

PROTECTING ELECTIONS DURING THE 2021 PERUVIAN GENERAL ELECTIONS

Case Study, March 2026

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This case study provides a comprehensive analysis of electoral protection mechanisms implemented during Peru's 2021 general elections. Peru's electoral management bodies (EMBs) demonstrated remarkable resilience while navigating unprecedented challenges: systematic disinformation campaigns (alleging electoral fraud), severe Covid-19 pandemic impacts and deep political polarization.

Key findings reveal that Peru's primary electoral challenges stem from external threats in the strategic environment—the pandemic, disinformation, delegitimization, violence in campaigns, gender-based violence (GBV), polarization—rather than internal organizational deficiencies. Despite these challenges, Peru's EMBs successfully maintained electoral integrity through innovative measures including initiatives to detect fake news, enhanced transparency protocols and adaptive crisis management strategies. Looking towards general elections in 2026, this analysis provides critical insights on risk management strategies essential for (a) preventing and mitigating external risks and threats, including sensitization strategies and legal frameworks against GBV; while (b) preserving institutional legitimacy and restoring public trust in democratic processes as a whole.

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INTRODUCTION

The 2021 general elections (elecciones generales, hereinafter EG 2021) in Peru represented a moment of exceptional political and historical significance.

Beyond electing the presidential formula (president and vice presidents), the Congress of the Republic and the Andean Parliament, these elections were also held during the bicentennial of national independence, which granted them additional symbolic importance.

However, the context in which these elections were conducted was particularly adverse and complex. The Covid-19 pandemic imposed unprecedented health restrictions, logistical challenges and new risks for citizen participation. Simultaneously, Peru was experiencing acute political instability marked by recurrent presidential crises, institutional erosion and widespread public disaffection. The dynamics were further worsened by a fragmented party system, with 20 political organizations nominating candidates for Congress, 16 contesting Andean Parliament seats, and 18 individuals standing for the presidency (ONPE 2021). The Organization of American States (OAS) Electoral Observation Mission (EOM) documented the rise of misinformation campaigns and increasing assaults on electoral authorities but ultimately confirmed that the second-round election took place without evidence of systemic irregularities (Gestión 2021a; OAS EOM 2022). Harassment and political violence against women remained a persistent problem (Ponte, Plasencia and Zegarra 2023).

This case study examines three integrity challenges that shaped the 2021 elections.

This case study examines three integrity challenges that shaped the 2021 elections: the pandemic, disinformation, and lack of trust in the electoral management bodies (EMBs). Special emphasis will be placed on risk prevention strategies, resilience to stress and recovery. Within this framework, focus will be specifically on the National Jury of Elections (JNE) and National Office of Electoral Processes (ONPE) as the primary institutions tasked with ensuring electoral integrity. Their importance lies in the fact that they intervene across all stages of the electoral cycle, from the organization and supervision of the vote to the resolution of disputes and the proclamation of results.

1. BACKGROUND

Although regular elections have been held in Peru since 2000, structural weaknesses persist that hinder the consolidation of democracy. These are primarily linked to political instability and institutional crises, as demonstrated by the succession of six presidents in just four years (Olmo 2022), as well as persistent protests against successive administrations. According to the Economist Democracy Index, since 2022 Peru has no longer been considered a democracy but rather a hybrid regime (EIU 2025) and, as reported by Freedom House, Peru's status declined from 'Free' to 'Partly Free' in 2024 (Freedom House 2025). This is also reflected in Peru's decline in Varieties of Democracy's electoral democracy index—from 0.82 in 2020 to 0.63 in 2024 (V-Dem n.d.), and in the Global State of Democracy Indices (International IDEA n.d.).

A key factor in understanding this situation is the functioning of the electoral system, which rests on two fundamental elements:

- *Peru has a compulsory voting system.* This means that participation in elections is mandatory for all citizens over 18 and under 70; after that age, voting is voluntary (Perú 1993: article 31).
- *The Peruvian electoral system is composed of three electoral bodies.* These are the National Jury of Elections (JNE), the National Office of Electoral Processes (ONPE) and the National Registry of Identification and Civil Status (RENIEC).

Peru has a compulsory voting system.

These bodies act independently and autonomously and have different functions. The JNE oversees the legality of electoral processes and resolves electoral disputes; ONPE organizes and conducts elections and referendums; and RENIEC maintains the electoral registry and provides updated voter information, which enables the other two bodies to plan and execute electoral processes effectively (Perú 1997: articles 33, 39, 43). This institutional design aims to ensure that the electoral process is transparent, decentralized and technically robust.

These institutional features have been recognized internationally. For instance, the most recent global Electoral Integrity Project report placed Peru in the top six countries for the quality of its electoral processes (Garnett, James and Caal-Lam 2025). Furthermore, the most recent electoral mission reports highlight the efforts of the Peruvian electoral institutions to implement improved practices in electoral processes (OAS EOM 2022; EU EEM 2021).

However, despite recognition from international bodies, considerable citizen distrust towards Peruvian democracy and its foundations prevail at the national level. Acceptance or support for democracy as the best system of government has declined compared to previous years. As of 2025, 55 per cent of citizens express only 'moderate' support for democracy; measures of satisfaction with democracy are also cause for alarm: more than 88 per cent are dissatisfied with the way democracy currently functions in Peru (IEP 2025). Less unfavourably, at first sight at least, 37 per cent of Peruvian citizens 'do not trust' elections (IEP 2025). All of this generates significant uncertainty, considering that Peru is in the preparatory process for upcoming general elections in 2026.

In fact, these serious warning signs are also reflected in the lack of confidence in electoral institutions: distrust surpasses trust. Of the three, the EMB that generates the most confidence among citizens remains RENIEC with a confidence level of around 44 per cent. Meanwhile, neither the ONPE nor the JNE reaches 20 per cent public confidence (being at 14.1 per cent and 10.7 per cent, respectively) (INEI 2025). This is a pattern indicated by many sources and surveys nationwide. A noteworthy point is that trust has been decreasing over time, considering that in 2021 at least 40 per cent of citizens trusted

each of the EMBs (JNE 2021a). This scepticism about the quality and value of democratic processes is related to various current threats to electoral integrity.

