

How to reform elections democratically

Policy brief

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Election quality varies enormously around the world. Given widespread concerns about global democratic backsliding, improving and protecting election quality has become a pressing policy challenge. Yet passing reforms to enhance the quality of elections has often proved difficult. Incumbent governments may be reluctant to change the rules that brought them to power. Where they hold legislative majorities, they may instead pursue reforms that make future electoral victories easier, potentially further undermining election quality.

Electoral reform may also struggle to gain traction on the policy agenda, competing with issues such as the economy, law and order, or education. In addition, governments may face unfair accusations of “rigging” the electoral process from sceptical publics, even when proposed reforms are intended to strengthen electoral integrity.

Academic research has largely focused on the effects of electoral laws, generating prescriptions about which reforms should be adopted. Far less attention, however, has been paid to the process by which electoral laws are made and changed. Key questions remain underexplored: who should be involved in electoral reform, when should reforms take place, and what practices help build trust among stakeholders and the public?

To address these challenges, the Electoral Integrity Project and Westminster Foundation for Democracy collaborated on a workshop and an edited volume (James, forthcoming).¹ The workshop explored:

- What principles should underpin the electoral reform process.
- The barriers to ensuring that the electoral reform process is democratic, inclusive, transparent and consensus oriented.
- What interventions can be adopted to help to ensure ‘good’ electoral reform.
- Case studies of electoral reform that provide examples of where the electoral process was strengthened or undermined.

The workshop was underpinned by the launch of new guidelines on electoral reform from the Global Network for Securing Electoral Integrity (GNSEI). It examined the electoral reform process in 14 countries, presented by leading experts. Quantitative cross-national analysis was also undertaken. This policy brief summarises some key lessons. It describes global practices and recommends that countries follow an electoral reform policy cycle to embed the principles in future electoral reform.

¹ The full book will be available open access. The workshop was held in March 2025 and materials are available online: <https://www.electoralintegrityproject.com/electoral-reform>.

Principles for the electoral reform process

In the landmark document *Principles for Democratic Electoral Reform Processes*, GNSEI set out six principles which could be used as guideposts for the electoral reform process (GNSEI 2024). These were:

- **Political consensus** building is foundational to any electoral reform process. Electoral reform is inherently political and may benefit some actors more than others. The good faith examination of proposals and goodwill among participants should therefore be encouraged.
- Electoral reform processes should be **transparent**. Independent oversight actors such as the media, election observers and civil society groups should have access to clear communication about the process. This includes the timeline, scope of reform, and the range of actors involved.
- Electoral reform processes should be **inclusive**. The process should include representation and be informed participation by women, youth, and other marginalized groups. A range of methods should be used to ensure a broad consultative approach, such as public forums, expert working group discussions, public comment periods, and active public outreach activities.
- Electoral reform processes should be informed by **evidence and a long-term vision**. Electoral reforms should have a focus vision that extends beyond the immediate election cycle. High-quality information is important to enable shared understandings of the issues and possible solutions. It is therefore important to incorporate credible expert input to enable evidence-based discussion.
- **Adequate timeframes and resources** for a viable and democratic electoral reform process. Late changes to electoral laws can make elections difficult to deliver, disadvantage candidates and leave voters confused about the changes. It is therefore important to start the electoral reform process early.
- **Clear accountability structures** are essential for electoral reform processes. Clear accountability structures allow for public scrutiny of the electoral reform process. This requires a clear leadership structure, responsibilities to be assigned, a communication strategy to be devised and stakeholder input to be integrated.

These principles were designed by the international community with academic input. However, as the book sets out, they have clear overlaps with the design of good democratic institutions according to most theories of democracy. They provide an initial aspiration for electoral reformers. But are they followed? What are the barriers? Are there trade-offs to be considered?

To what extent are the principles followed?

The project examined 14 country cases of electoral reform, spanning a range of political systems including democracies, hybrid regimes, and electoral autocracies. In all cases, those responsible for the reforms were unaware of the principles, as these did not exist at the time the case studies were conducted. Each case was assessed according to the extent to which the principles were met. Countries were scored on a three-point scale—high, medium, or low.

As shown in the Appendix, the principles were breached overall in seven cases. In four cases, they were met to some extent, and in only two cases were they broadly adhered to: South Africa and Ghana.

