

Research Report - 7th Annual Session

General Assembly

Reforming electoral systems to prevent political corruption

Forum: General Assembly

Issue: Reforming electoral systems to prevent political corruption

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Introduction

Democracy, A word when translated from Greek, means “rule by the people”. A concept that was first introduced in prehistoric times, when civilisation was still hunter-gatherer societies, has come a long way since then. Out of the 167 countries analysed by the World Population Review, only 24 countries have been recognised to have a completely democratic system. Along with 50 countries having a flawed democracy, meaning a system that is influenced by corruption or discrimination (“Democracy Countries 2025”). This brings us to the issue being discussed: Electoral systems. These systems have been the backbone of democratic governance, a system which allows citizens to choose their leaders and to further hold these leaders accountable for their actions. But after recognising that out of the 57% of countries which claim to be democratic (DeSilver), a vast majority of them come under the classification of a “Flawed democracy”, one that may be heavily influenced by corruption due to the electoral system. Political corruption in the electoral system can happen in several ways, including vote buying, ballot manipulation, misuse of campaign funds, Gerrymandering and even voter suppression.

This problem surrounding political corruption caused by electoral systems has reached an all-time high, especially in recent years, with the year 2024 being one of the biggest years for elections, with close to 2 billion people casting their votes worldwide. (Transparency International) During this year, rigging of the electoral system has led to large amounts of political corruption. With observations being conducted over the national election across the globe, it was further seen that electoral corruption was observed in over 70 national elections, further influencing the results. Allegations of electoral malpractice in countries all over the world, combined with the growing power and influence of digital misinformation campaigns, have challenged the integrity of elections on a global scale, further demanding a change in the system to ensure corruption-free political campaigns. But these consequences of corruption extend beyond a domestic sense, leading to civil unrest and declining confidence in the democratic system.

Given the especially important role of a fair and transparent election that plays a part in maintaining peace, stability and good governance, addressing the corruption within electoral systems has become a pressing priority for the international community.

Definition of Key Terms

Democracy

Democracy is a system of government in which laws, policies, leadership and major undertakings of a state or other polity are directly or indirectly decided by the “people” (Froomkin etc.)

Electoral System

An electoral system is a process through which the electorate (the “people”), those eligible to vote in a particular election, choose who they want to represent them. These systems play an important role in representing democracy in countries. (“Electoral Systems - the Constitution Society”)

Electoral Reform

Electoral reform refers to changes in electoral policy aimed at enhancing the fairness, transparency and effectiveness of the election process. This reform can encompass legal, administrative and political changes designed to improve voter turnout and decrease political corruption. (Walter and Andrew)

Flawed Democracy

Flawed democracies are nations where elections are fair and free and basic civil liberties are still honoured, but may have issues; these could include issues with media freedom infringement, or political corruption may occur. These generally signify a democracy that has yet to fully develop into a complete democracy. (“Flawed/Defective Democracy”)

Gerrymandering

Gerrymandering is the practice of drawing electoral district boundaries with the intent of favouring a specific political party. A method is often used to amplify or reduce the political power of certain demographics. (Walter and Andrew)

Political Corruption

Corruption is generally defined as the misuse of public authority, political corruption is further defined as corruption in which the political decision-makers are involved. Political corruption is generally associated with the abuse of authority. (Amundsen)

Vote Buying

Vote buying is an electoral campaign violation that occurs in many countries, where specific political parties “bribe” voters to favour their party. A method that often undermines the integrity of elections. (“Vote Buying”)

General Overview

The history of the electoral systems and the issue of political corruption are deeply intertwined. With Political corruption often leading to the rigging of the electoral process, it is important to constantly search for better systems that can reduce its effect. Since the earliest forms of modern democracy were in Ancient Greece, elections were conceived as a way to empower citizens to choose their leaders and influence decision-making (National Geographic). As this democratic system developed throughout the years, forms of manipulation and elite control were extremely evident to change and sway the results of it.