One of the main challenges to electoral integrity is the influence of illicit money in political campaigns; Peruvian citizens perceive corruption as the chief factor in the deterioration of governance. Various corruption cases, such as the Odebrecht scandal, have demonstrated how private companies and criminal networks have financed candidates and parties in exchange for political favours (Whitehead 2021; Dammert and Sarmiento 2019).

Another factor that has grown in importance in recent elections is the circulation of unverified or false information, or 'misinformation', in digital environments (Norris 2022). In contexts characterized by pre-existing distrust of institutions, the dissemination of such misinformation can exacerbate polarization and generate tensions after election day. This was evident in the 2021 general election (Muñoz 2021).

An ongoing challenge to electoral integrity in Peru is gender-based political violence.

An ongoing challenge to electoral integrity in Peru is gender-based political violence. Despite advances in women's participation and representation, many female candidates still experience harassment and intimidation. According to data from the 2021 Congressional Candidate Survey conducted by the JNE, 48.2 per cent of female candidates reported experiencing at least one instance of harassment throughout their political career. However, only around a quarter of these incidents were officially reported, and in over half of the cases, the perpetrators faced no sanctions or consequences (Ponte, Plasencia and Zegarra 2023).

The Peruvian political system is characterized by high fragmentation and the weak institutionalization of political parties (Barrenechea and Vergara 2023). Most party organizations lack democratic internal structures and have a short lifespan, largely due to their dependence on individual leaders rather than established ideological platforms. This has resulted in a volatile electoral landscape and a Congress with high turnover and political dispersion, making consensus building and governance difficult.

In addition to the previously mentioned challenges, the EG 2021 faced a significantly different regulatory context compared to previous processes, which required both political actors and EMBs to adapt. The main legal changes are outlined in Table 1.

Within the framework of reparative measures and affirmative action policies, Peru had also approved a Law to Prevent and Sanction Harassment Against Women in Political Life (Peru 2021). This legislation aims to guarantee women's equal political participation and represents a significant normative advancement in protecting women's political rights. However, despite the law's approval and its formal existence within Peru's legal framework, its regulatory statute had not (and at the time of writing, still has not) been approved by the congressional plenary. This absence of an approved regulatory framework rendered the law on paper effectively unenforceable in practice, with electoral

Table 1. New regulations applicable to the EG 2021

Gender parity and alternation—under Law No. 31030 (Peru 2020a)	The application of the principle of gender parity and alternation in the composition of presidential formula, as well as in congressional candidate lists.
New electoral district abroad—under Law No. 31032 (Peru 2020b)	A formal electoral district was created for Peruvians abroad, offering a total of two seats in Congress.
Public internal elections—under Law No. 30998 (Peru 2019)	Internal elections of political organizations were mandated to be public, open, simultaneous and obligatory; and with the support, advice and organization of EMBs.

Source: Developed by the authors based on legislation cited.

and judicial institutions therefore unable to hold perpetrators accountable (instead, the focus of their actions has been limited to support, prevention and accompaniment in response to reported cases).

This regulatory gap had concrete consequences during the EG 2021. During the campaign period alone, 26 cases of gender-based political violence against women were documented (JNE 2022), illustrating the hostile environment female candidates continued to face. The law's existence without enforcement mechanisms—it was passed less than a week before election day—undermined its intent during the very electoral cycle in which it was approved.

The adaptation of electoral actors to the provisions in Table 1 was progressive but also revealed significant limitations. Regarding the internal election process, many political organizations (17 of the 24 participating) opted for the delegate election modality. These elections were held between 29 November and 6 December (JNE 2021c) and achieved an average participation rate of 81.6 per cent (JNE 2021b). In stark contrast, organizations that opted for affiliate elections experienced considerably lower engagement, with participation reaching only 7.8 per cent on average (JNE 2021b).

Regarding the application of gender parity and alternation requirements, implementation proved challenging and exposed deep-rooted structural barriers. Despite requiring political parties to mobilize their bases and political actors, only 24 per cent of female candidates were placed in the top third of congressional lists (JNE 2021d). This pattern reflects an entrenched culture of machismo in the political sphere.

Patterns of marginalization extended beyond gender. Despite constitutional protections, no specific provisions were established to promote or protect the participation of other vulnerable populations—including youth, persons with disabilities, Indigenous communities and Afro-Peruvians. Political

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organizations largely failed to meaningfully incorporate these groups into their electoral strategies.

The EG 2021 in Peru were held in circumstances that posed an extraordinary threat to electoral integrity.

2. ELECTORAL INTEGRITY CHALLENGES

The EG 2021 in Peru were held in circumstances that posed an extraordinary threat to electoral integrity. First, the Covid-19 pandemic created unprecedented challenges that forced authorities to balance the protection of public health with guaranteeing citizens' right to vote. Second, structural weaknesses such as widespread distrust of institutions, growing political polarization and proliferation of misinformation further exacerbated tensions throughout the electoral process. Taken together, these conditions created an electoral context in which preventive measures and institutional resilience were essential to safeguarding democracy.

2.1. Covid-19 pandemic

On 30 January 2020, the World Health Organization declared a global public health emergency due to the Covid-19 pandemic (PAHO 2020). This led various governments to implement biosecurity and protection measures, including health protocols, quarantines and other preventive actions. Subsequently, on 15 March 2020, President Martín Vizcarra declared a national state of emergency and mandatory social distancing. This measure restricted constitutional rights relating to personal freedom and security, the inviolability of the home, freedom of assembly and free movement within the country (El Peruano 2020). In addition, the closure of national and international borders was ordered. Although the state of emergency was initially established for a period of 15 days, its validity was extended until October 2022 (MINSa 2022). During this period, Peru was one of the countries most affected by the pandemic, recording the highest rates of confirmed cases, deaths per million inhabitants and excess mortality worldwide (Herrera-Añazco et al. 2021; Corvetto Salinas 2021).

