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# Election staff training: Tracing global patterns of institutionalisation

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## ABSTRACT

The safe delivery of elections is a pivotal international issue in an era of widespread concerns about global democratic backsliding. Despite this, there remains little research on the training provided to electoral officials – those responsible for delivering elections and democracy on the front line. This article introduces the concept of electoral training institutionalisation, which refers to the extent to which training is embedded into electoral processes by electoral management bodies. It then presents original data from a survey of electoral management bodies to give an overview of the global provision of training. An original index of training institutionalisation is developed from the dataset. These data are analysed to identify the patterns of training. The results suggest that training institutionalisation tends to be associated with the overall quality of democracy and economic development. Deepening the embeddedness of electoral training is recommended as a step towards the strengthening of electoral democracy.

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## Introduction

The safe delivery of elections is a pivotal international issue in an era where there are widespread concerns about global democratic backsliding. Errors in the implementation of voting procedures at polling stations can become flash points which might ignite protests and conflict. It can also lead to citizens' fundamental democratic rights being denied.

The provision of training and the professionalisation of public services is widely recognised as an important goal across multiple policy areas. A commitment to excellence in public services has therefore increasingly come to be established as important for achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals.<sup>1</sup> Elections are enormous logistical challenges that require a huge volume of resources, infrastructure and personnel to be delivered successfully. As well as their permanent staff, most electoral management bodies (EMBs) mobilise large temporary workforces to administer registration, polling and counting processes. The human resource practices that electoral organisations have in place therefore

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have an important effect on the capacity of a country to deliver high quality elections. Despite this, there is relatively little research on the extent to which EMBs provide training and resources for their staff.

This article seeks to address this gap by mapping out global patterns in the composition of EMB workforces and the provision of training provided to them. We know that there can often be shortcomings in the provision and quality of training within countries and that this can impact both the quality of the election but also the confidence that citizens have in the electoral process. Existing research, however, tends to focus on single country studies and there is a need for a broader topographical overview which also enables comparative analysis.

This article begins by reviewing existing literature on electoral management bodies and their workforces. It then proposes the concept of electoral training institutionalisation to refer to the extent to which training is embedded into electoral processes by EMBs. The argument is that the more embedded that electoral training is in the electoral process, the better the quality of elections and the experience of the citizen will be. The likely relationships with training quality are considered. The article then presents original data from a survey of EMBs to give an overview of the provision of training to poll workers and permanent staff. This shows considerable variation around the world in terms of whether electoral training is embedded into the electoral laws and constitutions, whether there is a certification process for electoral officials to be able to work in elections, whether there are learning and professional development opportunities for staff, and whether there is organisational infrastructure to support learning and development. The article proposes an index of institutionalisation and maps 44 countries according to their level of institutionalisation. It finds that the extent of institutionalisation is heavily correlated with the quality of democracy. Strengthening training is therefore proposed to be an important step in the protection and consolidation of electoral democracy. A research agenda is encouraged which considers election worker training and its relationship with electoral integrity in the future.

## **The importance of electoral management**

Electoral management, understood as the application and implementation of electoral rules,<sup>2</sup> is a critical aspect of democratic governance because periodic elections are both a core component of modern democracy and extremely complex logistical undertakings. A poorly run election can undermine citizen confidence in election processes and outcomes, create barriers to democratic consolidation and lead to violent conflict.<sup>3</sup> While a growing body of research has explored electoral malpractice undertaken by elites seeking to manipulate elections in their favour,<sup>4</sup> less consideration has been given to the problems arising from incompetence, inefficiency, logistical challenges or resource constraints, which might be associated with mismanagement or poor organisational performance rather than partisan subversion.<sup>5</sup> Unpacking approaches to effectively maximising available human resources can therefore offer important insights to scholars and practitioners seeking to advance electoral integrity.<sup>6</sup>

Electoral management comprises all aspects of the organisation and certification of elections as well as the monitoring of conduct of key stakeholders throughout the electoral process.<sup>7</sup> In most cases, responsibility for these functions lies with one or more EMB,

understood as an organisation that 'has the sole purpose of, and is legally responsible for, managing some or all of the elements that are essential for the conduct of elections'.<sup>8</sup> The design of these institutions has attracted significant interest as a determinant of electoral integrity. The most commonly cited typology, popularised by International IDEA, distinguishes between independent, governmental and mixed models of electoral management. The independent model applies to EMBs which are directly responsible for administering elections and are institutionally autonomous. They manage their own budgets and are not accountable to any government ministry or department; instead, oversight may come from the legislature, judiciary, or the head of state. In the governmental model, elections are managed by the executive through national and/or local authorities, and election costs are included in the corresponding budgets. The mixed model combines elements of both the independent and government models, with an independent EMB with a supervisory mandate and a second EMB which sits within government that is tasked with delivery.<sup>9</sup>

These models provide a useful starting point; however, they do not fully reflect the diversity of EMBs around the world or account for variations in performance. For example, although the independent model has been favoured as the preferred institutional model for promoting impartiality and citizen trust,<sup>10</sup> studies suggest formal EMB independence only has an impact on electoral integrity in the context of lower levels of democracy.<sup>11</sup> In addition, EMBs with *de jure* independence are not always impartial, due to factors such as constraints on their financial autonomy or partisan involvement in the selection of electoral commissioners<sup>12</sup> and in practice it is *de facto* EMB independence which has been found to have a stronger positive impact on electoral integrity.<sup>13</sup>

The electoral management design typology also conceals other significant structural variations between EMBs, such as the degree to which election management functions are centralised. In many countries, particularly with governmental and mixed model EMBs, the implementation of elections is localised. Advocates of centralised election management suggest that the top down approach produces greater consistency in the implementation of rules, more uniform service and better quality elections.<sup>14</sup> However, there is evidence from the UK that less centralised approaches enable more efficient and effective use of human and financial resources, and higher staff morale and job satisfaction.<sup>15</sup>

