



U.S. Agency for International Development Report on the Modernization of Electoral Assistance

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) submits this report pursuant to Section 7019(e) of Division G of Public Law 116-94, the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act, 2020, which incorporates by reference the requirements of the accompanying Joint Explanatory Statement and Senate Report 116-126.

Joint Explanatory Statement: *In lieu of the directive to the President [of the National Endowment for Democracy, NED] in the Senate report regarding a report on the modernization of elections assistance, the USAID Administrator shall submit such report, in consultation with organizations with expertise in electoral processes, in the manner described.*

Senate Report 116-126: *Not later than 90 days after enactment of the act, the NED President, in consultation with its four core institutes, as appropriate, shall submit a report to the appropriate congressional committees detailing the strategy, funding, and other resources necessary to modernize elections assistance to address emerging challenges, including: (1) foreign interference in elections; (2) the manipulation of new media platforms; (3) advancements in artificial intelligence; (4) quantum computing and sophisticated cyber threats; and (5) corruption in electoral processes that undermines governance. The report should also outline cross-sectoral approaches to these new challenges, for example between rule of law and democracy programming; between stabilization and democracy programming; and programming focused on the full inclusion of women and other marginalized groups.*

INTRODUCTION

This report addresses how USAID is modernizing our assistance to address emerging threats to electoral integrity worldwide. The report includes input from interagency counterparts at the U.S. Department of State (DOS), as well as the broader U.S.-based democracy assistance community, including the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), the International Republican Institute (IRI), the National Democratic Institute (NDI), and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), among others.

USAID regularly adapts and modernizes our approaches to electoral assistance. Our work in this area has evolved from an early focus on the development of political parties and the observation of elections in the mid-1980s to more integrated programming that cuts across citizen-responsive governance, the rule of law, civil society, stabilization, media, and human rights. USAID views credible and transparent electoral processes as pivotal to a country's stability and quality of governance, as well as to achieving U.S. foreign policy priorities.

In recent years, the global environment for elections has changed significantly. Elections have become increasingly data-driven and digital; election management bodies (EMBs) are adopting digital technologies to conduct elections; and political parties are leveraging social media platforms and artificial intelligence (AI) to engage voters in more personalized, targeted ways. At the same time, data safeguards are vulnerable to ***sophisticated cyber attacks***. Linked to this challenge,

elections around the world face the growing threat of *malign foreign interference*, which is not new, but is increasing in intensity, sophistication, and scope. Foreign actors, as well as domestic provocateurs, are *manipulating new media*, including by launching disinformation campaigns to undermine elections and broader political processes. They are using *AI* increasingly to automate processes that create, amplify, and micro-target online propaganda and misinformation campaigns. Elections also face more pervasive forms of *corruption* that breaks the chain of accountability between voters and elected officials, thus undermining democratic governance.

While the challenges have grown more complex, USAID continues to build on several opportunities and positive developments. In many countries, USAID’s funding and technical assistance focuses on a new generation of politicians, women, and young leaders. New technologies pave the way for new entrants into the political arena, and civil society plays a key role in demanding greater transparency in financing and holding legitimate elections. USAID has worked to increase the professionalism and capacity of election-management bodies in many countries. Domestic, citizen-based, and international election observation efforts have spread globally with financial and specialized assistance from USAID and others in the U.S. Government.

STRATEGIES AND INITIATIVES TO MODERNIZE ELECTORAL ASSISTANCE

Foreign Interference in Elections

Elections are a central battlefield in the struggle against resurgent authoritarianism and malign foreign influence. Foreign actors, including the Russian Federation, the Islamic Republic of Iran, and the People’s Republic of China, increasingly exert their influence across borders to interfere in elections and undermine emerging democracies. This includes surveillance; disinformation campaigns; cyber-attacks; the financing of fringe or co-opted political leaders; fake election observer groups; buying media outlets to further control information; and surreptitious campaign contributions with “dark money.” The rise of AI, big data, mobile technology, and social media have created more opportunities for foreign actors to manipulate electoral processes. At the same time, low- or non-technology-based forms of foreign interference remain.

