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Counteracting electoral disinformation

A practical guide for organizations and electoral bodies

LEGAL

ÍNDICE

Executive Summary

Disinformation has become a critical player in elections, questioning their transparency and operation, jeopardizing the right to a free and informed vote, and casting doubt on their legitimacy.

This Guide addresses the types of disinformation that may arise at different moments of the electoral process. It proposes actions to be adopted by electoral authorities and all organizations involved to counteract it, ensure transparency, and ensure that accurate information is made available to citizens.

Elections are times when information must be accurate. In this day and age, when messages are very quickly reproduced and disseminated, the lack of quality information can easily be replaced with fake news. Reports about the quality of the voting instruments, the preparation of the voting lists, the validity of the votes, the documents allowed to cast your vote, among many others, are common topics for discussion during an election. When dealing with electoral matters, government institutions must actively provide information on issues that may lead to misunderstandings or that are being used to deceive the public. Elections entail an array of complex procedures, where numerous irregularities are bound to happen, but this does not mean, for example, that an irregularity is an attempt at fraud. However, each case must be thoroughly analyzed.

Since elections are a process that involves all of us, many times, we generalize situations and draw conclusions based on individual experiences and perceptions that end up misinforming citizens. Other times, the spread of fake information has a clear political purpose. Providing citizens with information about the electoral process can help counteract disinformation in these cases.

This Guide describes the key stages in electoral processes. It focuses on the misinformation usually spread about each of them and the recommendations to access accurate information to debunk it in time.

This entails a set of general proposals around the following topics:

- **When: always in advance.**
  To this end, we must:

  - Design communication strategies that focus on electoral integrity and address disinformation and the role of electoral authorities as the primary data source to offset its impact on the electoral process.

  - Monitor traditional and social media during the elections to address any doubts or potential disinformation crises in a timely manner.

  - Raise the levels of active transparency of the electoral bodies by systematizing past experiences.

● **What: quality information that improves electoral competition and can anticipate common forms of disinformation that threaten the legitimacy of the entire process.**
To this end, we must:

- Develop media and information literacy campaigns focusing on electoral integrity, especially for journalists and other popular leaders, as they serve as multipliers and amplify reliable information.

- Collect official information (before the elections) on the number of complaints made in the previous elections, the investigated cases, and their findings regarding the different types of fraud. One of the key elements underpinning this type of disinformation is the lack of official data on the true magnitude of these events and their impact on the outcome of the elections.

● **With whom: with all parties involved in the public debate.**
We should strive to:

- Promote mutual knowledge and coordination between electoral authorities, their communication teams, and the network of fact-checkers/verification journalism to quickly and effectively share information that makes it possible to debunk disinformation before it escalates.

● **For whom: for citizens in general and in coordination with journalists and public leaders as they can effectively improve the quality of the democratic process.**
We must focus on:

- Producing information for citizens, Civil Society Organizations, public leaders, and journalists to develop a glossary of electoral terms and situations (irregularities, problems, etc.) that occur regularly in electoral processes, indicating the seriousness of each one of them and the solutions that the system has to offer.

- To make a direct communication channel available to the press and the media with specialists within the organization to clear any doubts that may arise before, during, and after the elections. A strong recommendation for this type of electoral body is to make staff available on Election Day, primarily devoted to communication efforts.

The fact that the electoral bodies themselves can respond to misinformation is especially valuable to strengthen the electoral process since it can eradicate early on possible doubts, misunderstandings, or ill intent around something as sensitive as an election in a democracy.

INTRODUCTION

Disinformation

Disinformation plays a vital role in today's electoral processes. To minimize its impact, UNESCO, together with Chequeado and the expertise provided by Latam-Chequea organizations—the network of fact-checkers in the region—developed this Guide to help electoral authorities and organizations involved in electoral transparency efforts, identify potential information gaps, and counteract the spread of misinformation.

What is disinformation?
Disinformation is nowadays commonplace. In all cases, this is a complex problem that, through many different channels, reaches diverse audiences who have different capabilities to identify the negative impact of this type of content on the possibility of exercising their rights to freedom of expression, information and to making decisions, which together lead to the opportunity to cast a free and informed vote.

The first step is to know what we are talking about when we talk about disinformation—its characteristics and sources—and to build a common front so that citizens, journalists, civil society organizations, and, especially, the State can join efforts **to protect one of the key "common goods" of our societies**: information.[1]

"Much of the discourse on 'fake news' combines two concepts: misinformation and disinformation. However, it may be helpful to consider that the misinformation is fake information, but the person who is spreading it believes it to be true. Disinformation is fake information, and the person spreading it knows it is false. It is a deliberate and intentional lie, showing that malicious actors are actively misinforming people.

A third category is malinformation, that is, information based in reality, but used to harm a person, organization or country."

UNESCO, **"Journalism, 'fake news' and disinformation. Handbook for Journalism Education and Training"**[2.]

Although in this publication, the term "disinformation" adopts a general meaning, it is crucial that electoral authorities—who are the target audience of this paper—are aware of the differences between disinformation, misinformation, and malicious information when designing measures to prevent and mitigate their impact. This implies not ignoring that, in practice, it is not the same to generate content knowing that it is fake as spreading impactful content without checking if it is true. And the responsibility held by authorities and political actors is not the same as that of citizens or journalists. Notwithstanding these differences, we are interested in avoiding the impact this may cause: **electoral processes can be seriously undermined when disinformation circulates.**

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[1] UNESCO (2021).
[2] UNESCO (2020:44-45).

When we think about disinformation, we often focus on disinformation on social media, the type of content any user can generate or share. Although this is an integral part of the problem, disinformation is not confined to our "virtual" lives: it unfolds within an ecosystem with different types of actors and motivations, including journalists, candidates, officials, and opinion leaders, known as amplifiers.

Likewise, when we speak about disinformation going viral, we need to consider the existence of information gaps: these are topics on which there is no good information available, so it is replaced with misinforming content. For example, suppose there is no readily available information on how electoral rolls are prepared. In that case, this gap may be filled with disinformation as people will find it more quickly than reliable information.

International standards indicate that multiple dimensions of the so-called *"information clutter"* should be considered, as seen in UNESCO's proposal below:

Agent		
	Actor type:	Official / Unofficial
	Level of Organisation:	None / Loose / Tight / Networked
	Type of Motivation:	Financial / Political / Social / Psychological
	Level of Automation:	Human / Cyborg / Bot
	Intended Audience:	Members / Social Groups / Entire Societies
	Intent to Harm:	Yes / No
	Intent to Mislead:	Yes / No

Message		
	Duration:	Long term / Short-term / Event-based
	Accuracy:	Misleading / Manipulated / Fabricated
	Legality:	Legal / Illegal
	Imposter Type:	No / Brand / Invdividual
	Message Target:	Individual / Organisation / Social Group / Entire Society

Interpreter		
	Mesage reading:	Hegemonic / Oppositional / Negotiated
	Action taken:	Ignored / Shared in support / Shared in opposition

Figure 2: Three elements of 'information disorder'

Source: UNESCO (2020:50).

This poses enormous challenges, but considering the role of electoral authorities as part of the information ecosystem and guardians of the legitimacy of the most critical decision-making processes in our democracies, there are some keys to preventing the spread of disinformation in all its forms, which are behind the recommendations presented in this guide:

- **Speed:** Proactivity, both in identifying information gaps and disinformation. The speed with which content is debunked can make all the difference between something spreading and going viral on social media or people being aware it is fake and deciding not to share it (for more on this, see the study: Fact-Checking and the spread of fake news on social media.)

- **Transparency:** Be transparent with the information available and explain why something is false. Going beyond authority statements and explaining in simple and straightforward terms why a piece of content is false can help convince skeptics and give people tools to identify similar disinformation themselves.