These risks to public health and the mitigation measures taken in response also held unprecedented challenges for democratic processes and for electoral integrity, as they did around the world. According to an International IDEA study (James, Clark and Asplund 2023), these were of six main types:

- epidemiological and humanitarian (risk to voters' health);
- equality of participation (obstacles to voting);
- equality of contestation (unequal campaign conditions);
- electoral management delivery (logistical and financial difficulties);
- certainty of the rules of the game (legal and political uncertainty); and
- reduced democratic scrutiny (limited observation and transparency).

Taking these challenges into account, jurisdictions worldwide had to decide whether to proceed with scheduled elections. Between 21 February 2020 and 21 February 2022, at least 80 countries and territories decided to postpone

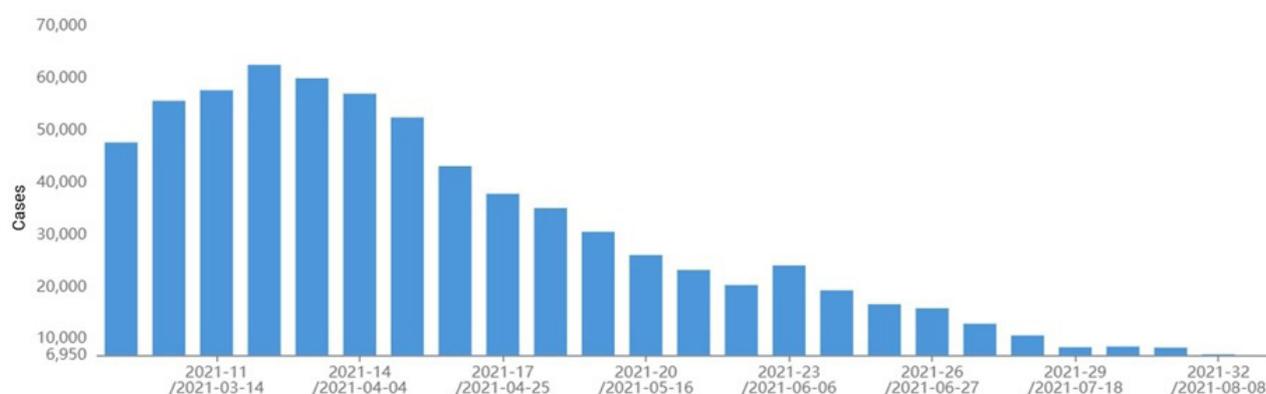
national and subnational elections. In other countries, modifications were made to allow for greater access to special voting arrangements such as online or postal voting, and in some cases, voting days were extended to avoid overcrowding (James, Clark and Asplund 2023; Corvetto Salinas 2021).

In the Peruvian context, and in accordance with the electoral calendar, the EG 2021 were scheduled to elect the presidential formula, members of Congress and representatives to the Andean Parliament. In view of this, the ONPE opted not to postpone the elections, but rather to implement rigorous preventive measures to reduce the risk of infection during election days. According to Piero Corvetto, National Chief of the ONPE, the institution conducted a comparative study on how to manage elections during the pandemic which allowed it to be better prepared (Corvetto Salinas 2025).

The ONPE opted not to postpone the elections.

By that time, the rate of infections was already showing a downward trend (Figure 1). From 28 March 2021 confirmed cases had started to decrease, and by 11 April—the day of the elections—cases had fallen below 40,000, with no evidence of a subsequent rebound.

Figure 1. Confirmed Covid-19 cases before, during and after EG 2021



Source: Ministry of Health of Perú (MINSA), 'Weekly update epidemiological (week 9–33)', [n.d.], <https://app7.dge.gob.pe/maps/sala_covid/>, accessed 15 September 2025.

2.2 Lack of trust; violence

Ever since the restoration of democracy in Peru in the 1980s, Peru's political culture has been marked by fragmentation, volatility and widespread mistrust—demonstrating among others that many citizens have been dissatisfied with the performance of the country's authorities and institutions. During the EG 2021, the voter profile study conducted by the JNE showed that almost 60 per

It is important to highlight that of the three EMBs, both the JNE and ONPE have educational mandates. Along with RENIEC, they have adopted an approach to promote evidence-based policies, therefore incorporating research and academic activities into their institutional framework. In this regard, since the 2016 general elections, the JNE has been implementing a national survey to explore trends in Peruvian political culture, aimed at improving their educational and capacity-building activities with candidates, political parties and the general public.

cent of Peruvians had little to no interest in politics and interpersonal trust was low, with 54 per cent of Peruvians considering their immediate environment (community) as untrustworthy (Aragon et al. 2022). These patterns are also reflected in the reduction of electoral and political participation. Prior to the EG 2021, the average absenteeism in Peru was approximately 18 per cent, but during the EG 2021 it rose to 30 per cent (JNE 2021c); it decreased slightly during the runoff election to approximately 26 per cent.

This erosion of institutional trust has been both reflected in and exacerbated by the treatment of EMBs during recent electoral cycles. A particularly significant example of this, and of polarization during the EG 2021 process, was the response to the election of new EMB leaderships. In 2020, the presidency of the JNE was filled by former magistrate Jorge Salas Arenas, the national leadership of the ONPE by Piero Corvetto, and RENIEC's with Carmen Velarde. The selection of these authorities was conducted transparently and in accordance with procedures mandated by law. However, from the moment of their appointment, a series of personal attacks began, including negative discourse and discriminatory comments—many of which labelled these leaders as belonging to certain ideological tendencies and sought to discredit their expertise and experience. These patterns of behaviour were sustained throughout the electoral process and beyond, into the 2022 regional and municipal elections.

Alarmingly, this situation escalated into threats against the lives of electoral officials. Piero Corvetto, ONPE national chief, reported that he was attacked both verbally and physically (*La República* 2021). Jorge Luis Salas Arenas, the JNE president, experienced multiple acts of harassment (Gestión 2021b) followed by death threats from an extreme right-wing groups. The gravity of these threats to democratic institutions and their leaders was such that representatives from the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights mission in Peru expressed its concern through social media platforms.