Moreover, the formal-legal lens can be restrictive because it implies a single or small number of clearly defined organisations are responsible for different aspects of the process. In reality the network of organisations and actors involved with election management is much more complex and goes well beyond the formally designated bodies.<sup>16</sup> EMBs, even if they are independent, may coordinate with government agencies, for example to access population data to facilitate registration processes. Political parties and civil society organisations play an important role in voter education and encouraging voters to register and turn out on election day. Private companies are frequently contracted to supply election stationery or technology, while in many emerging democracies international donors provide resources and technical expertise. The degree to which EMBs involve these stakeholders in decision making and cultivate interpersonal connections can therefore significantly impact election delivery and quality.<sup>17</sup>

An EMB's ability to deliver on its mandate is further shaped by the wider context in which it operates. In particular, EMB capacity is an important factor. Capacity in this

context refers to an EMB's ability to consistently carry out required functions, including whether it has access to sufficient resources.<sup>18</sup> Adequate budgets are important in this regard, but appropriate human resources are also essential. If permanent staff do not have the necessary familiarity with the electoral framework or specialist expertise for their roles, or if insufficient numbers of capable poll workers are recruited, the EMB will struggle to deliver the election effectively.

### ***Electoral management body workforces***

Little is known about the electoral officials who are responsible for delivering the essential service of elections prior to 2000. This lacuna began to be addressed following the 2000 US Presidential election where there were infamous problems with the quality of election administration at the polls, which culminated in the US Supreme Court adjudicating on the election.<sup>19</sup> There suddenly became a more urgent need for reform and information about how the US electoral machinery functioned. This led to a series of studies which sought to identify the nature of the workforce used at US elections. Poll worker surveys focussed on identifying the quantities and qualities of these temporary workforces.<sup>20</sup> Studies identified that the composition of the workforce was important for elections, with public perceptions of poll workers identified as being a significant predictor of voter confidence.<sup>21</sup> They were also found to have considerable discretion in how electoral laws are implemented. A study of New Mexico poll workers, for example, found that poll worker attitudes towards photo identification and their educational attainment influenced implementation of voter identification laws.<sup>22</sup> The absence of descriptive representation (ie, reflecting the demographic composition of the electoral base) of ethnic minorities in the poll worker workforce has also been found to affect citizen's confidence in the electoral process.<sup>23</sup>

These studies were subsequently followed up by studies in other countries. Alistair Clark and Toby James surveyed UK poll workers at elections in the UK to gather information about their composition and their assessment of the quality of UK elections.<sup>24</sup> UK poll workers did not provide descriptive representation – they were found most likely to be women, White, British, and with an average age of 53 years. In a similar vein, Francisco Cantú and Sandra Ley have explored the recruitment processes in Mexico.<sup>25</sup> Achim Goerres and Evelyn Funk have noted how recruitment processes vary across Germany<sup>26</sup> and the prevalence of corruption and professionalisation in the Ukrainian workforce has also been studied.<sup>27</sup> Kokouvi Momo Amegnran evaluated whether poll workers have the resources that they need in Togo.<sup>28</sup> The question of poll worker recruitment became an important one. Clark and James found that motivations were broadly structured around solidary, purposive and material factors.<sup>29</sup>

Temporary workforces elsewhere have received little systematic analysis. Case studies drawn from West Africa have underscored challenges associated with mobilising and training large workforces for registration exercises and polling day.<sup>30</sup> It has been further documented that EMBs established in the 1990s and 2000s incorporated substantial training provision or dedicated departments from the outset, invariably supported by international donors.<sup>31</sup> In the case of Ghana, for example, the EMB developed meticulous procedural manuals and practical sessions for different categories of election officials, and training for wider stakeholders such as party agents were developed to support early

multiparty elections.<sup>32</sup> However, studies have demonstrated that even with significant technical assistance the effectiveness of training in less established democracies is persistently restricted by time, expertise and resource constraints.<sup>33</sup>

In addition to the temporary staff who are recruited to administer the polls and count votes in the immediate electoral period, EMBs require a core permanent workforce. The core permanent workforce is required to deliver on the EMBs wider planning and operational functions. National or comparative data on these workforces has been very rare. The first cross-national electoral management survey (EMS) was run by researchers between 2016 and 2018 to provide the first comparative data.<sup>34</sup> This reported that staff levels ranged from 74 EMB employees (per 100 000 people) to less than one – and that the average number of staff was five.<sup>35</sup> These surveys also asked employees about their experiences of human resource management practices. Using AMO (ability, motivation, opportunity) theory, James found that EMBs that had meritocratic recruitment practices, higher job satisfaction and lower levels of stress performed better.<sup>36</sup>

Cross-national research on training provision remains underdeveloped. Based on insights from a pan-African cohort of trainees taking specialised election management modules at the University of South Africa, Kealeboga J. Maphunye reviewed the barriers which African EMBs face in this area. He underscored the need and emerging efforts to develop higher quality training tailored to specific individual and organisational needs.<sup>37</sup> Erik Asplund presented a series of country case studies on the provision of training in five countries: India, Nigeria, Moldova, Peru and Australia.<sup>38</sup> In India, for example, the Electoral Commission established an organisation called the Indian International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Management (IIIDEM) in 2011 to provide training, education and curriculum development.<sup>39</sup> Asplund also identified 38 EMBs around the globe that had established dedicated electoral training and education centres.<sup>40</sup> James reported that 60% of respondents from all countries responding to the survey had undertaken training workshops within the past five years.<sup>41</sup> Undertaking training was negatively associated with the level of democracy and one proposed explanation was that democracies tend to have more stable workforces with employees in post for a longer period of time. The study reported evidence that training did have a positive effect on EMB overall performance.

