

Committee: Specpol 1

Topic: The Question of Free and Fair Elections

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Summary

The question of free and fair elections is a crucial issue that needs to be addressed to ensure democracy and good governance in countries around the world. Free and fair elections are essential for legitimising governments and allowing citizens to choose their leaders in a transparent and accountable manner. Some issues that must be considered are that everyone has equal rights in voting, polling stations are accessible enough for people to cast their vote and the votes are counted and published without bias.

If society is to move forwards in the direction that the global population wants it to, it is imperative that free and fair elections are instituted all over the globe in order for politicians to effectively represent the voices of the people.

Definition of Key Terms

Democracy - a system of government by the whole population or all the eligible members of a state, typically through elected representatives.

Universal suffrage/universal franchise - ensures the right to vote for as many people bound by a government's laws as possible, as supported by the "one person, one vote" principle.

Election - a formal and organised choice by vote of a person for a political office or other position.

Migrant - a person who moves from one place to another, especially in order to find work or better living conditions.

Refugee - a person who has been forced to leave their country in order to escape war, persecution, or natural disaster.

Sustainable Development Goals - a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure that by 2030 all people enjoy peace and prosperity.

Electoral Management Bodies - commonly established to increase electoral legitimacy by designing, implementing and/or enforcing rules surrounding nominations, polling, voting, and tabulation.

Background Information

Protection of voters' rights and transparency in the electoral process are also integral to ensuring that the population is effectively represented and helps in preventing the manipulation of results or the rigging of elections. The independence of electoral management bodies, where electoral bodies are not managed by the government, means that politicians can't control how elections are taken in order to benefit themselves. Additionally, efforts must be made to combat electoral fraud, voter intimidation, and other forms of manipulation that can distort election results.

It is important for the international community to support countries in establishing and maintaining free and fair elections by providing technical assistance, monitoring elections and condemning any actions that undermine the integrity of the electoral process. By upholding the principles of free and fair elections, countries can promote democracy, uphold human rights, and foster trust in their political systems.

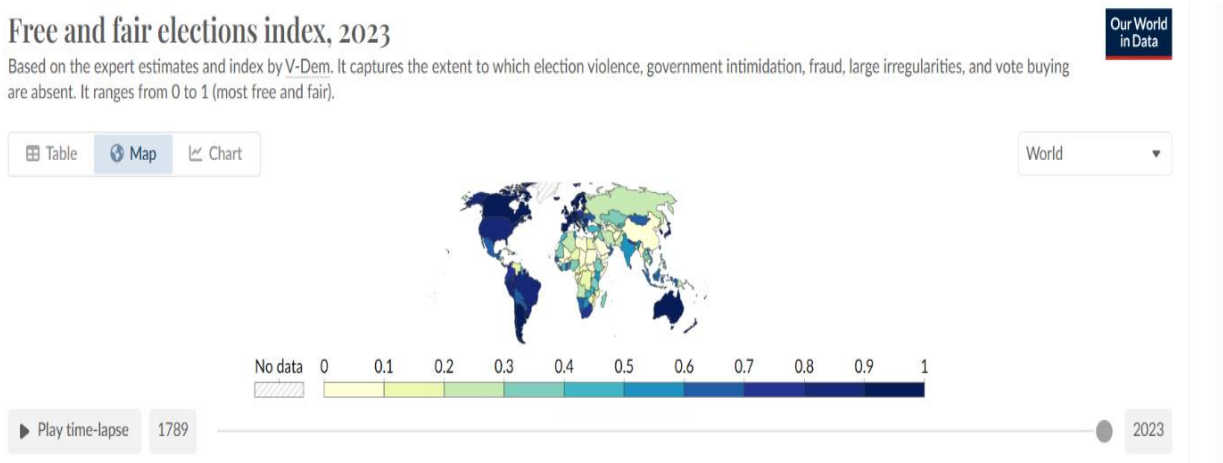
Although there are around 2 billion eligible voters worldwide (as of 2024), universal suffrage is something only 22 countries claimed to have in 2023 (according to worldpopulationreview).

Voter turnout is certainly an issue regarding this problem. In many cases, voters still face daunting obstacles that can affect whether they turn up to vote on election days. Based on data from the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), Rwanda displayed the highest voter turnout in a recent national election (in 2017, 98.15% of eligible voters turned out for the presidential election).

