



# Policy Brief

July 2020

## 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.

## What does International IDEA 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.

## Where does International IDEA work?

Our headquarters is located in Stockholm, and we have regional and country offices in Africa and West Asia, Asia and the 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.

# Managing Elections during the COVID-19 Pandemic

## Considerations for Decision-makers

### Challenges to electoral democracy

Since its outset, COVID-19 has introduced pressing new challenges to societies and democratic systems worldwide. In the span of a few months, the pandemic has transformed fundamental aspects of individuals' social lives, limiting their participation in public events and gatherings, and challenging the fulfilment of their individual and collective civic responsibilities and political rights.

It is therefore no surprise that elections have been an immediate and inevitable casualty of the pandemic. Elections are large, social events that mobilize millions of people and bring entire societies together. No other operation conducted by a nation, state or territory presents a similar degree of operational magnitude, legal and procedural complexity, and mass involvement. Elections are also the costliest and most administratively and logistically burdensome operation that a democracy can undertake during peacetime. Moreover, not only do elections need to be run seamlessly, and attain high levels of participation; they also need to simultaneously ensure inclusivity, transparency, security and integrity at all stages.

The pandemic has rapidly challenged elections, making new and pressing demands on how they are managed. The main public health threat associated with elections arises from the requirement for voters to cast their ballots in person, at a polling station, most often on a single day. Having to converge to polling stations and handle voting materials that have been touched by many others, while being confined in crowded spaces where maintaining a safe distance from others may be difficult, or even impossible, has suddenly become a new challenge—and a potential serious threat to both individual and public health. The required physical presence at the polling stations, for voters and poll workers alike, presents individual health risks and may spread the virus exponentially and exacerbate the impact of the infection across a nation.

The sweeping restrictions needed to respond to the pandemic pose a challenge to democracy as they could limit the core participative dimensions of elections. The outbreak is thwarting both the symbolism and recurrence of the social ritual through which voters, across a nation, state or territory, 'armed' only with the power of their individual vote,

determine who should represent them. Orr (2015) notes that elections have ‘a dimension of a grand ritual, a recurrent public occasion marking the passage and renewal of political seasons. It is an extended ritual run according to established timetables and made up of a myriad of ritualised processes’.

### New dilemmas for decision-makers

Emergencies, such as the global crisis stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic, are decisive tests that may reveal the health of any democracy: they indiscriminately expose the strengths and weaknesses of the social contract between citizens and the governments they have elected. They also expose the quality and accountability of systems and institutions of governance, governments’ competence and strength in responding to the crisis, and the effectiveness of the decisions they have taken to resolve the emergency.

In the midst of the extraordinary challenges and uncertainty stemming from COVID-19, decision-makers are under increasing pressure to determine how to manage the pandemic’s immediate impact on, and consequences for, the timing and sequencing of elections. These decisions cannot be taken lightly, as they could jeopardize public health and shape the state of democracy in their countries, states or territories for years to come. In times of crisis and of collective and individual vulnerability, citizens are naturally inclined to look at their governments for prompt action, support and protection. If a government fails to take appropriate and timely decisions, it quickly loses credibility, legitimacy and popularity—as well as votes.

When considering the feasibility of holding an election during a pandemic, the most common dilemmas confronted by decision-makers may include:

- How to ensure sufficient and credible levels of voter participation that, in turn, can guarantee the representativity and legitimacy of the resulting democratic institutions;
- How to provide a safe voting environment for both voters and poll workers, and minimize the health risks associated with all electoral operations that require in-person interactions (including, for example, voter registration, election campaigns, voting and counting processes, observation, etc.);
- How to deliver—despite the restrictions imposed by the pandemic—a transparent and accountable electoral process that enjoys a high degree of integrity; and
- How to ensure that all phases and operations comprising the electoral process are inclusive and safe for the age groups (i.e. over 60) and ethnic minorities that are especially vulnerable to the disease (WHO n.d.). Several factors such as cultural aspects, language barriers, income inequality, racial disparities, occupational disadvantages and housing differences have been found to make certain racial groups and ethnic minorities more vulnerable to COVID-19 (BBC 2020).