- **Clarity:** Being categorical when dealing with fake content. Not leaving room for ambiguity and making it clear from the title itself or the message posted on social media helps people who do not read the entire article understand the critical information right off the bat (for more details on this, see: What is the truth sandwich and how can it help fight disinformation).

Election stakeholders

All these problems, which are common in an information ecosystem at all times, build on the challenges already present in electoral periods, which involve many actors:

- Citizens: the ultimate beneficiaries of the election, play an active role with their vote, which is the highest moment of involvement in political life.

- Political parties: as they organize the electoral offer to make it available to the citizens.

- Journalists: play a crucial role in helping make an informed vote by providing reliable data on elections, candidates, and the organization of the process and by being, in short, one of the links between the citizens, the electoral procedures, and the options proposed by the political parties.

- Civil society organizations play an increasingly important role in developing tools to monitor the different aspects of the electoral process.

- Electoral bodies have the enormous challenge of ensuring that the electoral process is fair, equitable, orderly, and transparent.

The roles described above change and become more complex as technology introduces innovative participation tools that can amplify the voice of the different actors that make up this system. Social media, for example, allows actors' comments, instructions, complaints, etc., to have a greater reach.

A few years ago, traditional media held the monopoly when it came to amplifying the opinions of experts, journalists, and the authorities in charge of the elections, even of what "citizens are saying." The Internet, social media, open data, and other mainly technological developments have democratized the voices heard around elections.

Electoral bodies no longer need journalists to raise public awareness about the measures adopted; citizens no longer need to be interviewed or interpreted by the media, and civil society organizations can develop tools that anyone can access. Even in this context, and even though they have lost this monopoly, traditional media continues to play a significant role in amplifying these voices and, above all, in the interpretation and validation/verification of the information that circulates. There are many interests at stake around an election. Political interests manifest themselves through partisan interests—personal interests and business interests. This allows for the spreading of content that may range from biased to malicious and from true to false.

In this context, **the risk of disinformation in an electoral process is high**. Amplifying different voices is undoubtedly a significant step in democratizing words and freedom of expression. This, at the same time, poses a considerable challenge: identifying which information is accurate and evidence-based and which is not.

And this is where one of the main challenges arises, mainly for those in charge of organizing the elections. Electoral bodies (which adopt different formats and tasks in other countries) know the procedures, rules, actions, and standard practices around elections. Still, they are currently facing pressing communication challenges as they face an unfair competitor: disinformation and its capacity to go viral. Thus, election expertise must be combined with a quick response, flexible and accurate channels to contact the media—journalists—as well as leaders in the public debate—-academia, civil society, and social media—to develop new communication skills: to respond to disinformation and clarify tendentious or malicious statements to reduce their circulation.

Disinformation at different stages of the election

An electoral process has various stages depending on each country. Still, broadly speaking, it has three well-defined critical moments in which particular attention must be paid to the possibility of disinformation:

- The implementation of the process itself.

- Election Day.

- And the hours and days that follow with the confirmation of the election results.

One of the first steps in an election (the order depends on each country) is the preparation of the so-called electoral roll or lists consisting of, first, the individual identification of the persons who will be eligible to vote and then the closing of the electoral roll. There are several ways to prepare this instrument, but this step is relevant to know who will have the right to vote and who will not. In many countries, there is a "window" period during which comments on errors, gaps, and disclosures can be made. Their publication allows, among other things, to exercise social control over them, monitoring their integrity.

This first part of the electoral process also entails the call for elections by the authorities; the presentation and recognition of political parties, alliances, or candidacies that will compete in the process; in some cases, the implementation of ad hoc judicial bodies for the elections; different procedures related to the financing of the political parties; distribution of media space for the parties and alliances; the official presentation of candidates or list of candidates; the approval by the electoral authorities of those nominations and lists, the official announcement of who will run and how; the presentation of the ballots (whether one for all competitors or several according to the voting system); dissemination of the electoral rolls/lists; and development of electoral campaigns with their specific prohibitions, among other things.

During election day, adrenaline rises considerably as the issues that may arise require immediate solutions. These issues could involve the distribution of electoral materials (it could be done the day before as well); the organization of voting boards and panels with their respective authorities; the relationship between the authorities and the party monitors; the order inside the voting centers; the experience of the voters in the voting centers, with the authorities, with other voters, with the electoral material; the electoral materials (quality, state, quantity); the protection of the secrecy of the vote; the end of election day; vote counting in any of its alternatives; the recount of votes in cases where a provisional recount is made at the polling place; the delivery of the results to the data processing centers; the collection of the electoral materials; the security forces assigned to the voting centers, the delivery and collection of the electoral materials, and custody of votes/ ballot boxes in the voting centers, transfer, and custody in the final counting center.

The last stage—in which we must also pay attention to disinformation—involves the results of the elections. If provisional results/quick count procedures are in place,

these operations are fertile ground for disinformation. This is linked to other issues such as the software used, the data processing centers, the staff in charge of these processes, and the possibility of delays in the procedure or interruptions in data loading.

ELECCIONES   FALSO

Difunden datos falsos sobre resultados del voto en el exterior

⊙ octubre 18, 2020 | 💬 0 | 👁 11992

Compártelo por:

Utilizan el logo oficial de Naciones Unidas para difundir datos falsos sobre supuestos resultados del voto en distintos países. Las imágenes tampoco coinciden con el número de votantes habilitados

False results of voters abroad are spread
October 18th, 2020.

The oficial United Nations logo is used to spread false information on supposed results in different countries.

An example of disinformation about results disseminated in Bolivia and denied by Bolivia Verifica

At the same time, the anxiety about knowing the results often generates unfounded suspicions when the time it takes to communicate the results is longer than what the news and social media expect. Other issues are related to the people in charge of communicating the results; the order in which the boxes from the different districts are entered, which may lead to misinterpretations of the outcome of an election; the premature declarations of candidates or authorities, among other topics.

Finally, there are risks of disinformation around the election's outcome. The final count is the key player in this case. It is critical to explain how it is done and how it differs from the quick count or provisional result; addressing tally sheets that may generate doubts; the resolution of questions about the identity of certain voters; and the communication of the results are crucial to counteracting any disinformation that may affect the legitimacy of the process. Also, at this stage, there may be questions about the protection of ballot boxes and votes; there is always a lot of talk about how votes are counted. Other aspects that must also be informed in a simple and timely manner are whether the ballot boxes are opened to recount the polls or not or whether they are opened when there are doubts, and who decides in each case when they are opened and when the minutes or forms of the results counted in the voting centers are used.

There are many issues, actions, and ingredients in an electoral process (we have only mentioned the main ones) around which disinformation or misinformation could be produced. If we want to protect electoral integrity, some of the things we must avoid, among others, are citizen complaints about their voting experience; public reports of poorly trained polling station authorities; the media causing alarm by generalizing a problem that may be specific or exceptional; social media spreading inaccurate information; and reports of fraud in the face of typical irregularities.

POLÍTICA

Los telegramas con errores no implican que haya habido fraude electoral

POR EQUIPO REVERSO · 14/08/2019

R– Los telegramas con errores no significan fraude electoral

¿#FRAUDEK?
LA VERDAD DE LOS TELEGRAMAS CON ERRORES

MÁS VIDEOS

0:00 / 1:28

Telegrams with mistakes do not mean there is electoral fraud

In the Argentine elections, crossed-out telegrams were circulated as proof of electoral fraud, which Reverso denied.

The presidential elections in Peru in 2021 are an interesting case to analyze. UNESCO Peru documented in a publication that points out the different challenges around electoral disinformation and the responses of other actors to counteract them, from fact-checking to media and information literacy initiatives. As part of its conclusions, it is pointed out that:

"Disinformation, as a multifaceted problem, requires the implementation of collective and coordinated responses based on the full range of human rights and the proactive involvement of citizens. For this reason, it is essential that each of the proposed responses is coordinated, which requires a multi-stakeholder approach ."[3]

This document does not intend to state that the systems are 100% secure and that complaints from organizations, citizens, voting station authorities, social media users, and the media are irrelevant. **Quite the contrary: elections are protected with the active participation of all parties involved.**

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[3] UNESCO Peru (2021:7).