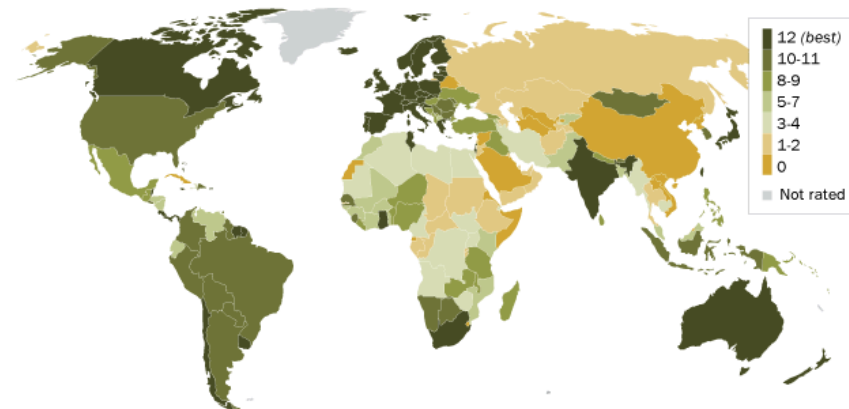
In the 19th and early 20th centuries, as more modern nation states began adopting democratic systems and universal suffrage expanded, the vulnerabilities present in the electoral system became more and more evident, to corruption became a norm. With practices such as **vote buying, voter intimidation and ballot stuffing** becoming common in both emerging and established democracies. To combat these issues as they came up, electoral reforms began. Changes to the system were made to attempt to combat these problems, such as the introduction of the secret ballot. In 1856, South Australia became the first state in Australia where all men were given the vote (universal male suffrage), and further on more importantly, in the same year, the secret ballot, the casting of votes in secret, was introduced in states across the country. This further influenced countries such as Great Britain and the United States to reform their electoral system in the 1870s and 1880s. (“Secret Ballot Introduced | Australia’s Defining Moments Digital Classroom | National Museum of Australia”). This simple change to the electoral system ensured voters that their choices could be made privately, reducing the risk of coercion or voter intimidation. This standard has now become a norm in our current-day society, as this practice has spread throughout the world.

Post World War 2 marked a new era, with many newly independent nations rising after the previous colonial rule, in which they began to introduce electoral systems. However, many of these nations still inherited the weak electoral systems of their colonial powers, prone to manipulation. But this further served as a landmark specifically for the nation of Germany, where West Germany adopted

a mixed-member proportional electoral system in 1949, following the collapse of the Nazi regime. To prevent political extremism, this system introduced a proportional system that ensured that the seats in parliament were equivalent to what the public decided ("What Is MMP?"). Ensuring fairer representation and limiting the ability of any one party to dominate. This system, while not as influential

Where are elections the freest and fairest?

Freedom House ratings of nations' electoral systems, 2016



Source: Freedom House
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as the secret ballot system, marked an important electoral reform and is still currently adopted in the nations of New Zealand, Germany and many more.

By the early 21st century, the rise of digital technology and social media marked a new problem for electoral manipulation, specifically surrounding misinformation campaigns and foreign interference. This newfound problem caused by the internet affected both established and emerging systems alike. Recognising these problems, the international community responded with initiatives such as the United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC), which came into force in 2003 to promote fair, transparent and accountable electoral processes. (United Nations)

When discussing a method to reform the electoral process, it is important to recognise the problems possessed by the current electoral system and specific current-day problems and their impacts on society. Some major problems include,

1. First past the post winners (The winner takes all Problem)

This problem refers to the issue surrounding the winner of the elections being the sole winner, regardless of whether they win by a mile or a centimetre. This indicates that the candidate who receives the most votes generally wins, regardless of whether they have more than 50 per cent of the

votes or not. This strongly discourages independent candidates from entering the race, along with creating a more significant problem. This system generally leads to only 2 candidates participating, in which one candidate just needs to perform better than the other. This is an extremely well-known problem in the electoral system in America. (Bonitatibus)

2. Opaque campaign Financing

In both developed and developing nations, lack of transparency serves as a major problem, with major campaign funds being supported by wealthy individuals and corporations, which further allows these interest groups to exert influence over the electoral outcomes. Further resulting in unregulated online advertisements.

Major Parties Involved

While a majority of organisations involved with electoral reform are generally specific to the country, it is difficult to specify a set of organisations across the globe related to the topic. However, some countries are leading as examples, along with others that face problems with their electoral system.