Evaluating the challenges posed by the pandemic to the management and integrity of the electoral process and balancing them with the health risks to all those participating is not an easy task. Decisions about whether to hold an election as scheduled or to postpone it are likely to be exposed to public, legal and political controversy.

### *The health of voters, or that of democracy?*

Countries, states and territories use different frameworks, systems and practices to determine which entity is ultimately responsible for determining whether to postpone or hold a scheduled election during a national emergency. In some contexts, the decision lies with the legislative, judicial or executive branch, or a combination. In others, electoral management bodies (EMBs) may be legally mandated to make such decisions and, when opting for a postponement, to

**The sweeping restrictions needed to respond to the pandemic pose a challenge to democracy as they could limit the core participative dimensions of elections.**

## Health risks of a pandemic require a choice regarding what should be prioritized—the health of citizens, or that of the nation’s democracy?

schedule a new election date. EMBs are legally responsible for managing some, or all, of the elements essential to the conduct of elections and direct democracy instruments (International IDEA 2014: 23).

Irrespective of which body is mandated with the decision, the serious health risks of a pandemic require a choice regarding what should be prioritized—the health of citizens, or that of the nation’s democracy? In practice, it does not require choosing one of these extreme ends; rather, it involves ensuring that voting is both safe and technically sound, and garners the needed legitimacy.

### *Determinants of electoral feasibility*

A significant initial challenge confronted by decision-making bodies is whether the considerable legal and procedural complexities imposed by the pandemic on an electoral process can be reconciled with the stringent safety requirements required. Key influencing factors on such a decision are numerous, contextual and strictly dependent on the specific environment of the countries, states or territories.

**Table 1. Key influencing factors**

Key influencing factors	Main considerations
Type of election assessed	What is the level of the election (e.g. parliamentary, presidential, local government, etc.)?  What is its constitutional relevance? And what is its political significance?
Whether legal provisions in the electoral framework allow for a postponement	Are legal provisions in place to justify a postponement in exceptional circumstances, such as a natural disaster or other types of national emergencies?  If so, are they unambiguously expressed so that a potential postponement due to public health concerns could be legally warranted and clearly regulated?
Whether the electoral legal and procedural frameworks can respond to the extraordinary requirements and safety measures stemming from the emergency	What are the main changes and measures required? Are they feasible?  Are existing provisions in the electoral framework clear, detailed, and flexible enough to accommodate the required procedural and operational changes?
The pandemic’s ‘Re’ rate and phase at the time of the decision, and the expected rate and phase at the time of the election	Is there sufficient time and requisite capacities to contain the pandemic by the time the election will be held?  Can a safe voting environment be guaranteed to reassure voters and ensure their participation?
Broad agreement and support among electoral stakeholders	Will key political stakeholders and electoral contestants support and trust the required legal changes and measures?
Whether the conditions are favourable for introducing (if absent), or expanding (if present), special voting arrangements	What special voting arrangements are suitable in the legal, procedural, operational, infrastructural, political, geographical and economic environment in which they have to be used and sustained?  Can key electoral stakeholders reach a broad consensus on the envisaged introduction/expansion of special voting arrangements?  Are there sufficient time, resources and capacities to introduce/expand new voting methods and sustain them over time?  Are there sufficient time, means and resources to inform the electorate, political contestants and other stakeholders about the new voting methods? Is there time for them to become familiar with, and trust, them?  What main risks and unknowns may the introduction or expansion of special voting arrangements imply?  Will special voting arrangements hinder the required levels of transparency, security, accuracy, and reliability of the voting and counting processes, and be able to resist to undue influence, coercion, vote buying, irregularities and fraud?