The Kremlin has weaponized information to destabilize nascent democracies and thwart democratic transitions and the aspirations of states that seek to integrate into the Euro-Atlantic community. Meanwhile, Chinese financing and training for election-management bodies and political parties, intended to build affinity with the model of a one-party state and curry favor with decision-makers with authoritarian tendencies, are on the rise. Regional powers, such as Iran and the illegitimate Maduro regime in Venezuela, as well as extremist non-state actors, are working from a similar playbook. The scale of resources that malign foreign actors dedicate to these tactics often far exceeds those provided by the democracy assistance community. In addition, local political actors are often willing to accept funding or assistance from foreign powers to gain advantage over their rivals. As a result, even minimal foreign interference can have a significant effect.

In light of these growing challenges, USAID is increasing our investments to reduce the vulnerability of electoral and political processes to foreign interference. USAID’s strategy to counter foreign electoral interference involves two main areas: (1) approaches that promote more credible election and political processes broadly; and (2) targeted approaches (described in subsequent sections of this report) that aim specifically to counter malign foreign interference.

USAID's broader funding for credible electoral and political processes helps ***strengthen a democratic culture that increases resilience to malign foreign interference***. USAID funds the development of electoral legal frameworks; the effective and impartial administration of elections; and strong citizen oversight. USAID builds linkages between our electoral assistance and our other investments in democracy, including those that improve the rule of law, increase civil society participation, strengthen the capacity of independent media to report on elections, and enhance human rights throughout the electoral process. USAID's Bureau for Europe and Eurasia recently developed a *Countering Malign Kremlin Influence Development Framework* to guide our activities in the region, based on the importance of checks and balances, the rule of law, and strong civil society as core factors in reducing foreign interference in elections.

USAID, along with the NED and the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL) at the Department of State, provides ***funding for robust citizen and international observation and monitoring of elections***, which can expose signs of foreign electoral manipulation and recommend concrete measures to mitigate against interference in voting.

USAID is exploring options for developing ***an approach to produce measurable indicators to track different forms of foreign electoral interference***. Options include financing research institutions, think tanks, civil society organizations, and media to improve analysis and awareness.

USAID is also ***increasing its coordination with the U.S. Government interagency and broader democracy assistance community partners*** on these new challenges to identify areas for collaboration and sharing of lessons. This coordination includes the Global Engagement Center (GEC) and DRL at the Department of State, as well as the NED, which funds programming to increase the awareness of, and counter, malign foreign electoral interference.

Manipulation of New Media Platforms and Advancements in AI

Free and unbiased information is a precondition for credible elections. Today, authoritarian regimes, state and non-state actors, transnational strategic-communications companies, and domestic political actors are manipulating new media platforms to influence and undermine trust in elections around the world. Such manipulation typically involves disinformation campaigns that deceive voters, create confusion, exacerbate polarization, and depress voter turnout. Combined with the increased use of surveillance technologies and the harvesting of personal data, foreign and domestic actors are weaponizing AI systematically to influence voters and undermine trust in political processes. They can do so because the privacy of data and the use of AI on new media platforms are not well-regulated, over-regulated, or, in some countries, completely unregulated. Along with disinformation, hate speech and dangerous speech have proliferated, especially on social-media platforms.

To remain effective in countering the manipulation and spread of disinformation, USAID is developing a more systematic and integrated approach to address weaknesses in the access to, and accuracy of, information. USAID is increasing our work that specifically counters the manipulation of information, by improving the knowledge and expertise of our staff and our partners, and using adaptive management to alter our approaches rapidly based on emerging evidence. USAID funds research initiatives to (1) map, measure, and understand the tactics used to manipulate information, including the disproportionate impact of propaganda and hate speech on women, religious and ethnic minorities, and marginalized populations; (2) build an evidence base for what works in

different contexts; and, (3) develop tools, training, and resource materials for USAID's staff and the broader democracy assistance community.

