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# ELECTORAL PROCESSES: NAVIGATING AND EMERGING FROM CRISIS

Global State of Democracy Thematic Paper 2021



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# Acknowledgements

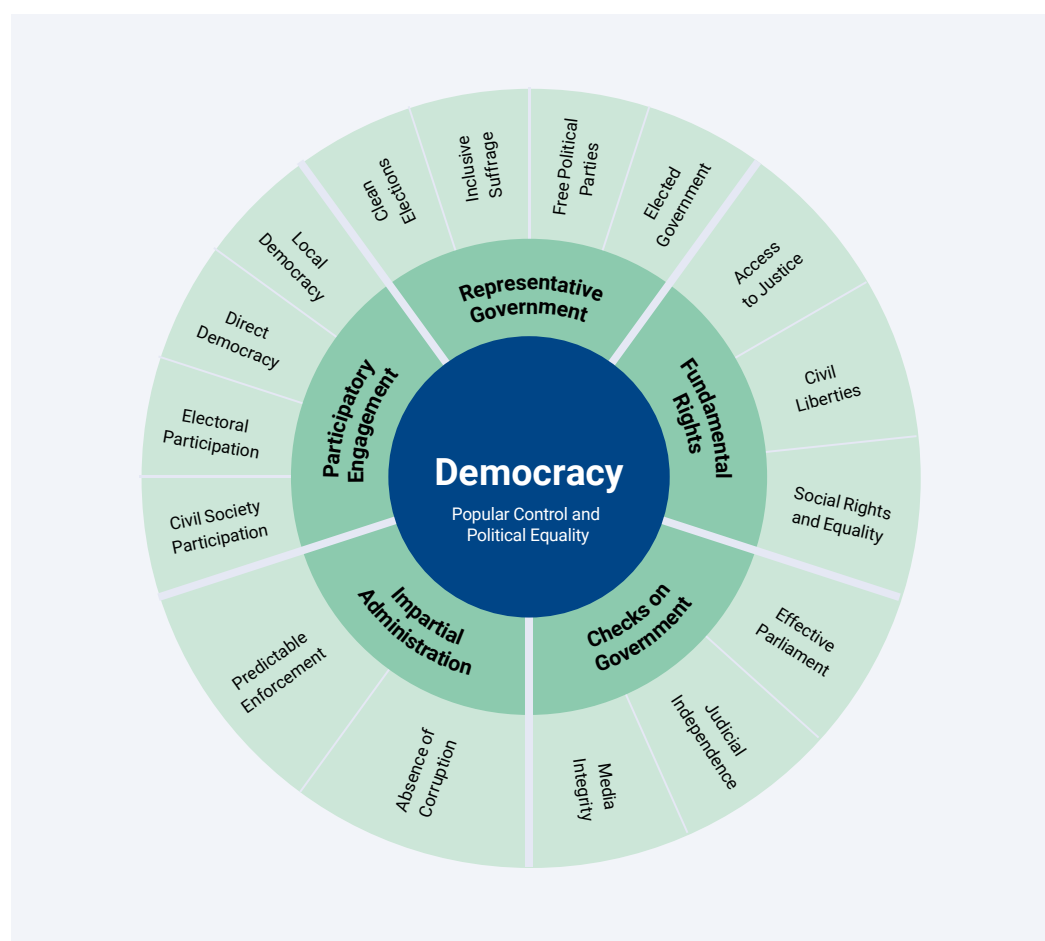
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## About the technical paper

International IDEA's *The Global State of Democracy (GSoD) 2021* reviews the state of democracy around the world over the course of 2020 and 2021, with democratic trends since 2015 used as contextual reference. It is based on analysis of events that have impacted democratic governance globally since the start of the pandemic, based on various data sources, including International IDEA's [Global Monitor of Covid-19's Impact on Democracy and Human Rights](#), and International IDEA's [Global State of Democracy \(GSoD\) Indices](#). The Global Monitor provides monthly data on pandemic measures and their impact on democracy for 165 countries in the world. The GSoD Indices provide quantitative data on democratic quality for the same countries, based on 28 aspects of democracy up until the end of 2020. Both data sources are developed around a conceptual framework, which defines democracy as based on five core attributes: Representative Government, Fundamental Rights, Checks on Government, Impartial Administration, and Participatory Engagement (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1

### The GSoD conceptual framework



This technical paper is part of a series on The Global State of Democracy, which complement and cross-reference each other. The report has a global focus, and it is accompanied by four regional reports that provide more in-depth analysis of trends and developments in **Africa and the Middle East**; the **Americas** (North, South and Central America, and the Caribbean); **Asia and the Pacific** and **Europe**. It is accompanied by two additional thematic papers that allow more in-depth analysis and recommendations on how to manage **emergency law responses**, and **how democracies and non-democracies fared** based on lessons learned from the pandemic.

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## CONCEPTS IN THE GLOBAL STATE OF DEMOCRACY 2021

- The reports refer to three main regime types: *democracies*, *hybrid* and *authoritarian regimes*. Hybrid and authoritarian regimes are both classified as non-democratic.
- *Democracies*, at a minimum, hold competitive elections in which the opposition stands a realistic chance of accessing power. This is not the case in *hybrid* and *authoritarian* regimes. However, *hybrid* regimes tend to have a somewhat more open—but still insufficient—space for civil society and the media than *authoritarian* regimes.
- *Democracies* can be *weak*, *mid-range performing* or *high-performing*, and this status changes from year to year, based on a country's annual democracy scores.
- *Democracies* in any of these categories can be backsliding, eroding and/or fragile, capturing changes in democratic performance over time.
  - Backsliding democracies are those that have experienced gradual but significant weakening of Checks on Government and Civil Liberties, such as Freedom of Expression and Freedom of Association and Assembly, over time. This is often through intentional policies and reforms aimed at weakening the rule of law and civic space. Backsliding can affect democracies at any level of performance.
  - Eroding democracies have experienced statistically significant declines in any of the democracy aspects over the past 5 or 10 years. The democracies with the highest levels of erosion tend also to be classified as backsliding.
  - Fragile democracies are those that have experienced an undemocratic interruption at any point since their first transition to democracy.
  - *Deepening authoritarianism* is a decline in any of the democracy aspects of non-democratic regimes.

For a full explanation of the concepts and how they are defined, see the conceptual framework, as well as Table 6 on p. 8 of the [summary methodology](#).

# Key facts and findings

## CHALLENGES

|   |  |  |
|---|--|--|
| Significant crises can derail electoral processes and disrupt the functioning of democratic institutions. | When elections occur during crises, new circumstances can expose weaknesses in legislation, capacity and infrastructure. These can jeopardize the credibility of results.  | Autocrats can abuse crisis measures to gain electoral advantages over their political opponents and suppress citizens' freedoms. |
| Crises can disrupt critical international electoral assistance and election observation efforts.          | Crises can prevent political parties from securing sufficient funding through traditional rallies and state subsidies, accelerating the trend of online campaigning and financing. Yet most existing political finance regulations fail to effectively address the corruption risks associated with online campaign finance. | Crises can exacerbate both the fear of foreign malicious interference and the rise of domestic misinformation.                   |

## OPPORTUNITIES

|  |   |
|--|---|
| Times of crises can be conducive to innovation and the development of arrangements for increased operational effectiveness, participation and improved trust in electoral processes. | Special voting arrangements have the potential to mitigate the challenges of proceeding with elections in environments where voters face limited access to polling places, including due to health hazards. |
| Domestic election observation can compensate for the lack of international election observation presence in times of crises.   | Electoral management in times of crises provides a roadmap for resilience and recovery from unexpected events. Lessons learned should be built into electoral policies and practices.                       |



# Introduction

Elections that take place regularly and provide for the orderly transition of power from one elected government to another are the cornerstone of democratic governance and political stability. During 2020–2021, the Covid-19 pandemic profoundly affected elections worldwide. In the first place, fast decisions needed to be made about whether to continue with planned elections, postpone or cancel them—balancing political rights with public health and safety concerns. For elections that went ahead, the pandemic necessitated rapid adjustments, including the introduction of health and safety measures and social distancing requirements, an accelerated move towards online campaigning, and the expansion or introduction of special voting arrangements (SVAs), such as advance, postal, proxy and mobile voting. Countries that held elections later in 2020 benefited from early lessons learned and the build-up of collective knowledge throughout the pandemic.

