



# Democracy Promotion in a Challenging World

Written Testimony Submitted by William R. Sweeney  
President & CEO, International Foundation for Electoral Systems

House Foreign Affairs Committee

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Democratic backsliding, disinformation and electoral interference dominate the global news cycle. According to Freedom House’s “Freedom in the World” report, democracy faced its most serious crisis yet in 2017, as 71 countries suffered net declines in political rights and civil liberties. As we have seen in Afghanistan, Iraq, Kenya, Libya and the United States, electoral institutions are being targeted for physical and digital attacks. When deciding whether to participate in political processes, the lives and reputations of candidates, public servants and everyday citizens are increasingly at stake. There is no disputing that democracy is under siege.

But behind the headlines you will find that the heroes of democracy are quietly gaining ground. In truth, great strides in access, administration and technology continue to prove the transformative power of elections. Every day in every part of the world, elections and democratic processes are overcoming great odds to meet growing public demand for transparency, speed and accessibility. A greater number of democracies – and particularly of developed democracies – naturally gives rise to more advanced problems. Facing increasingly complex and nuanced challenges is a direct reflection of the sophistication of the world’s electoral systems.

The United States, and particularly the U.S. Congress, must rise to the challenge – those who champion democracy need American support and leadership to administer credible elections, particularly in the rapidly evolving areas of cybersecurity; disinformation; and the empowerment of women, persons with disabilities and ethnic and religious minorities; and especially in the face of China and Russia’s rising “sharp power.” We respectfully urge this committee and the U.S. Congress to continue its tradition of bipartisan support for democracy, rights and governance (DRG). Relatively small, strategic investments in electoral assistance will continue to contribute to a more prosperous, secure America.

## **About IFES: “A Vote for Every Voice”**

For over 30 years, IFES – a 501(c)3 nonpartisan nonprofit – has worked in over 145 countries to support citizens’ right to participate in free and fair elections. Credible elections are the cornerstone of a healthy democracy and enable all persons to exercise their basic human right to have a say in how they are governed.

Currently, IFES works in over 30 countries to strengthen democratic processes across the electoral cycle. Our core service lines include the long-term capacity building of election commissions; the broadening of citizen participation and inclusion; the empowerment of marginalized groups; and research and surveys that inform our work and further the DRG discipline. Unique IFES methodologies include Election Integrity Assessments (EIA), the Violence Against Women in Elections (VAWIE) Framework (to identify and address gender-based election violence), the Electoral Process Diagnostic (EPD) and Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) for key elections.

*In FY2017 alone, IFES trained 137,165 election officials and reached 45,180,498 people via civic and voter education campaigns.*

IFES achieves its goals by providing targeted technical assistance to local partners on electoral frameworks; election operations; accurate and timely vote counting and results transmission; election dispute resolution; fraud and malpractice mitigation; campaign and political finance

regulation; civic and voter education; electoral security; tools to address electoral violence, extremism and hate speech; the constructive relationship between the media and electoral stakeholders; effective, transparent communication (including through social media); and codes of conduct that support peace, professionalism and high standards of ethical behavior.

IFES works to enhance political competition, transparency, accountability and the legitimacy of outcomes. Our approach is firmly grounded in international norms, best practices and treaty obligations concerning human rights, democratic governance and genuine elections.

## **Electoral Assistance Advances American Interests**

More stable democracies support American interests by becoming better trade partners; providing new market opportunities for U.S. businesses; improving global health outcomes; and promoting economic freedom and regional security. Failing states benefit terrorist, criminal and drug networks, and those who commit human rights abuses; restrict space for civil society to operate; give rise to corruption and the subsequent squandering of assistance dollars; spread unfair economic practices that undermine U.S. businesses; and leave the world unprepared for the crises (terrorism, disease, migration) that transcend borders.

IFES' work has supported stability and prosperity across the globe:

- **Kenya** is critical to the fight against terrorism<sup>1</sup> and is East Africa's largest and most important business, financial, and transportation hub. The U.S. is the third largest destination for Kenya's exports and the seventh largest source of its imports.<sup>2</sup> In 2017, IFES' multifaceted Kenya project included direct technical assistance to the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) and judiciary on strengthening internal governance systems; developing election regulations; promoting voter education and registration; and election technology. Our project also included a sub-grant component to engage civil society on voter registration and voter education; participation of women and youth; and dialogue, consensus-building and conflict early warning and response.
- **Ukraine** is on the frontlines of efforts to combat Russian influence and interference. IFES' Ukraine program provides technical assistance to the Central Election Commission; promotes electoral law and political finance reform; and supports civil society activism and the inclusion of underrepresented populations. For example, IFES works to engage elected officials on issues

