

Challenges of Electoral Integrity in an Era of Overlapping Crises

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Abstract

Despite rapid advancements in electoral integrity research, our understanding of how and to what extent a confluence of contemporary crises—ranging from the rise of digital electoral manipulation and increasing domestic political polarization to international confrontations between democracy and autocracy, as well as natural hazards such as the COVID-19 pandemic—affects the practices and processes of electoral integrity remains critically underexplored. This special issue thus examines the question: What are the potential impacts of emerging crises on electoral integrity and, consequently, the resilience of democracy? We argue that the current overlapping crises play a crucial role in shaping how political leaders manipulate electoral processes and influence election outcomes. The evolving conditions of electoral processes in response to these crises introduce new challenges for electoral administration, necessitating further scholarly attention.

Introduction

As a fundamental cornerstone of democracy, elections are designed as a means for citizens to voice their opinions on what matters and who should represent them (Powell 2000). Contested electoral campaigns educate the voters, as candidates seek to influence and persuade them in order to get elected. They also provide accountability that legitimates the power given to chosen representatives (Issacharoff 2002, 685). In this way, they can minimize popular dissatisfaction with laws and allow societies to regulate conflicts peacefully, to avoid bloodshed (Przeworski 2018, 116). They also the everyday citizen to have voice against the otherwise powerful and act as mechanisms for political equality (James, 2024; James and Garnett 2025).

However, many elections fall short of this ideal. Electoral malpractice has become a common problem worldwide as more countries hold multi-party elections. The optimism that came with the Third Wave of democratization that started in the 1970s (Huntington 1993), has eroded as there has been a rise in the number of electoral autocracies, which do not have a level electoral playing field (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). In these electoral autocracies, and in many cases even in longstanding democracies, politicians have become adept at using elections to maintain and enhance their hold on power and legitimacy (Schedler 2006). As Birch states: “violation of electoral integrity is one of the most significant forms of political manipulation, given the centrality of elections in grounding democratic processes and selecting key actors in the political system” (Birch 2007).

This realization of the importance of electoral integrity has led to an increase in academic interest in this topic. In recent decades, scholars have examined the causes and repercussions of electoral integrity, refining theoretical frameworks and utilizing a range of quantitative data and qualitative case studies in both democratic and autocratic contexts (Simpser 2013, Norris 2014, Cheeseman and Klaas 2018, Higashijima 2022). However, despite the rapid advancements in electoral integrity research, our understanding of whether and how a confluence of crises in the contemporary world – rising digital means of electoral manipulation, growing domestic political polarization, international confrontations

between global democracy and autocracy, and natural hazards, including the COVID-19 pandemic - impacts the practices and processes of electoral integrity remains in critical need of further research.

This special issue thus explores the question: *What are the potential impacts of emerging crisis on electoral integrity and, subsequently, the strength of democracy?* This special issue will address significant issues in understanding the emerging threats to electoral integrity, identifying four significant threats to electoral integrity amidst the overlapping crises: *the evolving digital methods of electoral manipulation, persistent domestic political polarization, the international confrontation between democracy and autocracy, and the impact of natural and health hazards*. We propose that the current overlapping crises have a critical impact on how political leaders manipulate electoral processes and, consequently, election outcomes. The changing circumstances of electoral processes resulting from these crises present new challenges for the practices of electoral administration. Together, these challenges influence citizens' perceptions towards and actions in elections.

The articles in this special issue present cutting-edge original research findings through cross-national or country-specific studies. Cross-national studies offer a global perspective on the relationship between political polarization and electoral integrity, as well as the effects of election administration on techniques of electoral manipulation and the survival of autocratic regimes. On the other hand, country-based studies explore significant issues related to the theme, such as the role of election officials in information dissemination and social media, the phenomenon of “zombie” election monitoring, the influence of international aid, and the challenges of electoral administration during the COVID-19 pandemic. The combination of these approaches allows us to draw lessons from various continents.

What is electoral integrity?

The academic field of electoral integrity has grown and diversified enormously in recent years. This has led to a growing amount of literature that focuses on ways to conceptualize a field of study on the quality of elections, from the use of the terms like free and fair elections (Elklit and Svensson 1997), electoral manipulation (Simpser 2013, Higashijima 2025) to electoral malpractice (Birch 2011) and, most broadly, electoral integrity (Norris 2014, 2017).