A series of violent demonstrations took place outside JNE and ONPE offices.

Between 2021 and 2022 a series of violent demonstrations took place outside JNE and ONPE offices, largely driven by supporters of political groups. Demonstrators not only threw stones at the institutions' facilities but also caused damage to private property belonging to employees and residents in the surrounding area. Such incidents were recurrent throughout this period, leading the president of the JNE to authorize the construction of a protective wall around the Jesús María headquarters (Perú 21 2022).

Violence constituted a significant dimension of the EG 2021 electoral campaign. Going beyond traditional political competition, the campaign was

The election of the JNE is carried out internally by the plenary, as established by law, and falls to the member elected as representative of the Supreme Court (Peru 1997: article 22). Meanwhile, the heads of the ONPE and RENIEC are designated by the National Board of Justice through a public selection process (Peru 1993).

characterized by attacks and commentary aimed at discrediting political opponents, with violence against female candidates manifested in complex, distinctly gendered forms. Violence against women in politics represents one of the principal barriers to women's participation in the public sphere (Krook 2017), and the 2021 electoral cycle provided stark evidence of this.

Research revealed that half of all female candidates to Congress during the EG 2021 had experienced political harassment throughout their political careers (JNE 2022). The proportion was even higher among women heading electoral lists, suggesting that increased visibility and prominence correlate with being targeted for harassment. The most common manifestations of this gender-based political violence included mockery, defamation and deliberate restrictions on women's ability to speak or participate at public events (JNE 2022). These forms of harassment not only affect individual candidates but also send a broader message of intimidation to women considering political participation, thereby perpetuating structural barriers to gender equality in democratic representation.

Violent rhetoric and imagery on social media is particularly prevalent during electoral campaigns. For female candidates, hostile discourse online predominantly targets their roles as mothers or family leaders while simultaneously questioning their capabilities as political leaders. Online harassment is typically perpetrated by 'trolls' who seek to publicly ridicule women candidates in digital spaces (Cantuarias 2019).

Paradoxically, female candidates' exposure in both traditional and non-traditional media remains severely limited, constraining their ability to present policy proposals even while increasing their exposure to criticism and attack. This is because digital media, the dominant channel for political campaigns, facilitate the proliferation of gendered disinformation and online abuse against women in politics, thereby reinforcing harmful gender stereotypes (#ShePersisted/Fundación Multitudes 2023).

The EG 2021 provide concrete evidence of these patterns. Media coverage of female congressional candidates reached only 35.8 per cent, while male candidates received over 60 per cent of coverage (JNE 2021e). Furthermore, many media outlets that did provide coverage of female candidacies reproduced gender stereotypes by emphasizing candidates' family circumstances, physical appearance and comportment rather than their political platforms and qualifications (JNE 2021e).

2.3. Malicious online actions and fake news

Following the election of EMB leaderships and attendant ideological polarization, the 2021 electoral campaign revealed high levels of political intolerance that align with the previously mentioned patterns of high interpersonal distrust. Polarization was further fuelled by the stark ideological characterization of the main presidential candidates. While the narrative of electoral 'fraud' reached its peak during the runoff election, it had begun to resonate much earlier in the electoral cycle. For example, former congressional

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candidate Ricardo Belmont stated, before the first round, that fraud was being committed due to corruption (Expreso 2021). Later, after the first-round results were made official, Rafael López Aliaga—the Renovación Popular party candidate—claimed on social media to have evidence that EMBs ‘had been immersed in a process against the popular will’ (Aliaga 2021).

The situation became aggravated when mainstream media amplified the fraud narrative in the lead-up to the runoff.

The situation became aggravated when mainstream media amplified the fraud narrative in the lead-up to the runoff. In the days before the second round, the well-known TV channel Willax reported that deceased individuals were allegedly registered to vote (Epicentro 2024). Subsequently, the newspaper Expreso featured front-page allegations suggesting that fraud was being plotted. From that moment, the fraud narrative escalated dramatically and began to proliferate across various media outlets, reaching unprecedented levels during and after the runoff election.

However, the situation worsened further when prominent political figures publicly defended the fraud narrative, notably Lourdes Flores Nano, who positioned herself as the spokesperson for the ‘anti-fraud’ campaign (RPP 2021). The Fuerza Popular party, led by Keiko Fujimori, actively solicited complaints about alleged ‘polling station fraud’, requesting the public to submit descriptions or videos of irregular acts at polling stations through the party’s public WhatsApp number (Epicentro 2024).

Added to this was a series of public demonstrations by supporters of both Fuerza Popular and Perú Libre that, in some cases, escalated into violent disturbances. Fuerza Popular supporters demanded scrutiny of alleged fraud, whereas Perú Libre supporters demanded recognition of the electoral results and acknowledgment of Pedro Castillo as president-elect (Infobae 2021).

This polarized environment enabled the proliferation of disinformation designed to generate greater tension and suspicion about the electoral process. Among documented examples, false claims circulated about the lack of polling locations abroad (particularly in Miami, United States), allegedly due to unwillingness to rent venues—claims later refuted by both the JNE and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. More seriously still, a fabricated JNE resolution circulated through social media and WhatsApp groups, falsely declaring complete results with the Perú Libre candidate as winner. This document proved fraudulent not only because vote counting remained incomplete but also because it bore the signature of a JNE plenary member who was no longer serving at that time. Similarly, unfounded allegations of lack of transparency in the deliberation process and review of contested electoral records proliferated online (JNE 2021f).

As mentioned, while such disinformation occurred throughout the electoral cycle, it intensified dramatically and became systemic during the presidential runoff between Pedro Castillo (Perú Libre) and Keiko Fujimori (Fuerza Popular). Rather than isolated incidents, the disinformation represented a coordinated strategy that exploited the contrast between two opposing economic and social models, exploiting fear and other emotions as primary

tools of persuasion. A sustained flow of manipulative, negative commentary and false information regarding the electoral process and its management further deepened citizens' institutional distrust and sense of democratic disconnection.