In addition to short-term solutions, USAID's approaches to combat manipulation of new media platforms and the use of AI to undermine elections include the following core areas:

Conducting innovative research on the vulnerability and resilience to disinformation. Limited data exist on how and why disinformation influences attitudes and behaviors, and under what circumstances individuals can develop resilience. USAID funds public opinion research to inform and target future programming more precisely, particularly in Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

Strengthening legal frameworks. Where democratic principles are at stake, USAID will prioritize developing and advocating for regulations on digital rights, disinformation, and dangerous speech in elections, while balancing protection of freedom of speech, transparency, and privacy.

Building the capacity of EMBs and governmental institutions to combat disinformation. USAID continues to increase our funding for technical assistance to EMBs to prepare for, and counter, disinformation attacks during election periods. USAID recently helped fund South-South cooperation among EMBs in the United Mexican States and the Republic of Guatemala focused on countering disinformation.

Strengthening and adapting domestic and international monitoring programs. In recent years, USAID, State/DRL, State/GEC, and the NED have greatly increased support for adapting tools for monitoring elections and social media to assess, expose, and discourage the use of disinformation and hate speech, as well as the malicious use of AI. USAID and our partners will expand this work.

Supporting independent media to increase the supply of accurate information. In several countries, along with State/DRL, USAID funds capacity-building for journalists at national and local-level television, print, and radio outlets to ensure accurate and responsible election coverage. For example, in the Republic of Moldova, USAID finances the Anti-Viral Media Squad through the International Center for Journalists, which is building a network of reporters focused on increasing attention to accurate information by using creative storytelling.

Increasing incentives for ethical online conduct by political parties and campaigns. Given the increasing role parties, candidates, and transnational strategic-communications firms play in using disinformation, inciteful rhetoric, and other harmful, AI-driven campaign tactics, USAID's approaches to combat this behavior include the following: facilitating norms for online Codes of Ethics for political consultants and political parties; funding monitoring by civil society and independent media to hold parties accountable; and strengthening the capacity of citizens to advocate for accountability and truth in messaging.

Promoting the accountability of social-media platforms. USAID, U.S. Government interagency partners, the NED, and implementing organizations will continue to support and fund direct engagement with social media platforms to promote more responsible norms and practices by their employees and users. At the country level, USAID builds coalitions of tech-savvy activists to provide local context and language capability in the fight against disinformation and hate speech. In the Republic of Kenya and Burma, USAID funds programs that bolster civil society's role in advocating for social media platforms to operate more responsibly and identifying inflammatory posts by malign actors.

Supporting media literacy. To build resilience against disinformation, USAID also funds a wide range of media literacy programs that help citizens develop healthy media habits and increase the demand for high-quality information. Training helps identify particularly vulnerable countries in which intensified media literacy campaigns are needed in periods leading up to elections.

Sophisticated Cyber Threats, Including Quantum Computing

An increasing number of governments are integrating technology into election processes, such as using biometrics to register voters and relying on electronic systems for voting and counting, tabulating, and/or transmitting results. Political parties continue to build large databases to micro-target supporters and deliver messages. Domestic and international observer groups use various forms of technology to conduct observation more effectively, including for parallel vote-tabulation. However, the widespread use of technology creates significant security risks. Governments, EMBs, candidates, and parties are often ill-equipped to prepare for, and respond to, cybersecurity attacks, and key decision-makers do not appreciate the gravity of these dangers. The lack of transparency and the disproportionate influence of vendors of technology, who often control sensitive election data and processes, complicate this situation.

USAID takes a holistic view of cybersecurity as part of our overall electoral assistance. In designing future electoral assistance programs, USAID plans to integrate a risk-assessment of existing and new electoral technologies to inform our programmatic priorities. In most contexts, addressing election-related cybersecurity threats usually includes legislative and policy support, as well as efforts to strengthen domestic capabilities to detect, identify, and deter cyberattacks by making them more difficult, costly, and ineffective. However, in more authoritarian environments, where major cybersecurity threats often emanate from the government itself, USAID's approach will focus on shoring up the capacity and resilience of the brave actors under threat.

