

COVID-19, Election Governance, and Preventing Electoral Violence

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The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on elections has been truly global, with countries and territories across every region affected. How governments and electoral authorities have responded to this challenge has generated innovative practices. Yet it has also revealed gaps and weaknesses to urgently address. Lessons from the COVID-19 era can help with preparedness for future challenges such as holding elections in the wake of natural disasters or in highly polarized contexts where protecting electoral trust, political stability and peace is essential. This analysis explores options in several areas.

Postponing or holding elections

Since March, countries, provinces, and cities around the world have been scrambling to determine whether to postpone or hold previously scheduled elections. As per Figure 1 below, eight months into the pandemic, over 70 countries and sub-national jurisdictions have postponed elections scheduled for 2020. A similar number have taken the opposite approach and held elections under pandemic conditions.

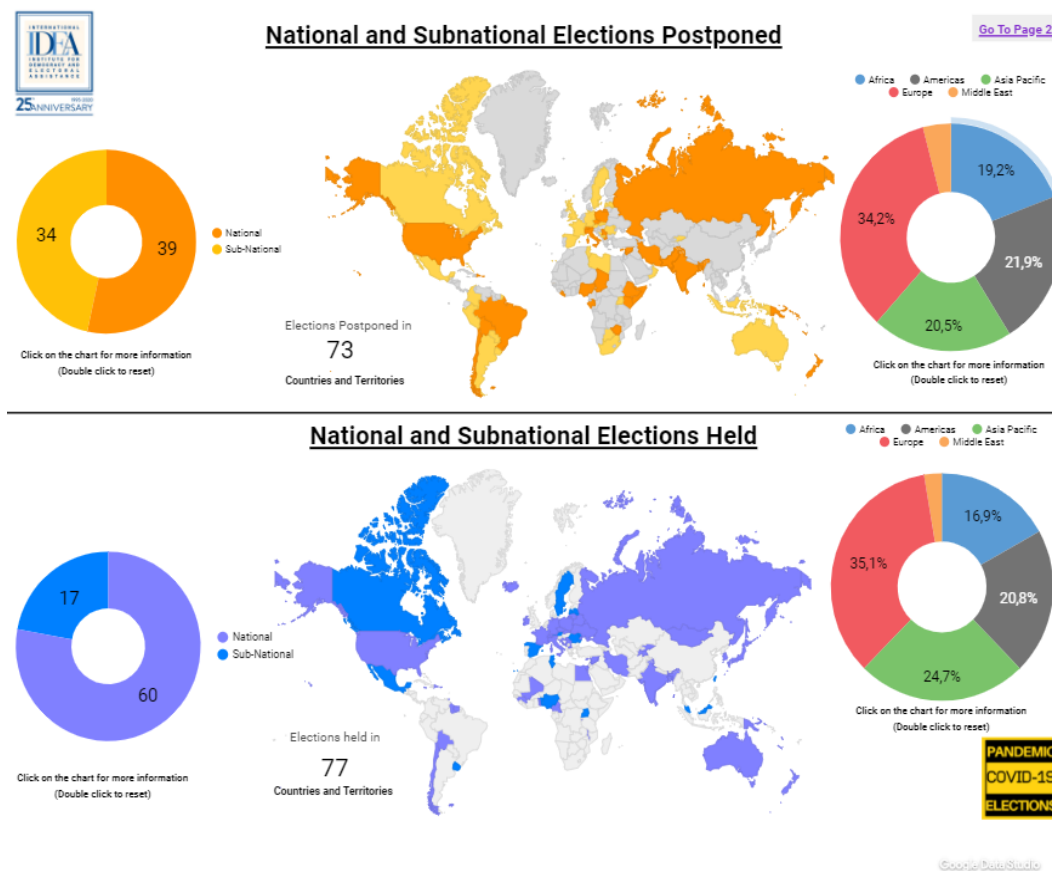


Figure 1: Elections Held and Postponed in 2020 (IDEA)

Between late March and June, postponement was the default decision. But by July this trend had started to shift, and a sharp decrease in postponement of elections can be seen by the fourth quarter of 2020. Global information sharing on how to hold elections with the necessary health measures and special voting arrangements helped those countries with elections scheduled later in the year. Compared to earlier this year, when CIC projected a doubling of elections in late 2020/early 2021, many countries have now succeeded in holding postponed elections, although there are several cases where prolonged postponement poses challenges to political legitimacy.