## **The importance of training institutionalisation**

There is therefore sufficient evidence to claim that the training that electoral officials receive is important and has the potential to affect the quality of elections and the experience of the voter. This article develops this argument further to claim that there should be deep institutionalisation of training. A new conceptual framework for understanding electoral training institutionalisation is proposed.

Institutionalisation, in the broadest sense, is the process of regulating societal behaviour within organisations or across whole societies. Rule institutionalisation is thought to have gone hand-in-hand with the development of democratic societies. The sociologist Max Weber, for example, differentiated between societies using a tripartite classification of authority; in contrast to societies governed by charismatic or traditional forms of authority, rational-legal systems used bureaucracies and established rules as mechanisms to generate authority and trust in society.<sup>42</sup> The movement towards the establishment of

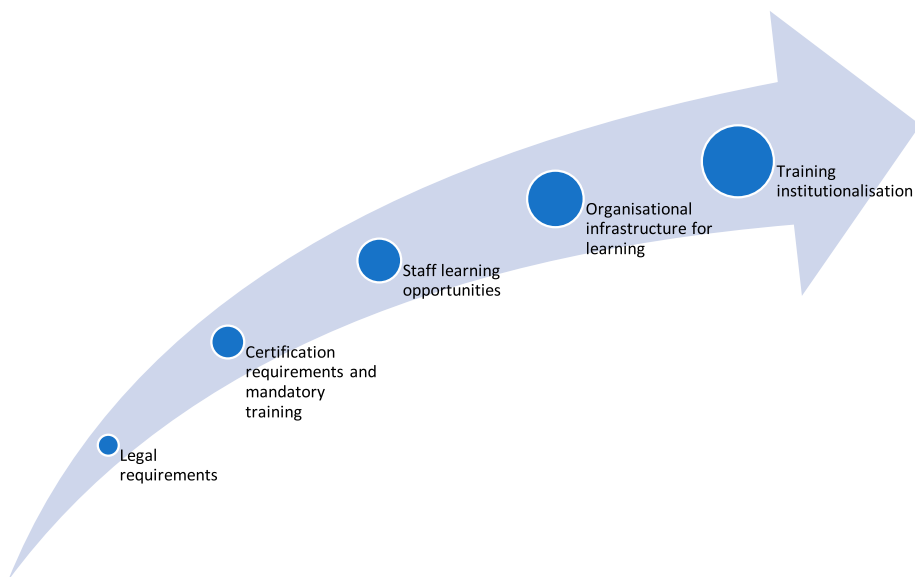
democracy – in which the state is under the control of the people through elections – required state institutionalisation.<sup>43</sup>

In the context of delivering well-run elections, we argue that the institutionalisation of training is a positive development. As discussed above, the quality of elections around the world varies by country and election, and election quality can hinge on the mistakes of individuals. The provision of training stands to reduce the chances of these mistakes occurring. By contrast, a lack of training, or training which is insufficient or poor quality, is likely to undermine electoral integrity.

Training institutionalisation can be defined as the strength of the mechanisms for ensuring that training provision is embedded into electoral processes by electoral management bodies.

It is argued here that training institutionalisation comprises several components (Figure 1). Firstly, training could be institutionalised via the electoral code, law or constitution of the country. As a rule, the scope of these documents varies enormously around the world and there are consequently huge variations in the extent to which electoral practices or parts of the electoral process are covered.<sup>44</sup> However, including a requirement for training in the law would be a positive step towards ensuring that training is provided.

Secondly, institutionalisation could be established through mandatory training of poll workers or through a certification process that may include written tests for electoral officials. Thirdly, training could provide broader learning and development (L&D) opportunities, particularly to permanent staff. In this sense, the EMBs are not simply providing fire-fighting knowledge to staff purely for election day but are investing in their broader knowledge and skills. Recognising the importance of training in elections, a BRIDGE ('Building Resources in Democracy, Governance and Elections') training programme was established in 1999 by partners including the Australian Electoral Commission



**Figure 1.** Stages of institutionalising training into electoral workforces.

Source: Authors.

(AEC), the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA), the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (UNDPPA).<sup>45</sup>

Finally, while training can be required in the law, it also requires effective implementation. The positive effects of institutionalised training can only be realised if there are staff and resources to deliver it. A further indicator of electoral training institutionalisation is therefore the extent to which there is a dedicated unit responsible for providing training – as opposed to ad-hoc arrangements. The presence of an organisational infrastructure for learning and development helps to regularise this provision.

Training institutionalisation can occur through a mix of logics of institutional incentives and norms. Institutions and organisational structures can be powerful in shaping the actions of individuals,<sup>46</sup> and legal requirements to provide training to poll workers, for example, can be both carrots and sticks for EMBs. Senior managers may be held to account if such training is not provided; there might be individual reputation loss, or they might face legal challenges if there are problems in the delivery of the election and they are found to have not provided the required training to staff. The requirement to provide training also provides middle managers with opportunities to request additional funds, grow their budgets and provide themselves with career opportunities. The presence of training opportunities and organisations can create cultures in which training is valued, as well as path dependencies and lock-in effects because once public institutions become established, they can be difficult to remove.<sup>47</sup>

### ***Institutionalisation and quality***

Training institutionalisation is not synonymous with training quality. Training quality refers to the extent to which training equips election workers with the knowledge and skills to deliver high quality elections. Training could be heavily institutionalised and the quality of that provision could be high. This would be the ideal outcome for an EMB since it would maximise the likelihood that knowledge and skills were developed across the whole workforce in the organisation. However, it might also be the case that institutionalisation is strong, but training quality is low. In this scenario, poor quality instructions could be widely disseminated to staff through, for example, certification processes. Strong mechanisms of institutionalisation could therefore weaken electoral integrity by further embedding poor training practices. In the absence of institutionalised training, there is at least the possibility that senior election staff would still provide some bespoke training to their team members. Electoral officials might still be able to use their initiative and problem-solve using their discretion.<sup>48</sup> However, given the importance of strictly following the law in elections, this is likely to lead to problematic outcomes.