This pandemic experience is not the first time that public health concerns have affected the conduct of elections. Similar situations arose with the US elections in the midst of the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic, Mexican elections during the swine flu epidemic in 2009, Haitian elections that took place in the middle of a cholera outbreak in 2010/11, and West African elections during the Ebola crises of 2013–2016. However, the impact of Covid-19 was unprecedented in terms of the global scope, and the sheer number of countries, political actors and voters affected.

Constitutions and election laws commonly include rigid provisions about electoral timelines and terms in office to protect the political system and secure democratic transitions of power. One of the major election-related lessons learned by parliaments and other institutions from the Covid-19 experience is that in an acute situation, such as when countries need to depart from the electoral schedule to protect citizens' lives and health, this rigidity can lead to legal, political and operational predicaments. Political controversies related to postponing or proceeding with elections impacted electoral conduct and undermined public confidence.

Decisions to cancel elections were seen to favour incumbents because they prolonged their terms in office or bought them time to restore popularity, which may have deteriorated during the crisis. For incumbents with authoritarian mindsets, holding elections during the state of emergency provided an opportunity to manipulate health and safety measures to sideline and silence political opponents, civil society, critical media and human rights advocates.

Beyond the legal and political controversies, there were operational challenges. When the pandemic emerged, most electoral administrators lacked a basic understanding of the risks and remedies for conducting elections during pandemics. The dilemma was that, traditionally, electoral management bodies encourage face-to-face electoral information and education events, and call for high in-person registration and voter turnout. Also, election observation critically depends on observers' presence in voter registration centres and polling and counting sites. Public health and safety measures imposed to prevent the spread of Covid-19 called for the opposite. Even when there was agreement to shift the election day, there were myriad other technical and administrative alignments.

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**The pandemic necessitated rapid adjustments for elections and accelerated a move towards online campaigning and introduction of special voting arrangements.**

During 2020–2021, the idea of growing in the face of challenges was true for many state institutions, both legislative and executive. In responding to new risks, many electoral management bodies in particular demonstrated resourcefulness and commitment as they rapidly adjusted to apply public health protocols to electoral events, broadened voting arrangements, cooperated with parliaments, health and other state agencies, and proactively updated the public on new procedures. These new or enhanced practices charted a roadmap for dealing with future crises but also provided valuable insights into improving even those elections held under normal circumstances. Interestingly, because the challenges of Covid-19 elections were equally perplexing in well-established and transitional democracies, various government agencies demonstrated a remarkable willingness and appetite for peer learning, irrespective of democratic history or geography.

This paper constitutes a background document for *The Global State of Democracy 2021*, which notes a decline in clean elections across both democratic and non-democratic (hybrid and authoritarian) regimes that has been exacerbated by the pandemic. The main report also points to cases of electoral resilience. Along these lines, this background paper aims to present key trends and lessons learned relating to challenges and opportunities for conducting elections during crises. The paper offers policy recommendations for national governments, parliaments, electoral management bodies and international development organizations, and makes forward-looking conclusions.

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**In responding to new risks, many electoral management bodies in particular demonstrated resourcefulness and commitment as they rapidly adjusted to apply public health protocols to electoral events.**

## Chapter 1

# Analysis and lessons learned

The period 2020–2021 was paved with electoral challenges that occupied governments, legislators, electoral administrators, political parties and citizens. Addressing pandemic-related challenges exposed democracy concerns, legal constraints, financial and logistical hurdles, institutional shortcomings, communication difficulties, participation and election observation limitations.

On a positive note, the crisis expedited learning, experimentation, dialogue and reform. Whether through sociopolitical tradition, lack of political will or inertia, many election frameworks were already long overdue for re-evaluating, particularly in long-established electoral democracies. The immediate and urgent need to deal with Covid-19-related challenges was an opportunity to re-energize electoral processes by seeking innovative arrangements for increased operational effectiveness, participation and improved trust in electoral processes.

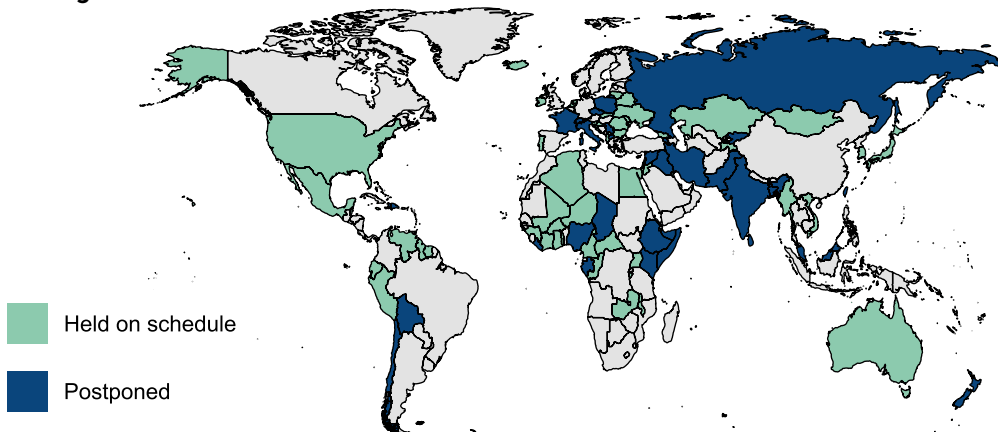
**On a positive note, the crisis expedited learning, experimentation, dialogue and reform.**

## 1.1 THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC LED TO LARGE-SCALE POSTPONEMENT OF ELECTIONS

Between February 2020 and August 2021, over 200 general and local elections<sup>1</sup> worldwide were scheduled to take place. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, at least 42 countries postponed national elections, while 37 countries postponed subnational elections. National elections were held in 110 countries and subnational elections proceeded in 22 countries (see Figures 2 and 3). While most of the postponed elections were held in subsequent weeks or months, as of 31 August 2021, a number of elections had not yet taken place. In some instances, elections were postponed without a new date set (see Figure 4).

FIGURE 2

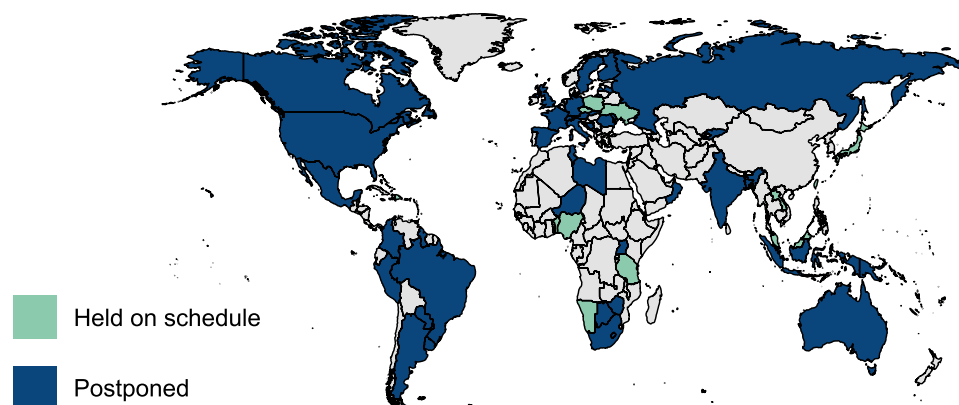
**National elections that were held or postponed between 21 February 2020 and 31 August 2021**



Source: International IDEA, 'Global Overview of Covid-19: Impact on Elections', last updated 20 September 2021, <<https://www.idea.int/news-media/multimedia-reports/global-overview-covid-19-impact-elections>>, accessed 6 September 2021.