Decisions to hold or postpone elections in the midst of a pandemic are fraught ones. They must take into account public health considerations relating to electoral events involving mass participation, such as voter registration, electoral campaigning, or voting day operations. Measures imposed to prevent infections may result in limited campaigning opportunities, low voter turnout, and consequently, potential damage to democratic legitimacy. Unsurprisingly, the first of these has triggered political discord in many places, particularly when the decision to restrict campaign activities was taken without consultation with other political actors or was viewed as an attempt by the incumbent government to disadvantage the opposition and maintain power. Controversies have surrounded such decisions in places as varied as Bolivia, Burundi, Cameroon, Croatia, Ethiopia, Guinea, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Serbia, Sri Lanka, Tajikistan, and Venezuela.

How to hold elections

Once a decision is made to go forward with elections, authorities face the second question of how to carry them out. They also confront the sudden pressure to introduce untested or rapidly scaled-up [voting](#) and [health measures](#) within very tight timeframes. In some countries, rapid interagency cooperation and political consensus-building led to pragmatic temporary solutions that could inform future reform of electoral legislation and structures. The importance of anchoring decisions on how to hold elections in *broad political agreements* is one of the lessons that emerges most clearly from the past few months.

South Korea is a case in point. Supported by a cross-party agreement, the South Korean electoral authorities took important steps, such as implementing early and home voting (including for COVID-19 patients), developing a clear communications strategy to provide information to voters, and ensuring health provisions (disinfection of polling stations, gloves and hand sanitizers for voters, temperature checks) were in place. There were also live streams from polling stations for observers. Other countries were equally nimble in [adopting electoral innovations](#). The Czech Republic provided drive-through voting; Switzerland used mobile ballot boxes to take to the elderly or those quarantined; India extended postal voting to those who tested positive for COVID-19 in the recent Rajasthan elections; New Zealand established a special call center to provide voter information; the Dominican Republic created socially distanced polling stations and disinfected all identification cards, markers, and ballots cards; Benin conducted all election campaigns solely through the media and megaphone-equipped vehicles, with no rallies or gatherings; Sri Lanka organized mock polls to test health and safety measures.

Yet in many countries the pandemic has also exposed gaps and weaknesses in the capacities, legal frameworks, financing, and infrastructure available for elections. For example, special voting arrangements, such as early or [mail-in voting](#), were often only feasible in places where some form of these previously existed and could be expanded. In many countries, there were no provisions available to allow [those sick or self-isolating](#) due to

COVID-19 to vote. Enhanced resources needed to be rapidly mobilized almost everywhere to implement new voting measures and provide the necessary staff and safety equipment. Adaptations to pandemic conditions have also faced legal obstacles. In [France](#), for example, despite broad public support and political consensus that the scheduled first round of municipal elections should be postponed, this was not legally possible. It was only through innovative use of case-law theory on exceptional circumstances that the French Parliament was able to pass a state-of-emergency measure that allowed for the postponement of the second round. In still other cases, controversial measures about electoral procedures have been imposed without transparency and consultation or through last-minute court interventions, sparking public anger. In Poland, the announcement of an all-mail vote took place with little consultation, leading to a bitter political argument and eventually to the postponement of the election. In the United States, important election decisions are still tied up in litigation.

The impact on turnout

How all of the above affects electoral participation is not a settled question. Since the start of the pandemic, there have been concerns that elections held during the pandemic will be afflicted by lower turnout. But low turnout is not inevitable. All in all, as shown in Figure 2 below, while overall turnout is lower than normal, in many places people have voted in surprising numbers considering the risks and confusing conditions.