Nigeria

Being one of the most prominent democracies in Africa, Nigeria has faced several significant electoral corruption challenges, including vote buying, ballot box theft, falsification, and even overvoting. Nigerian elections often fall short of the international standard (Onyedikachi Madueke and Chukwuemeka Enyiazu). Regardless, Nigeria is still a major player as they constantly reform the electoral system, with the most prominent being in 2015 and 2022, where they introduced biometric verifications along with stricter penalties for misconduct. Taking great strides towards a fairer and equal voting system.

Russia

Russia is globally criticised for manipulating elections through media control, suppression of opposition and the more pressing problem of cyber-based disinformation campaigns. Especially post the Ukraine-Russia war, there has been mass speculation surrounding the freedom within the Russian electoral system. Recent election results have been claimed to be “not free or fair” by independent watchdog groups as a result of intimidation and corruption. (Papachristou)

United States of America

Despite being one of the most developed democracies in the world, the USA remains deeply flawed and has often been accused of allegations of foreign interference (notably in 2016), gerrymandering and opaque campaign financing. Most recently seen in the recent elections of 2024, with the landslide influence of Elon Musk on the elections. These issues have fueled public debates specifically about electoral integrity and the need for systemic reforms.

European Union

Compared to the other major parties, the European Union serves as a group of countries. But has further demonstrated missions externally to ensure fair elections throughout nations across the globe. The EU is a globally recognised and credible actor in international election observation. Since 2000, the EU has deployed over 180 Election Observation Missions (EOMs) in more than 65 countries. With the importance of a fair and transparent democracy being highlighted in the EU's principles, the EU election observation Missions aim to enhance engagement with partner countries, along with supporting their efforts to fulfil international human rights. ("EU Election Observation Missions")

Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)

The OSCE's office for democratic institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) is one of the world's leading organisations in election observation. It provides impartial assessments and policy recommendations to improve the electoral systems across countries in Europe, Central Asia and North America. Specifically targeting countries with flawed and weak electoral systems.

Timeline of Key Events

Timeline of events in reverse chronological order leading up to the present day.

Date	Description of Event
2022	Nigeria passed the amended Electoral Act, introducing stricter rules on vote buying and digital transmission of results.

2021	Russian parliamentary elections face international criticism for a lack of transparency and suppression of opposition
2016	The US presidential election faces confirmed foreign interference due to social media disinformation campaigns.
2005	The United Nations Convention against Corruption comes into force, promoting anti-corruption measures
1999-2001	A series of international election observation missions by the OSCE and EU has become a standard practice in new democracies
1949	West Germany adopts a mixed-member proportional electoral system to prevent the concentration of power after World War 2
1948	The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was adopted by the UN General Assembly, affirming the right to free and fair elections as a fundamental human right.
1856	Victoria, Australia, pioneered the secret ballot system

Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

Various attempts have been made globally to combat the issue of electoral corruption. The UNCAC, effective since 2005, promotes transparency and accountable electoral practices. While other independent attempts from countries include Nigeria's 2015 and 2022 electoral Act amendments to ensure safer elections. The EU EOM has actively been monitoring elections in Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe, hoping to reform and improve transparency. Finally, concerns over cyber interference have led many nations, including the US and France, to enhance digital election security measures; however, this significant challenge persists globally.

Possible Solutions

While there are several problems present in the current electoral process, there are tiny steps we as an international community can take to further reform them. Some possible solutions include;

1. Strengthening Independent Electoral Bodies

Establish or reinforce independent, impartial and adequately funded electoral commissions that operate free from government interference, further including provision for transparent processes and international oversight when needed.

2. Adopting Secure and Transparent Voting Technologies

Promote the use of biometric voter identification systems to further prevent voter impersonation and multiple voting. In situations where electronic votes are used, regular independent cybersecurity assessments must be used.

3. Adopting a similar approach to the MMP electoral system

Establishing a system similar to the MMP system to ensure proportional results and representation from the results of the elections. Preventing Dominant party leaders throughout a nation.

Appendices

Electoral Reform Society

Electoral Reform Society is an organisation present in the UK that campaigns for democratic rights, working across multiple political parties to ensure proportional representation in the UK

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