FIGURE 3

### Subnational elections that were held or postponed between 21 February 2020 and 31 August 2021



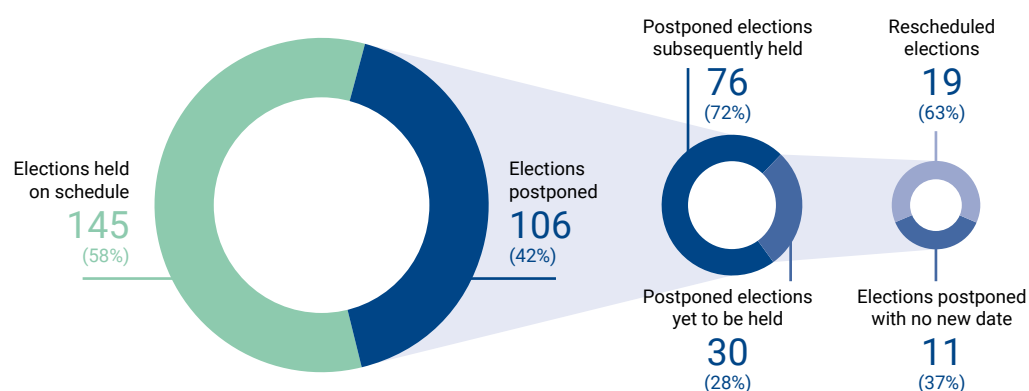
Source: International IDEA, 'Global Overview of Covid-19: Impact on Elections', last updated 20 September 2021, <<https://www.idea.int/news-media/multimedia-reports/global-overview-covid-19-impact-elections>>, accessed 6 September 2021.

Some of the elections that were held, such as the first round of local elections in France in March 2020,<sup>2</sup> proceeded because of a lack of legal grounds for postponing them. Such situations demanded quick and close cooperation between legislators, legal specialists and electoral authorities to identify legally compliant solutions.

Most postponements of elections due to Covid-19 took place in early 2020. In March 2020, 50 per cent of planned elections were postponed. By April 2020, approximately 80 per cent of elections were postponed. May and September 2020 also recorded more postponed than held elections (see Figure 5). A greater share of the postponed elections was at the subnational level (see Figure 6).

FIGURE 4

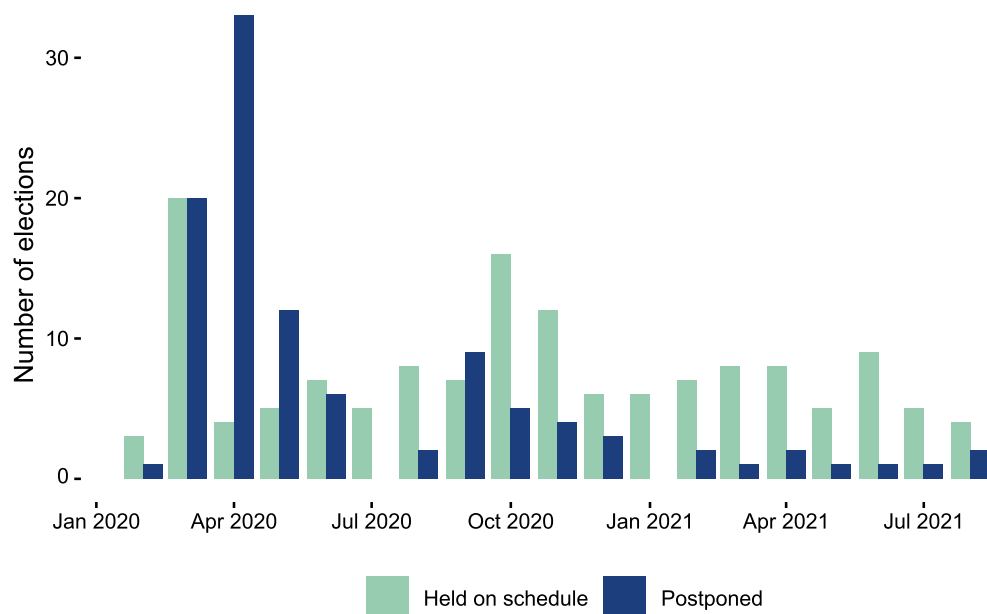
### Postponed elections (February 2020 to August 2021)



Source: International IDEA, 'Global Overview of Covid-19: Impact on Elections', last updated 20 September 2021, <<https://www.idea.int/news-media/multimedia-reports/global-overview-covid-19-impact-elections>>, accessed 6 September 2021.

FIGURE 5

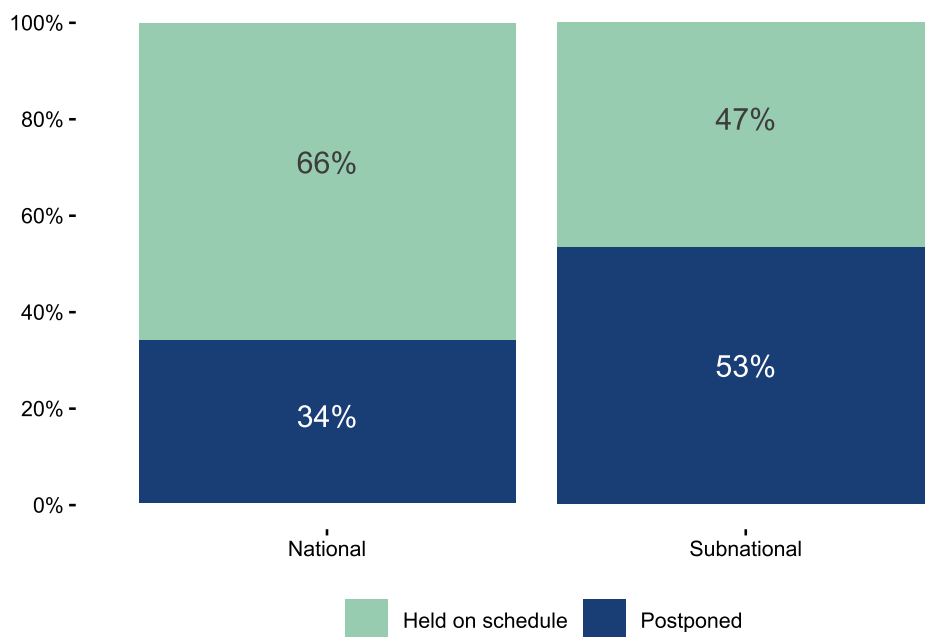
### Elections held and postponed, trend (February 2020 to August 2021)



Source: International IDEA, 'Global Overview of Covid-19: Impact on Elections', last updated 20 September 2021, <<https://www.idea.int/news-media/multimedia-reports/global-overview-covid-19-impact-elections>>, accessed 6 September 2021.

FIGURE 6

### Elections held and postponed, ratio (February 2020 to August 2021)

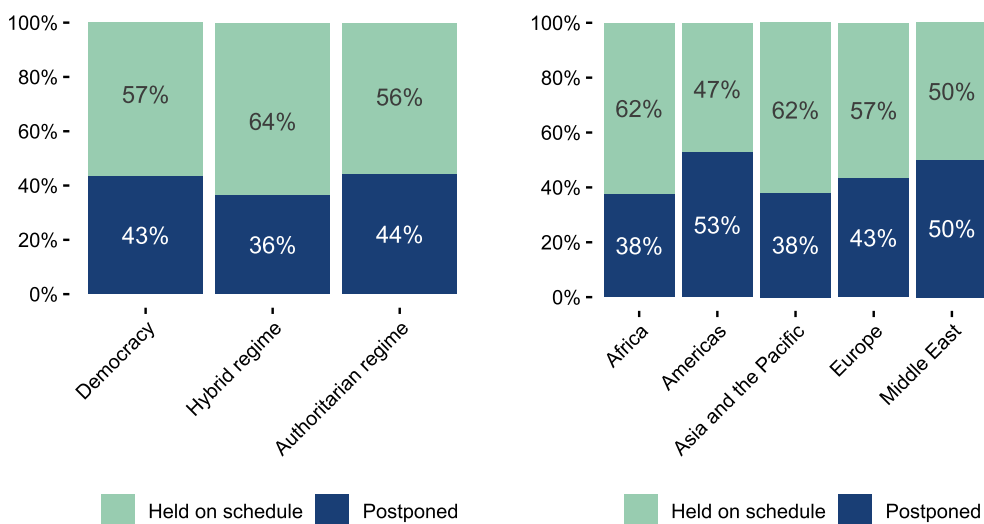


Source: International IDEA, 'Global Overview of Covid-19: Impact on Elections', last updated 20 September 2021, <<https://www.idea.int/news-media/multimedia-reports/global-overview-covid-19-impact-elections>>, accessed 6 September 2021.