We want to stress the opportunity to carry out an electoral process that is responsible from a communication perspective. The electoral bodies nowadays, in addition to the fundamental and sometimes unknown role they plan in an election, must take on the challenge of **generating information in advance to counteract the disinformation that may cast doubt on the future and legitimacy of the electoral process**. Electoral agencies have a large amount of helpful information for the media and citizens. Materials often used for training or by experts on the matter; specific regulations; answers to frequently asked questions; recurrent disinformation that is periodically answered; etc. Making this information available to the media can significantly contribute to a better understanding of the electoral processes.

This document intends to provide recommendations for electoral bodies, so that means can be developed to offer professional, well-founded, accurate, and, especially, **timely** responses to combat the disinformation that may arise during an electoral process.

> **"If there's an information gap, it'll probably be filled with disinformation."**

Information for electoral integrity: everything that needs to be communicated so that disinformation does not compete in elections

The electoral process is a set of acts established by law (Constitution, laws, decrees, resolutions, and judicial decisions) for citizens to select their representatives. Democracies aspire for a fair, equitable, and transparent electoral process and, above all, one that is respectful of voters' decisions. To make this possible, a network of entities is responsible for carrying out this process. Their functions and members depend on the legislation established in each country. In this document, "Electoral Bodies" refers to the different institutions with some involvement in the electoral process.

In addition to the tasks inherent to the organization of the elections (e.g., preparation of electoral rolls, the official announcement of candidacies, organization of the voting day and electoral materials, etc.), **the Electoral Bodies are especially relevant for the citizens and the media as they are a reference when it comes to clearing up doubts about the process.** As we have warned repeatedly, the challenge ahead of us—especially in an era where the spread of opinions or publication of information or contents disguised as such is relatively easy—is to fight disinformation, whether it is tendentious or straightforward malicious. Although this is not necessarily regulated as one of the tasks of the Electoral Bodies, their expertise and knowledge can play a critical role so that citizens' vote is well-informed and are not manipulated.

To prevent disinformation from becoming a competitor in the elections, Electoral Bodies must pay special attention and be willing to produce relevant and timely information but especially **become the primary source of information and consultation in the face of attempts to mislead the public**. Although all Electoral Bodies have communication departments or units, which generally inform or comment on the stages of the process, publish timetables or the body's decisions, their **role nowadays must be expanded for them to develop specific response mechanisms for the inquiries they receive (passive information) or to deal with situations that call for their participation to clarify misunderstandings, errors or deny false facts (active information)**.

This type of intervention implies a multidimensional challenge, primarily focused on different audiences. Different strategies should be developed depending on who you want to reach and what you want to pay attention to. Traditional media (radio, television, etc.) are one thing; social media or electronic communications are another. Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, TikTok, Twitch, and Youtube, among others, are environments where information is disseminated to a particular audience. In general, Electoral Bodies are either not present in such environments or present but are still adapting and learning how they work.

Why ask this of the Electoral Bodies? **The gap not filled with technically accurate and reliable information is often filled with disinformation or poor-quality news.**

Although elections are processes that are periodically put into play in established democracies, very few people have a thorough knowledge of the procedures involved. **At the same time, many "truths" about electoral processes lack a solid basis for their justification and are frequently repeated by the media or the general public. The problem deepens when these "truths" go viral and end up affecting the credibility of the electoral process.**

The communicational value of the Electoral Bodies' knowledge and expertise must be leveraged. They must be consulted and listened to, and their knowledge must be made available to citizens. And in these times of mass disinformation, their role entails the generation of information prior to the beginning of the electoral cycle and the definition of a process or "workflow" for validating or denying the content that circulates around electoral processes.

What is fraud? When is fraud involved? What is an irregularity? At what point is it necessary to raise alarms about the integrity of the electoral process? What things are "normal" or usually occur without affecting the integrity of the process? What problems do we encounter regularly? How do we solve problems at the voting stations? What is the solution to certain irregularities? Answers to these types of questions can be prepared in advance and provided by proactive Electoral Bodies during the electoral processes.

Preparing to fight misinformation: anticipation, active transparency, and rapid response. General recommendations

Electoral authorities play an essential role in the organization and operation of the electoral process. However, they face new challenges election after election related to the communication of the process and its transparency. International standards—such as those of the United Nations or the OAS, among others—focus mainly on the following recommendations as a critical aspect to organize their efforts.

- Design communication strategies with a particular focus on electoral integrity, addressing disinformation and the role of electoral authorities as the primary source of data to counteract its impact on the electoral process. As mentioned above, speed of response is essential, and for this to happen, preparation is vital (see more resources here): Journalism, "Fake News" & Disinformation).

- Produce information for citizens, Civil Society Organizations, and journalists to create a glossary of electoral terms and situations (irregularities, problems, etc.) that often happen in electoral processes, indicating the severity of each and the system's responses to them.

- Develop media and information literacy campaigns focusing on electoral integrity, especially for journalists, as multiplier agents of reliable information (see: Responses to Address Disinformation in the Context of the 2021 General Elections).

- Promote mutual knowledge, previous contact, and profound articulation between electoral authorities, their communication departments, and fact-checkers/verification journalism networks to share information quickly and effectively to debunk disinformation before it escalates (see more on the subject in Elections and media in digital times).

- There are many channels through which election agencies can make themselves available to citizens and journalists. Make a direct communication channel available to the press and the media to communicate with experts in the organization to address any doubts that may arise before, during or after the election. Organizations are strongly advised to make dedicated communications officers available on Election Day.

A communication channel of this nature can help clear doubts on:

- Issues concerning the electoral rolls/lists (such as having deceased persons appear in the list does not mean that someone will take their place or that there is fraud).

- Problems with electoral materials (shortage, materials of questionable nature, bad conditions, inconsistencies in telegrams).

- Questions about the members of the voting stations, the role, and attributions of the authorities and party officials.

- Difficulty of access to the voting station locations.

- People around voting stations who are not directly involved with the process whose intention is to influence people's vote (we need to consider the legislation of each country).

- Any other questions related to voting stations that may tarnish public trust in the elections.

- Monitor traditional and social media while elections are taking place to address any doubts or potential disinformation crises in time (see here for a guide to News compilation and social media monitoring).

- Collect official information (before the elections) on the number of complaints made in the previous elections, the cases that were investigated, and their findings regarding the different types of fraud. One of the critical elements that underpin disinformation is the lack of official data on a) the true magnitude of the problem; b) its impact on the election results. (For more on this, see the transparency section of the document Addressing Disinformation in the Context of the 2021 General Elections).

- Enhance the electoral body's levels of active transparency by systematizing past experiences on communication, strategies to counteract disinformation, and engagement efforts with journalists (for more information, see 2021 Elections in Argentina. The impact of disinformation on democratic integrity).

