Guidelines and Recommendations for Electoral Activities During the COVID-19 Pandemic

As the world reacts to a new pandemic (COVID-19), it is essential that election management bodies (EMBs) and public authorities around the world make sensible and well-informed decisions regarding whether and how to hold scheduled electoral activities (e.g., voter registration, political campaigning, poll worker training, and ballot casting). These decisions should be informed by health authorities and might vary depending on each country's public health capabilities, level of spread of the disease, and other contextual factors. Holding elections in the time of pandemic will not be easy but should not be viewed as impossible without considering reasonable measures that could protect both health and democratic rights. Where elections are not feasible in the short term, careful consideration must be given to measures that ensure the continuity of governance, protection of institutions and fundamental rights of individuals. Any delays should be agreed to on the basis of sound risk assessment and involve set milestones agreed across the political divide and based on public health evidence.

IFES has gathered a series of recommendations to guide EMB planning and implementation of electoral events during this period that is informed by general guidance issued by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and best practices issued by the U.S. Election Assistance Commission (EAC) or implemented by EMBs around the world who have conducted electoral processes during public health crises. These recommendations were developed to the best of IFES' knowledge as of March 19, 2020. As research on COVID-19 is ongoing and new information is made available every day,[1] please refer to the relevant health authorities for the most up-to-date guidance.

Alternatives to Holding In-Person Electoral Activities

Postponements – To avoid crowds and the risk of person-to-person contagion, EMBs might postpone electoral events (e.g., in-person voter registration, political rallies, in-person ballot casting) until a later date, respecting the country's legal provisions.

Holding electoral activities online/remotely – Crowding can also be avoided by holding some electoral events online or remotely, where legal provisions allow.

- Electoral campaign – Candidates and political parties might suspend in-person rallies and conduct campaigns solely online or via traditional media.
- Voter registration – EMBs might facilitate and encourage online or mail-in voter registration.
- Poll worker training – EMBs might develop and encourage virtual trainings for poll workers.
- Vote casting – EMBs might encourage online, mail-in, drop-off, or absentee ballots.
- Electoral dispute resolution – EMBs might encourage the filing of complaints regarding the electoral process online.

---

[1] Among the issues still being further studied are, for example, the real risks of transmission via fomites (objects or materials which are likely to carry infection) and how long the virus can survive in surfaces, whether and for how long the virus can remain airborne, and what distance is safe to prevent transmission via respiratory droplets.

Mitigating Risks of Holding in-Person Electoral Activities

Situations to Consider	Electoral Events Affected	Risk Factors	Mitigation Actions
Avoiding or reducing the risks of crowding and human-to-human contact	Political rallies; in-person voter registration; poll worker trainings; packing of polling station kits; ballot casting	High rate of transmission of respiratory droplets from person to person	Mark (with tape on the floor, for example) and enforce required social distancing (6 feet) between voters in line and during procedures
			Rearrange polling stations to maintain required social distance and to allow for sufficient space between voters, poll workers, party agents, and observers during all procedures
			Develop building entry and exit protocol to avoid large number of people in closed spaces
			Prominently display posters promoting hand washing, social distancing, and reminding citizens to avoid touching their faces
			Display posters promoting respiratory hygiene/cough etiquette
Avoiding or reducing risks of contact with contaminated surfaces or objects (e.g., voter IDs, ballots, ballot boxes, pens, fingerprint scanners)	Voter registration; poll worker trainings; packing of polling station kits; ballot casting; vote tallying	Potential transmission of virus via fomites (surfaces and objects likely to be contaminated) through touching of mouth, nose, and possibly eyes	Provide hand-washing stations with soap and water, or hand sanitizer (at least 60% alcohol)
			Rearrange polling station layout to minimize contact between voters and curtains, doorknobs, desks and other surfaces
			Clean surfaces and objects in polling station (desks, tables, dividers, scanners, voting machines, pens, ballot boxes) touched by people frequently with alcohol-based solution (at least 60% alcohol)
			Provide gloves and masks (with appropriate training for correct usage) for poll workers
			Consider encouraging citizens to bring and use their own pens
			Issue guidance for voters and poll workers to avoid all unnecessary handling of material (e.g., verifying ID cards without touching them)

Mitigating risks to highly vulnerable populations	In-person voter registration; poll worker trainings; packing of polling station kits; ballot casting	Older adults and people with serious chronic medical conditions such as heart disease, diabetes, and lung disease are at higher risk of dying from the disease	Consider sending mail-in ballots for voters in independent or assisted living facilities, retirement communities, and care centers
			Consider relocating polling stations from areas close to independent or assisted living facilities, retirement communities, and care centers
			Consider releasing vulnerable populations from all poll worker service
			Consider proxy voting, taking needed precautions to avoid voter intimidation
Releasing healthcare workers from poll worker service	Voter registration; poll worker trainings; ballot casting	Healthcare workers must be available to support the potentially high number of patients	Consider releasing health workers from all poll worker service