USAID is increasing our coordination with relevant parts of the U.S. Government, such as the GEC and the Office of the Coordinator for Cyber Issues at the State Department, and others engaged in improving cybersecurity overseas. Depending on the local capacity, needs, and willingness to engage with the U.S. Government on sensitive cybersecurity issues, USAID's approach focuses on the following core areas of support:

Developing guidance on the appropriate and inappropriate uses of technology. New technologies introduced in administering elections can magnify cybersecurity, and their risks and costs can outweigh their benefits. Sustaining technologies past one election cycle, building election administration capacity to implement them, and educating voters about how to use them can be costly. USAID will continue to fund long-term technical assistance to EMBs and other decision-makers on whether, and how, to integrate appropriate technologies into elections.

Assisting with legal and regulatory frameworks, policies, and procedures that balance cybersecurity risks with transparency principles. This could include introducing appropriate domestic cybercrime laws and assistance with developing national and international normative frameworks that emphasize election cybersecurity as a key element in the protection of human rights. This can also include data protection laws to govern the storage and digital use of voters' personal information. This programming effectively ties together the Agency's work in elections and the rule of law.

Providing technical assistance to governments, legislatures, and particularly EMBs on digital literacy, such as support for training staff on detecting and responding to cyber threats, conducting assessments, and upgrading software and hardware. Examples of such assistance include training on “cyber hygiene” for EMBs through support to information technology (IT) departments, as well as technical assistance on selecting appropriate security measures and tools. USAID will fund technical assistance to Ecuador’s National Election Commission (*Consejo Nacional Electoral*) on cybersecurity following a September 2019 data breach, and recently supported an IT assessment of the State of Libya’s voter registration system that produced recommendations on protecting the voter registry from cyber attacks.

Supporting post-election reviews that include a cybersecurity assessment to inform improvements for the next electoral cycle. For example, after the 2018 parliamentary elections in the Republic of Iraq, amid allegations of fraud around newly introduced biometric voter registration devices, USAID funded technical assistance to address cybersecurity vulnerabilities.

Providing technical and financial support to citizen election-observer groups to monitor electronic technologies more effectively in elections and cybersecurity preparations.

Strengthening the cybersecurity of political parties and civil-society groups. In a number of countries, including Moldova, the Republics of Serbia and North Macedonia, and Ukraine, USAID, along with the NED, has funded work with political parties and campaigns to raise awareness of key cybersecurity issues and provide tailored training to enhance risk-mitigation strategies by using, among other tools, the Cybersecurity Campaign Playbook and Cyber-Incident Communications Plan Template, both developed by the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University

Investing in high-end cybersecurity support to local partners on preventive measures and rapid-response resources. This includes USAID’s Digital APEX initiative, implemented by PM Consulting Group, LLC, which seeks to reduce vulnerabilities by preemptively equipping non-governmental beneficiaries of programs funded by the U.S. Government with experts from private companies that help with improved data hygiene, the safe storage of private data, capacity for advanced encryption, and responses to cyberattacks.

Supporting Internet freedom. Regimes more frequently restrict Internet connectivity and block social-media platforms and websites in periods surrounding elections. USAID will continue to (1) fund advocacy for improved legal and regulatory environments that adhere to principles of Internet freedom; and, (2) provide journalists, activists, and citizens with tools and know-how to overcome Internet restrictions and social-media blockages.

Collaborating with strategic allies on the use of electronic technologies (including the member governments of the Group of Seven [G-7]) on election-related cyber threats through fora such as the Global Forum on Cyber Expertise, and through partnerships with the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE/ODIHR) and the Council of Europe.

Expanding public-private partnerships with companies such as IBM, Microsoft, and Facebook to provide *pro-bono* technical expertise and services that strengthen resilience to cyber attacks.