International standards

UNESCO Addis Ababa Declaration

World Press Freedom Day 2019

"Journalism and elections in times of disinformation" (excerpts)

"We call on each UNESCO Member State, including their Electoral Management Bodies, to

- *Create, strengthen and/or implement, as agreed in various conventions, an enabling legal and policy framework in line with international standards to guarantee respect for freedom of expression and privacy, to foster a diverse, independent media sector, and to ensure that relevant officials are properly trained so as to abide by that framework in practice;*

- *Adopt and/or implement right to information laws and policies and the required mechanisms to give effect to them, as per Sustainable Development Goal 16.10;*

- *Remove existing legal obstacles, and avoid adopting broad and vaguely-worded regulatory responses to the problems of disinformation, and repeal measures that fail to respect international standards of legality, legitimate purpose and necessity, or which otherwise risk unduly restricting the right to freedom of expression;*

- *Abstain from delegating, legally or through political pressure, the regulation of online content to internet companies in a manner which goes beyond what is permitted under international law (privatizing censorship);*

- *Invest in Media and Information Literacy among the general public, with a particular focus on the youth, in various ways, including by incorporating these competencies into formal, informal and non-formal education programs;*

- *Protect voters' registration data and secure critical election infrastructure, including voting equipment, ensuring that election-related measures and practices are underpinned by integrity, as well as protect and respect freedom of expression, press freedom and privacy as it relates to data protection;*

- *Explore and implement effective ways to ensure a level playing field for electoral contenders and the free flow of information and ideas during election campaigns and voting days, including through transparency and regulation related to electoral campaigns' spending and political advertising, while ensuring that any such measures respect international guarantees of freedom of expres-*

sion and citizens' privacy as it relates to data protection;

- *Avoid making, sponsoring, encouraging or further disseminating* statements which they know or reasonably should know to be false (disinformation) or which demonstrate a reckless disregard for verifiable information (propaganda), as well as statements that undermine the credibility of journalists and media or label them as enemies, liars or opposition;

- *Promote* a code of conduct among political actors to avoid the use of disinformation campaigns in electoral processes and the establishment of accountability mechanisms related to the violation of such a code;

- *Foster and use* academic and scientific research on social media and social messaging effects, as well as safety of journalists, in order to guarantee that institutional and state responses are based on rigorous and extensive public analysis;

- *Advocate* for ethical and safe spaces for disseminating and receiving verified information and enabling peaceful dialogue to strengthen democracy;

- *Promote* multi-sectoral dialogue with actors in the electoral ecosystem such as electoral authorities, political parties, intermediary platforms, media regulatory authorities, information and data protection authorities, media, journalists, civil society organizations, parliamentarians, among others in order to address disinformation while respecting international commitments on freedom of expression and privacy.[4]

[4] UNESCO (2019).

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Best practice

IACHR: Electoral authorities and their role in electoral communication

"A good examples of this are the actions of Mexico's National Electoral Institute or Brazil's Superior Electoral Court in the context of their respective 2018 presidential elections. In these cases, the electoral authorities established efficient communication channels with the main platforms, media, and fact-checking organizations. They were thus able to respond with truthful information to false information, especially that intended to affect the integrity of the electoral process. These types of actions seek to (a) raise awareness among citizens about the problem of disinformation; (b) draw attention to the problem to encourage citizens not to reproduce false information; (c) offer tools and resources to verify information, and (d) contrast false information with accurate information. Many of these recommendations were especially supported by the European Commission's High-Level Expert Group, which suggests that most reactions to disinformation should be "non-regulatory and should involve a broad range of stakeholders." [5]

[5] CIDH (2019:29).

Best practice

IACHR: Electoral authorities and their role in electoral communication

Faced with the spread of disinformation, electoral authorities in the region have adopted different measures to anticipate, counteract and mitigate its impact on electoral processes, focusing on protecting their integrity. Along these lines, the IACHR highlights those actions that are aimed at: (a) raising awareness among citizens about the problem of disinformation; (b) drawing attention to the problem to encourage citizens not to reproduce false information; (c) offering tools and resources to verify information, and (d) contrast false information with accurate information. Many of these recommendations were primarily supported by the European Commission's High-Level Expert Group, which suggests that most reactions to disinformation should be "non-regulatory and should involve a broad range of stakeholders.[6]

[6] CIDH (2019:29).

Best practices

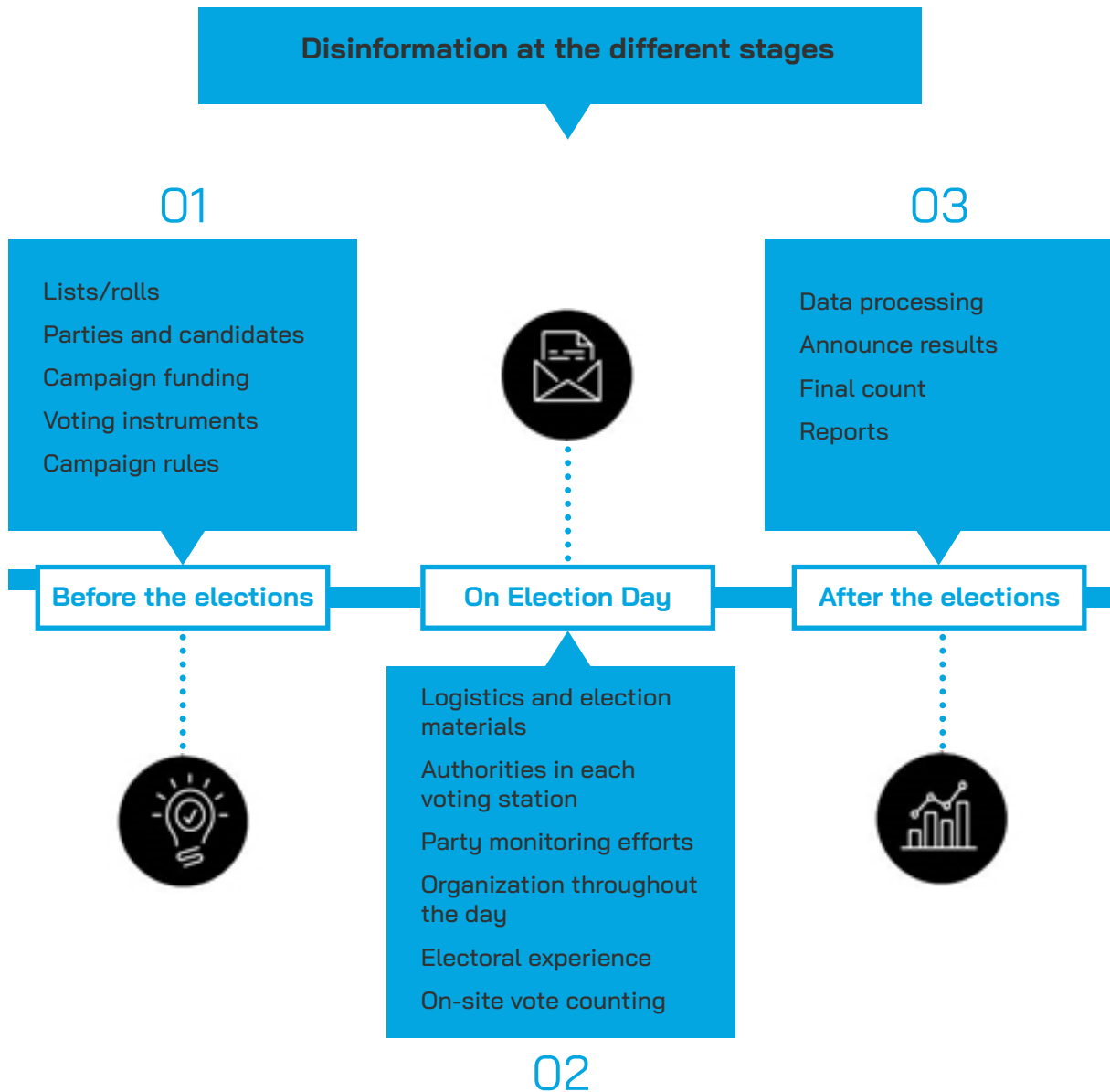UNESCO

Strategies against
electoral disinformation

In its 2019 report, UNESCO introduces and analyzes three intersecting trends in recent elections: the rise of disinformation, the intensification of attacks against journalists, and disruptions related to the use of information and communication technologies in electoral processes.