Key influencing factors	Main considerations
Reputation of the EMB and level of public trust in the fulfilment of its mandated functions	<p>Is the EMB capable (and perceived to be capable) of professionally managing and delivering a credible and legitimate electoral process given the complex challenges and restrictions imposed by the pandemic?</p> <p>Has the EMB established a solid track record of independent, impartial and professional management of past elections?</p> <p>Do key electoral stakeholders and political contestants broadly trust the EMB and its record of managing past electoral processes?</p>
Timing of the elections and how soon they are scheduled	<p>Is it administratively, logistically, operationally and procedurally feasible for the election to happen as scheduled?</p> <p>Is the envisaged timeline sufficient and realistic to accomplish all the required legal, procedural, administrative and operational changes imposed by the pandemic?</p> <p>Can a new election date or timeframe be set to provide clarity and predictability for stakeholders?</p> <p>Does the timeframe available require short-term (possibly provisional) solutions? Or is there enough time for a proper reform of electoral procedures?</p>
Implications of holding the election during the pandemic	<p>How will restrictions of movement, distancing requirements and other limitations affect the integrity of the election? Which phases and operations of the electoral process will most likely be affected?</p> <p>Is a level playing field for electoral contestants and a meaningful and unrestricted election campaign possible?</p> <p>Is it possible to safely conduct pre-election activities such as voter registration, candidate and party registration, and poll worker training?</p> <p>Is it possible to recruit enough election officials to open a sufficient number of polling stations?</p> <p>Do the outbreaks of the pandemic in foreign countries where overseas voters reside allow for out-of-country voting operations to take place safely and in full?</p> <p>Will the domestic and international observation of the election be feasible, unrestricted and safe? If not, how can the accessibility, transparency and integrity of all electoral phases and operations be ensured?</p> <p>What is the level of institutionalization, effectiveness and responsiveness policies, procedures and practices of electoral risk management?*</p> <p>What legal, operational, political, institutional and reputational risks is the election and EMB likely to incur if the election is held as scheduled?</p>
The expected voter participation rate	<p>Will the envisaged voter turnout rate guarantee that basic inclusivity, participation and representativity requirements will be met?</p> <p>What expected participation rate would reasonably justify the increased cost and extraordinary measures required to provide a safe voting environment?</p>
Extraordinary public health measures to be enacted to guarantee safe conditions	<p>What protective measures need to be enacted to guarantee a safe in-person voting environment at polling stations for all those participating in the election (including poll workers, voters, candidates, media and observers)?</p>
Procurement, financial costs and other implications associated with holding the election, particularly given the economic contraction resulting from the pandemic	<p>Is the procurement of the required personal protective equipment, safety and other materials feasible in the given timeframe? What is their cost? Are these materials readily available? Can personal protective equipment and other needed supplies be produced, procured and distributed in time?</p> <p>Are the required means, resources, and supplies sufficient and suitable to guarantee that extraordinary public health measures and safeguards can be implemented in time, and safe voter participation guaranteed?</p> <p>Will the envisaged voter turnout rates justify the increased operational and safety costs resulting from the decision to hold the election as scheduled?</p>

\* 'Risk management' is 'a systematic effort undertaken to improve knowledge about and situational awareness of both internal and external risks to electoral processes, to initiate timely preventive and mitigating action' (International IDEA 2016).

*Note:* The 'effective reproduction number' ('Re') is a mathematical rate that refers to the effective reproduction value/number indicating the number of people in a population that can be infected by an individual at any specific time. It changes as the population becomes increasingly immunized, either through individual immunity following infection or vaccination, or as people die. The World Health Organization (WHO) provides an influenza pandemic alert system, with a scale ranging from Phase 1 (low risk of a pandemic) to Phase 6 (full-blown pandemic).

When deciding whether to hold an election during a pandemic, decision-making bodies should first determine whether (and how) the risks of exposing voters, poll workers and others to potential contagion at polling stations can be minimized. This requires devising appropriate safety measures to protect public health when voting as well as a strategy to reassure voters.

Several safety measures may be introduced to reduce the risk of contagion at polling stations. These include the use of personal protective equipment safeguarding the wearer from infection (e.g. protective masks, gloves, glasses, face shields, aprons), safety materials (plexiglass compartments, cordons and signs to ensure safe distancing at each step of the voting process) and other safety, hygiene and behavioural measures (ranging from the use of disinfectants, temperature checking and maintaining a safe distance from others, to sanitizing hands and avoiding or limiting the use of objects commonly touched by others).