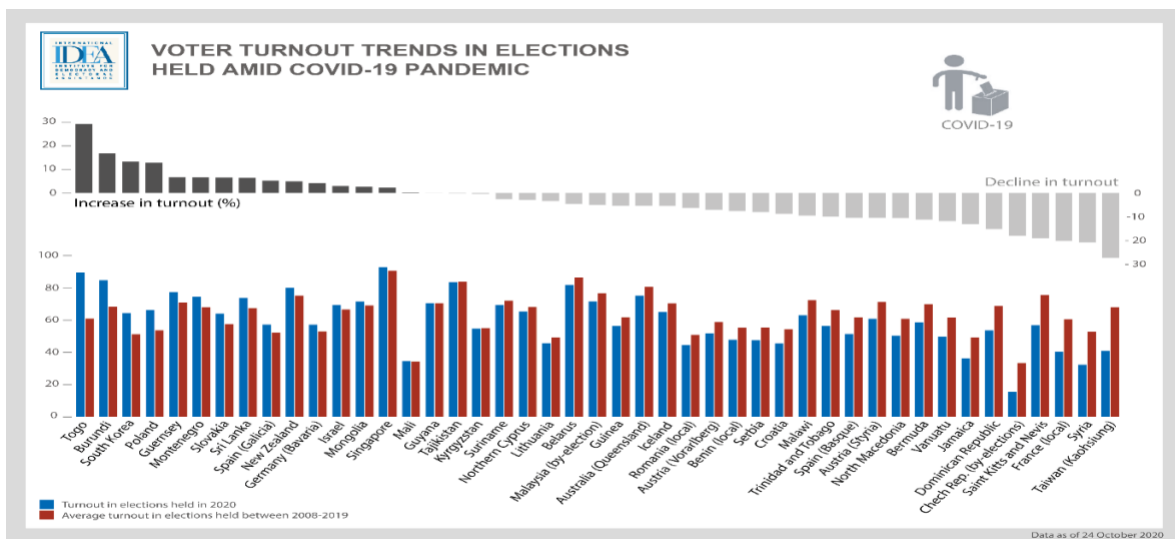


Figure 2: Voter Turnout Trends During COVID-19 (IDEA)

While the factors that affect turnout are numerous and complex, two aspects appear to be particularly relevant in the context of the pandemic. First is the availability of different modalities to exercise the vote. A lack of special voting arrangements can contribute to a precipitous drop in turnout. In Latin America, for instance, no country allows for early voting or for postal voting of those resident in the country. In the Dominican Republic, despite the stringent safety measures adopted by the authorities, participation in the recent presidential election decreased by 14 points compared to the previous one. In South Korea, conversely, the April election resulted in the highest voter turnout in three decades, in part due to the provision of postal voting and additional voting days, during which more than a quarter of the electorate voted. Both postal voting and early voting were part of South Korea’s electoral law well before the pandemic struck.

Second, the evidence shows that in most cases the point of the contagion curve at which a country is found at the time of the election may have a significant impact on electoral participation. The increased participation in South Korea owes much to the fact that the election took place when the number of infections had already been stabilized for over a month. By contrast, elections held amid growing outbreaks, for example Iran's parliamentary elections in February, or France's municipal elections in March, saw dramatic drops in voter turnout. However, this impact is mediated by many other factors, including political polarization and the availability of special voting arrangements. In the United States, high reported turnout in early voting and postal voting appears to be taking place despite rising infection rates in many states.