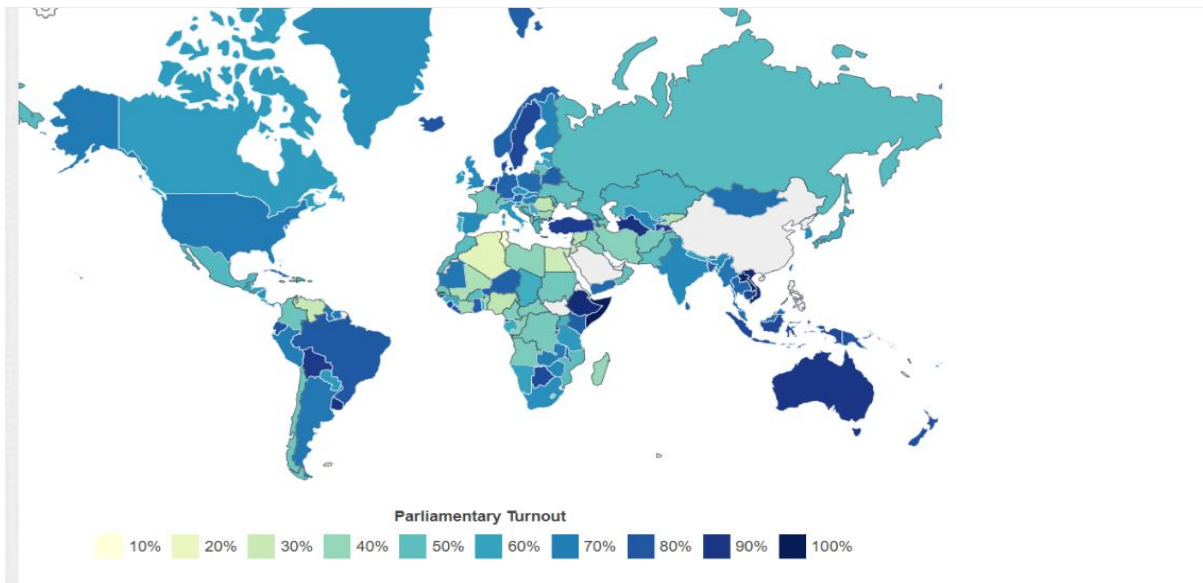
Furthermore, at present, migrants, refugees, and non-citizens only enjoy voting rights in a few nations worldwide, which can lead to underrepresentation. However, giving them rights to vote could also raise more issues, such as people having the right to vote in too many countries, meaning votes would no longer effectively represent the population of the country.

A shortage of polling stations can also make it nearly impossible for some people to cast their vote, especially those living in more remote areas – making polling stations more accessible is certainly an issue that needs to be addressed. A lack of political education exacerbates this issue, as some people may find that they do not understand enough about the political climate by the time they reach voting age to vote, or even if they do vote, they may not understand enough about the policies they are voting for, meaning they could end up simply voting, for example, in the same way as their parents or other influencers in their lives. Not only this, but some people may not have been educated about the importance of casting their vote, hence it is imperative that young people across the world are encouraged to cast their vote when they are of the correct age. Fewer than half of 18 to 24-year-olds exercised their right to vote in the last UK elections (according to the BBC), compared to the three quarter of people aged 65 and above, despite parliamentary research from 2021 finding that people under 25 were the most politically active age group (such as through petitions, campaigns and political content online). This shows how young people should be encouraged to vote, as they may contribute towards more ‘fair’ elections where people are correctly represented.

Map Showing extent of free and fair election around the world: (according to ourworldindata.org)



Map showing voter turnout by country:



The UN could have a big impact in aiding the provision of free and fair elections, with it providing technological assistance to 20 countries which will or may hold elections in 2024, as well as preparing guidelines and giving logistical support to ensure (especially war-torn) countries exercise their right to choose their government and build democratic structures. The UN places a large emphasis on inclusivity in elections, aiming to ensure that women, those with disabilities and the youth are all represented.

Since 1991, the UN has provided electoral assistance to over 115 countries, clearly showing how the UN's power, if correctly harnessed, could contribute towards free and fair elections around the globe.

Major Countries and Organizations Involved

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) – aims to eradicate poverty, which includes providing free and fair elections, especially to developing countries. It does this by working mostly with electoral management bodies, as well as with national governments and civil society organisations. It places great emphasis on women's rights in politics and challenges the violence against women in politics.

European Union – a major donor towards the provision of free and fair elections in developing nations (has a longstanding partnership with UNDP as well). Within Europe, it puts measures in place to prevent interference, misinformation and cyber-attacks. It has also funded electoral assistance programmes worth over 500 million euros in around 70 countries since 2007. In 2020 the EU adopted the European Democracy Action Plan to promote free and fair elections even further by strengthening media freedom and countering disinformation.

Electoral Assistance Division (EAD) – part of Department of Political and Peacekeeping Affairs and advises on electoral policies. Assistance is given at the request of the member state and is given at the discretion of the General Assembly if the country is deemed to be in a position where it needs the assistance to be given. More than 115 countries have been given this assistance since 1991.

Timeline of Events

1945 – UN established, with the aim of promoting democracy and human rights worldwide

1964 – United States (US) passes Civil Rights Act, ensuring all citizens have the right to vote, regardless of their race.

1965 - Voting Rights Act passed (USA): Aimed to eliminate barriers to voting for African American citizens, ensuring fair electoral access.

1974 - Watergate scandal leads to reforms in U.S. electoral processes, promoting transparency and accountability.

