbents or other interested parties. Examples of such measures include the development of special courts and prosecutors for resolving electoral disputes and investigating electoral crimes; the granting of statutory powers and positions to electoral management agencies and their leadership; and the granting of financial and political independence to electoral administrators and electoral dispute adjudicators. However, with these institutions often under attack, regulatory agencies like EMBs struggle with the burden of serving as guardians of electoral democracy through regulation or new oversight methods. In these instances, public anger and disgust at political corruption may be a more powerful mechanism for change.

International IDEA's work on the global state of democracy (see box above) shows that when democracy backslides, citizens do not accept this passively: they notice, and they react in defense of democracy. In Indonesia, when the independence of the electoral authorities known as the KPU (Komisi Pemilihan Umum) came under attack between 2012 and 2017, civil society organizations publicly came to the defense of the agency's independence. The implication for International

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IDEA's work is the realization that we need to repurpose many of the election administration training tools and manuals to support actors on the demand side for high

quality and meaningful elections (in addition to the supply side, as explained in the following section). For example, International IDEA's Electoral Risk Management Tool is conceived as a platform through which electoral management bodies, security sector agencies, and other stakeholders (e.g., CSOs, media, traditional leaders, and so on) should come together and reinforce each other's efforts to deliver or support peaceful and credible elections.

Lesson 3: There are no perfectly organized elections.

While the two lessons above may point away from a technical approach to elections, this does not render the technical aspects of elections less important. Although technical mishaps or direct attempts at fraud are rarely of proportions that can impact electoral outcomes, there is no room for complacency in the administration of elections. Elections are complex undertakings, and there are no perfectly organized elections. The sheer number of (often inexperienced) administrators involved, the scope and complexity of technical preparations—including the use of often newly introduced and not fully tested ICTs—the strict chronology of electoral events and pressing timelines, the level of popular mobilization and participation required, and the necessary coordination between multiple agencies all make electoral processes prone to inevitable human and technical errors.

The scale and complexity of elections can be seen worldwide, and some efforts are truly gigantic. The Election Commission of India, for example, caters to over 800 million voters with one million voting stations.¹⁴ The cost of elections in Indonesia is over \$1 billion. The national electoral institution in Mexico (INE) employs over 16 thousand permanent staff. In addition to permanent staff, EMBs also need to recruit a vast number (sometimes millions) of temporary workers to undertake complex logistical, financial, and administrative tasks, including voter registration, voter education, polling day staffing, or counting operations. Mistakes can happen, and they do. In the 2013 election for the Australian Senate, ballot papers lost in transport in one state resulted in the full rerunning of those elections, at great expense, and knock-on delays for the governance of the nation.¹⁵

This area is the core of International IDEA's work. Since its formation in 1995, International IDEA has engaged in election-related research, policy and practice-oriented initiatives, and the development of knowledge resources, in partnership with those who lead democratic change at the national level. Partnerships with national EMBs, IGOs, and INGOs gave rise to the knowledge sharing and capacity-building resources such as the ACE Electoral Knowledge Network and the Building Resources in Democracy, Governance and Elections (BRIDGE) training curriculum.¹⁶ International IDEA handbooks on Electoral System Design, Electoral Management Design, and Electoral Justice, to mention a few, remain mandatory reading for election practitioners.¹⁷ The electoral cycle approach, developed by International IDEA and the European Commission in 2005, acts as a visual planning and training tool to help understand the cyclical nature and challenges of electoral processes, and has become fundamental in

shaping international electoral assistance as well as national policies and practices.¹⁸ Together with other mechanisms of international electoral assistance, International IDEA has contributed to carving the normative framework for the conduct of elections through developing codes of conduct for electoral administrators and international electoral observers, and international standards and obligations for electoral processes.¹⁹

Lesson 4: Systematic electoral risk management and effective electoral dispute resolution help make electoral processes resilient.