In summary, the EG 2021 EG unfolded within a context plagued by multifaceted electoral challenges. Peru's prolonged political crisis and unprecedented levels of citizen distrust towards democratic institutions combined to create fertile ground for narratives alleging systematic electoral fraud. While ultimately unfounded, these accusations gained traction as never before in Peru's democratic history.

3. PREVENTION

3.1. Health safety protocols: Preventing Covid-19 transmission

The organization of elections in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic represented an unprecedented challenge for the ONPE. In this scenario, the institution assumed the obligation to implement all control and healthy safety measures, in strict coordination with the Ministry of Health (MINSA).

At the time, the ministry issued two fundamental provisions that served as a frame of reference for the development of election-specific protocols: Ministerial Resolution No. 972-2020/MINSA and Ministerial Resolution No. 905-2020/MINSA. These resolutions established technical and regulatory parameters that guided prevention, control and monitoring actions in workplaces and social interaction activities that, as in the case of elections, involved mass mobilization of citizens.

Based on these provisions, the ONPE approved the 'Safety and Prevention Protocols against Covid-19 applied for the 2021 General Elections' (Protocolos de Seguridad y Prevención contra el Covid-19 aplicados para las Elecciones Generales 2021), a regulatory instrument applied transversally throughout the entire process and structured into seven specific protocols, some of which are specific to certain electoral actors (polling station staff, voters, observers, journalists and *personeros*). These included mandatory use of hand sanitizer, footbaths, temperature checks upon entry to premises (and refusing entry to those with temperatures above 99.5°F (37,5°C)), social distancing, signage, and a 25 per cent reduction in capacity at polling stations (Corvetto Salinas 2021).

Additionally, the ONPE implemented other preventive actions according to different stages of the electoral process, which were established in the 'Electoral Operational Plan' (Plan Operativo Electoral).

The organization of elections in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic represented an unprecedented challenge for the ONPE.

The *personero* is a citizen registered with RENIEC who oversees and represents the interests of a political organization in the development of an electoral process (Resolution 291-2010-JNE, article 7).

During the pre-election phase, priority was given to training election personnel through virtual modalities, supplemented by in-person sessions with reduced capacity and duration, in compliance with social distancing measures (Corvetto Salinas 2021). An information campaign called 'Vote Safely' was also launched, and new channels such as chatbots and podcasts began to be used to disseminate clear messages about preventive measures and the electoral process (Corvetto Salinas 2021). A nationwide campaign was also carried out to promote the Choose your Polling Station (Elige tu Local de Votación) platform.

The main challenge on election day was to minimize the risk of infection among voters and staff by avoiding crowds.

The main challenge on election day was to minimize the risk of infection among voters and staff by avoiding crowds. To this end, the ONPE implemented several innovations, the four main ones being as follows (Corvetto Salinas 2021):

1. *Distribution of polling stations.* Through the Choose your Polling Station platform, voters could select three options close to their homes, and the ONPE would then assign the most suitable location to reduce travel time and minimize overcrowding. Additionally, the number of polling stations increased by over 125 per cent by using open spaces and non-traditional venues, such as parks, esplanades and sports complexes.
2. *Staggered voting schedule.* To avoid crowds, the ONPE established voting time slots based on the last digit of the National Identity Document (DNI). Special hours were allocated to vulnerable groups including the elderly, pregnant women and people with disabilities.
3. *Compensation for polling staff.* For the first time in Peru, a financial incentive of PEN 120 soles (approximately USD 33) was offered to encourage those responsible for running the polling stations to keep them open and functioning properly throughout the day.
4. *Reasonable adjustments to compulsory voting.* An application was created to register those presenting symptoms or exceeding the established temperature level. This allowed them to be exempted from penalties for not voting.

Since the 2006 general elections, the JNE has run the Informed Vote programme in fulfilment of its educational function.

3.2. Civic education and awareness-raising campaigns

Since the 2006 general elections, the JNE has run the Informed Vote (Voto Informado) programme in fulfilment of its educational function. This programme has two main objectives: (a) to design and promote electoral information/dissemination activities, training and technical assistance for

During the post-election period, too, the ONPE continued to work remotely and in a blended manner to analyse and evaluate the process. Priority was given to systematizing information using digital tools to minimize the need for face-to-face meetings, and regulations were updated to adapt functions to the new health situation (Resolution 291-2010-JNE, article 7).

citizens; and (b) to promote commitments from political actors during electoral processes to foster democratic elections (JNE n.d.c).

Working in accordance with the National Plan for Civic Education and Training, Informed Vote focuses on working closely with political organizations participating in elections and with citizens to promote resources that enable them to exercise their vote responsibly and with full knowledge. These include initiatives that are repeated in each electoral cycle, most notably the Electoral Ethics Pact, whose purpose is to commit electoral contestants to good practices, as well as to promote respect and transparency in the process. The Pact consists of a series of commitments drafted by various public institutions and civil society organizations. For the EG 2021, a total of 14 commitments were agreed, oriented towards promoting ethical practices during the electoral campaign, prioritizing the use of technological resources to prevent Covid-19 transmission, avoiding discriminatory acts among participating actors, emphasizing policy proposals, and safeguarding the integrity and transparency of the electoral process (JNE 2021f). These were signed by 17 of the 21 political organizations participating in the election (Quispe 2021).

Another voter education and digital literacy initiative repeated each cycle is presentation of information about all candidates' biographies and governance plans online. For the EG 2021, the platform was updated with a 'Your Vote Has Power' campaign and, with an eye towards engaging young people, a TikTok account (UNICEF 2021). The Informed Vote programme is also responsible for organizing and convening candidate debates in each electoral process. In 2021, a first electoral debate was held among 18 presidential candidates across three separate dates as a measure against Covid-19 risk. For the runoff election, the presidential debate was held for the first time outside Lima, in Arequipa, a change that was positively viewed by citizens.