*"Until IFES recruited chama [community microfinance] women to become voter educators, I never imagined my role as a change agent ... This new role earned me the honored community title of mwalimu – meaning teacher in Swahili. I now realize I have a role beyond elections in helping women understand why they need to participate in civic issues and help reduce ethnic intolerance. Each day grants me an opportunity to restore optimism." -Ann Kutswa, Kenya.*

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.heritage.org/africa/report/kenyas-stability-important-us-priority>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2962.htm>

pertinent to the 1.8 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Ukraine. IFES has worked with 197 civil society representatives to support development of a draft law guaranteeing voting rights, as well as trained 300 civic actors and election officials on international standards and national legislation for the inclusion of IDPs in the voting process.

- **Syria** remains one of the world’s most challenging and destabilizing humanitarian and security crises. IFES works to prepare Syrian youth for the inevitable transition, while constructively engaging them in a peaceful, democratic way. IFES’ Building Leaders program develops adolescents’ capacity to be leaders in their communities through concrete skill building, such as public speaking, combined with exercises to increase self-confidence and develop knowledge. Participants have gone on to create and implement independent projects and propose new activities.
- **Guatemala.** After Mexico, the largest number of unauthorized immigrants to the U.S. come from Guatemala.<sup>3</sup> Credible elections contribute to a more stable Guatemala; stability and rule of law help people feel safer and more connected to their communities, and less likely to leave home. In 2017, IFES programming was timely in the fight against impunity and corruption. Providing technical assistance to the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE), our work advanced second-generation electoral reforms to increase accountability, enhance the transparency and inclusivity of the electoral system, and expand the TSE’s mandate as a political finance regulator. IFES also worked with the National Council of People with Disabilities to improve the advocacy capacity of disabled persons’ organizations and with IFES’ assistance, the TSE incorporated accessibility and participation measures in their electoral law reform proposal.
- **Nepal** – despite its tough geopolitical neighborhood – is rapidly becoming a democratic success story. During an intense 12-month period, the people of Nepal voted in local, provincial and national elections. It was the first time in 20 years that successful local elections were held, and the first-ever simultaneous provincial and national elections. IFES supported the Election Commission of Nepal in their efforts to register three million new voters, simplify complex ballots and improve transparency around campaign spending. IFES also supported large-scale, multilingual voter education reaching diverse populations.

## Electoral Assistance Is Not Electoral Interference

IFES is deeply disturbed by the ongoing effort to conflate election assistance with election interference.

Election assistance is a key element of international development. It is practiced by nonpartisan, international non-governmental organizations that work with local partners to promote more professional and independent electoral institutions. It is rooted in the principle of transparency, involving budgeting and open procurement; professional outreach to citizens; clear and inclusive voter education; integrity in results tabulation and transmission; and rule of law-based processes to address electoral complaints. Even the way that electoral assistance is funded is transparent — it’s not underwritten by any “black budget,” but through public U.S. Agency for International

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/03/06/us/politics/undocumented-illegal-immigrants.html>

Development (USAID) and Department of State (State) programming. Any taxpayer can see where their dollars are being spent.

Detractors of democracy would delight in the downfall of electoral assistance. Autocrats and proponents of non-democratic systems of governance simply do not want political competition and open election processes. To protect and defend democracy worldwide, the U.S. Congress must send a clear message – election assistance is not election interference. The DRG community does not manipulate results, or impose the American system on others. We support democracy all over the world, and tailor solutions to the local context based on international standards and principles.

## **Election Assistance and Cybersecurity**

Cyberattacks have become a favorite tool of bad actors, as foreign governments and domestic partisans seek advantage by disrupting and undermining election processes. Election systems have also become a riper target, as they increasingly rely on digital information, including electronic voter rolls and results transmission; biometric identification systems; and internet-connected voting machines. Lessons learned from the United States in 2016; Kenya and Liberia in 2017; and experiences in Afghanistan, Georgia, Honduras, Indonesia and Ukraine suggest that the U.S. Government should consider the following in directing electoral assistance:

- Election systems should be designated and budgeted as national critical infrastructure, with established partnerships with relevant government agencies (intelligence, police, military and foreign ministries).
- In all countries, cultivating a trust-based relationship between the election management body (EMB) and the military/police forces is critical. Well-trained armed forces can provide logistical support and physical safety to voters, election workers and ballots without intimidation. This relationship must be expanded to include cybersecurity.
- Much of the information about cybersecurity assaults and protections is classified by every country. In 2016, there was no election official in the United States with the proper classification status to receive information on the Russian cyberattacks from U.S. intelligence, military or law enforcement. In reviewing the changing roles of EMBs, an appropriate level of security clearance to designated public servants responsible for the election must be provided.
- Information is only valuable if it can be shared and acted upon. Information protocols must be developed between EMBs and the intelligence communities, so information on cyberattacks can be acted upon in real time, without compromising privacy and personal identifiable information.
- The communications capabilities and budgets of EMBs must scale to match challenges to their integrity. The rise of social media as a force within most societies, as well as the potential for abuse of these platforms by partisan forces (including global political consultants and foreign interests), transforms EMBs into the first line of defense.
- In many countries where IFES works, the reality of corruption feeds into bad actors' narrative and efforts to discredit political processes, election results and the ability of the

nation to govern itself in the future. When election commissioners are corrupt, they fundamentally compromise the hope for a credible process and election. They are conspirators in the process to undermine democracy.

- For election cycles that depend on advanced technology, the first test of credibility takes place with the public procurement of election technology and election materials. Development of the procurement specifications should be an open dialogue, with the utilization of party liaison committees and civil society outreach. Dialogue and technical explanation should occur at the beginning of preparations for the next election, not in the year of the election, when the political calendar is intense and compressed. This demands that political parties be ready for engagement in technical areas years ahead of the election. Unfortunately, many election commissions become subject to political pressure to introduce too many technologies late in the election calendar, which usually means flawed procurements and inadequate time for testing, training and deployment.
- Lastly, public administration is a discipline. Public leaders must invest in the creation and maintenance of a professional body of public servants with a career path of expertise in their fields. For too many countries, election commissions are episodic assignments without civil service protections or a public commitment to continued excellence. A management focus with a perspective of emerging challenges to service delivery by a professional staff able to engage with innovations in technology and threat is now needed as part of the job description.

## **Disinformation is a Global Challenge**

Well-established, newly established and transitioning democracies are all vulnerable to disinformation campaigns aimed at exerting influence and capturing power during elections. Disinformation is becoming a significant problem for EMBs, as political and civic engagement today takes place in a rapidly evolving information ecosystem. Attacks on the integrity of the electoral institutions and processes include falsely accusing EMBs of lacking independence, impartiality and neutrality, as well as undermining the credibility around accuracy of critical aspects of election administration, such as counting and results transmission.

EMBs carry a mandate of voter and civic education (and in some legal frameworks also a mandate to fight disinformation during campaign periods) and are at often at the center of responding to disinformation campaigns. They are increasingly interfacing with major private sector actors in the social media, internet media, and digital information space.

IFES has a long history of working both directly and indirectly to fight disinformation and propaganda. We are on the cutting edge of partnering with EMBs to combat misinformation with tools, strategies, partnerships and approaches to counter the exploitation of new information technologies that corrupt the information landscape and amplify false messages and narratives that undermine the legitimacy of democracy. In addition, IFES has mobilized civil society partners to participate in and lead efforts to counter hoaxes and intercommunal incitement. IFES has pioneered this approach in Kenya in the form of “myth-buster” public service announcements. Countering hoaxes and fake news helps to diffuse tensions triggered by misinformation and false narratives.

IFES also finds a clear connection between the proliferation of disinformation and the promotion of hate speech. In January 2018, IFES published a white paper to help EMBs better understand the range of issues surrounding hate speech during the electoral cycle and the regulatory and non-regulatory options that may be brought to bear. During elections in Sri Lanka and Fiji, IFES organized multi-stakeholder hate speech and fake news consultations, as well as media trainings on how to report on hate speech and fake news.

The Global Electoral Exchange Act – passed by this committee in March – would further help EMBs combat disinformation by promoting exchanges between American and international election professionals on best election practices. We thank the committee for its passage of the Act.

## **Electoral Assistance Advances American Values**

DRG promotes American values. For example, electoral assistance helps such traditionally marginalized groups as youth, women and persons with disabilities gain equal access to public institutions, win economic and political self-determination, and fully realize their individual rights. Inclusion and empowerment activities also help strengthen the credibility and stability of democracies more broadly, as democratic institutions flourish when all groups of society are represented.