These conjectures about the interaction between training, institutionalisation and election quality are summarised in [Figure 2](#). Institutionalisation is an accelerant that deepens the effects of training quality. While the relationship might not be linear, institutionalisation could also increase training quality. Putting in place legal requirements and certification processes is likely to require EMBs to invest resources into developing training programmes and therefore bring about better training than there otherwise might be.



<i>Institutionalisation</i>	<b>High</b>	--	++
	<b>Low</b>	-	+
		<b>Low</b>	<b>High</b>
	<i>Training Quality</i>		

**Figure 2.** The effects of training and institutionalisation on electoral integrity.

*Notes:* Plus signs signal a positive relationship between the two variables and electoral integrity. Minus signs signal a negative relationship.

*Source:* Authors.

Providing organisational infrastructure for training will allow training designers to critically reflect on the materials that they develop – and learn best practices from elsewhere. The effect of training institutionalisation on elections is therefore proposed to be generally very positive.

### ***Variations in institutionalisation***

We might expect that patterns of institutionalisation will vary around the world. Three factors might be important in this regard.

Firstly, the EMB model in place could play a role. As noted above, EMBs are traditionally differentiated between independent, governmental and mixed models. The establishment of an independent EMB might help to facilitate the institutionalisation of training for two possible reasons. Independent EMBs are more specialised and election-focussed organisations. When a government department is responsible for running elections, there can be much more fluid arrangement as the ministerial portfolio for elections can be transferred between government departments. Given that there is likely to be more stability in the workforce and organisational structures in independent structure, there would be more scope for training to be developed. In more theoretical terms, budget-maximisation models of the policy process argue that managers tend to extend and maximise their budgets.<sup>49</sup> In addition, the presence of an independent EMB may indicate that electoral officials have *de facto* independence from the government of the day and therefore may have more power to invest in training to improve the electoral process.

Secondly, the broader quality of democracy might be important in shaping training institutionalisation. Democracies are characterised by the presence of free media, and constitutional checks and balances on the executive. Higher quality democracy should increase the quality of delivery of elections, although broader democratic and electoral quality need to be distinguished.<sup>50</sup> This is because the free press might provide an important accountability mechanism for helping to ensure that public officials in electoral management bodies are held accountable for the quality of elections that they deliver. Legal or procedural flaws that lead to mistakes such as errors in the use of indelible ink, long

queues at polling stations and inaccessible polling booths will be reported in the press. This would therefore incentivise electoral officials and policy makers to embed training into the electoral process. Living in a democratic environment would also be likely to cause them to value any practice that improves elections.

Thirdly, training institutionalisation might be shaped by the availability of sufficient resources. EMBs which are located in countries with limited resources and underfunded public administrations may have less scope to undertake training work. The provision of extensive training and bespoke training organisations may not be prioritised given demands for spending on other public goods.

## Research questions and method

Having introduced the new concept of training institutionalisation, this study seeks to map patterns of training institutionalisation around the world and consider the factors that might be shaping institutionalisation.

A survey of EMBs was run during the COVID-19 pandemic in the summer of 2021 to ascertain how they had adapted their processes for the pandemic. The survey also covered other electoral practices which are not easily identifiable from other sources, such as legal codes and election observation reports. The survey was run in collaboration with members of International IDEA, who co-designed the survey and supported its distribution. The survey covered the EMBs response to COVID-19 and the personnel and training practices. The full survey questions, data and codebook are available open access.<sup>51</sup> The survey was a follow up to the EMS undertaken in 2016–2018 discussed above.<sup>52</sup>

Overall, 242 EMBs were contacted, of which 49 responded. These were mostly national EMBs, but also included three regional bodies: Élections Québec, the Zanzibar Electoral Commission and the Electoral Management Board for Scotland. The survey was completed by a representative of each organisation via online survey software or a Word document and was provided in Mandarin Chinese, English, French, Spanish and Russian.

The data provided in the survey was complemented with additional correspondence with some of the electoral officials who completed the survey to gather information, and some media sources were able to corroborate workforce sizes. By the nature of the study, it is not possible to triangulate data provided by the EMBs in their responses against other sources. Additionally, the survey dataset does not allow all of the conjectures about the relationships between training institutionalisation and quality to be evaluated but makes a first important step towards advancing our understanding of a key area of elections. It provides an indispensable original source of information about how elections are run.

## Electoral management workforces sizes

The survey asked respondents about the permanent and temporary workforce sizes. Enormous variations were reported in the responses. Permanent workforce size ranged from 100 000 permanent employees in the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission to just four in the Ministry of Interior in Cyprus.

Variations can be partly explained by the EMB model in practice, ie, independent, governmental or mixed.<sup>53</sup> There is also variation in the number of EMBs present in each country. For example, in Timor-Leste, there are two EMBs: the Technical Secretariat for Electoral Administration (Secretariado Técnico de Administração Eleitoral, STAE), which is responsible for the organisation of all national elections; and the National Commission for Elections (Comissão Nacional de Eleições, CNE) as the constitutionally mandated independent supervisory body. Elsewhere, in Peru there are three election authorities: the National Office of Electoral Processes (Oficina Nacional de Procesos Electorales, ONPE), in charge of organising electoral processes and referendums; the National Jury of Elections (Jurado Nacional de Elecciones, JNE), in charge of administering electoral justice; and the National Registry of Identification and Civil Status (Registro Nacional de Identificación y Estado Civil, RENIEC), with responsibility for the civil registry and electoral roll. By contrast, in some countries, especially operating under the independent model, there is a single body responsible for all parts of the electoral process such as in Mexico. But there are also often multiple EMBs within a single country, with national EMBs and sub-national EMBs in countries with a federal system like Australia, Nigeria, Canada, the US and India. We would therefore expect there to be a larger workforce where there is a single, centralised national independent EMB. This explains larger workforces reported by the Independent National Electoral Commission of Nigeria (18 000),<sup>54</sup> Mexico's Instituto Nacional Electoral (17 572)<sup>55</sup> and the National Election Commission of the Republic of Korea (2 922). By contrast, where a central government department acts as an EMB in the 'governmental' model, alongside various other bodies, one can expect much smaller teams. The Danish Ministry of the Interior and Housing was staffed by seven people and the Federal Public Service Home Affairs in Belgium was staffed by four.