Anticipating the effect of quantum computing. Authoritarian regimes such as the Chinese Communist Party are investing heavily in quantum computing, which will be able to break the

encryption currently used to secure data. In the future, USAID will explore ways to integrate post-quantum or quantum-resistant cryptography. USAID plans to engage with the quantum-computing ecosystem, mostly in the private sector, to assist governments to migrate to post-quantum cryptography in their electoral infrastructure before the threat of quantum-computing-based hacks puts sensitive election data at risk of manipulation.

Corruption in Electoral Processes

Whether through the influence of drug money in campaigns, patronage-based political and economic networks, or the abuse of state resources, corruption in elections creates an uneven playing field and further entrenches incumbents. Corruption advantages political and economic elites, malign foreign actors, and sometimes criminal elements, which gives them undue influence on policymaking, governance, and access to the resources of the state. This undermines the rule of law, hinders economic growth, and weakens the governments' abilities to provide public services and security. Electoral corruption reduces the inclusiveness of elections, as women and marginalized groups often have less access to funds to run as candidates and fewer means to donate politically. Corruption in elections also can trigger electoral violence. In many countries, political finance, procurement processes, and state resources are not sufficiently regulated and lack transparency because of the limited capacity of oversight institutions.

USAID's approaches to address corruption in elections cover a combination of global, regional, and country-level programs linked to broader initiatives in citizen-responsive governance, inclusion, and the rule of law. The Agency also cooperates closely with interagency and international partners to coordinate our activities and leverage resources, including with the Department of State under the Indo-Pacific Transparency Initiative and the Global Anti-Corruption Consortium.

USAID's strategy for reducing election corruption focuses on the following core areas:

Improving legal frameworks. USAID funds efforts to undertake legal and regulatory reforms to increase transparency in political finance and the use of state resources. This includes providing technical assistance to EMBs and legislatures on reforming political-finance legal and regulatory frameworks, as well as financing for civil-society advocates of political-finance reform. As campaigns move increasingly online, USAID will fund activities that work to incorporate language and laws for online political advertising into political-finance regulations. USAID recently supported the *Abuse of State Resources Research and Assessment Framework*, published by IFES, which draws on years of global experience to help monitor, and advocate for, measures to mitigate the abuse of state resources. USAID's programs around the world are now applying this tool.

Strengthening enforcement. Enforcement bodies often do not have the capacity, resources, and political will to fulfill their mandates. USAID is equipping enforcement bodies to ensure compliance more effectively with political finance requirements. In the Republic of Colombia, USAID funded the development of oversight mechanisms for the financing of political campaigns; trained the Office of Inspector General to identify and prevent electoral crimes better; and helped strengthen the Attorney General's Office to analyze, investigate, and punish electoral crimes more effectively.

Monitoring and advocacy. Because tackling corruption in elections is primarily a political, rather than a technical, challenge, USAID will increasingly invest in helping civil society, independent media, and other demand-side actors to advocate for enacting and enforcing electoral anti-

corruption measures. Alongside these efforts, USAID funds more-effective monitoring of campaign finance and abuse of state resources during elections to expose corruption and develop evidence-based, targeted recommendations for reform. For example, in Guatemala, USAID financed local civil society groups to monitor campaign finance and advocate for change, which helped convince lawmakers to pass historic reforms that strengthen the oversight of funding for campaigns.

Leveraging transparency initiatives. USAID funds electoral transparency initiatives to develop new standards, commitments, and tools that reduce the potential for electoral corruption. USAID finances the Enhancing Cost-Effectiveness in Elections project, implemented by the Consortium for Elections and Political Process Strengthening (CEPPS), to collect and analyze comparative cost data on the administration of elections through a web-based portal. This will position USAID and the larger electoral integrity community to understand the true costs of managing elections. USAID has also funded the Open Election Data Initiative (OEDI), in collaboration with NDI and Google, which helps to foster cooperation and consensus among EMBs, civil society, and election observers on the principles of open election data.