To fight it, UNESCO calls for multi-stakeholder efforts to develop strategies to counter electoral disinformation, including options for integrating media and information literacy into voter education programs. It is also necessary to reinforce, before, during, and after the elections, or surveys, the implementation of the United Nations Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity. In addition, electoral regulations must be reviewed and updated to consider the latest digital developments.[7]
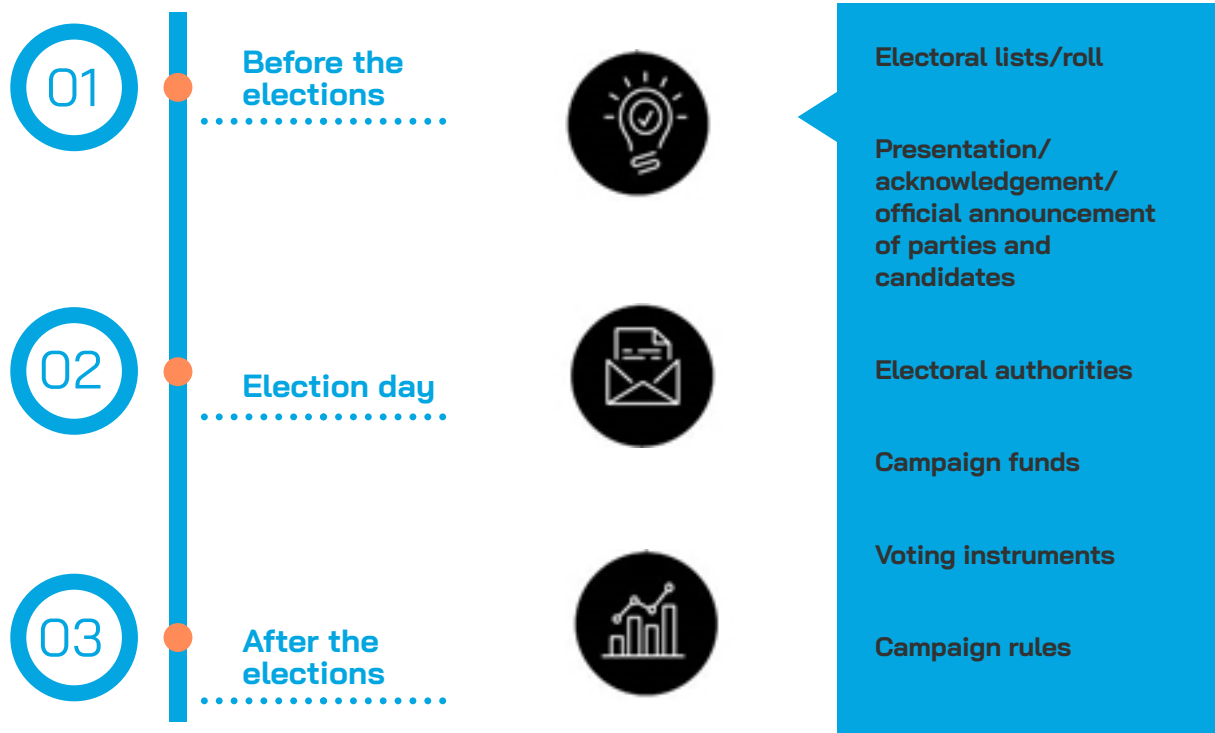
[7] UNESCO (2019b).

Most relevant periods for disinformation as risks to electoral integrity

As disinformation will fill the gaps that result from the lack of information on electoral integrity, we have to anticipate it and be prepared during the three major milestones in the voting cycle. To do so, it is essential to watch out for any changes in regulations that may be used to misinform and to pay attention to any concerns or doubts candidates or social leaders express publicly.

Disinformation at the different stages

01

Lists/rolls

Parties and candidates

Campaign funding

Voting instruments

Campaign rules

Before the elections

On Election Day

After the elections

03

Data processing

Announce results

Final count

Reports

Logistics and election materials

Authorities in each voting station

Party monitoring efforts

Organization throughout the day

Electoral experience

On-site vote counting

02

1. Pre-electoral stage: Preparation of the process

01	**Before the elections**	Electoral lists/roll
		Presentation/ acknowledgement/ official announcement of parties and candidates
02	**Election day**	Electoral authorities
		Campaign funds
		Voting instruments
03	**After the elections**	Campaign rules

Electoral rolls/lists

These lists indicate the persons who can and cannot vote. The public and the media are usually unaware of how they are put together, and they are only newsworthy when there are alleged violations. Still, it is not considered a central element of electoral integrity.

Thus, although it is the process that brings together the right to civil identity and the possibility to exercise our paramount political right in our democracies, how they are produced, compiled, narrowed down, and organized the deadlines for collecting them. The fact that citizens can monitor them and other stakeholders usually go unnoticed and appear either as mere bureaucratic processes or as one of the primary sources of "shocking information" in electoral campaigns. Providing more and better information about their main features and controls can help counteract the disinformation related to electoral rolls or lists.

Disinformation about the electoral rolls/ lists usually refers to:					
Deceased persons eligible to vote	Minors/ or close to the limit of eligibility to vote	Foreigners	People living abroad	People who are not "eligible" (incarcerated persons, subject to active court cases, security forces, etc.)	Instrumentos de prova de identidade expirados ou não habilitados

Information/communication to protect the integrity of electoral rolls/lists

- **Identify and disseminate information on the relevant authorities responsible for preparing the electoral rolls/lists**, focusing on their communication departments. This allows the public to know who the authority in charge is and for journalists to get quickly in touch to debunk disinformation.

- **Communications focused on:**

  - **Sources for the electoral list/rolls:** focusing on the source of information on voter identity, how it is processed, and how lists are prepared so that citizens know where the data comes from and why errors may occur.

  - **Timelines for generation/validation of electoral rolls/lists.** This information—which is usually part of the broader electoral timeline—should be distributed especially among journalists and public debate leaders, such as academics and civil society organizations, so that they can work with reliable data about how they are developed, compiled, and the categories of eligible voters.

  - **Categories that are eligible to be part of the electoral list/roll:** simply put, we must pay attention to all categories that may be subject to disinformation. To this end, the information available should account for:

    - Removing deceased persons from lists during the periods between elections: deadlines for their removal; quality controls on this information.

    - Deadlines for adding qualified persons by lower age limit.

    - Check eligibility to vote for nationals and foreigners who may be qualified for specific categories.

    - Preparation of the electoral rolls/lists of voters who live abroad, focusing on sources of information, dates for inclusion in the lists, removals, etc.

    - Categories of people who are not eligible: by profession, by situation, etcetera.

- **Particular focus on communicating the dates for the public consultation/audit period to check data** by the public and the media. This is critical because for citizens to engage effectively in civic control, they must be informed of the possibility of doing so and of the period open for reviewing the electoral roll and submitting reports.

- **Make clear, from the very moment the electoral rolls/lists are being produced, which civil identity documentation is allowed for voting.** Using images and text to explain which documents can be used for voting is a good idea.

Introduction/recognition of political parties or alliances or candidates that will participate; official notification of candidates and lists

Political parties, electoral alliances, or individual candidates—depending on what each legislation allows—have to comply with specific legal requirements and procedures to become contenders in an election.

In the first place, they have to announce they are running—through a party-list or open list, whichever way the legislation allows— either for general elections or for preliminary rounds to become a contender in the elections.

The competent electoral bodies check that candidates meet the conditions for the position they are running for and that they are not subject to any legal provisions that might disqualify them.

Disinformation related to candidates and alliances usually refers to:				
Candidates that do not comply with residency requirements	Candidates disqualified from running for office due to ongoing legal proceedings or convictions	Candidates who have held recent positions that disqualify them from holding the position for which they are running for office	Breach of positive discrimination regulations	The official announcement of lists and candidates

Information/communication to protect the integrity of candidates and alliances

In many countries, the conditions for voters are the same or similar to those required for candidates. However, there are specific requirements for certain positions and party-lists, and these should be identified and reported. Therefore, by actively providing such information, we can prevent the spread of rumors and disinformation, which could be detrimental to certain candidates.