In addition to legal gaps, there were often domestic political controversies and domestic and international concerns over the decisions to postpone or proceed with elections, regarding how this would impact democracy. Overall, global data analysis for the time period February 2020 until August 2021 (see Figure 7) does not show differences between democracies and authoritarian regimes, which have almost equal ratios of held/postponed elections (57:43 and 56:44), while hybrid regimes have less tendency to postpone elections with a ratio of 64:36 held/postponed. These figures, nonetheless, should be taken with some reservations as overall ratios fluctuated in different time periods. Reasons for pressing with elections in hybrid and authoritarian regimes may include the expectation of low voter turnout, which favours incumbents,<sup>3</sup> and the weakened organizational ability of oppositional parties<sup>4</sup> during elections, which allows incumbents to stifle dissent. Authoritarian and hybrid regimes have also been able to control media narratives on the Covid-19 pandemic and use medical expertise strategically to legitimize their leadership.<sup>5</sup>

FIGURE 7

**Postponement per regime type and region, as of August 2021**



Source: International IDEA, 'Global Overview of Covid-19: Impact on Elections', last updated 20 September 2021, <<https://www.idea.int/news-media/multimedia-reports/global-overview-covid-19-impact-elections>>, accessed 6 September 2021.

A review of the cases shows that decisions to either hold or postpone elections were neither democratic nor undemocratic by default. The effects on the democratic processes and institutions were highly contextual. What was more important for understanding the democratic implications of this early phase of the pandemic was *how* these decisions were made and conveyed. The case studies on Covid-19 and elections available on International IDEA's website<sup>6</sup> show that navigating the difficult decision-making well required not only rapid political consensus-building and the mobilizing of the highest level of legal expertise but also operational agility and robust public communication, whereby the legal issues, the decisions, the reasoning and the measures in place to secure both public health and democratic continuity were clearly explained.

The Republic of Korea national elections in mid-April 2020 were trailblazing. Closely watched by election authorities worldwide, the Korean model<sup>7</sup>—combining health and

safety measures, SVAs and public information—shifted the global trend from postponing to holding elections by mid-2020 (see Figure 5). As electoral management bodies (EMBs) learned from each other in a remarkable example of accelerated and informal professional peer learning, the confidence to hold elections increased. Many of the initially postponed elections were held in the second half of 2020.

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## 1.2 LEGISLATIVE GAPS PROMPTED LEGISLATIVE ACTION, COLLABORATION, INNOVATION AND REFORM

The decisions on whether to delay or hold elections demanded multiple legal considerations. The focus was on the rigidity of laws that set terms for elected officials and election timelines, the implications of declarations of states of emergency, and the provisions for the postponement of elections under such a state. For example, some countries (e.g. Guyana) must continue to hold parliamentary elections in some circumstances, regardless of whether an intervening constitutional state of emergency has been declared. Others (e.g. Afghanistan, Albania) cannot hold elections during a state of emergency. Sometimes, a delay is allowed if deemed necessary (e.g. India, Mongolia), while in other instances (e.g. Central African Republic), it is unconstitutional to postpone an election if this would extend term limits regardless of whether a state of emergency is in effect. In some countries (e.g. France), it was unclear what should happen to elections that had already started and had to be interrupted or postponed by weeks or months due to the pandemic.

These legal quandaries were compounded by the rapid introduction or upscaling of special voting arrangements (SVAs), such as mobile ballot boxes and early and postal voting, as alternatives to avoid polling day crowding and to allow at-risk groups and infected and quarantined citizens to vote safely (see Table 1). The timeframes were remarkable for these adaptations—with, for example, just a two-week turnaround to implementation of full postal voting in Bavaria, Germany. Offering existing SVAs to broader groups of voters was in most countries more feasible than introducing new SVAs—for legal as well as operational and public trust reasons. Introducing new SVAs was often not possible—for example, due to restrictions in the law (Sri Lanka) or time limitations (Lithuania)—or was met with criticism and lawsuits (e.g. USA<sup>8</sup>). Even the expansion of SVAs served as a potential tinderbox, as was the case in the US state of Pennsylvania.<sup>9</sup>

Clearly, these scenarios stretched the boundaries of legal praxis. With this backdrop, election-related decision-making under the pandemic often required rapid legislative actions. Where the political divide was deep and stakes were high (e.g. Poland, USA), there was often neither sufficient time nor sufficient consensus to agree on or bring about the required legal and process changes. As a result, related decisions have often been disputed and highly politicized, and led to the questioning of the legitimacy of elections and their results. A persistent narrative about the linkage between postal voting and ‘rigging’ and mistrust in the handling of related complaints contributed to the tensions during the 2020 presidential elections in the USA, which culminated in the January 2021 violence at the US Capitol.

In contrast, when decisions were inclusive and based on effective dialogue across the political spectrum, new timelines, rules and regulations for proceeding with elections were less controversial. In some countries (e.g. Finland, New Zealand), political actors joined forces to find the required solutions in the face of the pandemic. For example, the decision

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**When decisions were inclusive and based on effective dialogue across the political spectrum, new timelines, rules and regulations for proceeding with elections were less controversial.**

to postpone the 2021 municipal elections in Finland entailed coordination between the Ministry of Justice and 10 parliamentary parties, of which 9 agreed with the course of action. The Government's act was approved by the Parliament and the President.<sup>10</sup> This makes a compelling case that, in crisis situations, how decisions are made is as important for public confidence as the substance of the decision.

More broadly, many countries have embarked on domestic conversations of electoral reform as a result of the gaps and weaknesses exposed during the pandemic decision-making on elections. Some important areas that have seen significant enhancements are elaborated in the following sections.

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### 1.3 OPERATIONAL STRESS TEST FOR EMBS

For EMBS, organizing elections during a pandemic stretched their capacity and increased their exposure to risks. Of course, many of the Covid-19-related challenges—such as limited access to working places, infected or quarantined staff—were equally relevant for EMBS as for other public and private sector organizations. Compounding these were challenges particular to electoral management, such as time scarcity, mass mobilization and geographical reach. EMBS had to work against the clock to find plausible solutions to align the necessary health and safety measures, including social distancing, with the high-scale mobilization of its staff, temporary workers, vendors and community participation, all within the already rigorous constraints of the electoral calendar.

The compliance with health and safety measures required purchasing personal protective equipment (such as face shields, medical gloves and protective clothing) for polling officials, as well as items for polling stations, including hand sanitizer, contactless thermometers and plexiglass screens. Furthermore, rules about social distancing, mask-wearing, ventilation of the polling station, cleaning of materials and handwashing had to be adhered to.

Almost all countries that held national elections in 2020 and 2021 adopted health and safety measures for polling stations. Beyond these general measures, many countries introduced innovative and extraordinary measures to decrease infection risk. For example, EMBS in Bermuda, Jamaica and Singapore introduced temperature checks for voters entering polling stations. In Bolivia, New Zealand and Republic of Korea, the election commissions decided to open more polling stations than in previous elections. The Netherlands held elections across a three-day period, rather than on a single day, in order to facilitate social distancing in polling stations. Most of these innovations came with unexpected costs.

These costs were not foreseen in many budgets and required budgetary increases in many cases (Australia, Israel, Kyrgyzstan, Republic of Korea, UK, Ukraine, USA<sup>11</sup>). Although most countries that held national elections introduced health and safety measures, international election observer missions (EOMs) pointed to inconsistent compliance and enforcement in some places (Burkina Faso, Croatia, Dominican Republic, Myanmar, Niger<sup>12</sup>).