Finally, Informed Vote includes educational initiatives with direct citizen engagement conducted in a decentralized manner through field personnel known as Informed Vote Facilitators and Implementers (FIVI) (El Peruano 2025). These personnel are responsible for training political organizations on the registration process, as well as offering advisory services to institutions, organizations and citizens in general about electoral processes. In each electoral process, these personnel are deployed to each department and report to the National Directorate of Electoral Education and Training.

For its part, the ONPE also conducts educational activities throughout the electoral process. According to the evaluation of the Electoral Operational Plan for the 2021 general elections and runoff, a total of 10,775,127 people were trained including voters, polling station members and party representatives (ONPE 2022: 29). The training sessions were conducted both in-person and virtually, although during the first round, due to contact restrictions, 92 per cent were trained virtually. In-person training sessions were held in groups of a maximum of 20 people. For virtual training, the ONPEeduca platform was

Of these, 7,779,859 were trained during the EG 2021 and 2,995,268 during the runoff (ONPE 2022).

launched (ONPE 2021) offering informational modules about the ONPE's functions, the importance of voting, voting processes and stakeholders' roles, and the importance of respecting electoral results. Educational activities directed specifically towards political actors—both candidates and political organizations—aimed not only to provide technical training on electoral rules and procedures but also to raise awareness about pressing issues such as violence prevention and how to effectively apply parity requirements in candidate lists.

RENIEC conducted multiple awareness campaigns with citizens for updating identity documents.

Meanwhile, RENIEC conducted multiple awareness campaigns with citizens for updating identity documents—both nationally and internationally (through consulates) (RENIEC 2025).

In these examples, the main risk-preventive element delivered and promoted by EMBs was the educational component. This is renewed in each electoral cycle both in terms of both content and reach. The European Union's electoral mission report highlighted these efforts, recommending expanding their reach to more remote areas of the country and to vulnerable populations such as Indigenous communities (EU EEM 2021).

3.3. Disinformation monitoring

While disinformation and the spread of fake news are not new challenges in Peruvian electoral processes, the EG 2021 required EMBs to develop monitoring and response capacities at an unprecedented scale (see 4. Resilience to stress and shocks: Resist, adapt and transform). According to the ONPE National Chief Piero Corvetto, the institution had not fully anticipated the magnitude of disinformation campaigns and their coordinated nature. This meant that the ONPE lacked comprehensive preventive infrastructure specifically designed for this threat (Corvetto Salinas 2025).

3.4. Inclusive electoral access: Protections for vulnerable populations

One of the actions promoted by the ONPE to guarantee the right to vote for historically excluded and vulnerable populations is the Protocol to Guarantee the Right to Vote for Transgender People on Election Day. First implemented in 2021, this made Peru the third country after Colombia and Mexico to establish guidelines aimed at ensuring the electoral participation of transgender people (Carranza et al. 2022).

The protocol was developed through a participatory process and aims to promote measures that guarantee transgender people the right to vote freely, secretly, under conditions of equality and without discrimination (Carranza et al. 2022). It includes general and specific guidelines for various electoral stakeholders, as well as a mechanism for reporting potential violations on election day.

Complementing these protective measures, the JNE developed the Observe Equality (Observa Igualdad) platform as part of its Informed Vote training programme, with the aim of raising awareness and promoting political participation in the GE 2021 among vulnerable groups (Voto Informado

2020; JNE n.d.a). These social groups include young people, women, Afro-Peruvians, indigenous peoples, people with disabilities and LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer) Individuals (JNE n.d.a). Observe Equality operates by collecting, organizing, analysing, and disseminating information generated in the context of the electoral process.

4. RESILIENCE TO STRESS AND SHOCKS: RESIST, ADAPT AND TRANSFORM

Peru's EMBs demonstrated their ability to resist, adapt and transform amid the unprecedented challenges of the 2021 general elections. They addressed the legitimacy crisis facing their own organizations through transparency and open communication when dealing with fraud allegations, adapted their operations to the constraints of the pandemic by revising logistical protocols and voting schedules, and transformed their institutional practices by responding innovatively and in real time to misinformation. Examples of this include the JNE's Fact-Checking Committee and the ONPE's OnpeChequea platform.

4.1. Adapting and responding to Covid-19 logistical challenges

During the first round of Peru's GE 2021 GE, some logistical failures relating to the handling of the pandemic came to light. One of these was the late installation of polling stations due to the absence of citizens summoned to serve as polling station officials (OAS EOM 2022; El Comercio 2021). In response, the authorities completed the formation of the polling stations by selecting willing voters from the queue, in accordance with current regulations and with the support of JNE staff at each polling station. However, the staggered voting system allocated the 07:00–09:00 time slot to older adults, pregnant women, people with disabilities and other vulnerable groups. This made it difficult to find suitable volunteers as these groups were particularly vulnerable to the virus. As a result, there were longer delays to the start of polling on election day, which led to crowds and long queues outside the polling stations, thus increasing health risks for citizens (OAS EOM 2022).

Despite the observed delays, the ONPE's report states that 98.99 per cent of planned polling stations nationwide were operational (ONPE 2022), which reflects a certain level of resilience in the electoral process. These polling stations were primarily staffed by regular members (62.2 per cent) and alternates (28.3 per cent), with the remaining 9.5 per cent filled by volunteers selected from the voter queue (OAS EOM 2022).

In response to these logistical problems, the ONPE implemented adjustments for the second round. It maintained the seven prevention and safety protocols already in place but introduced additional measures such as the mandatory use of double masks to enter polling stations. Additionally, the suggested schedule for vulnerable groups was changed from morning (07:00–09:00) to afternoon (14:00–16:00) to avoid a repeat of the situation observed in the first round (OAS EOM 2022).

Peru's EMBs demonstrated their ability to resist, adapt and transform amid the unprecedented challenges of the 2021 general elections.

While the proliferation of fake news represented a significant challenge, it also presented an opportunity for EMBs to innovate.