Lessons on the conduct of credible elections during COVID-19

There are several universal lessons learned from COVID-19 elections held thus far that could help inform reform processes and better prepare countries for the exercise of peaceful democratic processes not only through the remainder of the pandemic, but in future crises:

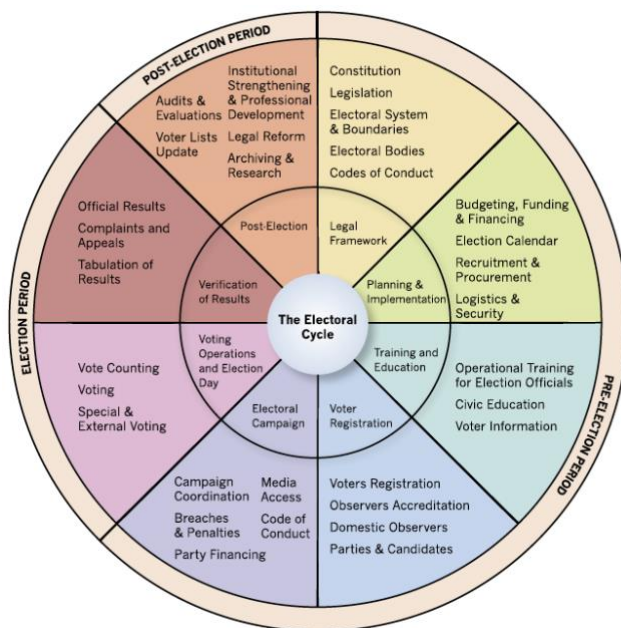
- Governments and electoral authorities that were inclusive and transparent in their decision making about the timing and modalities of the electoral process, and that actively tried to build political consensus and communicate with citizens, were able to proceed more effectively.
- The ability to work across agencies is essential. Cross-agency cooperation on safe polling station procedures and health precautions, as employed in South Korea and elsewhere, provides useful lessons.
- Special voting arrangements such as early, postal, proxy, and mobile voting have played an important role in allowing voters to cast their votes safely and maintaining voter turnout.
- There is a need for periodic and systematic review of rules that govern the organization of elections, including opportunities to test new voting arrangements and research into public views on them.

Lessons on preventing electoral violence for the COVID-19 era

We know that elections can increase tensions, exacerbate social conflicts, and trigger election-related violence. Outbreaks of violence are generally more likely to occur after the result than before, although both can occur. As outlined above, COVID-19 has the potential to increase this risk, because of accusations that some groups were unable to register, campaign, or vote due to pandemic restrictions; suspicion and contestation over new instruments such as postal or digital voting; and delayed or ambiguous results due to new voting modalities. COVID-19's second-order effects are also likely to increase conflict risk, due to the socioeconomic impact of the pandemic and measures such as lockdowns and school closures, which has been variable across different social groups. There is therefore a strong reason for all countries to invest in actions that will decrease the likelihood of electoral controversies that could exacerbate these conflict risks.

Post-authoritarian and post-conflict countries and those with high levels of criminal violence have long grappled with how to balance the benefits of elections, in terms of inclusion and legitimacy, with the risks of instability. Over time, they have developed a number of approaches that may now be of use to a broader number of countries facing increasing distrust over electoral processes during COVID-19. Selected results from research include:

- Approaches can be divided into capacity-building endeavors (electoral management body capacity building, electoral monitor training and deployment, police training, security planning) and accountability and attitude-transforming initiatives (codes of conduct, building of multi-stakeholder fora, and grassroots advocacy against violence by civil society groups).



The eight phases of the electoral cycle include:

1. The legal and institutional electoral framework.
2. Planning and preparation for the implementation of electoral activities.
3. Training and education
4. Registration of voters, political parties and election observers.
5. Electoral campaigning.
6. Voting operations.
7. Election results announcement.
8. Post-electoral phase.