A further factor to consider is the population of each country. The size of the country would obviously influence the number of staff needed. A per capita calculation is therefore more instructive. Based on population data in the World Bank, a per capita ratio per million citizens was calculated. Focusing only on countries operating with the independent model, there remains considerable variation. Permanent staff sizes ranged from 1 893 staff members per million citizens in Timor-Leste, down to 0.43 in Belgium.

Temporary staff sizes also varied enormously. As many as 1.6 million temporary staff are involved in delivering elections in Brazil, 648 500 in Nigeria and 250 000 in Canada. Much smaller teams were reported in countries such as Timor-Leste (1 800) or Tonga (750).<sup>56</sup> Mauritius reported the highest ratio between poll workers and citizens, at 12 638 staff per million citizens (Figures 3 and 4).

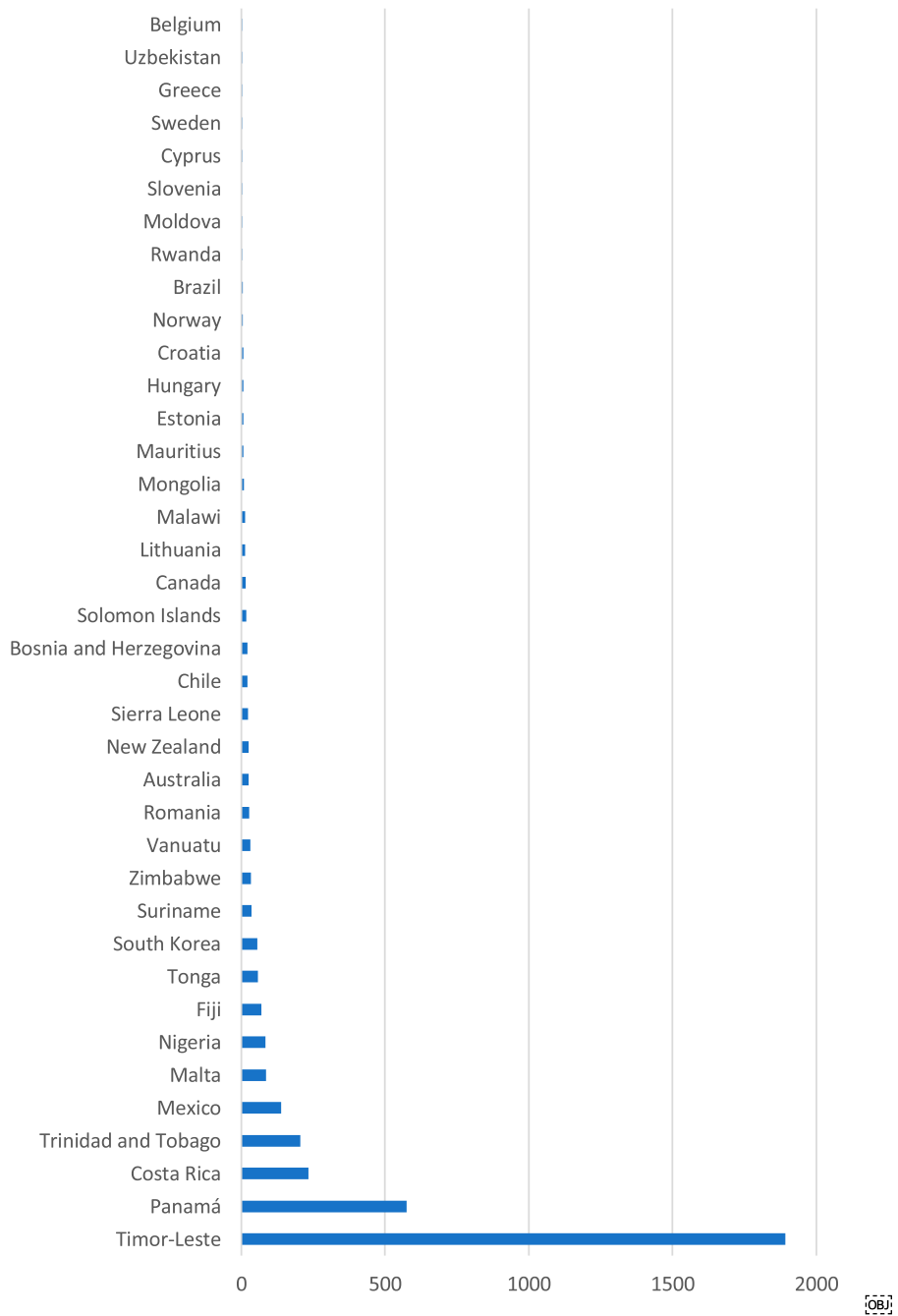
## **Global patterns of training institutionalisation**

The survey asked respondents about the extent to which training for staff was embedded into their practices. This covered four areas: poll worker training, poll worker certification, learning and development opportunities and the provision of a dedicated training unit.