Successful cases

In **South Africa**, as Dirk Kotzé explains, reforms were adopted to allow independent candidates to stand as a new category in the 2024 national and provincial elections. The reform originated in a legal challenge brought by a non-profit civil society organisation, which argued that existing electoral law was unconstitutional. The Constitutional Court ruled in favour of the appellants. This decision prompted the government to establish a Ministerial Advisory Committee on Electoral Reform.

An eight-member committee was formed, comprising representatives from independent electoral bodies, academics, and the former chairperson of the Municipal Demarcation Board. The committee invited public submissions and conducted its own research on electoral systems. Based on its report, the minister developed proposed legislation, which was then considered by a National Assembly committee. This committee initiated its own inquiry and consultation process, inviting the Department of Home Affairs, the Electoral Commission (IEC), and the Parliamentary Legal Service to comment on a consolidated report of public participation inputs. Only after this process was completed was the Bill presented to the houses of the National Assembly for debate and approval.

In Ghana, as Emmanuel Graham and Ransford Edward Van Gyampo describe, biometric voter registration and the use of verification devices were introduced ahead of the 2012 election to prevent multiple voting. The proposal for reform had been advanced by civil society organisations as early as 1992 and was supported by election observer groups in their reports. The Electoral Commission subsequently brought the proposal to political parties, convening regular meetings with stakeholders to seek common ground. While consensus was not initially achieved, it emerged through dialogue, contestation, and negotiation.

The Electoral Commission organised pilot tests of the biometric kits, collecting extensive data on problems encountered at polling stations. Accountability mechanisms were also in place. The Inter-Party Advisory Committee—a forum established by the Electoral Commission in 1994 to facilitate dialogue among political stakeholders—provided opportunities to challenge decisions. In addition, the Supreme Court heard electoral petitions that gathered detailed evidence on the effects of the reforms, albeit after implementation.

The South African and Ghanaian cases illustrate how ideas for electoral reform can emerge outside the immediate orbit of political parties and government actors, but require carefully structured committees and processes to apply key principles effectively. The case studies also demonstrate that successful reform is not automatic, but contingent on sustained consultation, institutional design, and accountability.

In **Mauritius**, as Sheetal Sheena Sookrajowa and Allison McCulloch explain, a Sachs Commission was established following the 2000 election to consider the case for electoral system reform. The winning party had campaigned on the case for electoral reform. In government, it established a three-person Commission on Constitutional and Electoral Reform, led by Albie Sachs, a judge of the South African Constitutional Court. The Sachs Commission received a wide set of 70 written memoranda and heard oral representations at 50 sessions. Some minutes and meetings were not publicly available. Once the Sachs Report was published, a Select Committee of MPs was asked to make recommendations on how it could be implemented. However, this committee could not reach consensus between the political parties. The reform therefore did not progress further.

There was mixed success in other cases such as the UK, New Mexico and Minnesota (USA), Netherlands and Ukraine.

Unsuccessful cases

In **Hungary**, as Anna Unger sets out, electoral system reforms fundamentally changed the electoral system in 2011 and 2024. The legislation was passed without support from the opposition. The bills were submitted by MPs rather than the government meaning that there was no prior public consultation and it was impossible to know which actors and experts prepared the drafts. The parliamentary passage was also truncated. The initial bill in 2010 was introduced without debate, while the 2011 bill only allowed only a month before passage. The 2024 reform draft was submitted by a member of parliament on 19 November 2024 and adopted by parliament barely a month later, on 20 December 2024. There were also little public justification and evidence presented.

In **Zimbabwe**, Reikai Rusinga described an electoral reform process triggered by a coalition of civil society organisations. It involved a wide range of actors with inclusive meetings. The range of election observation methods used help to bring about some good evidence to inform the reform process. However, the ruling party was able to use its position to veto any proposals. One opposition MP noted that the Minister “practically rejected everything that was being proposed” during debate. An entirely different bill was constructed instead. The principles were therefore achieved in one sense, and yet not in another.

In **Venezuela**, Daniela Urosa explains how changes were made to the procedures for voting from abroad for the 2024 presidential election. The reform was made by a non-impartial electoral management body. The CNE has used its regulatory powers to restrict the ability of Venezuelans living overseas to exercise their right to vote. There was no reform proposal available for review by political actors or organizations advocating for the right to vote, nor were there any documents justifying the proposed changes. The case illustrates the dangers of electoral management bodies being able to make rule changes without checks to their powers.

