

Advisory Committee on Voluntary Foreign Aid (ACVFA) report

Democracy's Moment: How USAID Can Support Global Elections in 2024 and Beyond

TO: Administrator Samantha Power

FROM: Kristin Lord, President & CEO of IREX, and Chair of the ACVFA Sub-Committee on Democracy and Anti-Corruption

RE: Recommendations to Strengthen USAID's Strategy for Supporting Global Elections in 2024

In 2024, USAID has an unparalleled opportunity to advance the cause of democracy around the world.

To support the Agency in doing this, ACVFA is pleased to present the following paper, which recommends steps USAID can take to support free, credible, and inclusive elections globally. We endorse USAID's new policy framework focused on [Driving Progress Beyond Programs](#), and recommend the 2024 elections as an ideal opportunity to adopt this approach.

The stakes are high. Elections are planned in more than 60 countries, representing half the global population and economy. While USAID has long supported credible elections around the world, the urgency of 2024 demands an even more proactive and comprehensive approach. The 2024 elections will take place in the context of a 17-year trend of democratic backsliding and unprecedented levels of manipulative information, some of it proliferated by foreign governments, both online and in traditional media.

The ACVFA Sub-Committee on Democracy and Anti-Corruption highlights key dynamics to watch for as well as strategic opportunities we hope USAID will seize. These include opportunities to build stronger habits of civic participation, engage youth, and strengthen support for independent media. More detailed, action-oriented recommendations for how USAID can advance democracy in 2024 are included in the paper.

It is our privilege to collaborate with USAID to support the integrity, inclusiveness, and credibility of the 2024 elections. Please let us know if we can provide further insight and support. We gratefully acknowledge the contributions of ACVFA Chair Paul Weisenfeld, members of the ACVFA subcommittee on democracy and anti-corruption, USAID colleagues, and many organizations and individual contributors; details are included at the end of this report.

Democracy's Moment: How USAID Can Support Global Elections in 2024 and Beyond

Overview

In 2024, the world will witness elections in more than 60 different countries.¹ Collectively, these elections will affect countries representing nearly half of the world's population and more than 50% of global GDP. Pivotal, populous countries are among those voting for new leadership. Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Pakistan, and South Africa are just a few examples. Elections in smaller countries like Georgia and Moldova could have outsized repercussions.

Historically, USAID has provided critical support to help countries make their elections as credible and peaceful as possible. The importance of 2024's elections demands an even more proactive and comprehensive approach. These elections will not only shape the world for many years to come. They will shape each other. Narratives about election dynamics and outcomes in some countries will spread more quickly than ever, affecting outcomes in others. The cumulative results could create a strong cascading force that could deepen the global commitment to democracy, or weaken it.

The elections in 2024 will occur within a fragile global context. The world continues to experience profound uncertainty, geopolitical rivalry, and large-scale violence. Domestically, many countries are experiencing political polarization, economic turmoil, intense identity politics, and coordinated anti-rights movements.² The elections of 2024 will occur amidst a 17-year trend of global democratic decline, affecting political systems ranging from dictatorship to established democracies.³ Meanwhile, political rights and civil liberties have decreased, due to direct attacks on democratic institutions, initiated either by foreign malign forces or by people in positions of authority.⁴ **At the same time, there are countries around the world experiencing democratic openings – so called “bright spots” – where there are opportunities to help citizens and governments advance their ambitious democratic reform agendas and deliver meaningful progress. It is important to recognize and amplify these successes, and not only focus on threats.**

Information manipulation will surround elections worldwide in 2024, some of it driven by malign foreign actors. The volume and tone of this manipulation, much of it online, could affect the

¹ See Katie Harbath, “Different Approaches to Counting Elections,” December 19, 2023, <https://anchorchange.substack.com/p/different-approaches-to-counting>

² Sara Pantuliano, “Women Deliver 2023: We Can't Let the Anti-Rights Movement Prevail.” *ODI*, 14 July 2023, odi.org/en/insights/women-deliver-2023-we-cant-let-the-anti-rights-movement-prevail/.

³ Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2023*, March 2023.

⁴ Yana Gorokhovskaia, et al. “Marking 50 Years in the Struggle for Democracy.” *Freedom in the World 2023*, Freedom House, March 2023, freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2023/marking-50-years.

level and nature of voter turn-out, how citizens vote, how legitimate they believe the outcome to be, and how they feel about civic engagement going forward. In addition, online forums will provide wide-reaching platforms for harassment and threats, at a scale not previously possible in human history. Some of these threats will translate into real-world violence. Online threats and harassment could have a particularly chilling effect on women's political participation, if women choose to silence themselves or disengage from civic engagement in order to protect themselves and their families from abuse.