There are anecdotal accounts of the effects of elections on Covid-19 spread and mortality—and EMBS were understandably concerned, not only for the welfare of citizens but also for their large numbers of temporary staff. Illustrative stories have been published by the media on the elections that have taken place in Brazil,<sup>13</sup> France,<sup>14</sup> Myanmar<sup>15</sup> and the

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**Almost all countries that held national elections in 2020 and 2021 adopted health and safety measures for polling stations.**



USA.<sup>16</sup> Typically, these accounts focus on candidates or election officials falling ill during the election period. Much of the scholarly research remains inconclusive and at times contradictory due to the difference in methods and approaches,<sup>17</sup> but the evidence from the USA,<sup>18</sup> India<sup>19</sup> and Malaysia<sup>20</sup> links the spread of the virus to non-compliance with health and safety measures during campaigning.

Therefore, EMBs around the globe collaborated with health services in 2020–2021 on the development of and adherence to health and safety guidelines (e.g. Bulgaria, Côte d'Ivoire, Ecuador, India, Jamaica, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Malaysia, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Turks and Caicos Islands, Uganda, UK, USA). In Malaysia, for example, ahead of the July 2020 Pahang State Assembly by-election, the EMB deliberated with health authorities on the timing of elections. In some cases, the EMB worked directly with government ministries (e.g. Curaçao, Czechia, Portugal), with the national emergency management organization (St Vincent and the Grenadines) or with Covid-19 task forces (Indonesia, Lao PDR, Philippines, St Kitts and Nevis, Tajikistan). In some cases, such as Portugal<sup>21</sup> and India<sup>22</sup>, health workers also took an active role during the implementation of SVAs.

What is clear from various Covid-19 case studies<sup>23</sup> is that cooperation with public health agencies was a new working modality for most EMBs. Here, the lessons learned from Liberian elections during the Ebola crisis were invaluable as a first entry point to think through how social distancing and lowering infection rates would work in polling stations.<sup>24</sup> Many EMBs have shown a renewed interest in risk management frameworks to identify and pre-empt future 'surprises' beyond the pandemic. The UK Electoral Commission, for example, has introduced a Covid-19 risk assessment as part of supplementary guidelines and planning considerations.<sup>25</sup>

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## 1.4 ACCELERATED SHIFT ONLINE FOR POLITICAL PARTY CAMPAIGNING AND FINANCING

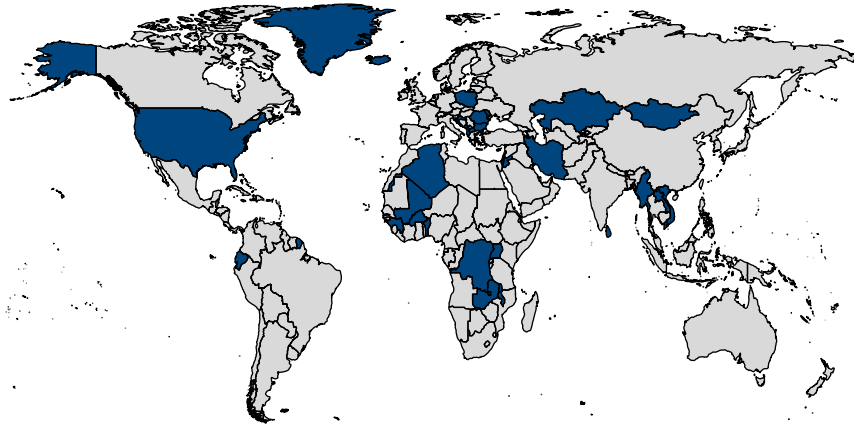
While pandemic-induced legislative and operational changes preoccupied the authorities charged with organizing elections, for voters and politicians other dynamics were at play. The pandemic profoundly impacted the ways in which political parties worldwide conducted their campaigns. While the move online was already under way pre-pandemic, the public health bans on political rallies and events or restrictions on large gatherings (see Figure 8) accelerated the use of digital technologies in fundraising and outreach activities to become an increasingly integral part of many political parties' campaign strategies.

The public health requirements that significantly reduced spaces for political parties and candidates to campaign through mass public gatherings had unevenly distributed democratic repercussions. In some instances, governments prohibited public gathering (Rwanda, Seychelles, Uganda<sup>26</sup>) and sanctioned opposition candidates who violated Covid-19 protocols by campaigning or protesting (Uganda). Due to the restrictions on assemblies across Europe, political party campaign events were limited in form and scope, but at times restrictions were violated.<sup>27</sup> In the USA, both presidential candidates organized in-person campaign rallies but took different approaches with regards to respecting public health guidelines. The incumbent candidate ignored the guidelines while the challenging candidate was in compliance. Nevertheless, some local officials 'shied away from enforcing public health orders for fear of provoking a backlash' with the incumbent.<sup>28</sup>

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**The public health requirements that significantly reduced spaces for political parties and candidates to campaign through mass public gatherings had unevenly distributed democratic repercussions.**

## Countries with a limit set for the number of participants at public gatherings during national elections



With Covid-19 restrictions in place, many political parties and candidates moved their campaign to social media and other online platforms. In Singapore, parties discussed their plans through e-rallies on Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and TV and radio. Ahead of the March 2021 general elections in the Netherlands, most parties campaigned through TV and social media. In Kuwait, social media was used extensively, particularly Twitter, Zoom and WhatsApp, because in-person meetings at *diwanis* (party reception areas) were banned. In the USA, party conventions were held online before parties began to adopt non-traditional rallies, such as drive-in events and those held at airports. Worth highlighting is the use of augmented reality technology<sup>29</sup> for virtual election campaigning. In the Republic of Korea, for example, some candidates and parties developed tools that could be used by citizens to take 3D photos with the parties' animated characters.<sup>30</sup> Also, the use of an online campaign resulted in more women candidates/minority candidates being elected in the Australian state of Victoria.<sup>31</sup> In Mali, where there was a lack of Internet penetration, political parties and candidates used text messages and community radio to reach voters.<sup>32</sup>

The pandemic has also exposed political parties' vulnerabilities, especially related to financing streams and accelerated shifts of fundraising efforts to the online sphere. Given that public funding is an integral part of political finance systems in many states, and recognizing the strain of the Covid-19 pandemic on national economies, there is evidence that the current pandemic will have a unique and unprecedented impact on the flow of money in politics.<sup>33</sup> Restrictions on the size of gatherings made it difficult to organize traditional fundraising events. In order to generate more financial resources to fight the pandemic, revising the amount of public subsidies to political parties has been considered by the courts and EMBs in some countries—for example, Brazil and Mexico. In some cases, the use of emergency powers also undermined the public financing of political parties, as was the case in Hungary, where the Prime Minister used an emergency powers decree to make significant cuts to political parties' state funding.<sup>34</sup>

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widely utilized online crowdfunding.<sup>35</sup> While it is encouraging that the Internet and online technologies make fundraising more accessible and facilitate small donors' contributions to political parties, digital technologies also pose challenges to the transparency and integrity of election campaigns. Political parties, candidates and third-party campaigners in many countries increasingly spend more on their online campaigns. However, only 7 per cent of countries worldwide regulate how these actors can spend money online.<sup>36</sup> The lack of transparency in online campaign spending opens up a risk of exploitation by undue interests to circumvent existing political finance regulations, such as contribution limits and bans on foreign and anonymous donations. As digital trends are likely to continue into the future, regulating online campaigning and online campaign finance<sup>37</sup> has become one of the emerging challenges to ensure the transparency and integrity of elections.

## 1.5 RETHINKING VOTER PARTICIPATION

Of the 90 countries that held national elections and referendums from the beginning of the pandemic to the end of August 2021, voter turnout declined in 58 countries (64 per cent) with a mean decline of 10.3 per cent compared to the average turnout during the last 12 years (see Figure 9).