Sarah Birch's work maps the variety of frameworks for evaluating the quality of elections, aiming to better understand how to measure electoral malpractice, which she defines as “the manipulation of electoral processes and outcomes so as to substitute personal or partisan benefit for the public interest” (Birch 2008). She identifies four competing approaches (Birch 2008, 2011). A legal approach considers how electoral malpractice may violate a country's legal norms and is also called the restrictive approach (Vickery and Shein 2012). The benefit of this approach is that it allows observers to avoid the challenges of cultural and political relativism—no “outside” norms are used to judge the election. This approach helps candidates, election officials, the public, and law enforcement follow a common code defining electoral misconduct, ensuring they know which actions to avoid, report, or address. Legal texts provide a concrete national standard for how elections should be conducted (Norris 2014, 35) and a clear avenue for recourse when those standards are not met. However, the weakness of this approach is that acts that should be considered election fraud may go unnoticed if they are not legally defined as such (Vickery and Shein 2012). Conversely, legal codes may prohibit actions that should be permissible in some contexts. Numerous recent examples illustrate this issue, including bans on opposition parties running for office (Szakonyi 2022), legal barriers that make it more difficult for certain population groups to vote (Kelley 2012), and the opportunistic manipulation of election timing to favor incumbents (Higashijima, Kadoya, and Yanai 2024). Furthermore, elections can

be perfectly legal while still violating moral principles and internationally accepted normative standards (Norris 2014, 35).

The other approaches, however, do not rely on a country's own legal definition, and is therefore robust against weak legal systems or systems that could be controlled by the people committing election fraud. Pippa Norris uses an approach focusing on international norms. She defines electoral integrity as those global norms that have normative authority because they are grounded in multilateral agreements, international conventions, treaties, and international laws (Norris 2013). An advantage of this approach is that it could encourage the practical improvement of electoral integrity because national and international actors, such as media, parties, and observers, can point out the failings of national laws and procedures by measuring them against these international norms. However, this approach, as Norris also acknowledges, is only beneficial for improving electoral integrity if the international norms are good. With the changing political situation in the world, there might well be forces that are willing to actively promote international norms that are, in fact, undermining electoral integrity. This is particularly true in these times of overlapping crises. Additionally, these standards may be shaped by Western-focused processes or criticized for imposing a set of standards that may not fit in all circumstances.

One alternative approach that both alleviates concerns about unjust laws that a legal approach may take, while also not relying too heavily on international standards, is to consider the perspectives of citizens, election administrators, candidates or other actors themselves. Focusing on perceptions of electoral integrity has been advanced in recent years by work such as a recent special issue on global public trust in elections (Kerr et al. 2024). It can be argued that elections are only as good as they are trusted, with the consequences of a mistrusted election as serious as those of a misrun or manipulated one (Garnett and James 2020). If voters have doubts about whether their votes are counted correctly and the results that are announced match the voter's intent, then the most fundamental aspect of the democratic system, the direct election of the leaders is in danger (Alvarez, Hall, and Llewellyn 2008, Atkeson and Saunders 2007). The legitimacy of those who are elected weakens when these doubts arise. This could ultimately undermine the strength of the democratic process and institutions in a country. Birch shows that confidence in the electoral process also influences turnout: "when voters are confident that an election will be free and fair, they are more likely to vote, all else being equal, than is the case when they have reservations about the ability (or willingness) of those conducting the election to maintain democratic standards of electoral integrity" (2010a, 1603). Most of modern democracies have had times when voters questioned the election process (Lehoucq 2002).

Thus the initiatives to gauge public perceptions, be that through public opinion surveys (like the World Values Survey battery on electoral integrity), national election studies, surveys of election administrators, or candidates, are crucial to this endeavour to assess where elections may be weakest (James and Garnett 2023, Schnaudt 2023). But again, these approaches come with strengths and weaknesses, notably that no actor has a complete, unbiased picture of the quality of an election, given the wide range of activities and processes that make up the full electoral cycle (Norris 2014b).

An alternative approach is to anchor the concept of electoral integrity in democratic theory. One such approach is that of James and Garnett (2025), who argue that "elections should empower people to have a voice, empower the everyday citizen against the otherwise powerful and act as mechanisms for political equality." Democracy is defined in terms as a societal system where preconditions exist to fully empower all citizens to realize their individual capabilities and there are no group inequalities in power (James 2024). Elections are one such mechanism to empower citizens. Elections only empower citizens when they follow four principles of contestation, participation, deliberation, and adjudication, drawing from key works in democratic theory. For this emerging generation of electoral integrity scholars,

international standards and national legislative frameworks should be aligned with these principles. They can then be powerful tools to enforce electoral rights. Public opinion is also a valuable, but imperfect, tool for understanding whether specific elections have empowered or disempowered people. A triangulation of research methods is therefore important.