### ***Poll worker training***

Poll workers play an essential role in delivering elections, and training provision is thought to impact election quality. The survey asked respondents whether operational training for

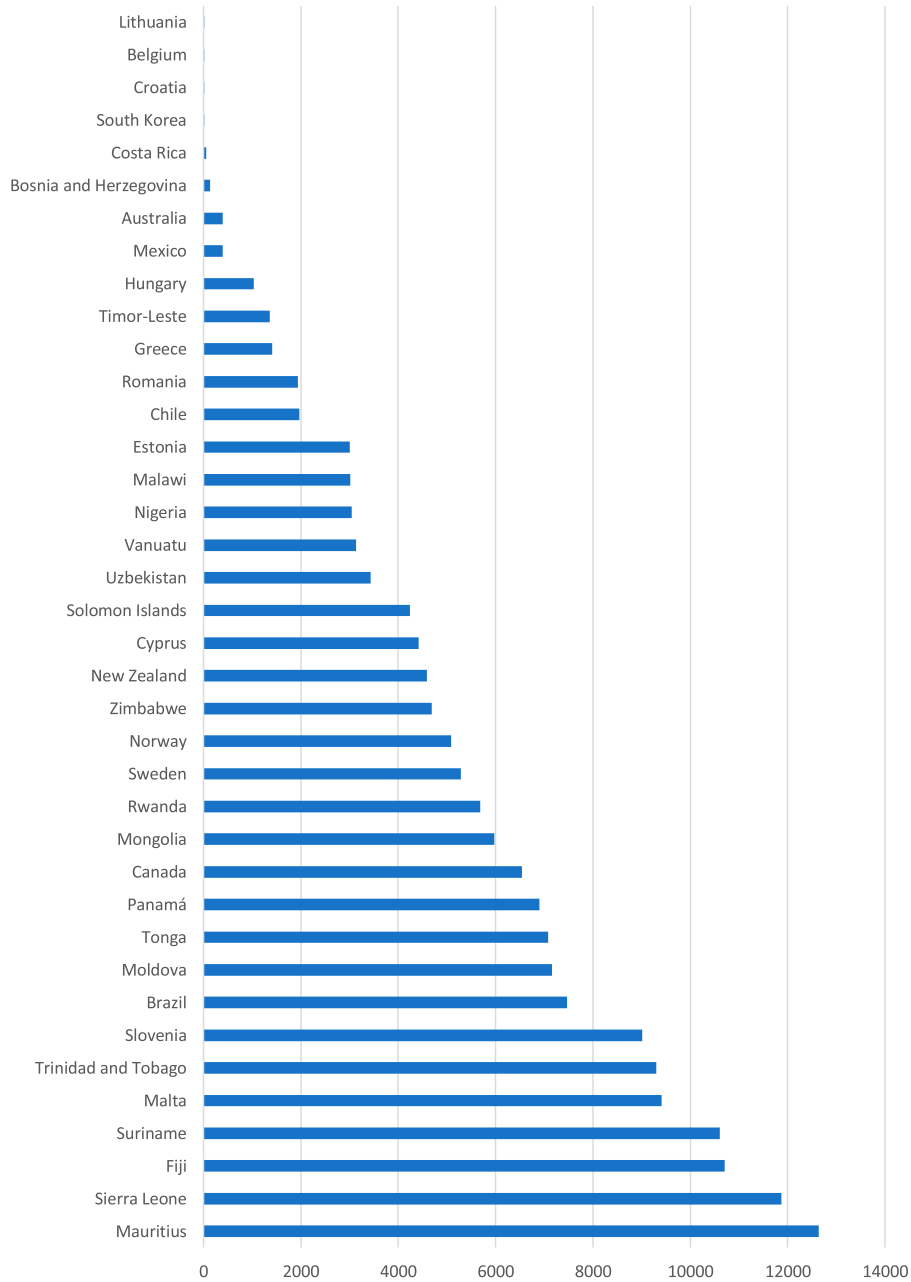
## Permanent staff per 1 million



**Figure 3.** Permanent EMB staff per 1 million citizens.

Source: Authors, based on data in T. S. James and H. A. Garnett, 'Electoral Management Survey (EMS-2.0),' *Harvard Data-verse*, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/Z7XVMC>.

## Temporary Staff per million citizens



**Figure 4.** Temporary EMB staff per 1 million citizens.

Source: Authors, based on data in T. S. James and H. A. Garnett, 'Electoral Management Survey (EMS-2.0),' *Harvard Data-verse*, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/Z7XVMC>.

poll workers was mandatory and roughly two-thirds of jurisdictions (65.2%) confirmed that it was.

In 38.8% of jurisdictions, this was stated in the electoral act or other electoral legislation. Examples were provided of laws which stated a legal requirement for poll worker training. In Malawi, for example, the law stated that:

Polling station officers may be appointed from amongst persons who served as registration officers and every person appointed as a polling station officer shall receive vocational training in his duties.<sup>57</sup>

Moldova also reported that poll worker training was in the law and pointed to the electoral code which stated that the Central Electoral Commission was required to 'organise, through the Centre for Continuous Electoral Training, the specialised training of electoral officials and other subjects involved in the electoral process'.<sup>58</sup> In Sweden the elections act specifies that county administrative boards (Länsstyrelsen) were responsible for the training of the election committees in the municipalities.<sup>59</sup> The Swedish Election Authority was given the mandate to produce training materials ahead of every election to the county administrative boards and election committees on 1 February 2022.<sup>60</sup> The Netherlands' Elections Act required that election officials working in a polling station are trained so that they have sufficient knowledge and skills about the electoral process.<sup>61</sup> Local authorities were responsible for providing the training for the election officials that they appoint. The training materials for polling station officials, on the other hand, were provided by the national government.