Figure 3: Violence prevention approaches should extend throughout the electoral cycle (IDEA)

- These approaches can be used at every stage of the electoral cycle (see Figure 3 above). A [guide](#) published by IDEA on action points for the prevention and mitigation of election-related violence provides 100 good practice cases in all stages of the cycles.
- Capacity-building endeavors (including capacity building of the state) [appear to be most effective in reducing non-state violence](#). Capacity-building measures are particularly important when there are changes in electoral laws or procedures. Such changes often occur in post-conflict and post-authoritarian transitions, but COVID19 has also required an abrupt change in policies, procedures and practice.
- [Accountability and attitude-transformation efforts appear more successful in reducing state/ruling party-led violence](#). These initiatives are most important when there is a change in the norms and culture that governs expectations of politicians, public officials, and security forces, and their relations with citizens. This occurs during post-conflict and post-authoritarian transitions, but we have seen wider changes in culture immediately pre-COVID-19, with a decline in voter turnout, in particular amongst the youth, declining political party membership, the rise of many new parties, and shifts in the orientations of established parties. In practical terms these initiatives include voluntary and statutory [codes of conduct](#) that can bind political parties and their leaders, or other actors such as the police, observers, and media, to both principles of action and protocols for response when incidents of violence occur.
- An approach that involves both capacity building, accountability and attitude transformation is the construction of [infrastructures for peace](#). Started in South Africa in 1991-94 and adapted to context in Ghana, Nepal, Tunisia, Thailand, and Colombia, these stakeholder fora typically bring together national,

regional, and local stakeholders (political party leadership, religious/traditional leaders, civil society, security forces, and civilian government) before an election to participate in a process of consensual planning for how to handle public events during the electoral period, and what to do if tensions escalate. The effectiveness of this approach is often [connected](#) with the utilization of early warning methods.

Approaches to combat electoral misinformation and disinformation

It is clear that in today's world, election battles often begin online. The spread of rumor, misinformation, propaganda, and intentional disinformation, which have always been problems in electoral contests, are now magnified through social media. The political and public health responses to COVID-19 have been hampered by the spread of false or misleading information about the disease itself, and the intersection of the pandemic and the electoral process provides additional opportunities for this—as in Niger, where [disinformation was spread](#) around the [timing of measures](#) to restrict biometric voter registration due to COVID-19. Numerous studies show that social media algorithms can increase polarization by directing users to more extremist [views](#)—this effect may be more significant when people's access to other sources of information, including public meetings, is limited by lockdown provisions. All of this can contribute to the risk of declining electoral legitimacy and, in the extreme, electoral violence. Governments are tasked with walking a fine line of combating these problems without impugning on citizens' rights. And while electoral monitoring benefits from a set of accepted [guidelines](#), there is no international framework for addressing disinformation. Despite these constraints, governments have found ways to counter misinformation and disinformation through:

- *Public communications using both traditional and social media.* The [Council on Foreign Relations](#) notes that South Korea displayed posters ahead of the election explaining how citizens could vote and [texted voting instructions](#) to people in quarantine. Serbia [published instructions](#) on voting procedures in nine newspapers and on Instagram, and broadcast public service announcements on television and thirty radio stations. Malawi's government shared voting information on social media and the radio.
- *Social media platform efforts to increase transparency and fact-checking.* The imminent US election in particular has become a cauldron of both contestation and experimentation in this regard: [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#) and [Google](#) have all been under criticism and have revised their policies at least once during 2020. A relatively new idea in this domain, and again one for which the US election is driving action, is for advance codes of conduct by social media platforms to combat disinformation on electoral results. Facebook, for example, includes in its site on preparation for the US election a specific section dedicated to [redirecting voters to reputable information sources](#) in posts about electoral results. These efforts are voluntary: an obvious future debate is whether they would be more effective if accompanied by government regulation and international norms or principles.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to spread and surprise, both in its direct and indirect impact on societies. Many democracies have too long prided themselves on decades-old practices and relied on unquestioned integrity. The pandemic has helped demonstrate that truly robust electoral systems require adjustments and flexibility. In this environment, bold yet well-consulted innovations by Governments, Electoral Management Bodies and civil society, global engagements in peer exchange, implementation of observer recommendations, and learning from [comparative examples](#) are more needed than ever.