

Ch. 1: Rationale for the Report—Why Religion and Election Preparation?

The task of fostering resilient democracies is more important than ever. Global trends show that democracy is in decline³ and that 72 percent of the world's population lives in autocracies.⁴ Addressing challenges to the integrity of electoral institutions remains a key aspect of confronting democratic regression. While democracy faces diverse challenges, including polarized societies, restrictive media environments, and politicized judiciaries, ample work remains to strengthen the core procedure of democratic governance: the election.

It is imperative that all those interested in electoral integrity better understand the contemporary challenges of democracy promotion and electoral assistance. To that end, the electoral support community must evaluate current approaches to assessment and intervention.

In this white paper, we propose that enhanced attention to religious dynamics in electoral assessment and engagement provides an important opportunity to rise to this challenge. The paper posits that the electoral support community can strengthen its approach to assessment and engagement by proactively evaluating religion's impact on different phases of the electoral cycle, identifying relevant religious actors who need to be engaged, and ultimately responding to religion's impact on electoral processes, both in generating challenges and in building electoral integrity and resilience.

Why should religion be on the agenda of the electoral support community? For much of the latter half of the 20th century, analysts assumed that economic development would take religion off the world's political agenda, a position that scholars commonly refer to as secularization theory. Since development also brings democracy, promoting democracy required little attention to religious dynamics beyond perhaps putting out sectarian fires in less wealthy countries holding elections.

The past quarter century has confounded secularization theory's predictions. Global research from the Pew Research Center finds that more than four in five people worldwide have some sort of religious affiliation—and that the share of those with an affiliation is on the rise.⁵ Democracies from India to Brazil to Nigeria have seen significant economic growth but little (if any) decline in religion's political salience. Religion remains a potent force in American politics, with roughly half of Americans claiming it is essential to have a president who shares their religious beliefs.⁶ Tensions tied to immigration and populism have "returned" religion to the public square, even in supposedly secular Europe. The two countries with the most significant improvements in Freedom House's 2022 Freedom in the World Report (Ecuador and Côte d'Ivoire) and the two countries with the greatest declines (Myanmar and Afghanistan) all have

³ Freedom House. 2021. "New Report: The Global Decline in Democracy Has Accelerated." Freedom House. March 3, 2021.

<https://freedomhouse.org/article/new-report-global-decline-democracy-has-accelerated>

⁴ "Defiance in the Face of Autocratization." 2023. https://www.v-dem.net/documents/29/V-dem_democracyreport2023_lowres.pdf

⁵ Conrad Hackett and M. Stonawski. 2017. "The Changing Global Religious Landscape." Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project. April 5, 2017. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2017/04/05/the-changing-global-religious-landscape/>

⁶ Mitchell, Travis. 2016. "Faith and the 2016 Campaign." Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project. January 27, 2016.

<https://www.pewforum.org/2016/01/27/faith-and-the-2016-campaign/>

high rates of religious affiliation and politically active clergy. In the words of Peter Berger, a scholar once among secularization theory's strongest advocates, "The assumption we live in a secularized world is false ... The world today is as furiously religious as it ever was."⁷

Thus we argue that religion is not some exotic factor but a regular feature of electoral politics around the globe. Rather than ignoring religion, this paper takes what some call "the political ambivalence" of religion as its starting point.⁸ Religious dynamics are at times implicated in religious, racial, and gender-identity-based exclusion; social polarization; and even political violence. However, they can also serve as a resource for promoting robust elections. In unstable democracies from Hungary to the Philippines, practitioners need guidance on responding to this ambivalence by integrating religious dynamics into their assessments and planning programmatic interventions.

One-half of the ambivalence of religion is the challenge that religious dynamics may pose to well-functioning electoral institutions. Nationalists may utilize religion to stir up support on the campaign trail, inciting violence on social media and offline or restricting access to polls for women and minorities. Not only might religion empower domestic hardliners, but it could also prove practically challenging to international actors. International governmental and NGO actors may struggle to understand local religious dynamics, feel constrained by donor-country laws that limit state involvement with religion, or be concerned about counterproductive intervention in local religious affairs.

Without minimizing these concerns, a second rationale motivates this report: Religious dynamics have been central to the consolidation of democratic institutions. Religious actors may participate in freedom struggles, peacebuilding, constitution drafting, voter registration, civic and voter education, voter mobilization, anticorruption advocacy, electoral rights promotion, or alternative dispute resolution. These initiatives may draw on the deep legitimacy that religious actors often enjoy and on values that motivate collective action. At a time when some openly question the ability of democracy to deliver for average citizens, this moral authority can be a potent contribution to building electoral integrity. Religious actors may also operate more tangibly through networks of schools, community centers, houses of worship, and media networks that bring material resources to the electoral support community, particularly in portions of a country outside of urban centers.

If carefully conceived to address this ambivalence, religious engagement could make significant and diverse contributions to promoting the resilience of electoral institutions. In a hypothetical election cycle, this could include:

- *Engaging* grassroots leaders from movements of religious women (often not considered religious leaders) in pre-electoral assessments focused on equity and poll access in the country.
- Assessing *religious framing within online hate speech* that could incite electoral violence against specific religious communities—often minority communities.
- Partnering with religious networks on *voter education* and *get-out-the-vote campaigns* designed to reach rural and isolated portions of a country with new information on voter registration and electoral procedures.

⁷ Berger, Peter L. 1999. *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Washington, D.C.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1999).

⁸ R. Scott Appleby. 2000. *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation*, Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict Series (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers); Philpott, Daniel. 2007. "Explaining the Political Ambivalence of Religion," *American Political Science Review* 101 (3): 505–25. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0003055407070372>.

- Developing communication channels with religious development organizations equipped to carry out *early warning and response* to potential electoral violence.
- Integrating religious organizations into *post-election lessons learned exercises* to guide and advocate for future electoral reforms.
- *Monitoring and evaluating* religious engagement efforts to rigorously document these approaches' unique strengths and challenges.