The principles were not followed in India, Mexico, Peru and Russia.

The principles were therefore, unsurprisingly, more frequently observed in democracies. But even established democracies experienced difficulties meeting the criteria. Electoral finance reform in **India** saw breaches of the principles. A major change to electoral finance rules was made by introducing a bill as a ‘money bill’ to Parliament. This limited the scope for scrutiny and for the principles to be realised.

The value of the principles

The case studies revealed the value of principles. Not following the principles led to:

- **Declining trust.** For example, in the UK, the government developed policy through an external committee run by a former party chair. There was a lack of transparency and poor-quality evidence used. Mistrust about the government's motives then followed.
- **Poor laws.** For example, in Peru, the high number of fragmental, last-minute reforms have led to a system of more than fifty overlapping laws and temporary provisions.
- **Distorted political competition.** For example, in India, the electoral bonds bill gave an unfair electoral advantage to incumbents.
- **Political inequality.** For example, in Hungary, constituency boundaries were drawn in ways that did not meet the Court's population and coherence standards, which reduced equal weight across districts.
- **A loss of electoral officials.** In the Netherlands voting machines had been used for more than 40 years. When they were withdrawn, a lot of experienced poll workers quit, because they did not feel included in the decision-making process.

Barriers to the principles

One of the barriers to following the principles identified in the case studies was the strategic choices of actors to prioritise political interests. Parties have parliamentary majorities and power to enforce changes, and this can be difficult to overcome. However, other barriers include problems with parliamentary processes:

- Legislation proposed through inappropriate parliamentary channels
- Inquiries taking place outside of parliamentary channels, thereby limiting accountability, transparency and inclusion.
- Low level participation in the electoral reform process by members
- Restricting membership of committees to members of the governing party
- Use of threat of dissolution of parliament
- Fast tracking of legislation

Organisational responsibility for elections can also be a barrier:

- Responsibilities may be split between local and national level leading to conflicts and co-ordination issues.
- The consolidation of responsibilities within an organization e.g. a central EMB can limit scrutiny where they have capacity to change rules.
- There can also be the absence of high-quality evidence to inform the process.

To what extent is consensus followed globally?

The book explores the extent to which the principle of consensus was met in more detail. This is possible because the Electoral Integrity Project provides data on the extent to which electoral reforms were made via *consensus* for elections held in 2023 and 2024, based on a survey of country experts (Garnett, James, and Caal-Laam 2025). Countries with a high degree of consensus are shaded in a darker colour on the map in Figure 1. It demonstrates a large degree of variation.