Decision-making bodies should then determine the overall feasibility of holding the election under the numerous restrictions imposed by the pandemic. In a next step, decision-makers must be confident and reassured that the election can be effectively managed without undermining public safety or compromising fundamental democratic principles and norms.

As mentioned above, the main threat that elections held during a pandemic pose to public health arises from the requirement to converge within a limited time (typically on a single day) in confined and crowded places (polling stations), where maintaining hygiene rules and a safe distance from others may be difficult. When opting to conduct an election under these conditions, decisions about the time and place of in-person voting may have major implications for determining and assuring voter safety. Hence, when considering how to minimize the health-related risks posed by the pandemic, decision-making bodies need to reasonably and realistically consider the impact of these two critical factors in the act of voting.

### Special voting arrangements as public safety guarantees

After deciding to hold an election during a pandemic, decision-making bodies should consider how to ensure the accessibility and safety of electoral stakeholders. Special voting arrangements may help meet both accessibility and safety requirements. Several definitions are traditionally used to refer to ‘special voting arrangements’ as alternative methods of voting to the more ‘conventional’ or ‘ordinary’ voting in person at a polling station. These broadly used definitions include alternative voting methods, alternative voting measures, convenience voting, special voting channels, etc.

While special voting arrangements may already be part of an electoral framework, they may need to be introduced. Where they are in place, these arrangements usually cater to special categories of voters, such as persons with limited mobility (e.g. elderly citizens in medical facilities; detainees confined in correction centres; or poll workers working in a constituency other than their own) or those who are absent from their constituency of registration on election day (e.g. because they live overseas). If they are already part of an electoral framework, special voting arrangements may need to be expanded and extended to the entire electorate. Otherwise, they need to be defined, introduced via legislative amendments, designed, tested, implemented and monitored from the ground up.

Special voting arrangements constitute an important safeguard measure that provides voters with alternative—and possibly safer—ways to cast a ballot. Such arrangements can also mitigate the impact that the fear of contagion may have on voter participation and the availability of personnel essential to managing the polling stations.

**Special voting arrangements constitute an important safeguard measure that provides voters with alternative—and possibly safer—ways to cast a ballot.**



**Table 2. Public health risks associated with voting**

Health-related risk	Special voting arrangements	Mitigating effects
The <i>time</i> factor poses health risks by requiring the entire electorate to vote on a single day	Advance/early voting allows voters to cast their ballot prior to election day, either in person or remotely, by absentee voting methods	Advancing the voting process to an earlier period than the scheduled election date, and typically allowing it to unfold over multiple days, can mitigate the risks to public health by eliminating the <i>time</i> factor requiring the electorate to vote on a single day.
The <i>place</i> factor poses health risks by requiring voters' physical presence in a polling station	Absentee voting allows voters to cast their vote remotely	Absentee voting can mitigate health risks and act as a strong safeguard by removing the need to physically attend the confined <i>place</i> of the polling station. Voters can cast their ballot by alternative means from their homes or any other <i>place</i> that is convenient, or safer, to them. Alternative means of voting may include postal or electronic voting; casting a ballot from a polling station in a constituency different from that of registration; or proxy voting, in which the right to vote is delegated to a person of trust, perhaps from a group at lower risk.

### *Balancing opportunities with risks*

In a matter of a few months, the COVID-19 crisis has rapidly transformed fundamental electoral norms, practices and approaches governing electoral management over the last few decades. The pandemic has therefore challenged numerous countries, states and territories to rethink how to deliver safe, technically sound and credible elections. This presents opportunities for growth, positive change and innovation—and incentivizes radical shifts in long-entrenched perspectives.

The pandemic also has the potential to generate a multiplier effect leading to the discovery and adoption of new values, policies, systems and approaches to electoral management; new ways for EMBs to operate internally and cooperate across borders, based on the recognition that collective thinking creates the most effective and sustainable solutions to common problems; and bold and long-needed reforms that could not be adequately prioritized or accomplished before (e.g. the need to introduce absentee voting to enfranchise overseas voters, or the introduction of internet voting).