Many provisions about poll workers say little about training, however. For example, in Trinidad and Tobago, Chapter 2:01 (Sections 7–8) of the Representation of the People Act specified the roles of returning officer, presiding officers and poll clerks. The law covered the hierarchy between them and what should happen in the event of the death of an official. But it said little about the detail of training.<sup>62</sup>

### ***Poll worker certification***

Certification of poll workers was usually not required by EMBs – only a quarter (24.5%) of jurisdictions required certification to be a poll worker. In Georgia, the Central Election Commission introduced certification for officials who are politically appointed, as well as certification exams for election administration officials. The annual report sets out how online examinations were undertaken, with questions covering the Constitution of Georgia, the Election Code of Georgia, general mathematics skills and general verbal skills. Certificates were issued to those who met the pass mark. The examinations were observed by two domestic non-governmental organisations.<sup>63</sup> In December 2022, Moldova introduced mandatory testing and certification for all election officials as per a modification in their election code, which requires that the Central Electoral Commission 'approve a Regulation that describes the procedure of attestation/certification of knowledge and competences in electoral field, performed by the Centre for Continuous Electoral Training'.<sup>64</sup>

Mexico's Instituto Nacional Electoral required trainers and supervisors to pass a test and be interviewed before being appointed. Once they are appointed, they must attend courses that cover collecting the ballots, setting up the polling station, counting votes and sending the electoral packages to each electoral district. Following the

completion of these courses, they are allowed to ‘reach out to ordinary citizens to be enrolled as volunteers in poll stations during the election’ (quote from survey).

### *Learning and development opportunities*

Respondents were asked whether their EMB offered ‘learning and development (L&D) opportunities to staff’. The majority (75.0%) provided learning and development opportunities. Roughly half (42.6%) did this via an online learning and management system.

Elections Canada, for example, offers staff access to the Canada School of Public Service which ‘provides a range of in-person and online learning activities to build individual and organisational capacity and management excellence within the public service’.<sup>65</sup> Further training included second language skills and organisation assistance for accredited programmes and courses. Elections Canada also provided a Virtual Training Centre which allowed election administrators to take online training courses and access various reference materials. Content included e-learning modules, videos, reading and reference materials, and interactive quizzes and activities. In other countries, electronic methods for learning included the use of the Moodle Platform (ie, Tribunal Electoral, Panama).

Some EMBs also referred staff to external training. The National Electoral Commission (NEC) of Rwanda reported that most staff had attended BRIDGE workshops. BRIDGE is a modular, professional development course with a particular focus on elections.<sup>66</sup> They also pointed out that staff could participate in trainings and workshops via broader government civil service training. Virtual training programmes with the Pacific Islands, Australia and New Zealand Electoral Administrators (PIANZEA) network were reported to be used by the Solomon Islands. The Zanzibar Electoral Commission (ZEC) reported that staff members were enrolled on a postgraduate master’s course in electoral policy and administration, run by Sant’ Anna Pisa University in Italy<sup>67</sup> and staff at the Electoral Commission, while the Kingdom of Tonga had some training provided by the London School of Economics. Study tours of overseas elections were also highlighted as an important learning opportunity.

### *Dedicated operating training units*

Respondents were also asked whether the EMB had a dedicated unit, department, centre, school, institute or academy that focuses on operational training. Roughly half had one in place – with the focus mostly covering electoral education. [Table 1](#) summarises the overall focus of the dedicated units – with electoral education being the most common. The EMBs of Australia, Afghanistan, Albania, Bhutan, Kazakhstan, Peru, Mozambique, Papua New Guinea and Sierra Leone all have specialised and centralised units, departments or

**Table 1.** The focus of EMB dedicated training units.

Focus	Percentage of EMBs with this type of focus	N (responses)
Electoral education	57.4%	47
Operational training	51.1%	47
Research	46.8%	47
Professional development	39.1%	46

Source: Authors, based on data in T. S. James and H. A. Garnett, ‘Electoral Management Survey (EMS-2.0),’ *Harvard Data-verse*, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/Z7XVMC>.

divisions dedicated to training, professional development and voter and civic education. For example, the 'Information and Electoral Education Unit' of the Peruvian EMB (ONPE) has approximately ten staff members and is fully funded by the ONPE regular budget. It is in charge of both training of electoral officials and civic and voter education.<sup>68</sup> In the case of other EMBs, a sub-unit under a corporate enterprise division, such as Human Resources, may be responsible for staff training and capacity development. For example, the Electoral Commission of South Africa has a sub-unit dedicated to human resources, skills development and training support services under a larger corporate enterprise division.<sup>69</sup>

## An index of training institutionalisation

The descriptive responses above provide useful illustrative evidence of variation in the provision of training. However, to what extent is this training institutionalised across different polities? And what explains these variations? To answer this, an additive index of the extent of training institutionalisation was constructed using four of the survey questions (Table 2). Answers with 'no' were scored as 0 and answers with 'yes' were scored as 1. The total possible score was therefore on the range of 0–4. Countries were eliminated from the analysis if they did not answer all questions. Based on the scores, a five-point classification was suggested, as set out below. Countries with a score of 4 are in the 'very high institutionalisation' category, while others appeared along the continuum ending with those scoring 0 in the 'very low' (Table 3).

## Explaining variation in training institutionalisation

What explains the variation in the institutionalisation of training of electoral workers? Statistical analysis was run (described in detail in the Statistical Appendix below) to identify patterns of institutionalisation around the world. The questions used in the index construction cover both temporary and permanent staff, hence the pattern of training institutionalisation covers all sets of workers.