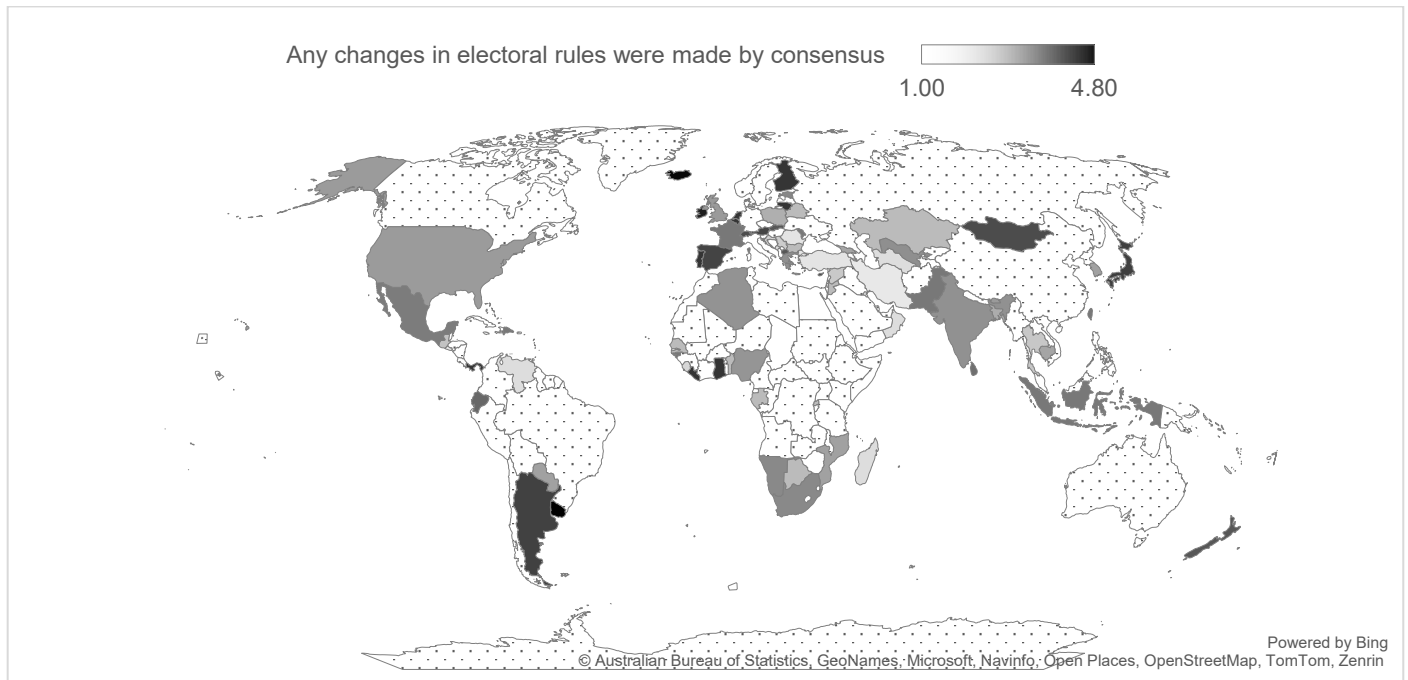


Figure 1: The extent of consensus about changes in electoral rules 2023-24

Countries that scored highly included Iceland, Uruguay, Ireland, Luxembourg, Belgium, Finland and Ghana. The lowest possible scores were Azerbaijan, Chad, Czechia, Egypt, Eswatini, Madagascar and Zimbabwe.

In those countries to have scored highly, there was a tendency to use open consultations to allow stakeholders to respond to policy proposals prior to legislative discussion. Parliamentary institutions then deliberated on the bills before passage. In addition, the recommendations of international election observation missions were often used. In countries which scored poorly, there were often claims of a lack of consultation – and often a backdrop of fear and repression.

Barriers to consensus

Quantitative analysis was conducted to identify the structural drivers of consensus in electoral reform. The analysis examined correlations between reform consensus and underlying political conditions. Table 1 summarises the factors that are positively associated, negatively associated, or not associated with electoral reform consensus.

Favourable economic conditions, broader traditions of transparency and evidence-based policymaking, and strong institutions are all positively associated with consensus. By contrast, contexts characterised by political polarisation and violence are negatively correlated with electoral reform consensus.

Positive correlation	No correlation	Negative correlation
Economic development (GDP per capita PPP)	Electoral system	Personalisation of political power
Election quality	Bicameral parliaments	Political polarization
Traditions of deliberative democracy		Political violence
Engaged civil society		International observers are denied access
Equality before the law		
Judicial and legislative constraints on the executive		
Equal distribution of resources		
Domestic observers can report on the election		

Table 1: Broader social factors which correlate with consensus on electoral laws.

Is consensus the most important principle?

The book explores whether consensus is the most important principle. Consensus plays a central role in democracy but also in diplomatic work.

Consensus plays an important, but complex role, in the electoral reform process. Consensus between the relevant stakeholders on electoral reform may indicate:

- **Fair play** – that governments are not seeking to manipulate rules for partisan interest.
- **Trustworthy institutions** – that electoral institutions are strong and trusted and that reform is therefore not needed.
- **Conditions for peace** – agreement on the electoral rules has value because enables peaceful politics to take place.

However, there is inevitably a pluralism of views about how elections should be run. Consensus may also indicate:

- **Repression** – as opposition, civil society and social movements fear the consequences of speaking out.
- **Insufficient attention** – electoral law may not have received sufficient media and public attention.
- **The absence of minority voices** – minority groups may have struggled to have their voice heard.
- **Media biases** – media systems may privilege some parties and give a distorted view of the effects.

Consensus is therefore not necessarily the only goal in the electoral reform process. Electoral reform may be disruptive to the existing order but be necessary to improve election quality. This is not to say that consensus is unimportant. Rather it should be considered as only one amongst the principles – which factor in the evidence-base for the reforms.