1989 - Fall of the Berlin Wall: Paved the way for democratic movements in Eastern Europe and the adoption of free elections in several countries.

1991 – UN started providing electoral assistance to countries (has provided assistance to over 115 countries since then)

1994 - Nelson Mandela is elected as the first black president of South Africa in the country's first truly democratic election, marking the end of apartheid.

2004 – European Commission (EC) and UNDP signed a Strategic Partnership Agreement to facilitate global, regional, and country-level policy dialogue and collaboration. Since 2006, this partnership has resulted in over 100 joint electoral assistance projects.

2007 – EU started funding electoral assistance programmes (since then it has funded programmes worth over 500 million euros in around 70 countries)

2010 - Law on Free and Fair Elections adopted in Uganda amidst political unrest, reflecting the global push for transparent electoral processes.

2012 - The adoption of the UN General Assembly resolution on the promotion of democracy and free elections.

2016 - The United States experiences significant scrutiny over foreign interference in elections, raising awareness of the importance of electoral integrity.

2018 - The European Union introduces measures aimed at protecting elections from disinformation and cyber threats.

2020 - Increased voter turnout in many countries during the global COVID-19 pandemic, showcasing the adaptability of election processes in ensuring public participation.

2020 – In Belarus, the disputed re-election of President Alexander Lukashenko leads to widespread protests and allegations of electoral fraud, highlighting ongoing challenges to fair and free elections around the world.

Relevant UN Treaties and Events

In 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted by the General Assembly, which included the right to free and fair elections in article 21. This was followed by the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation (passed by the General Assembly in 1994), which outlined standards for monitoring and assessing the conduct of elections.

The United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) was deployed for 15 years in response to the civil crisis in Liberia from 1989 to 2003, which resulted in significant loss of life and displacement of thousands. During its deployment, UNMIL played a vital role in supporting Liberia's recovery, including aiding the National Transitional Government and facilitating successful elections in 2005, 2011, and 2017. Through logistical support, road reconditioning, and media training, UNMIL contributed to the peaceful transfer of power in Liberia after decades of instability.

In 2015, the UN's 16th Sustainable Development Goal included a target of ensuring free and fair elections around the globe.

The 2023 UN Election Resolution focused on diversifying the electoral process, aiming to ensure that everyone, no matter what race, ethnicity, religion, sex, sexual orientation, national identity, language, disability or political views had the right to vote. A large emphasis was placed on ensuring women had the chance to cast their vote, with each of the focuses of the resolution being based off electoral data.

Previous Attempts to solve the Issue

In the 1990s, Nigeria experienced significant challenges with free and fair elections due to widespread corruption and voter intimidation. In response to these issues, the Nigerian government implemented various electoral reforms, including the establishment of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) in 1998. Despite these efforts, the 2007 elections were marred by allegations of rigging and violence. In subsequent years, the Nigerian government introduced additional measures to enhance the credibility of the electoral process, such as the use of biometric voter registration and electronic voting machines. These reforms were put to the test in the 2015 elections, which were widely hailed as the most credible in Nigeria's history.

Ukraine has struggled with free and fair elections since gaining independence in 1991. The 2004 presidential election, known as the Orange Revolution, was marred by allegations of fraud and voter intimidation. In response to these issues, the Ukrainian government implemented electoral reforms, including the introduction of a mixed electoral system and the establishment of a Central Election Commission. Despite these reforms, the 2010 presidential election was also marred by irregularities and allegations of fraud. In the wake of this election, Ukraine experienced widespread protests and political instability. Subsequent elections in 2014 and 2019 have shown improvements in terms of transparency and credibility but concerns about corruption and interference still persist.

Zimbabwe has faced ongoing challenges with free and fair elections under the rule of President Robert Mugabe, who was in power for over three decades. The 2008 presidential election was characterized by violence and allegations of rigging, prompting international condemnation. In response to these issues, the government of Zimbabwe implemented electoral reforms, including the establishment of a new constitution in 2013 and the introduction of biometric voter registration. The 2018 elections were seen as a test of these reforms but concerns about transparency and fairness remained. The main opposition party, Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), accused the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) party of electoral fraud, leading to post-election protests and violence.

Possible Solutions

Increase transparency and oversight - One possible solution is to implement greater transparency in the election process, such as requiring all political parties and candidates to disclose their funding sources and expenses. Additionally, establishing independent oversight bodies to monitor elections and ensure fair play can help prevent fraud and ensure a level playing field for all participants.

Implement voter education and voter registration reforms - Another possible solution is to focus on increasing voter education and improving voter registration processes. By ensuring that all eligible voters are properly registered and informed about the election process, more people can participate in the democratic process and make informed decisions at the polls.

Strengthen electoral laws and regulations - It is important to update and strengthen electoral laws and regulations to prevent manipulation and fraud. This may include mandating the use of secure and tamper-proof voting machines, implementing strict penalties for election-related offenses, and establishing clear guidelines for campaign conduct and advertising. By enforcing these laws effectively, governments can help ensure free and fair elections.

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