These opportunities come with considerable risks. Such risks, unless they are carefully and systematically considered, assessed and taken into account, increase when changes and innovations must be adopted during a major crisis when there is an urgency to respond rapidly and effectively. Time could be limited, and the pressure to address the crisis may be very intense. Table 3 details a number of risks that decision-making bodies should consider when exploring special voting arrangements.

**Table 3. Risks relating to special voting arrangements**

Risk	Key considerations
Rejection by electoral stakeholders	Irrespective of whether they are existing or introduced from the ground up, special voting arrangements require strict conditions to be in place that are accepted and trusted by all electoral stakeholders. When introducing and enacting new voting methods, decision-making bodies should envisage extensive levels of consultation with all electoral stakeholders and political contestants. In order to gain public trust and acceptance, clear information must be provided about how the new voting methods work.
Political controversies, lack of legal feasibility	When introducing and enacting new voting methods, the electoral law should not be amended within six months of the scheduled election. Failure to comply with this principle is likely to cause political controversies. Distinctions should be made between reforms that would require substantial legal changes in the electoral framework/system and secondary procedural improvements that could be more rapidly adopted by amending the election regulations.

**The pandemic has challenged countries, states and territories to rethink how to deliver safe, technically sound and credible elections. This presents opportunities for growth, positive change and innovation.**

Risk	Key considerations
Lack of stakeholder awareness	Time allows predictability: voters and electoral contestants should know what to expect so they can better understand the new measures and prepare for them. Intense political controversies and partisan confrontations, with last-minute uncertainties on the eve of the election, create major confusion and unnecessarily put public health at serious risk.
Reforms exceeding their initial purpose	The circumstances of an emergency, such as one on the scale of the COVID-19 pandemic, requiring immediate responses may encourage rash decision-making that exceeds or defeats the initial purpose. For example, suddenly substituting one voting method with another—e.g. replacing in-person voting with a postal-only or electronic voting system—may be rejected. Quick, poorly considered and planned reforms may produce undesirable or even harmful outcomes.
Contextual risks	The introduction of special voting arrangements should carefully consider the political, legal, procedural and operational context. Any shortfall or irregularity that occurs in their implementation, even if unintended, could be interpreted as partisan, creating serious repercussions for the EMB's reputation as well as the legitimacy and outcome of the election.
Lack of integrity (perceived or real)	The fact that voting under some alternative methods is unsupervised, and several key conditions cannot be verified, makes them vulnerable to undue influence, intimidation, interference, coercion and vote buying. These risks would be lower through in-person, advance voting at polling stations. Absentee methods, such as postal voting, could raise questions of integrity.
Lack of time	Time needs to be factored in for all political forces to consult and agree on the most appropriate electoral reform and special measures to be put in place in a consensual, linear and consistent manner. Unless meaningful consultations are held, political forces that lack ownership of the electoral reform and special measures adopted will most likely mistrust and reject them.

**When considering special voting arrangements, it may be more prudent, and viable, for decision-making bodies to proceed with balanced and gradual solutions, with degrees of variation, adaptation and choice among the various arrangements.**

Ultimately, to ensure the smooth and effective introduction of special voting arrangements, decision-making bodies should consider the following points:

- Arrangements should be devised, piloted and gradually implemented in harmony with the existing legal and procedural framework. This requires systematic planning, suitable security safeguards, adequate training and consultation with key electoral stakeholders to obtain their crucial buy-in and trust.
- Arrangements must be appropriate for the environment and the related infrastructure.
- Adequate information should be provided to all those with a stake in implementing the newly introduced or expanded voting arrangements. This includes those responsible for administering them in the long term, those using the new arrangement to cast their ballots, and those assessing their effectiveness and levels of integrity and reporting to the public.