- **Promptly inform who is the competent authority to approve nominations, handle complaints and decide on appeals, if any.**

- **Legal conditions to present the electoral offer:**

  - The existing rules that govern political parties, their operation, and their ability to announce an alliance or candidate.

  - The qualifications required to become a candidate or to be part of a list of candidates.

  - The reasons why candidates may be disqualified from running.

  - The conditions people must meet to announce their individual candidacy—when possible to do so.

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- **Regarding positive discrimination:**

  - Conditions political parties or electoral alliances must meet to put together their list of candidates.

  - Replacement lists to comply with positive discrimination conditions.

- **Electoral Calendar**

  - Electoral bodies should communicate and stress the importance of the electoral calendar to establish a time frame for electoral procedures.

Who are the authorities, and who will oversee: the voting stations/ polling boards.
The pinnacle of the electoral process is Election Day when several actors play critical roles. Mainly:

- Citizens who come to cast their vote.

- Authorities in charge of voting procedures on the different premises and voting stations.

- Representatives of political parties that monitor the process.

- Security forces.

Disinformation related to electoral authorities (premises/stations/local) usually refers to:	
Arbitrariness in the selection of voting station authorities	Lack of independence of voting station/board/premises authorities

Information/communication to protect the integrity of election authorities (voting station/ board/premises)

- Widely inform who are the authorities presiding over voting stations/boards/premises and how they were selected.

- Publish the security and conflict resolution procedures that voting stations or polling board authorities may have to implement.

- Establish the tasks and responsibilities of each person at the voting station or polling board.

- Educate about the difference between station authorities and party officials/proxies/representatives.

Funding the electoral process and campaigns

Money plays a critical role in the election process. It is necessary to organize the process and for political parties to showcase their electoral offer.

This involves public funds from taxes paid by citizens and private funds donated to the parties or alliances of their preference.

Disinformation in these cases suggests funding irregularities, biased organizations, unfair competition, and the involvement of actors whose participation in financing campaigns is forbidden based on the legislation of each country/province/region/city.

Disinformation related to campaign financing usually refers to:			
Excessive election costs/ irregular supplier contracts	Reports of irregular donations	Reports of irregular expenses	Reports of the use of public resources for proselytizing purposes

Information/communication to protect the integrity of campaign financing

- **Use citizen-friendly formats to inform about the resources allocated to the electoral process:**

  - Provide clear information about the costs of each electoral process stage

  - Publish the purchases and contracts made to carry out the electoral process accurately, openly, and promptly. It is suggested that the supplier selection procedures be explained.

- **Information on prohibitions, limits, and types of expenditures authorized for electoral campaigns:**

  - Point out the prohibitions established in the current regulations regarding who can finance a campaign and who can't.

  - Disclose what political parties/alliances/candidates can and cannot spend money on.

  - Disclose clearly and separately the public funds allocated to political parties/alliances/candidates for all purposes.

- **Collect specific information on state neutrality, the role of the government and governing party focusing on:**

  - Establishing what governments are allowed to spend money on within the framework of a political campaign, stressing the neutral position the State should adopt concerning citizens, especially when those who are currently in public roles are running for office.

  - Publishing in a timely, open, and accurate manner all available information on the income and expenditures of political parties.

  - Making available all advertising expenditures by governments and electoral agencies around the electoral process.

> - **In all cases, define and announce:**
>
>   - What financing-related issues can be reported in electoral processes.
>
>   - Reporting channels, if applicable, and related procedures.
>
>   - The channels for citizens to report irregular financing of electoral campaigns.

Public resources and how they are used during electoral campaigns

During electoral campaigns, a fine line separates the funds of the alliances and political parties from the funds used by the ruling parties to announce their activities through advertising, public events, etcetera.

Being able to separate the two is quite a challenge since, in almost all cases, officials are either involved in the electoral race or are contenders themselves. Disinformation in these cases often arises from a lack of knowledge of the regulations in place.

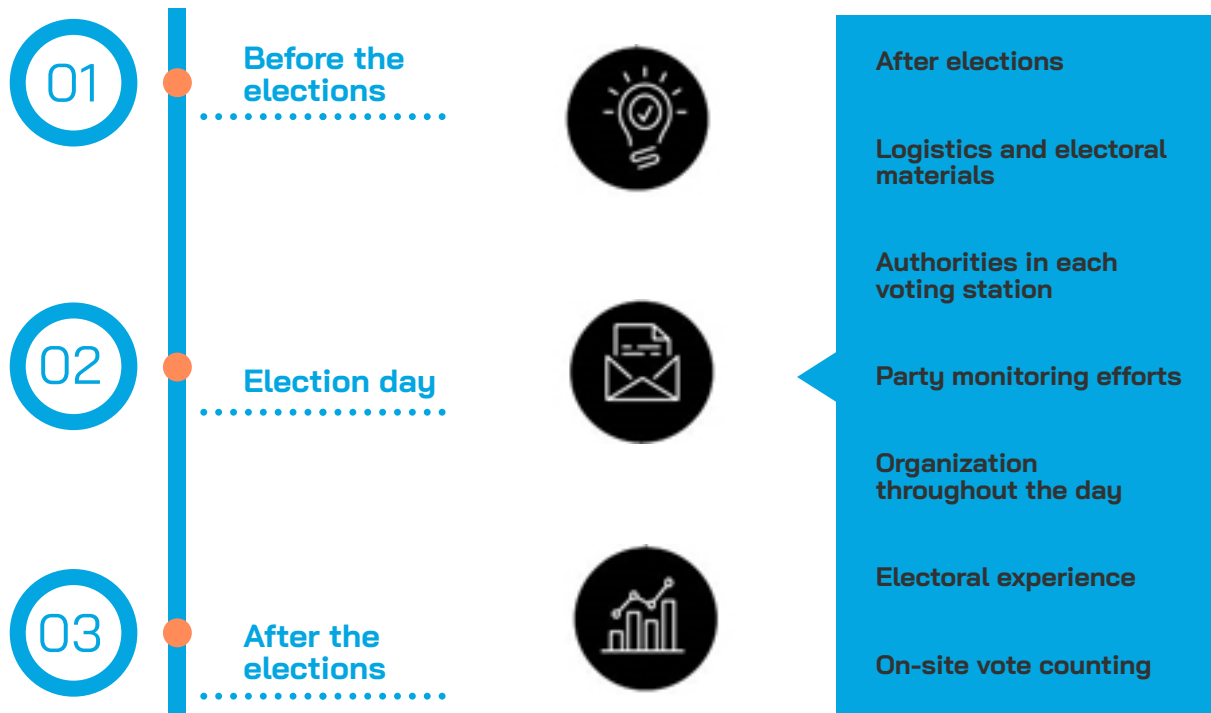| Disinformation regarding the rules of the electoral competition usually refers to:			
The use of public buildings and resources for campaign events	Inaugurations of works, governmental events during the electoral ban	The electoral ban	Polls during the electoral ban period

Information/communication to protect the integrity of electoral competition rules

- **Collect specific information on state neutrality, the role of the government and governing party focusing on:**
  - Electoral timeline, the start and end dates of electoral campaigns.

  - Explain, in a way that is easy to understand for the public, what public officials can and cannot do during election campaign periods.

  - Especially stressing the prohibitions regarding the use of public resources for electoral campaigns by the authorities whose parties/alliances are participating in the electoral competition.

  - Identify what official advertising is and improper use of official advertising as part of an electoral campaign.

  - Enable and announce the reporting channels for improper use of public resources for electoral purposes.

2. Electoral stage: Election Day

01 Before the elections	After elections
	Logistics and electoral materials
	Authorities in each voting station
02 Election day	Party monitoring efforts
	Organization throughout the day
	Electoral experience
03 After the elections	On-site vote counting

Logistics and election materials

There are always going to be problems in any election. The complexity of the process, the number of people involved, and the amount of electoral material needed to carry out the election will undoubtedly lead to many problems and irregularities. However, as mentioned above, this does not necessarily mean that there is "electoral fraud" or a desire to cheat.