4.2. Transformation for real-time disinformation response

While the proliferation of fake news represented a significant challenge, it also presented an opportunity for EMBs to innovate (Mauricio 2025). In 2021, the JNE created the Technical Fact-Checking Committee in response to the large volume of disinformation generated during the EG campaign. With the overall goal of detecting and confronting fake electoral news on social networks—including about the JNE itself—the Committee operates with three objectives: (a) maintaining citizen awareness through news verification communicated in accessible language; (b) contributing to digital literacy among users of digital platforms; and (c) establishing the JNE as a leading institutional actor in combating disinformation (JNE n.d.b). As part of this initiative, the JNE published a Guide Against Disinformation, which details the steps the institution will follow to confront information manipulation, particularly during electoral periods, to preserve Peru’s democratic system.

The ONPE launched OnpeChequea, an online platform that verified electoral information across multiple digital channels. Throughout the electoral process, the ONPE issued 217 responses: 129 on Twitter, 26 on Facebook, 17 on Instagram, 17 on LinkedIn, 16 through media outlets, and 12 through fact-checkers. This work was recognized by public and private entities and reached a wide audience across digital platforms (ONPE 2021).

4.3. Resist: Maintaining institutional legitimacy through radical transparency

Unprecedented polarization around electoral fraud narratives was fuelled by the spread of false news, media pressure and Fuerza Popular’s challenge of electoral records. A comparison of electoral records challenged over the previous decade (Table 2) shows that 2021 had by far the highest number of reported cases.

It is important to note that these cases were handled with exceptional caution and transparency. All JNE hearings to resolve electoral challenges were conducted publicly, and following a recommendation by JNE President Jorge Luis Salas Arenas, even the internal deliberations of the plenary, traditionally held behind closed doors, were opened to public observation (JNE 2021f). This unprecedented level of transparency represented a proactive measure to counter fraud allegations and reinforce institutional legitimacy during a highly polarized electoral context.

With the objective of promoting access to information about vote management, vote counting and other elements, both the JNE and ONPE activated various platforms that facilitate real-time access to information. The JNE enabled its electoral platform update system and provided access to different case files from both the JNE plenary itself and the decentralized Special Electoral Juries (Jurado Electoral Especial, JEE). The ONPE enabled its real-time results platform, providing transparent access to the progress of vote counting throughout election day.

Table 2. Number of observed electoral records (2011–2021)

Electoral process	Number of electoral records observed
EG 2011	5
SEP* 2011	1
EG 2016	7
SEP 2016	19
EG 2021	0
SEP 2021	1,084

Note: SEP= segunda elección presidencial, presidential runoff.

Source: Developed by the authors based on Incio, J., 'Peru: analisis longitudinal de las elecciones presidenciales 2001–2021' [Peru: Longitudinal analysis of the presidential elections 2001–2021], International IDEA, 5 September 2022, <<https://www.idea.int/es/news/peru-analisis-longitudinal-de-las-elecciones-presidenciales-2001-2021>>, accessed 1 December 2025.

5. RECOVERY FROM CRISIS

The EG 2021 provided the ONPE with important institutional lessons that guided strengthening and improvement processes in preparation for the 2026 elections. Based on the ONPE National Chief Piero Corvetto's reflections, the lessons learned can be grouped into three main areas: internal management; legal and normative adjustments; and external communication and multi-stakeholder engagement (Corvetto Salinas 2025).

5.1. Internal management reforms

The ONPE carried out a thorough reflection on the lessons learned from the EG 2021, aiming to identify institutional strengths and areas for improvement. It became clear that the institution's performance did not meet the expectations of all electoral stakeholders. One of the key insights was that a significant portion of the public remained unaware of the ONPE's activities and the reasoning behind its decisions. Therefore, the institution recognized the importance of using non-electoral periods more effectively to strengthen communication and increase public understanding of its functions, decisions and procedures.

It was also acknowledged that the technological systems in place since 2001, although compliant with current regulations and ISO standards, were no longer adequate to meet contemporary demands. In response, the ONPE proposed a comprehensive overhaul of its internal systems, including the development of a new results platform and pilot implementation of digital voting. These new systems are scheduled to undergo audits in December 2025, making

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the EG 2026 the first to be conducted with all systems fully audited—a highly favourable step in the institution’s post-crisis recovery.

In addition, the ONPE recognized the need to reform its internal structure. The ONPE redesigned its organizational chart to reduce bureaucracy and enhance operational efficiency. In particular, it was determined that the training and organization areas should operate jointly rather than separately, creating a virtuous cycle between planning and implementation. This integration aims to achieve more coherent, efficient and comprehensive electoral planning.

5.2. Legal and normative adjustments

Legal and normative adjustments were identified as essential to improve electoral management, strengthen transparency and restore citizens’ trust. These changes addressed specific issues observed during the EG 2021 and demonstrate how crisis experiences can drive concrete institutional improvements. To avoid controversies such as the accusation that ‘dead people vote’—one of the false narratives that gained significant traction during the 2021 campaign—the ONPE coordinated with RENIEC to receive monthly updates on the registry of deceased people until election day for the 2022 regional and municipal elections, as will also be implemented for the EG 2026 (Corvetto Salinas 2025). This inter-institutional coordination represents critical learning: that electoral integrity depends not only on individual EMB performance but on seamless information exchange between complementary institutions. The monthly updates close a vulnerability that disinformation actors had exploited, transforming a defensive crisis response into a proactive prevention mechanism.

Similarly, to overcome the staffing challenges polling stations experienced during the first round, it was decided that for the EG 2026, nine polling station members would be selected: three regular members and six substitutes (three more than in previous elections). This expansion of the substitute pool directly addresses the 9.5 per cent of polling stations that had to resort to selecting volunteer members from voter queues during the first round and reduces operational uncertainty.

Voting hours were also extended; for future elections, polling stations will be open from 07:00 to 17:00, providing greater flexibility and reducing the pressure that contributed to first-round delays.