Many of the factors that lead to electoral mishap or crisis are, in hindsight, somewhat predictable. EMBs seldom have the whole picture. Focused on pressing daily tasks and the enormity of the logistical challenge of the electoral process, EMBs may miss the red flags indicating that something will go wrong. Field-based civil society organizations, external observers of the electoral process, security and government officials, and the political actors themselves will together have a composite picture that shows where areas of weakness, trigger points, or fault lines may lie. Similarly, electoral officials in areas far from the capital can have an intuition—based on deep knowledge of local actors and conditions—of what is likely to go wrong, whether it be related to infrastructure weaknesses, an unresponsive marginalized group, or local grievances that may play out during an electoral event. For this reason, we at IDEA advocate (and sometimes facilitate) structured early processes to deliberate, analyze, and map areas of risk, and discuss possible prevention and mitigation strategies.

We promote and support these recursive “deliberating, doing, reflecting” habits for all areas of electoral processes—that is, investing in the ongoing electoral processes rather than in specific electoral events. Risk management as a way of thinking is the art of predicting—and acting. This process-driven approach privileges careful planning over last minute scrambles; stakeholder dialogue and avenues of redress over the short-term efficiency dividends of exclusion; and incremental and partnership-based development of ICT systems over outsourcing to external vendors.

In essence, we advocate seeing an electoral authority as an institution of governance that thoughtfully safeguards and enables electoral democracy, rather than as a service delivery agency only required for the electoral event. This approach—visible in our knowledge products as well as in our on-the-ground work—is grounded in, and informed by, practitioner experience.

Lesson 5: Elections are crucial, but both transitional and established democracies require more than elections to endure.

Since the very earliest democracies, the expression of the public will through voting has been at the core of democratic societies. Elections continue to be the essential, hallowed act without which there can be no democracy. However, in modern democracies the modalities through which this process unfolds—as well as the institutions, procedures, and limitations with which public power is exercised—are also paramount to the development and maintenance of democracy.

In electoral processes, political parties have developed into the dominant vehicle through which political interests are organized and channeled. Among other issues, much attention must be paid to how such parties are financed; to their basis for organization; and to the ease of establishing new parties to enter the political marketplace and internal party democracy in order to ensure that parties remain enablers, rather than obstacles, of democracy.

With regards to the institutions, constitutions provide the framework within which democratic politics operate. They delineate the ground rules through which access to public power and resources is gained and the procedures and constraints on the exercise of power. Moreover, many modern constitutions venture beyond the procedural and aim to reflect the values and identity of the country, which can either help to foster a sense of a unified political community or can serve to exclude and divide segments of the citizenry. It should also be stated that in post-conflict democratic transitions, constitutions—and the processes through which constitutions are made—have become central to establishing a new social contract that meets the terms for peace of warring parties, whether that entails a renegotiation of the political framework or a reframing of notions of group identity and autonomy.

In response to this more holistic view of what makes democracies work, International IDEA continues to support long-established programs on Political Parties, Representation and Participation, and Constitution Building Processes, which accompany our work in the field of electoral processes.

CONCLUSION

There is a sense among electoral assistance providers and national practitioners that elections are too often taken as a quick fix to complex social challenges, or as an exit strategy from costly interventions to restore and build peace. The specter of the societal ills from unaccepted results explains why electoral trust is such a sought-after commodity for anyone invested in the wellbeing of a na-

tion. The potential of domestic electoral tensions to escalate and contribute to regional instability explains the strong interest of the international community in electoral processes where results are close or contested. In these discussions, the spotlight is often on electoral integrity. However, while some tend to overuse the concept by portraying it as a silver bullet to all problems, others overlook, or underappreciate, the societal value of trusted elections.

The nature of contemporary challenges requires both normative and practical changes to electoral assistance in a way that emphasizes the relational and societal dimensions, in balance with the operational and professional dimensions, of electoral work. After all, accepted and trusted results are the main deliverable for any electoral management body. This makes trust building more than an incidental by-product, but rather a critical aim.

In the election administration dynamics discussed above, the trust problems that stakeholders have with the electoral processes (and by extension, with the authorities in charge) are sometimes justifiably and sincerely based on genuine problems, but also often on other less constructive dynamics of misinformation, the playing out of deep seated grievances, and/or deliberate game playing (using unsavory tactics) for political gain by political actors. It is in this difficult space that electoral assistance bodies such as ourselves must dare to engage in order to advance, strengthen, and safeguard the democratic values and practices that we hold dear. 

NOTES

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