These understandings of electoral integrity as key in the work of promoting and strengthening democracy all recognise the crucial role of elections in the current age of concern over democratic backsliding. For many scholars, the third wave of democratization is over, and a new era of democratic backsliding may be in progress (Schnaudt 2023). Also referred to as autocratization or democratic erosion (Rickett 2022), the term “democratic backsliding” is often used to describe the changes “made in formal political institutions and informal political practices that significantly reduce the capacity of citizens to make enforceable claims upon the government” (Lust and Waldner 2015, 3). Uribe Burcher and Bisarya note that political leaders increasingly manage to maintain their political power by “manipulating electoral norms, restricting dissent and freedom of speech, and altering the constitution to extend their terms in office — all within the legal framework of the democratic system” (2017, 70).

But despite these alarming trends, scholars in recent years have also contributed more nuanced arguments to help delineate between global trends in democratic quality and trends in the field of electoral integrity. For example, work by Garnett and James (2024) suggests that electoral integrity has not globally been following a trend of backsliding, but instead we see divergence in which there are instances of progress in some areas and decline in others. We also see diverging trends in how backsliding may occur. Anderson (2019) distinguishes between electoral and liberal backsliding. Electoral backsliding is the process in which free and fair elections slowly and subtly lose meaning, resulting in the breakdown of electoral contestation. Signals of this kind of backsliding are that one party monopolizes media access or even access to the ballot or limits the opposition's opportunities to hold a proper campaign. The result is often that the country ends up with competitive authoritarianism.

Liberal backsliding is usually also slow and subtle but does not immediately target the electoral core of the democracy. Instead, constraints on the executive by the parliament or judiciary are relaxed or other liberal-constitutional norms slowly lose meaning (Anderson 2019). According to Anderson, this last form of backsliding is visible even in long-standing democracies such as the United States and countries in Western Europe (2019, 647, see also Rickett 2022, Mechkova et al. 2017). Anderson notes that the literature on electoral backsliding is lacking in the sense that it does not pay enough attention to both the historical origins of the institutional aspects of democracy nor to the impact of historical junctures that may interrupt institutional paths and install new ones (Anderson 2019, 658). He then presents two models that might give better explanations, one focusing on exogenous shocks, mainly due to international circumstances, to the system and one on endogenous changes. This latter model focuses on the division between different groups in society (Anderson 2019, 658).

Threats to electoral integrity

This discussion of the threats that may be posed by recent trends in backsliding, and the role that elections and electoral integrity play in them, bring us to the key overlapping trends highlighted in this special issue. We now explore the four trends: namely, political polarization, a global tension between democracy and autocracy, evolving methods of electoral manipulation and the impacts of new crises, including the Covid-19 pandemic. Each of these broader political phenomena have impacted elections, and the aim of this special issue is to explore how this has materialized in a variety of cross-national contexts and country case studies.

Evolving digital methods of electoral manipulation

The past decades have been marked by rapid advancements and spread in global technology, a trend that has also made its way into the sphere of elections. Alongside promising opportunities for enhancing accessibility and providing new opportunities for deliberation, new means of communication and information have nonetheless brought new challenges to democracy in general and electoral integrity in particular (Kendall-Taylor, Frantz, and Wright 2020, Feldstein 2021, Garnett and James 2020, Garnett and Pal 2022).

One of these new challenges to elections is the growing use of electoral misinformation and disinformation for political gains (Shu et al., 2020). Of course, the challenging of false or misleading information in elections is hardly new; for example, when radio was introduced, the British Parliament debated how the spread of false information on candidates and parties through foreign radio shows should be forbidden. During the Cold War, both sides were very active in trying to influence elections in this way. However, with the rise of the use of the Internet and, more recently, the ubiquity of social media platforms, it has become both very easy and very cheap to spread misinformation, to the point where the actual influence on voting behaviour becomes measurable (Iida et al. 2022).

For example, in December 2024, the result of the presidential election of Romania was annulled by their Supreme Court due to the influence of messages on TikTok. Historically, annulments have typically been associated with clear procedural errors or fraud, but the Romanian ruling signifies an important shift; the court's decision highlighted the impact of the extensive deployment of artificial intelligence (AI), automated systems, and coordinated information integrity campaigns on electoral integrity, among other findings of interference. The Court determined that these actions skewed voter perceptions, deprived candidates of equitable opportunities, and violated voters' rights to make informed choices. In its decision, the Court referred to established international norms on electoral integrity, such as the Venice Commission Code of Good Conduct in Electoral Matters.