The nature of consensus may also be more complex. There are four different types of possible (dis)agreements on electoral reform:

- **Normative** – where there is (dis)agreement on the values that should underpin the system (e.g. should it prioritise stable government or representation?).
- **Epistemic** – where there is (dis)agreement about the likely effects of different electoral rules (e.g. will voter identification requirements reduce turnout?).
- **Interest-based** – where actors have perceived or real disagreement about the interests that they should pursue (e.g. national interest, party interest, personal interest or group interest).
- **Preferential** - where there is (dis)agreement on the policy option.

Understanding the causes and nature of consensus or disagreement should consider all these dimensions.

The Electoral Reform Cycle Approach

There were several factors which were found in the cases to have facilitated the adoption of the principles. These included informal spaces for dialogue, such as the Ghanaian Inter-Party Advisory Committee (IPAC) and cross-party commissions (such as the Sachs Commission in Mauritius). Building on this, it is recommended that an electoral reform cycle is followed. This has four stages (Figure 2).

- In the **evidence collection stage**, information should be collected about the quality of the election which can inform subsequent debate.
- In the **evidence review stage** there should be broad, open public debate about election quality and how it can be enhanced. Establishing formal cross-party commissions or political dialogue forums can bring together stakeholders to develop more concrete policy ideas.
- In the **official deliberation stage**, policy proposals should be put out to formal consultation by the government. They should receive full parliamentary scrutiny and there should be efforts made to reach consensus.
- In the **implementation stage**, information needs to be disseminated about changes – and review points established.