### *Stopping Violence Against Women in Politics*

Violence Against Women in Politics (VAWP) contributes to the lack of women’s participation in democratic institutions; undermines electoral integrity; and undercuts sustainable democracy and lasting peace. A recent IFES Violence Against Women in Elections (VAWIE) assessment indicates that women who venture into public life as candidates, journalists, voters and in public service roles are likely to experience targeted acts of violence and harassment. This coerces women’s choices and silences their voices. Violence against women in online spaces — especially social media — has exploded in recent years, with so called “morality-based” attacks (accusations of prostitution, witchcraft, failed parental/marital duty, etc.) carrying much greater social costs for women than for men.

IFES is creatively engaging to end VAWIE through innovations in digital technology; targeted legal reform; and prosecution of gendered electoral and criminal violations. However, greater support from the Congress and Administration is needed. While international actors, including the U.S., increasingly recognize VAWP as a serious impediment to women’s political participation, U.S. lawmakers have yet to formally recognize the issue or respond with effective and consistent policy. Options for filling this gap include integrating the issue across U.S. strategic, diplomatic and policy tools and frameworks; and standalone legislative tools to document and monitor the impact of VAWP and ensure adequate resources for effectively addressing the issue.

### *Supporting the Political Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities*

USAID’s Disability Policy recognizes that development programs are more impactful if the estimated 15 percent of the world’s population that has a disability are included. In closing spaces, disability rights is often a ‘wedge-issue’ which allows the U.S. Government to establish trusted relationships with government and civil society stakeholders, before discussing more controversial topics such as election dispute resolution or legal reform.



The United States has been leader in this space and should continue to demonstrate leadership by providing dedicated disability rights funding, encouraging mainstreaming in broad assistance and filling open positions at State and USAID.

## **Relinquishing the Narrative to Russia and China?**

Countries around the world look to America for leadership on liberty, democracy and rule of law. Should the United States reduce democracy support, China, Russia and Iran are poised to fill the void with a playbook that not only strangles human rights, but allows authoritarian and hostile regimes to gain military, economic and political influence at our expense.

Take, for example, Cambodia. As the U.S. and European Union withdrew their electoral support, China stepped in with the announcement of significant additional material and technical assistance, including \$12 million in support to the national election commission. Russia followed suit, and in a show of “mutual trust and respect,” organized an agreement for its EMB to work with the national election commission in technical areas — including those where the U.S. Government was previously (and legitimately) engaged (e.g., electoral law and election technology). In the absence of other international missions, Russia has also pledged to send election monitors to Cambodia.

Subverting election assistance narratives, the election support from these powerful states is held up by the government of Cambodia as a clear endorsement from the international community of its electoral process.

## **Robust Funding for Electoral Assistance**

We thank the Congress for its continued support of DRG in even the most challenging budget environments. Since FY2016, Congress has mandated that State and USAID spend no less than \$2.3 billion on democracy programs – which represents less than half of one percent of the total International Affairs Budget.<sup>4</sup> Congress’ provision of a funding floor protects critical programming. The full funding of DRG programs is necessary to address democratic backsliding, consolidate gains from economic development efforts and contribute to a more stable and prosperous world. We ask for Congress to continue funding for DRG at existing levels.

The National Endowment for Democracy (NED) is a critical component of the USG’s foreign aid strategy. However, the vast majority of its funding is reserved for its four core institutes, and does not support many critical organizations, like IFES, that have emerged in the more than three decades since its initial legislative establishment. To this end, it is vital that the other accounts for DRG remain amply funded.

## **Electoral Assistance: A Global, Long-term Development Commitment**

Electoral assistance has evolved into a sophisticated practice undertaken by most democratic countries. IFES receives about 70 percent of its support from State and USAID. However, countries from all parts of the globe fund DRG – IFES’ international donors include Australia, Canada, European Union, South Korea, India, Mexico, Norway, Romania, Sweden, Switzerland, United

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.usglc.org/the-budget/>

Kingdom and others. Several of our programs – including in Tunisia and Myanmar (Burma) – are funded by multiple donors.

No matter the donor, effective electoral assistance demands investment years in advance of an election date and in the period between elections. Consistent, long-term support throughout the electoral cycle also enhances stability during uncertain democracy building processes. Shorter term or immediate assistance does not allow for capacity building, the introduction of technology (or the training and public education necessitated by it), or strategic planning.

### **Looking Ahead: The Continued Need for Electoral Assistance**

With the continued support of the U.S. Congress, DRG will further promote American interests and values abroad. Investment in electoral assistance simply cannot wait, and must be advanced in FY2019. Such pressing challenges include general elections in Nigeria, Guatemala, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Georgia; Tunisia’s long-awaited local elections; and Indonesia’s 2019 presidential elections (Indonesia is the world’s largest Muslim democracy and holds the largest single-day elections in the world).



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