The article in this special issue by van Ham, Sipma, and Fiselier considers the role of elite and media information cues on the perception of citizens on the integrity of elections. It presents a case study of the Dutch 2021 national parliamentary elections, which were held during the COVID pandemic (more on this overlapping challenge later in this introduction). The research finds that traditional media generates an accurate positive perception of electoral integrity, whereas social media and elite cues have negative effects on the perceptions of citizens. According to the authors, this highlights the need to better regulate and monitor disinformation on social media. This article brings into focus the challenge of new digital forms of communication for electoral integrity.

Persistent Political Polarization

Whether due to income inequality, or the effects of the new medias mentioned above, there is growing evidence of increasing political polarization (Carothers and O'Donohue 2019). While scholars continue to debate the causes and consequences, the effects on elections are becoming clear. Electoral integrity might be harder to achieve in polarised societies (James and Garnett, 2023). As animosity between candidates or political parties becomes higher, the stakes of an election may feel higher. As a result, any number of actors, be those candidates or citizens, might use underhand tactics to try to win the election. They may also criticize institutions that are involved with the delivery of elections, such as electoral management bodies and courts, if their preferred outcomes are not realised (Arbati and Rosenberg 2020). In sum, increasing polarization threatens the actual and perceived integrity of elections, making this trend one of the key overlapping threats we highlight in this special issue.

During the highly contested election in the US in 2020, for example, electoral integrity became a political issue, and was the focus of elite rhetoric, be that calls of widespread voter fraud on one side of the political spectrum, or the accusations of voter suppression on the other side. This politicization of the integrity of elections led to threats against poll workers, judges, and other people dealing with the claims of a 'stolen' election (James and Garnett, 2023) and ultimately culminated in physical violence in Washington DC at the US Capitol Building. Scholars have attributed this and similar concerning threats to democratic election in part to the polarization that has crept into electoral integrity debates (Vail et al. 2023).

While polarization can affect electoral integrity, at the same time election issues can affect feelings of polarization, as explored in this special issue. Hatice Mete-Dokucu investigates the impact of electoral fraud and election outcomes on mass affective polarization across 160 elections in 48 countries from 1996 to 2020. By analysing citizens' assessments of political parties using a like-dislike scale from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) and electoral integrity scores from the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), this research reveals that manipulative electoral strategies directly contribute to increased mass affective polarization. Additionally, this study identifies that winning-losing status (i.e., whether an individual voted for the winning party in the previous election) plays a role in amplifying mass affective polarization. Mete-Dokucu claims that those who voted for the losing party may reconcile their support for the losing party by forming stronger associations with other political parties compared to supporters of the winning party. Furthermore, the research uncovers that the relationship between low electoral integrity and heightened affective polarization is more pronounced among individuals who voted for the winning party. These findings significantly impact our understanding of mass polarization, democratic legitimacy, and winner-loser status.

In his article, Joseph Klaver looks at a specific case study that focuses on by-elections: elections to fill vacant legislative seats outside of a general election. These are common in France, the case used in the paper, as they are in many democracies. What differentiates French by-elections from those elsewhere is that electoral annulments from the Constitutional Council frequently precipitate them. Klaver examines if these are different from other by-elections since electoral annulments by the Courts indicate that there were problematic elections first. Using a dataset covering by-elections to the French National Assembly between 1988 and 2020, he looks to answer the question of whether political change is more likely under different by-election conditions, finding that by-elections induced by the Constitutional Council are considerably more likely to lead to the seat subsequently being won by a different political party. This finding has ambiguous implications but raises potential questions on the effectiveness of the election dispute resolution process in a mature democracy, as well as the role of by-elections more generally.

Democracy versus autocracy

The third trend we identify is the growing power and the presence of autocratic countries, such as China and Russia and their impacts on electoral integrity worldwide (Hyde 2022). The Third Wave era of democratic diffusion, supported in part by global and Western efforts to support democracy worldwide may be in waning (Wejnert 2013, Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). Rapid economic development over the past decades has allowed China to engage in the Global South by offering development aid and various other foreign assistance, promoting the Belt and Road initiative, and declaring the superiority of the "Chinese model" of governance (Mattingly et al. 2024). All of them led to increasing their political influence in the world and relativizing the power of the West. Meanwhile, Russia has taken a confrontational approach that challenges the liberal international order built after the end of World War II, all while strengthening autocratic rule in the country.