The challenge regarding the logistics of an election and the condition and availability of electoral material is to separate those events that are expected from the irregularities provoked explicitly to take unfair advantage of the elections.

Disinformation about voting instruments usually refers to:		
Defective, incomplete, missing, apocryphal election materials	Production and availability of election material. Irregular ballot box set-up/misplaced or incomplete ballots/inaccessible locations.	Incomplete/torn/missing/apocryphal ballots Ballot boxes improperly closed with no security measures/hidden or moved without reason or proper security

Information/communication to protect the integrity of voting instruments

- **Focus the information to be produced and the responses on the following topics:**

  - Procedures for preparing, storing, distributing, and delivering voting material—ballot boxes, ballots, school supplies, voting boxes, forms, telegrams, etc.

  - Pay attention to the condition of the electoral material, reports of thefts, apocryphal ballots, ballot boxes with ballots inside, etc.

  - Make clear instructions available to the station/board/premises/board authorities and to all citizens on how to set up the voting centers, stations, and the availability of ballots—depending on each voting system.

  - Instructions on what happens if the material is questionable, damaged, or stolen and the solutions available to remedy the problems that may arise.

  - Facilitate access to reporting channels for complaints to be received and resolved as they occur.

The authorities and inspectors at each polling place

Voting stations are composed of two types of actors. Authorities - are usually elected by the Electoral Bodies among citizens, and they are the persons who monitor the process on behalf of the political parties. They are selected by the parties or electoral alliances themselves. Their roles are quite different. Station authorities are responsible for protecting the decision made by citizens, which was expressed through their vote. Their public responsibility is non-transferable.

Disinformation about authorities/inspectors in each polling place usually refers to:		
Improper/illegal behavior of party authorities/inspectors	Replacement of electoral authorities by partisan persons when this is prohibited	Manipulation/pressure/violence by inspectors against station authorities

Information/communication to protect the integrity of authorities/inspectors in each polling station

- Produce information on the absence of station authorities, how they are replaced in case of absence, and the role of security forces.

- Point out who citizens should turn to in case of any problem with the electoral material or other issues on Election Day.

- Produce accurate information on the role of each of the people present at the voting centers.

- Point out the extent of the responsibilities of political party inspectors/proxies/representatives.

- Making the mechanisms for reporting potential inconsistencies widely available.

Party auditing

Political parties play a crucial role in monitoring elections by looking after their votes. This contributes to the integrity of the process because the presence of several competing political forces at the polling stations encourages cross-checking, favoring citizens in general.

Disinformation about party audits usually refers to:			
Inspectors´ influence on the station authorities	Inspectors who instigate voters/do not fulfill their role with integrity/ hinder the work of the station authorities	Election officials who manipulate votes without the authorization of the station authorities/want to assume roles that are not their responsibility, such as taking the votes out of the ballot box	Attorneys who manipulate electoral materials such as electoral rolls/ lists, which are not those assigned to them/ transfer of ballot box/ entry to the darkroom or polling place, without authorization of the station authorities

Information/communication to protect the integrity of party auditing

- Publish the corresponding instructions on the tasks that may be performed by those who monitor on behalf of parties and alliances, the electoral material they may handle, and the impact they may have on the proper operation of the station.

- Clearly indicate what political party representatives are not allowed to do during Election Day at the polling station.

- Point out the rights of those who supervise on behalf of parties and alliances to control the electoral materials while setting up the polling station, monitor voters, the condition of the voting premises, the availability of party materials—if applicable—and during vote counting.

- Establish the monitoring tasks that may be required from a party monitor regarding the voter's identity and request these be challenged.

The electoral experience

Election Day is marked by a series of procedures established in advance that unfold in a short and specific period.

Many times those who come to vote may face obstacles, in some cases justified and, in others, unexpected. This is when voters, voting centers, polling stations, the polling station authorities, the security forces, the electoral roll, and the electoral material all come together.

Disinformation about the electoral experience usually refers to:

Persons who, due to their disability, do not have access to the polling place or voting station and must be assisted	Persons who, upon arrival, realize they are not on enrolled in the electoral roll/did not bring the proper documents/ or their identity is questioned by the authorities or inspectors	Voters who either do not have voting materials with them or find voting materials in poor condition	Biased polling station authorities or partisan inspectors who want to make it difficult for people to vote	Security forces taking on functions other than those specified in the electoral regulations
Voting secrecy violated	Proper votes and their integrity	Incomplete/out-of-hours voting/by unauthorized staff	Voting stations in unfit conditions/presence of persons who are not part of the process showing questionable behaviors inside the voting premises or in surrounding areas	Voting allowed for ineligible persons

Information/communication to protect the integrity of the electoral experience

- **Focus the compilation of advanced information on:**

  - Explaining to the public the optimal conditions for the elections to take place.

  - Disseminating electoral rolls/lists, assigned voting centers, and the procedure for requesting corrections/incorporations/modifications.

  - Providing clear instructions on how to proceed in the presence of persons with difficulties in accessing the polling place or with a specific disability—transfer of ballot box and electoral material, accessible voting room, escorts for blind persons, etc.-.

  - Providing information on how station authorities and voters should proceed if there are defective/missing/apocryphal materials.

  - Indicating the "step by step" measures to adopt if there are partisan station authorities or if they attempt to interrupt the vote of an eligible person arbitrarily.

  - Describe the security forces' specific role and responsibilities during the electoral act.

  - Providing clear instructions on how to protect the voting secrecy and the obligations of voters, authorities, inspectors, and security forces in this regard.

  - Describing the procedures for collecting electoral material, officers in charge of doing so, handling of the materials, security procedures, and final or preliminary destination.

  - Publicly describe the safeguards of the control system in the event of errors in the filling out forms/telegrams/ballot counting forms, explaining what is done at the voting center and what is done at the data processing center.

The IN SITU vote count

The end of Election Day implies a systematic follow-up of established steps to achieve satisfactory results. From the moment the last person has voted until the results are disclosed, anxiety and attempts to tip the balance in a specific direction generate a great deal of disinformation.

For this reason, it is crucial to inform what happens inside the polling stations and the closing of the voting day, the vote counting process, the on-site compilation, the transfer of information to the authorities, and the integrity of the electoral material (custody).
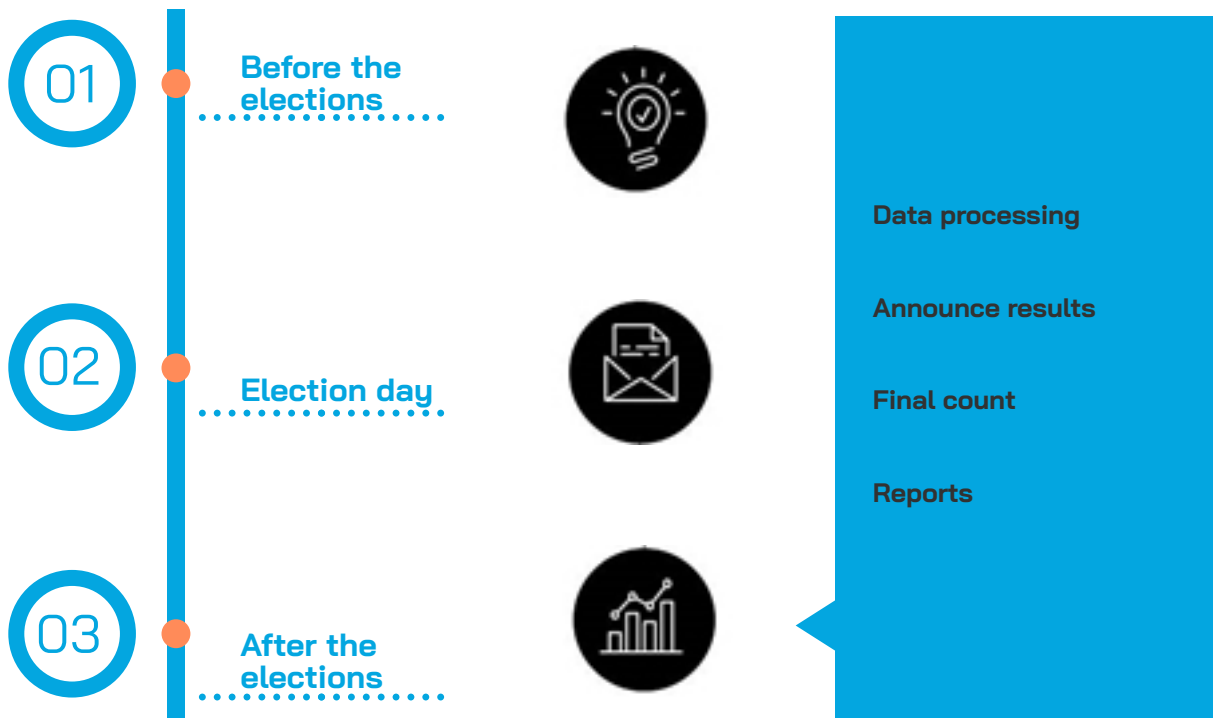
Disinformation about the on-site vote counting process usually refers to:

Irregularities in the opening of the ballot boxes or the transportation of the ballot boxes	Irregularities in the vote counting process, especially concerning those responsible for this procedure and how votes are counted	Reports of irregularities/falsification/replacement/disappearance of the material on which the results are posted	Lack of information about the procedure for the delivery of results, irregularities in the delivery of information	Statements about the relevance of the provisional results/quick count

Information/communication to protect the integrity of the on-site vote count:

- Inform about poll closing procedures and the exceptions to voting after the closing time, if any.

- Indicate who is the highest authority that regulates when voting closes and the existing exceptions.

- Explain the role of the party inspectors in vote counting, the review of each case, and the legal mechanisms to appeal a vote to be analyzed by the courts.

- Indicate the proper way to count the votes and tally the totals if there is a mandatory procedure.

- Disclose the procedures for filling out the electoral materials that contain the results of the voting stations and the purpose of each of those materials—spreadsheets, certificates, telegrams, etc.

- Disclose procedures and existing controls in place if the vote count is carried out by electronic means.

- Indicate the procedures to deliver these results, whether in electronic form or by sending certain paper documents to the data processing centers.

- Indicate the role of the security forces when closing the voting stations and custody of the material during transportation.

3. Post-electoral stage: what ultimately matters is to have reliable, quality, and timely information

01 **Before the elections**

02 **Election day**

03 **After the elections**

Data processing

Announce results

Final count

Reports

Processing electoral information

Once the polling stations are closed, and the votes are counted on site, the focus of the electoral process is put on the data processing centers, that is, where either the telegrams/spreadsheets/forms with the results of each of the polling stations are sent, or sent via electronic means from the voting centers.

Potential disinformation, in this case, refers to the timing of this stage, the custody of the material during transportation, uploading the results, and the reliability of the computer system.

Disinformation about the processing of information usually refers to:			
Poorly guarded/ handled/lost election materials	Questions about the computer system due to delays in data uploading or publication of data	Questions about the staff in charge of entering the information in the system and the control mechanisms established for proper operation	Doubts and questions about the timing for the publication of provisional or preliminary results
Release times of preliminary results	Fake surveys	Misunderstanding as to which entity is in charge of counting the votes/draft reports/ forms and how this is carried out	

Information/communication to protect the integrity of information processing

- Provide information about the procedures for transporting materials to the data processing centers, the staff in charge, security requirements, and potential controls.

- Provide a clear explanation of the route taken to transport the material with the results to the data entry and processing center.

- Show citizens the procedures in place for data uploading, whether there is a specific order, whether they are uploaded as they arrive or whether there is a preferential order, for example, certain districts for any particular reasons.

- Point out the cross-checks in place for data processing.

- Publish as much information as possible about the computer system where the data is stored and its source code for political parties—and any citizens who wish to do so—can monitor.

- Inform citizens about the timing of the vote counting process to prevent unfounded doubts about the procedure due to expected delays or being rushed.

- Disclose the software security tools in place to clear up doubts due to interruptions or delays in data entry and processing.

Final vote count

In our region, electoral fraud is always possible in systems with integrity problems—and those risks actually exist—but it is also one of the central myths in our democracies.

Therefore, it is crucial to focus on debunking the disinformation that usually circulates around these times, informing citizens about these issues, and helping journalists fulfill their role of providing information. In general, disinformation focuses on topics such as differences with the preliminary count or provisional result; tally sheets that raise doubts; the resolution of questions about the identity of certain voters; the communication of the results; the protection of ballot boxes and votes; how the votes are counted (are the ballot boxes opened? when and when not, and above all, who makes the decisions and who has the final say?).

Disinformation about the final count usually refers to:

Provisional or quick counts viewed as the actual election results	The tally sheets and their irregularities	Challenge procedures	Questions/ speculation as to what the actual results are	Vote counting (ballot box opening, misuse of ballots)	Who makes decisions over election irregularities

Information/communication to protect the integrity of the final count:

- Stress—providing information that is easy to understand—the difference between the provisional and final counts. This issue is critical to take into account when releasing information.

- Clearly explain the difference between the materials used to input the results of the voting or polling stations.

- Explain the difference between the types of votes and questions about the voter's identity.

- Explain how the problems at the voting stations are resolved and who has the final say.

- Provide clear information about the vote counting process: when tally sheets are used and when it is necessary to open the ballot boxes (depending on each system and if the system allows it).

- Explain the role of each of the bodies involved in the election process, their specific tasks, scope, decision-making powers, and the judicial path an election may take.

Conclusions

The information circulating around electoral processes is critical because it refers to the most important act in any democracy. Therefore, we should pay attention to all opinions, news, comments, or posts on this topic as they may attempt to discredit an already complex process.

Since it is an event that actively involves all citizens, individual experiences are often generalized. As there are political-partisan interests at stake, people often turn to the integrity or weaknesses of the procedures in place to explain the outcome. As it is the mechanism used by citizens to elect their representatives and distribute power, people often try to get whatever advantage they can, wherever they can. Sometimes they do so through actual fraud, other times by winning a debate in the media by questioning the electoral process.

In these cases, it is essential that Electoral Bodies take action on the matter and issue statements, deny accusations, and make well-founded contributions to get to the bottom of media discussions.

"Fraud" is too serious a word to use lightly. This does not mean that fraud does not exist or that irregularities may occur and be addressed by public opinion. But it is essential to distinguish between particular experiences and unfounded reports that only seek media impact from what truly deserves attention and relates to the integrity of an electoral process. This is an urgent matter and current challenge for the electoral authorities.

Following UNESCO[8] suggested responses to fight disinformation in electoral contexts, we identified three items that we believe are key for Electoral Bodies to consider when dealing with this problem.

First, **we need to identify the disinformation, check that it is not actually accurate information, and identify the source**.

Then, **we need to identify the target audience of this disinformation, i.e., the persons who may be impacted by this content.** Both responses are, of course, linked and build on each other since the receiving audience may, in turn, potentially reproduce that information.

Therefore, the third essential element to consider **is having the possibility to respond in the same media channel where this information is reproduced and spread**. Thus the need for Electoral Bodies to engage in social and traditional media outlets and messaging systems. The best way to actively fight the attempts to discredit the electoral processes is to disseminate information; have staff available to search for disinformation actively; train journalists, and generally engage through the channels where disinformation circulates. **We are talking about fighting on the same battlefield where disinformation is produced and reproduced.**

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[8] UNESCO Peru (2021).

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