The reasons for voter turnout declines may not exclusively be due to Covid-19 concerns. For example, the sharp decline of 39 per cent in turnout in the parliamentary elections held on 6 December 2020 in Venezuela can also be attributed to an opposition party boycott. Despite the majority of elections seeing a decline in voter turnout, a significant number of countries actually saw an increase, with a mean increase of 8.2 per cent.

Unique to this pandemic were participation challenges experienced by different age groups and persons in isolation (e.g. in France<sup>38</sup>). It is common in some regions that older people are more likely to vote (e.g. in Europe<sup>39</sup> and the USA<sup>40</sup>). However, Covid-19 prompted a paradigm shift due to the disproportionate risk that the pandemic presented to older people. In countries where clear-cut generational voting preferences exist (e.g. the UK<sup>41</sup>) or where older people constitute a majority of poll workers (e.g. the USA<sup>42</sup>) the perceived risks of infections at polling locations were considered factors that could potentially impact voting patterns and the quality of polling processes, respectively. The perceived risks also affected recruitment of polling staff.

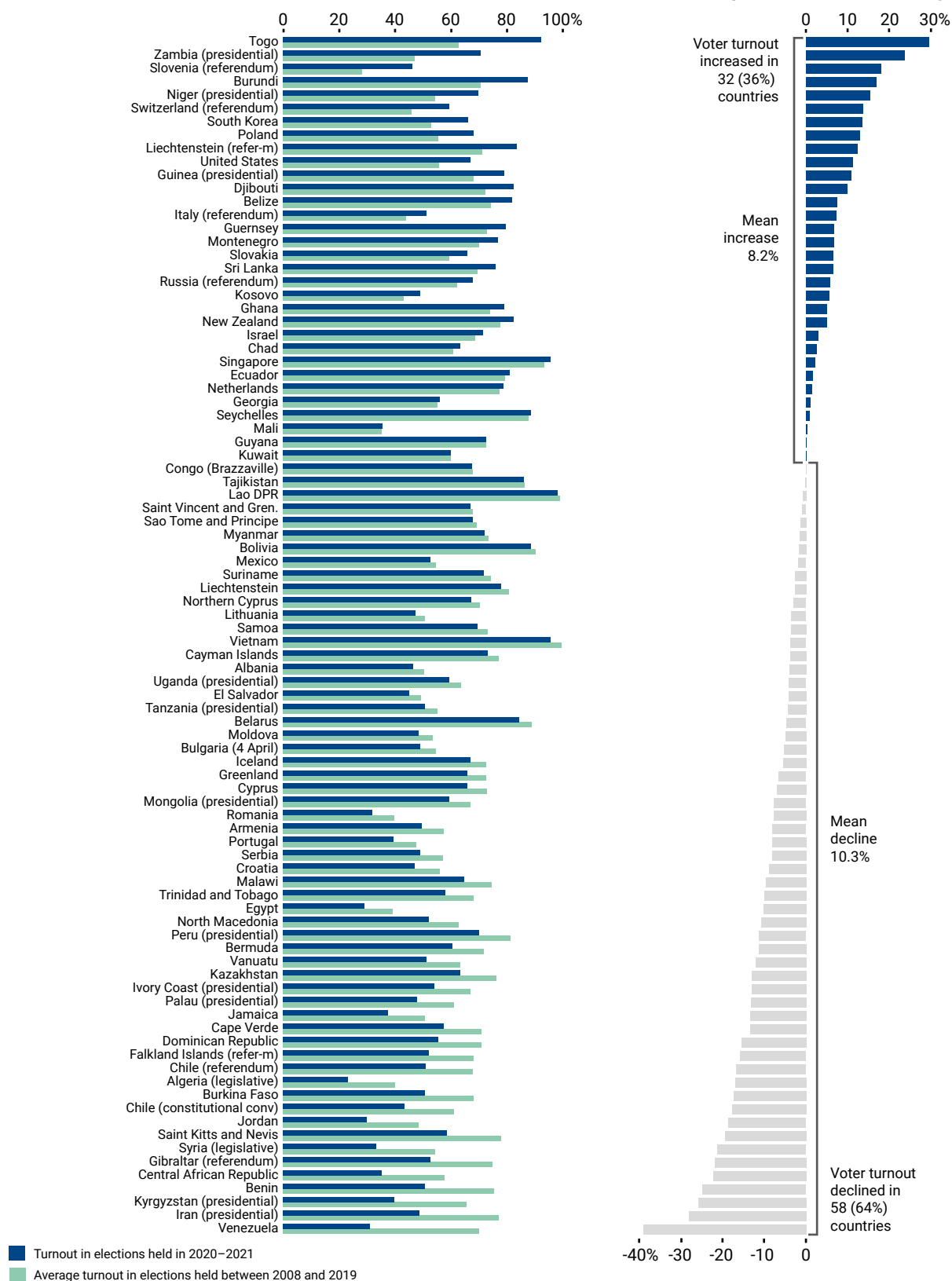
Due to the pandemic, persons in Covid-19-related isolation or quarantine ran the risk of being disenfranchised.<sup>43</sup> While some states adopted SVAs<sup>44</sup> to accommodate these people, other countries took away the right to vote due to restrictions on their freedom of movement as part of government regulations and laws to limit the spread of infection.

Belize, for instance, prohibited people in isolation from voting in polling stations during the general election and did not provide any alternative arrangements for these groups.<sup>45</sup> People in Singapore who were infected with Covid-19 were not allowed to vote, as leaving their home would be in breach of the Infectious Diseases Act.<sup>46</sup> Taiwan adopted similar measures as a result of the Taiwan Communicable Disease Control Act.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, in Chile thousands of people over the age of 18 were de facto disenfranchised, as the country did not allow people to break their isolation and did not introduce any SVAs.<sup>48</sup> The Chilean authorities did, however, provide special permits to vote for people residing in quarantined territories.<sup>49</sup> In Jordan, voting by Covid-19-positive patients<sup>50</sup> or those suspected of being infected was considered a crime punishable by law.<sup>51</sup>

**Voter turnout declined in 64 per cent of the countries that held national elections and referendums in the beginning of the pandemic to the end of August 2021.**

FIGURE 9

**Voter turnout trends in national elections and referendums held amid Covid-19 pandemic, as of 31 August 2021**



Source: International IDEA, Voter Turnout Database, [n.d.], <<https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/voter-turnout>>, accessed 31 August 2021.

TABLE 1

**Special voting arrangements used in 2020 and 2021 national elections and referendums by country, data as of 31 August 2021**

| Type of SVA                   | Country |  |
|-------------------------------|---------|--|
| Early voting (25)             | 2020    | Belarus, Bermuda*, Ghana, Iceland, Israel, Jamaica, Lithuania, Myanmar*, New Zealand, North Macedonia*, Republic of Korea, Russia, Sri Lanka (various special categories of voters), Tajikistan, Trinidad and Tobago*, USA   |
|                               | 2021    | Cabo Verde, Congo (security forces only), Israel (security forces only), Lao PDR*, Liechtenstein, Netherlands, Portugal, Slovenia, UK (only by post)   |
| Postal voting (16)            | 2020    | Iceland, Lithuania, New Zealand (only from abroad), Poland*, Republic of Korea*, Romania (only from abroad), Switzerland, USA  |
|                               | 2021    | Aruba* (voters in isolation), Ecuador, Gibraltar, Liechtenstein, Micronesia (only from abroad), Netherlands (above 70 years only), Slovenia, UK  |
| Proxy voting (8)              | 2020    | Belize, Croatia*, Poland, Switzerland  |
|                               | 2021    | Algeria (various special categories of voter), Gibraltar*, Netherlands*, UK  |
| Mobile ballot box voting (36) | 2020    | Belarus, Bermuda*, Croatia*, Czechia*, Georgia*, Iceland*, Italy*, Kyrgyzstan, Lithuania*, Moldova*, Mongolia*, Montenegro*, Myanmar*, North Macedonia*, Republic of Korea*, Romania*, Russia, Serbia, Seychelles, Singapore, Suriname*, Switzerland, Tajikistan   |
|                               | 2021    | Armenia (in-patients and voters in preliminary detention centres), Aruba (voters in hospitals, prisons and nursing homes), Bulgaria* (restricted to various special categories of voters), Bulgaria* (permanently disabled and voters in Covid quarantine), Cyprus, Ecuador, Iran*, Israel, Lao PDR, Moldova* (disabled voters), Mongolia* (restricted to various special categories of voter), Portugal*, Slovenia* (ill voters and residents of care facilities), UK |

Note: Countries that include an asterisk (\*) extend SVAs for Covid-19 patients.