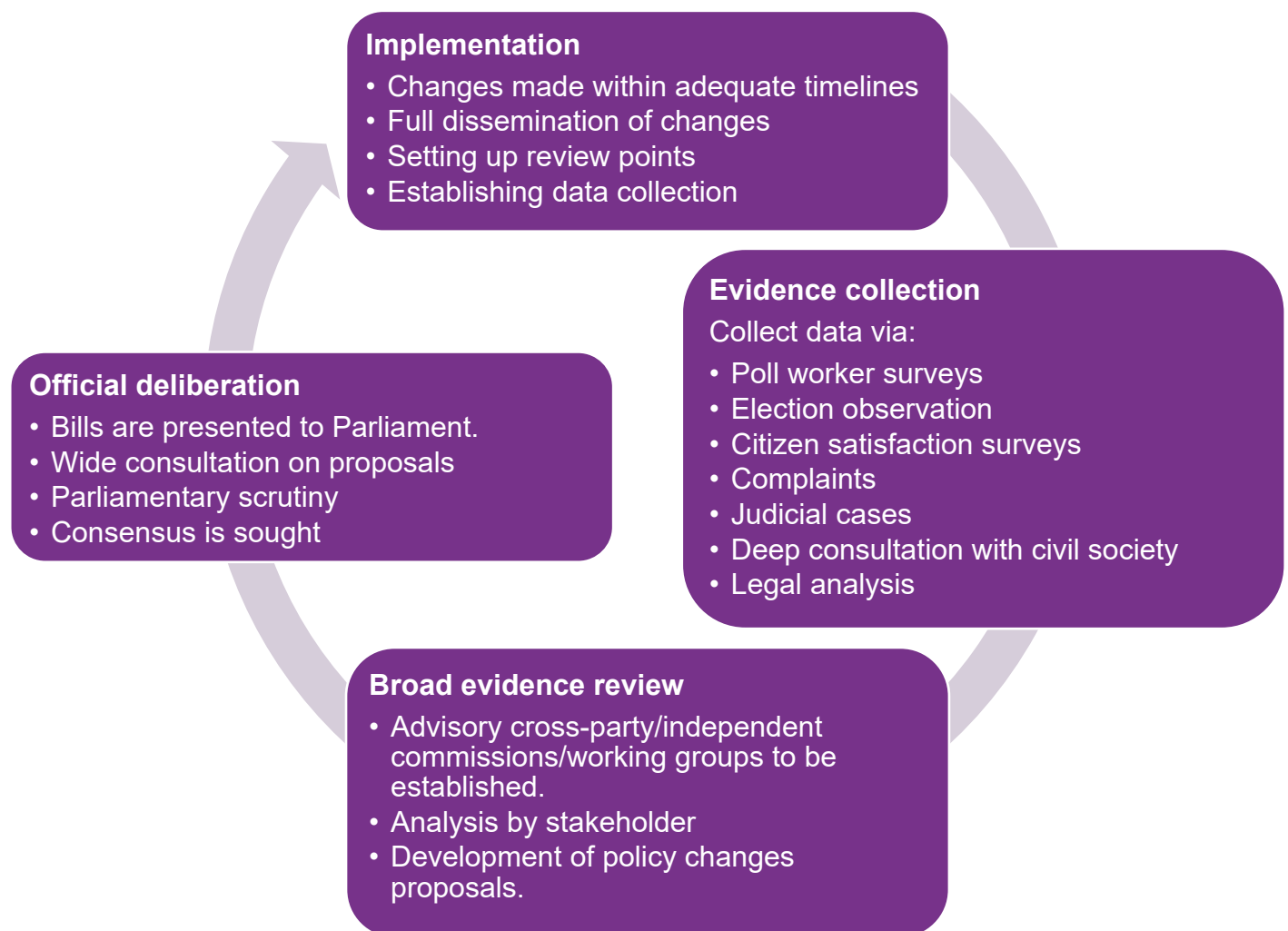


Figure 2: An electoral reform policy cycle approach

Recommendations: follow the electoral reform cycle

Based on the materials developed in this project it is recommended that:

- The GNSEI principles are important point reference, which should be used by stakeholders worldwide, to undertake electoral reform.
- Consensus is sought during the electoral reform process – but not seen as the only principle to be followed. Consensus can often be a barrier to necessary electoral reform. However, by focusing on the other principles, it may enable consensus to be formed.
- Principle 4, that electoral reform processes should be informed by evidence and a long-term vision, includes a focus on deliberative principles. These are that there is reasoned justification and counter arguments are considered by stakeholders.
- Bearing this in mind, it suggested that the principles are:
 1. Political consensus building is a key goal for the electoral reform process
 2. Electoral reform processes should be transparent
 3. Electoral reform processes should be inclusive
 4. Electoral reform processes should be informed by evidence and deliberation.
 5. Adequate timeframes and resources for a viable and democratic electoral reform process.
 6. Clear accountability structures are essential for electoral reform processes
- That an electoral reform cycle approach is taken. This means:
 - Establishing processes to ensure the **reliable collection of data** about the quality of the election to inform debates.
 - **Establishing cross-party and/or independent inquiries** to evaluate the electoral process based on the evidence.
 - **Ensuring that a rigorous parliamentary process** is followed. Legislative proposals involve a consultation stage, are scrutinized by a cross-party committee and have full parliamentary scrutiny before passage.

Appendix 1: Country case studies examined in the workshop

Country	Reform	Overall	Consensus	Transparency	Evidence	Accountability	Inclusive	Timeframes	Evaluation of reform
India	Electoral bonds	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Negative
New Mexico and Minnesota (USA)	Various	Medium	Low	Medium	High	Medium	High	Medium	Positive
Ghana	Biometric voter registration	High	High	High	Medium	High	High	Low	Positive
South Africa	Independent candidates	High	Medium	High	Medium	High	High	High	Positive
UK	Voter ID	Medium	Low	Medium	Medium	Medium	Medium	Medium	Medium
Netherlands	Voting machines	Medium	Medium	Low	Medium	Low	Low	Low	Positive
Mauritius	Electoral system	Medium	Medium	Medium	High	Medium	Medium	n/a	Not achieved
Mexico	Electoral management body autonomy	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Negative
Ukraine:	Electoral system	Medium	High	Medium	Medium	n/a	Medium	Medium	Positive
Peru	Mandatory primaries	Low	Low	Medium	Low	Low	Medium	Low	Negative
Hungary	Electoral system reforms	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Negative
Venezuela	Out of country voting	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Negative
Zimbabwe	Various	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Negative
Russia	Executive-Controlled Electoral Rule Changes	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Negative

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Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD) is the UK public body dedicated to supporting democracy around the world. Operating internationally, WFD works with parliaments, political parties, and civil society groups as well as on elections to help make countries' political systems fairer, more inclusive and accountable.

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The Electoral Integrity Project produces innovative and policy-relevant research comparing elections worldwide. The project is currently directed by Professor Holly Ann Garnett and Professor Toby S. James, and is housed at the Royal Military College of Canada/Queen's University and the University of East Anglia.

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