When considering special voting arrangements, it may be more prudent, and viable, for decision-making bodies to proceed with balanced and gradual solutions, with degrees of variation, adaptation and choice among the various arrangements. These may include the decision to provide voters with several options, including:

- vote in person at polling stations;
- cast their ballot remotely, by absentee voting methods;
- participate in advance voting over multiple days, over longer periods and through extended operating hours; and
- delegate someone else (at lower risk of infection) to vote on their behalf where proxy voting arrangements are in place.

These voting methods may be complemented by several additional practical measures, including:

- increasing the number of polling stations to reduce the numbers of voters to be served in each of them;
- when feasible, locating polling stations outdoors to reduce the risks of confining large number of people indoors; and

© 2020 International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance

International IDEA publications are independent of specific national or political interests. Views expressed in this publication do not necessarily represent the views of International IDEA, or those of its Board or Council members.

The electronic version of this publication is available under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 (CC BY-NC-SA 3.0) licence. You are free to copy, distribute and transmit the publication, and to remix and adapt it, provided it is only for non-commercial purposes, that you appropriately attribute the publication, and that you distribute it under an identical licence.

For more information visit the Creative Commons website:  
<<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/>>

## Contact us

International IDEA  
Strömsborg  
SE-103 34 Stockholm  
Sweden  
Email: [info@idea.int](mailto:info@idea.int)  
Website: <<https://www.idea.int>>

- bolstering security measures to ensure that the special voting arrangements do not increase the risk of fraud and irregularities that could compromise the integrity of such operations.

### *Towards a 'new normal' in managing elections after COVID-19?*

Since the WHO declared the COVID-19 outbreak a global pandemic, scientific reports have warned that the virus might persist for many months to come, or even resurge and continue to spread for a long period of time. There is also a risk that other similar types of pandemics may emerge. For instance, the WHO (2020) stated that 'the risk of re-introduction and resurgence of the disease will continue' and that 'without careful planning, and in the absence of scaled up public health and clinical care capacities, the premature lifting of physical distancing measures is likely to lead to an uncontrolled resurgence in COVID-19 transmission and an amplified second wave of cases'. With such a scenario looming, numerous countries, states and territories are bracing themselves to hold elections in these conditions.

While acknowledging that each country, state and territory has unique conditions and diverse contexts, and is differently equipped and prepared to respond to the COVID-19 crisis, the experiences accumulated by those that have held elections since the outbreak offer valuable insights. The resilience of democracy involves a process of continuous analysis and learning to strengthen and prepare institutions for the challenges to come. While the pandemic inevitably requires hard choices, compromises and sacrifices, the experiences so far have shown that it is possible to hold safe and technically sound elections during a pandemic.

By devising timely, appropriate and sustainable solutions, drawn from own or others' experience, electoral democracy frameworks can be gradually strengthened to withstand undue pressure. Ultimately, the extent to which countries, states and territories are able to cope with, innovate, survive and recover from the complex threats and challenges imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic will reveal and determine how resilient their electoral frameworks and management systems are, how competent their governments are, and the health of the social contract with their citizens.

## References

- BBC, 'Coronavirus: why some racial groups are more vulnerable', 21 April 2020, <<https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200420-coronavirus-why-some-racial-groups-are-more-vulnerable>>, accessed 30 June 2020
- International IDEA, *Electoral Management Design: Revised edition* (Stockholm: International IDEA, 2014), <<https://www.idea.int/publications/catalogue/electoral-management-design-revised-edition>>, accessed 5 July 2020
- , *Risk Management in Elections* (Stockholm: International IDEA, 2016), <<https://www.idea.int/publications/catalogue/risk-management-elections>>, accessed 5 July 2020
- Orr, G., *Ritual and Rhythm in Electoral Systems: A Comparative Legal Account* (Ashgate: Routledge, 2015)
- World Health Organization (WHO), 'COVID-19: vulnerable and high risk groups', n.d., <<https://www.who.int/westernpacific/emergencies/covid-19/information/high-risk-groups>>, accessed 30 June 2020
- , *COVID-19 Strategy Update* (Geneva: WHO, 2020) <<https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/covid-19-strategy-update---14-april-2020>>, accessed 5 July 2020