Source: International IDEA, Featured Cases of Risk Mitigation Measures during Covid-19—Global, <<https://www.idea.int/news-media/multimedia-reports/global-overview-covid-19-impact-elections>>, accessed 6 September 2021.

The introduction and expansion of SVAs was a particularly important method for reducing infection risks at polling stations and ensuring access for people already infected with Covid-19 or in quarantine.<sup>52</sup> Expanding the scope of SVAs included arrangements for early voting, postal voting, proxy voting and mobile ballot box voting (see Table 1). Additional SVAs included, for example, drive-through/kerb-side voting made available for people with Covid-19 or self-isolating in Lithuania,<sup>53</sup> Iceland,<sup>54</sup> Israel<sup>55</sup> and Czechia.<sup>56</sup>

## 1.6 THE INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT AROUND ELECTIONS BECAME MORE COMPLEX

The accelerated shift of campaigning to online spaces following the Covid-19 outbreak was only one symptom of a larger reshaping of information and communication patterns across the entire electoral cycle affecting all actors, from voters to political actors to

regulatory authorities. The consumption of digital content increased significantly for better or for worse. The Covid-19 pandemic escalated what was previously diagnosed as an information disorder into an infodemic,<sup>57</sup> an information environment that is increasingly difficult to navigate due to the overwhelming amount of facts, biased presentation of information, and intentional and unintentional spread of falsehoods. Concerning elections, the focus shifted from heightened awareness and fear of foreign malicious interference to rising concern over domestic disinformation as an equally worrying phenomenon. In the USA, state authorities and conventional media were implicated in generating deliberate confusion and mistrust in democratic institutions and processes.<sup>58</sup> Only a few months later, public discrediting of democratic institutions transpired in Myanmar—this time led by the military.<sup>59</sup> In Peru, biased coverage of the presidential run-off elections by most private media undermined the right of voters to receive balanced information while social media was polluted by offensive memes, hate messages, smear videos and fake news.<sup>60</sup>

Ultimately, voters in many countries found themselves in the position of having to distinguish between a wide variety of data and information about various aspects related to elections (voter registration, voting procedures, electoral contestants, campaigns, vote counting, results, safety of exercising their electoral rights in a pandemic context). This information was often conflicting or inflammatory, making informed electoral decisions difficult.

As the Covid-19 pandemic caused the total or partial shift of many social and political activities to the online environment, the digital divide became apparent and problematic from an electoral fairness perspective.

While more people use the Internet as a key source of information, including on electoral matters, approximately 35 per cent of the world's population still doesn't have access to the Internet,<sup>61</sup> with the typically marginalized segments of populations being more severely impacted. Barriers to online access are mainly correlated with poverty, lack of digital literacy or state-sponsored restrictions, including abuse through censorship and Internet shutdowns. Abusive limitations of the freedom of expression under the pretext of tackling Covid-19 disinformation were documented in at least 46 countries; of these, 23 are authoritarian regimes, 15 are democracies, and 8 are hybrid regimes.<sup>62</sup>

Various countries shut down the Internet around elections,<sup>63</sup> providing different justifications (for example, hate speech and fake news reasons in India, national security reasons in Belarus and Tanzania) or no explanation whatsoever (Burundi, Guinea, Kyrgyzstan, Togo). In their capacity as voters, candidates, activists, elected representatives or electoral management officials, members of historically marginalized groups found themselves targets of online aggression and disinformation. Disinformation attacks against the electoral process were sometimes the result of coordinated domestic campaigns, while in other cases foreign state actors were involved. The purpose varied from eliminating opponents to discrediting key democratic institutions, such as EMBs.

The rapid shift online and the disturbing trends associated with disinformation accelerated a global regulatory conversation involving legislators, electoral authorities, civil society and social media platforms. The challenges are twofold. On the one hand, there is the question of how to foster a social media and online environment in which a levelled playing field among electoral stakeholders and transparency are preserved. On the other hand, there is the question of how to shut down and disable the increasingly sophisticated manipulation aimed at influencing elections. Addressing these challenges without restricting opportunities will remain an important task in upcoming years.

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**As the Covid-19 pandemic caused a shift of many political activities to the online environment, the digital divide became apparent and problematic.**



## 1.7 BARRIERS TO ELECTION OBSERVATION AND RENEWAL OF METHODS

Election observation, conducted by both national observers and international observation organizations, proved to be a challenge during 2020–2021.<sup>64</sup> Commonly, international EOMs rely on experts and election day observers from abroad to observe, analyse and assess an electoral process. Due to the pandemic, many EOMs were either cancelled or reduced in number and size. Barriers included restrictions in international travel, quarantine requirements, budgetary gaps, and a fear of exposing observers or nationals in the country where the election was held to Covid-19. For example, in 2020, the European Union deployed 4 EOMs compared with 13 in 2019 and 14 in 2018. The Organization of American States (OAS) deployed a core team of experts to observe Suriname<sup>65</sup> and Dominican Republic<sup>66</sup> elections through a combination of in-country and remote means. Rather than deploying an EOM to Tanzania and the Seychelles, the Southern African Development Community organized virtual consultations. Elections in Burundi were observed by the East African Community, whose observers had to stay in quarantine for two weeks, while the African Union observers were not accepted.<sup>67</sup>

Given these limits, the advantages of domestic observation have come to the forefront. Namely, the ability of domestic election observation groups to draw from the bigger pool of observers (that are present on the ground), and their devotion to and legitimacy for promoting the rule of law became more important than ever. In that respect, in April 2020, the Global Network of Domestic Election Monitors (GNDEM)—with 251 member organizations in 89 countries and territories—issued its ‘Guidance on Election Monitoring During the Covid-19 Pandemic’.<sup>68</sup> According to GNDEM, domestic observers should engage in monitoring and advocacy to ensure that, among other things: electoral standards are maintained during a public health crisis; barriers to electoral participation that result from the pandemic are removed; civic and voter education around the impact of the virus on electoral processes can bridge the digital divide; information integrity is preserved; postponements are limited and take place only when necessary; and the pandemic is not used to gain electoral advantage and/or curtail fundamental rights which are essential to electoral integrity.<sup>69</sup>

Obstacles to independent citizen observers were reported in Kazakhstan ahead of the January 2021 presidential election. In Kazakhstan, domestic observers reported efforts by the Government to prevent effective observation by introducing tax investigations on civil society organizations shortly before election day or by limiting access to polling stations, as well as obligatory Covid-19 testing for observers.<sup>70</sup>

The profound impact of Covid-19 on electoral processes also inspired adaptation and innovation in electoral observation work. The EU, OAS and the Carter Center adjusted their conventional methods to employ foreign residents in-country to serve as long- and short-term observers. Core team experts increasingly utilized online platforms to conduct interviews with stakeholders. Early evaluations suggest that such engagement yielded positive results. Despite the lack of insight that can be achieved through established in-country assessments, new avenues for observing elections under Covid-19 have had some positive effects, such as enhanced relationships between international election observation organizations and national observer organizations. The likely result of Covid-19 adjustments is a new approach to international election observation, in which local ownership and digitalization feature more prominently. Moreover, many of the organizations that did deploy EOMs in 2020 were able to observe compliance with health and safety measures by customizing their observation methodology.<sup>71</sup>

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**The profound impact of Covid-19 on electoral processes also inspired adaptation and innovation in electoral observation work.**

## Chapter 2

# Conclusions

Elections are high-stake processes, and where the trust between electoral stakeholders is low, there are always tensions. When electoral timelines or rules change along the way the strains can be further exacerbated. The Covid-19 pandemic has had such effects on elections in many countries. Decisions about whether to halt the electoral process, move forward as if nothing is happening, or proceed with modified rules, were unavoidably controversial.