One of the most significant changes was the decision to start preserving ballots from the EG 2026 onward.

Finally, one of the most significant changes was the decision to start preserving ballots from the EG 2026 onward. This measure ‘constitutes the best guarantee for citizens and could have saved [Peruvian EMBs] a lot of problems in 2021’ (Corvetto Salinas 2025). This reform directly responds to the contested records crisis, providing physical evidence that can definitively resolve future disputes. The absence of preserved ballots in 2021 created space for unfalsifiable fraud claims; ballot preservation eliminates this vulnerability entirely, transforming allegations that cannot be disproved into claims that can be tested through physical audits.

5.3. External communication and multi-stakeholder engagement

The third approach focuses on the external projection of the ONPE and the need for permanent, multisectoral communication. The institution recognizes the importance of maintaining constant dialogue and utilizing available channels to strengthen its relationships with citizens and national institutions. This interrelational logic stems from the need to gain direct insight into what happens in the field and to bring electoral management closer to the regions.

During previous elections, the National Chief of the ONPE organized visits and meetings with various institutions in the interior of the country. However, this work was not replicated in Lima under the mistaken assumption that stakeholder relations would be easier to manage there. The main lesson learned was clear: ‘One must talk to everyone’ (Corvetto Salinas 2025). This recognition that no stakeholder can be taken for granted, regardless of location or political alignment, represents a fundamental shift in crisis prevention strategy. The 2021 experience demonstrated that urban centres, far from being easier to manage than rural districts, can become epicentres of coordinated disinformation and political mobilization.

The learning process extended beyond the ONPE. The JNE’s Technical Fact-Checking Committee, initially created as an emergency response, has been institutionalized as a permanent mechanism. The unprecedented transparency measures (public deliberations, real-time information platforms, multi-stakeholder coordination protocols—including ONPE–RENIEC monthly data exchanges) transitioned from crisis responses to standard operating procedures.

This systematic approach to learning reflects the final stage of electoral crisis management—recovery and learning—which emphasizes not only restoring institutional functioning after a disruption, but also incorporating the lessons of the crisis to enhance preparedness and resilience. The coordination between the ONPE and RENIEC illustrates this process: what initially emerged as a vulnerability exposed by disinformation was transformed into a structural improvement, strengthening institutional capacity and reducing the likelihood of similar challenges in future electoral cycles.

What initially emerged as a vulnerability exposed by disinformation was transformed into a structural improvement.

6. CONCLUSION

Peru’s 2021 general elections revealed a critical paradox in contemporary electoral integrity: while the country’s EMBs displayed strong technical capacity and organizational competence, they faced unprecedented challenges from coordinated external threats. This case study identifies three key findings that question traditional assumptions about legal, institutional and managerial safeguards.

1. *Keeping pace with strategic environment.* Contrary to conventional electoral integrity frameworks that emphasize administrative capacity and

procedural rigour, Peru's experience demonstrates that the gravest threats to electoral legitimacy can originate outside institutions, in fast-moving strategic environments. The convergence of a global pandemic, systematic disinformation campaigns, violent attacks on electoral authorities and politically motivated delegitimization efforts posed greater risks to democratic processes than any organizational shortcoming within the EMBs during the 2021 elections. The sharp contrast between international validation—with OAS and EU missions all confirming the integrity of the process—and deep domestic polarization illustrates how campaign, media and social media narratives can erode trust in technically sound elections.

2. *Level playing field implies gender equality.* Critically, these threats exhibited distinct gendered dimensions that disproportionately affected women's political participation. Female candidates faced the usual challenges but also GBV: 50 per cent experienced political harassment throughout their careers; media coverage favoured male candidates 60 per cent to 35.8 per cent; and 26 documented cases of gender-based political violence occurred during the campaign (JNE 2021e). The ineffectiveness of Law No. 31155 to prevent and sanction harassment against women in political life, despite being passed during the same electoral year, exemplifies how structural gender inequities persist even within formally progressive legal frameworks.
3. *Meeting rumour with transparency.* Despite facing multiple, overlapping crises, Peru's EMBs exhibited remarkable adaptive capacity through strategic and innovative responses. Notably, the JNE's unprecedented decision to broadcast its plenary deliberations during the adjudication of 1,084 contested records was a deliberate effort to prioritize transparency and legitimacy over procedural convention. As mentioned, the next steps will be preservation of ballots and fully audited systems for EG 2026—but transparency of internal systems cannot deliver public trust on its own.

Peru's 2021 experience thus offers a cautionary lesson for democracies worldwide: institutional competence is necessary but no longer sufficient to safeguard electoral integrity in an era marked by digital disinformation and political polarization. The true measure of democratic resilience lies not only in technical performance but in the capacity to preserve legitimacy amid orchestrated attempts to undermine it—and to protect all citizens' equal rights to political participation, particularly those from historically marginalized groups who face compounded vulnerabilities.

As the country prepares for the 2026 elections, the key challenge will be to transform crisis-driven innovations into sustainable institutional practices while addressing the structural vulnerabilities that enable external manipulation. Ultimately, Peru's case underscores that protecting elections in the 21st century requires reimagining EMBs not merely as administrative agencies but as frontline defenders of democratic legitimacy confronting hybrid threats such as information warfare, political violence and institutional contestation.

ABBREVIATIONS

EG 2021	General elections (elecciones generales) 2021
EG 2026	General elections (elecciones generales) 2026
EMB	Electoral management body
GBV	Gender-based violence
JNE	National Jury of Elections (Jurado Nacional de Elecciones)
MINSA	Ministry of Health (Ministerio de Salud)
OAS	Organization of American States (Organización de los Estados Americanos)
ONPE	National Office of Electoral Processes (Oficina Nacional de Procesos Electorales)
RENIEC	National Registry of Identification and Civil Status (Registro Nacional de Identificación y Estado Civil)

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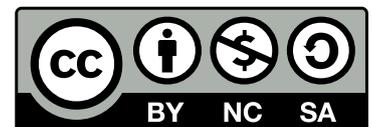
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