A positive correlation was found between training institutionalisation and the *de facto* independence of the EMB. Those electoral authorities who have greater independence therefore seem more likely to institutionalise their training. There was also a positive relationship between training institutionalisation and the overall quality of democracy. Democracies therefore do seem to be more likely to ensure better training for their workers. Economic variations such as GDP and the level of budget deficit did not seem to be correlated with training institutionalisation. The level of GDP was found to be significant, but not the budget deficit. In other words, it is therefore the longer term availability of resources in a society that affects institutionalisation rather than short term

**Table 2.** Questions used for the additive index of training institutionalisation.

Question	Possible answers
Is operational training for temporary poll workers stipulated in the election act in your country?	0 = No, 1 = Yes
Is certification required to work as a poll worker in your country?	0 = No, 1 = Yes
Does your EMB offer learning and development (L&D) opportunities to staff?	0 = No, 1 = Yes
Does your EMB have a dedicated unit, department, centre, school, institute or academy that focuses on operational training?	0 = No, 1 = Yes



**Table 3.** A classification of countries according to the extent of training institutionalisation in 2021.

Very high institutionalisation	High institutionalisation	Average	Low institutionalisation	Very low institutionalisation
Denmark	Austria	Australia	Brazil	Romania
Iceland	Chile	Canada	Nigeria	Bosnia and Herzegovina
Luxembourg	Croatia	Costa Rica	Suriname	
Switzerland	Estonia	Malta	Uzbekistan	Panamá
	Finland	Mauritius	Mexico	Timor-Leste
	Norway	Solomon Islands	Hungary	
	Sierra Leone	Tonga	Sweden	
	Cyprus	Zimbabwe	Rwanda	
	Greece	Belgium	Malawi	
	New Zealand	Moldova	South Korea	
	Scotland	Slovenia	Lithuania	
	United Kingdom	Guinea	Mongolia	
	Vanuatu			

Source: Authors.

economic factors. This is understandable given that institutionalisation may take time to embed into electoral processes.

## Conclusion

Elections are enormous logistical challenges that require a huge volume of resources, personnel and infrastructure to be delivered successfully. This article has focussed on the training that is provided to the workforces responsible for administering elections. Existing research has demonstrated that training is important for improving the quality of elections, but there has been very little cross-national research on comparative practices or conceptual terminology developed to date. The article introduced a new framework for considering training as being composed of institutionalisation as well as quality. Institutionalisation refers to the extent to which training is embedded into the electoral process. It then used original survey data to map training institutionalisation across 44 EMBs around the world.

The article demonstrates considerable variation in the extent of training institutionalisation and has highlighted some novel practices. A key pattern is that training tends to be much more embedded into practices in liberal democracies when compared to autocracies. The EMB model seems to be less important. *De facto* EMB independence is associated with greater training institutionalisation, however. Overall economic prosperity is also important.

The policy consequences are that many countries have considerable scope to further embed training into their electoral processes. Given that many countries' election laws do not stipulate that election training should be provided, this is an obvious reform that should be considered. Certification processes for poll workers would help to ensure that those on the frontline of democracy are fully equipped with the informational knowledge and soft skills to administer elections. Developing staff learning opportunities and ensuring that there is infrastructural support for election training will enable EMBs to create reflexive workers who can develop training that will best equip those on the frontline. Given the known positive effects of training this is only likely to increase the quality of elections and democracy – and therefore be an important response to concerns about democratic and electoral backsliding.

This article has sought to open up avenues for future research. More research on the relationship between institutionalisation, training quality and election quality would further advance the field, using the proposed framework. This would enable their inter-relationships to be better understood. This could take the form of single country case studies, for example profiling both good and poor practices to process trace the impact of training. Given that training institutionalisation and training quality are so pivotal to elections, research should also explore why this is not provided. Together this research can help to inform the development of more robust electoral management practices in the face of pressures of democratic backsliding.

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## Statistical Appendix

What explains the variation in the institutionalisation of training of electoral workers? The number of cases did not allow inferential statistical measures to be run, however, bivariate correlations were possible. Table 4 shows bivariate correlations between the training index and some independent variables, which were suggested above to be possible factors shaping training institutionalisation in the discussion above. Correlations tested for the effects of the presence of an independent EMB model, using the International IDEA dataset.<sup>70</sup> Countries with the independent model were coded as 1, other models as 0. An independent-samples *t*-test was conducted to compare the scores. The institutionalisation score was lower for independent EMBs ( $M = 1.81$ ,  $SD = 1.31$ ) than for non-independent EMBs ( $M = 2.58$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ). However, the difference was not statistically different. This provides no evidence that organisationally independent EMBs have more institutionalised training.

Partial correlations between the EMB model and training institutionalisation were therefore run, controlling for level of democracy and *de facto* EMB independence as measured by V-Dem. This removed any effect of the type of EMB model on training.

Research shows, however, that the *de jure* independent EMB does not guarantee *de facto* independence. The relationship between training and *de facto* independence was therefore also measured with the V-Dem measure of EMB capacity.<sup>71</sup> This did show a positive correlation ( $\beta = 0.379$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), as did the overall quality of democracy as measured by V-Dem's Liberal Democracy index ( $\beta = 0.560$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). GDP per capita for 2021 was taken from the World Bank (2023) to identify whether overall societal level of resources were a significant factor and a correlation of ( $\beta = 0.428$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) was found. Given that many societies have seen difficult turbulent times in recent years, correlations were also run against the government budget deficit and the level of GDP growth, also using the World Bank data. No statistically significant relationship was found. In other words, it is therefore the longer term availability of resources in a society that affects institutionalisation rather than short term economic factors.

**Table 4.** Pearson correlations between the index of training institutionalisation and independent variables.

Variable	Pearson co-efficient
EMB <i>de facto</i> autonomy (V-Dem v11.1 EMB Autonomy)	0.379*
Democracy (V-Dem V11.1 Liberal Democracy Index)	0.560**
Log 10 GDP	0.427**
Government budget deficit	0.189
GDP growth	0.030

\*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).