The yardstick for evaluating such decisions is the extent to which they are made in the best interests of democracy, transparently and inclusively, rather than accommodating incumbents' political interest. Elections taking place in the face of Covid-19 threats—most visibly in the USA but also in other countries that did not capture the global spotlight—have reinforced the importance of resilient, democratic institutions and maintaining public trust. The Covid-19 crisis will not be the last crisis to have an impact on elections. Environmental hazards, migration pressures, geopolitical rivalries, malicious foreign interventions and untested effects of digitization are all part of the cocktail of issues that future authorities will increasingly need to navigate when organizing elections. As a global community—beyond the digitization of elections within national borders—the fusion of big data, perceptions of increasing intrusion of governments in the lives of its citizens, and artificial intelligence will be squarely on the democracy agenda.

For democratic institutions and processes, resilience entails the ability to withstand stresses and shocks and ensure democratic continuity through fully functional executive, legislative and judicial institutions, through democratic checks and balances. A credible electoral process is a stabilizing constant that guarantees that—even if authoritarians use democratic instruments to gain power—democracy can bounce back using the same gate. When the trustworthiness of the electoral process and electoral authorities is undermined, democratic foundations are weakened. That is equally dangerous for well-established and transitional democracies.

Online platforms offer opportunities and risks for electoral institutions and processes. In the past decade, the perception of the utility of social media has shifted from an initial excitement about the potential to enhance democratic mobilization to greater apprehension, as cyber-hacking, abuse and fake news threaten the integrity of electoral processes. At the same time, the pandemic has highlighted how critical online platforms can be. When adequately regulated, properly managed and protected, they become an asset in ensuring transparency, participation and efficiency.

Globally, citizens and civil society organizations, political parties, scholars and international development organizations have displayed admirable alertness to attempts to undermine democratic elections through measures to curb the pandemic. Indeed, as the global democratic community of practice paves its way through the crisis it has gained new and perfected existing electoral knowledge and practices and overall has become better prepared to deal with what the future brings. The preparedness will make a difference.



## Chapter 3

# Policy recommendations

The lessons learned from elections postponed or held during the Covid-19 pandemic can inform the response to future crises. While scale and severity may vary, managing known and unknown electoral risks will be easier if structural arrangements and responsive behaviours are in place.

- 1. Consultative, inclusive and transparent processes are critical for election-related decision-making, on issues such as postponement or changes to procedure, regardless of who takes charge of them.** Consultations and information-sharing should include all affected stakeholders, such as political parties and civil society organizations, and be transparent to the media and wider public. Decision-making processes should strive for consensus-based solutions grounded in the best democratic interests of society and safety, not in the partisan interests of the incumbent. Processes marked by transparency and consultation can help to mitigate dis/misinformation and fear. The buy-in from a widely accepted decision can help to ensure a smooth planning process for the elections in question.
- 2. Authorities who make decisions in the face of a crisis, especially ones that deviate from the normal conduct and cadence of elections, should define a clear roadmap that details actions and milestones that mitigate any possible undemocratic implications of the decisions.** A roadmap accompanying a decision to delay should include, at a minimum, an explanation of the legal basis for the delay, a new date for elections and timeline for pre- and post-election activities (voter registration, party registration, etc.), and measures to ensure that no party or candidate will be unfairly advantaged/disadvantaged as a result of the delay. In addition, the decision to proceed with elections during crises must include provisions and funding for solutions to protect the credibility of election results, broad access to the polls and the personal safety of voters and election observers.
- 3. EMBs should develop relationships and modes of collaboration with other state actors in times of normalcy. Such working relationships will be critical to weathering future storms, as established modalities and pre-identified technical solutions can serve as effective risk mitigation during crises.** Identifying the possible external hazards to the electoral process (natural and manufactured) is key to determining the appropriate state agencies or essential service providers that will have the mandate, skillsets or resources to act should these risks materialize—whether cybersecurity, natural disaster or health-related. Institutionalization of formal risk management processes by an EMB can support synergy with other state agencies.
- 4. When crises emerge, EMBs must establish themselves as primary and reliable sources of information related to elections.** Because false public perceptions thrive in times of crisis and can have a profound, negative impact on the electoral process, EMBs should continually invest in developing the capacity to communicate with electoral stakeholders in a broadly accessible way. Messages need to be clear, comprehensive and relevant to political actors and citizens, including marginalized groups. Because some citizens have less access to the online environment, there should be a balance between online and offline methods to ensure the broadest outreach. Interagency cooperation is a prerequisite for countering disinformation.

5. **As soon as possible after holding elections during the pandemic, EMBs should review lessons learned from the introduction or expansion of SVAs and other pandemic-specific innovations to initiate legal reforms and internal enhancements.** Such a review should identify what worked and what did not work, and why. Further, it should determine what resources and capacity are needed to retain the benefits of important innovations post-crisis. In particular, such a review should consider the effects of innovations and changes on the communities for whom access to polling stations is difficult. Such a review will help to ensure that gains are retained, and that electoral processes are more resilient for the future.
6. **Public entities with political financing and campaign oversight responsibilities, such as EMBs, auditing agencies and anti-corruption agencies, should, without delay, review the rapid move online of political party financing, advertising and campaigning that was further accelerated by the pandemic.** On the one hand, the review should examine and put in place measures to manage the risks of the largely unregulated movement to online fundraising and campaigning; on the other hand, new regulation should avoid depriving political parties of genuine funding and campaigning opportunities.
7. **Domestic civil society groups and international organizations monitoring elections should draw and share lessons on how to communicate, advocate and hold authorities accountable in fast-moving and uncertain scenarios that future crises may bring.** These lessons can inspire deeper thinking about how to update election observation methodologies to protect democratic processes and institutions under threat. The Covid-19 pandemic has shown that this is both necessary and convenient.

# Endnotes

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# About International IDEA

The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) is an intergovernmental organization with the mission to advance democracy worldwide, as a universal human aspiration and enabler of sustainable development. We do this by supporting the building, strengthening and safeguarding of democratic political institutions and processes at all levels. Our vision is a world in which democratic processes, actors and institutions are inclusive and accountable and deliver sustainable development to all.

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## WHAT DO WE DO?

In our work we focus on three main impact areas: electoral processes; constitution-building processes; and political participation and representation. The themes of gender and inclusion, conflict sensitivity and sustainable development are mainstreamed across all our areas of work. International IDEA provides analyses of global and regional democratic trends; produces comparative knowledge on good international democratic practices; offers technical assistance and capacity-building on democratic reform to actors engaged in democratic processes; and convenes dialogue on issues relevant to the public debate on democracy and democracy building.

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## WHERE DO WE WORK?

Our headquarters is located in Stockholm, and we have regional and country offices in Africa, the Asia-Pacific, Europe, and Latin America and the Caribbean. International IDEA is a Permanent Observer to the United Nations and is accredited to European Union institutions.

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Elections that take place regularly and provide for the orderly transition of power from one elected government to another are the cornerstone of democratic governance and political stability. During 2020–2021, the Covid-19 pandemic profoundly affected the conduct and integrity of elections worldwide.

This paper notes a decline in clean elections across both democratic and non-democratic (hybrid and authoritarian) regimes that has been exacerbated by the pandemic. At the same time, there are important cases of electoral resilience displayed by democratic institutions and civil society. The paper offers policy recommendations for national governments, parliaments, electoral management bodies and international development organizations, and makes forward-looking conclusions.

International IDEA's Global State of Democracy (GSoD) Reports review the state of democracy around the world. The 2021 edition covers developments in 2020 and 2021, with democratic trends since 2015 used as a contextual reference. This paper on electoral processes is one of three thematic papers which complement a global report and four regional reports. The GSoD reports draw on data from the Global State of Democracy Indices and lessons learned from International IDEA's on-the ground technical assistance to understand the current democracy landscape. The 2021 reports also draw heavily on data collected by International IDEA's Global Monitor of COVID-19's Impact on Democracy and Human Rights.