With the liberal international order at risk, there is a changing the balance of norms between democracies and autocracies for international assistance for democratization (Cooley and Nexon 2022), such as foreign aid and election monitoring missions (Bader 2014, Bush and Prather 2024). Furthermore, the reelection of Donald Trump in the 2024 U.S. presidential elections and the subsequent weakening of U.S. commitments to global democracy and ties with other Western countries may shift the balance of norms in favor of autocratic powers. These trends are likely to affect electoral integrity, especially in developing democracies unsure of where to turn for support and assistance.

The article written by Markus Pollak in this special issue brings to light one example of these changing balance of norms. Pollak focuses on the theme of the use of parallel election observations, which mimic the election observation done by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Although these parallel missions claim to use the same liberal-democratic norms to measure the quality of elections, often, they give these norms a different meaning, thus leading to a different outcome than the OSCE mission. This can then create different findings on the quality of the elections, aimed at discrediting the findings of the OSCE. The article analyses 16 CIS and OSCE preliminary statements assessing 8 elections in Kyrgyzstan, Belarus, Serbia, and Azerbaijan in the period between 2007 and 2024. The article shows that the process of fragmentation and polarization of international election observation is already ongoing, which could challenge the universalizing narratives of liberal democracy promotion by attacking norms at the core of the definition of electoral integrity.

In her article in this special issue, Rebecca Wagner examines the role of citizen election observers in resisting autocratization, focusing on their resilience in restrictive environments. She highlights how civic election monitoring, which gained global prominence during the third wave of democratization, faces increasing repression from autocratic regimes. Autocracies manipulate elections and target civil society organizations, including election observers, viewing them as opposition forces. Wanger explores how election observers adapt to restrictions, considering the case of Kyrgyzstan where the Coalition for Democracy and Human Rights built a national election monitoring network. In the process of autocratization in the country, their resistance strategies varied, sometimes leading to adaptation or resignation. In detailing the cases of Kyrgyzstan under different political leaderships, Wagner relies on the concept of electoral resilience, defined as the ability of election observers to sustain operations under autocratic pressures. She argues that resilience depends on strong civic networks, organizational health, and assistance from the international society. The study underscores that external support, particularly from Western donors, is crucial for maintaining the resilience of domestic election observers.

Impact of the pandemic and other forms of crises

Another relatively new field of study is the effect of emergencies (James, Clark, and Asplund, 2023; James and Alihodzic, 2020). Holding elections under difficult circumstances, be that global health crises, war or natural hazards, will influence electoral integrity, for example when access to the ballot box has to be restricted, laws have to be changed at the last minute, or Election Management Bodies face other obstacles to running elections (International IDEA 2022). At the time of writing, a pressing question is whether Ukraine is able to hold an election during a war.¹ In conflict-ridden societies, electoral integrity is more likely to be at risk, as elections are exposed to rampant fraud and pervasive electoral violence (Weidmann and Callen 2013). Low levels of electoral integrity threaten the security of both candidates and citizens and may also undermine the legitimacy of elections. That being said,

¹ <https://www.idea.int/news/explainer-conducting-elections-during-war>.

prolonged delays in holding elections may weaken the legitimacy of the incumbent, whose political power is derived from democratic elections.

Other crises include natural disasters, such as floods, hurricanes, or wildfires. These natural disasters have the potential of greatly influencing election quality and voting behaviour. For instance, one study shows that the major floods in Germany and the subsequent relief program impacted voting behaviour differently according to citizens' differences in experiences of democratic elections between the former West and East Germany (Neugart and Rode 2021). In the United States, Hurricane Michael, which struck Florida a month before the 2018 midterm elections, forced election officials to reduce the number of polling stations in disaster-affected areas, resulting in lower voter turnout (Morris and Miller 2023). The occurrences extreme wildfires grow rapidly worldwide over the past two decades.² Although electoral administrations do not necessarily prepare for this relatively new type of natural disasters and its impacts on electoral integrity (Birch and Fischer 2022).

Among these various crises, the most widespread ones which impacted our lives extensively over the past half decade was the COVID-19 pandemic. The article by Ani Tepnadze and Erik Herron in this special issue considers the effects of COVID-19 on the perceptions of electoral integrity in the Republic of Georgia. The authors analyse the impact of the extraordinary measures taken to ensure that elections could be held, which included special polling stations to allow infected voters to cast votes when they were in quarantine. The article finds that the ruling Georgian Dream party performed significantly better in most of these polling stations than in regular polling stations. In the second round, this effect did not occur. The article tries to explain these differences but does not find a coherent reason. The authors, therefore, correctly point out that these findings raise concerns about the conduct of elections under crisis conditions and the need to investigate further how measures taken in such cases could influence the outcome of elections.

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² <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-024-02071-8>

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