Preparing for the 2024 elections around the world will also require focus on what happens in the days, weeks, and months after citizens go to the polls. Ensuring peaceful transitions of power, in ways that reinforce democratic norms, should be a high priority. **It is important to prepare now for elections that do not go well, due to manipulation, corruption, or violence. This planning must occur in advance of the elections. It is also not too early to begin planning for elections in 2025 and beyond.**

In short, the stakes in 2024 are high. Some foresee significant opportunities for democratic forces to make gains worldwide. Other predictions are more dire, such as the statement by journalist and Nobel prize winner Maria Ressa who warned that, "We will know whether democracy lives or dies by the end of 2024."

We strongly advise USAID to develop a coordinated strategy, in partnership with other US government agencies, to support the democratic aspirations of citizens around the world in the 2024 elections. We urge USAID to leverage not just its own work and expertise but also its considerable convening power to mobilize a coalition of allied governments, development organizations, philanthropic organizations, and civil society to support democratic forces worldwide. We endorse USAID's new policy framework focused on [Driving Progress Beyond Programs](#) and recommend the 2024 elections as an ideal opportunity to adopt this approach.

There is still time to support free, fair, and peaceful elections as well as the democratic institutions, norms, information environment, and civic infrastructure that will best serve the will of the people. ***USAID should seize this opportunity to advance the cause of freedom.***

ACVFA recommends specific actions to support credible elections in 2024 (see additional details further down in the paper):

- Mobilize USAID to prepare for 2024 elections around the world
- Mobilize bilateral, multilateral, philanthropic, business, and civic organizations worldwide to support democratic elections globally in 2024

- Support robust long-term, independent observation of elections (including of the information environment), particularly by nonpartisan civic groups and reinforced by international observation
- Prioritize voter education, digital literacy, and resilience to manipulative information
- Encourage youth engagement and build long-term habits of civic engagement
- Increase support to independent media
- Promote inclusion of women and marginalized populations
- Create, leverage, and support platforms and networks for transnational learning
- Enhance responses to closing civic space
- Invest in countering foreign malign influence in elections
- Support greater transparency regarding digital platforms and their roles during election periods
- Provide tools and resources to USAID missions in addressing AI-enabled information manipulation
- Plan now for the post-election period; conduct scenario planning for various contingencies
- Evaluate and build the long-term infrastructure to support future elections

Key Dynamics to Watch in the 2024 Elections

Several dynamics merit watching in the months and years ahead.

Manipulation of the political environment

Increasingly, authoritarians influence political outcomes by shaping the political environment well before any voting begins, by closing space for political opposition, harassing and obstructing independent media, interfering in electoral management bodies, and curtailing the role of independent civil society, among other tactics. This influence extends to the digital realm, with global internet freedom declining for 13 consecutive years.⁵ This decline is evident in increased website blocks, forced content removal, cyber attacks on independent media, increased arrests for online free speech, and the imposition of repressive laws criminalizing freedom of speech.

Whereas in the past, authoritarians may have been more willing to use violence, imprison opponents, or employ other obvious ways of exerting control, today they also use more subtle means. These means include the use of information technology to surveil and repress populations and manipulate domestic and global narratives, to give the illusion of democracy while perpetuating authoritarian rule. Autocratic actors have been undermining the autonomy of electoral management bodies (EMBs) either by appointing allies and influencing their decision-making or by limiting EMBs' mandates and capacity to hold

⁵ Allie Funk, et al. "The Repressive Power of Artificial Intelligence." Freedom on the Net, Freedom House, Nov. 2023, freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2023/repressive-power-artificial-intelligence.

incumbents accountable.⁶ Additionally, authoritarians use “wedge” issues, such as gender equality, to foster social division and undermine democratic elections. Key challenges include the quality of the information environment, restricted voter registration, lack of transparency of election results and tabulation processes, abuse of state resources and campaign finance, electoral violence and intimidation, restricted independence and effectiveness of the judiciary, and failures of inclusion in the electoral process.

Foreign Malign Influence

Foreign Malign Influence is the manipulation of the political and information environment by foreign actors. It encompasses, among other things, the abuse of state resources, breaches of political finance laws, and strategic corruption orchestrated by foreign actors. Foreign malign actors now have newer, subtler, and often harder-to-detect tools at their disposal. Tactics include laundering of illicit funds to the campaigns of politicians supportive of criminal groups and weaponizing transnational corruption networks to disrupt and influence electoral processes. Subversion by foreign actors extends to political financing, rewards to politicians, and operating or funding of online information manipulation campaigns. Those who wish to protect democratic institutions and processes from foreign manipulation will need to employ both short- and long-term strategies. These include exposing foreign interference, mobilizing countervailing forces through existing laws and institutions, and directly countering foreign manipulation. Longer term strategies involve shifting laws and regulations, introducing transparency requirements, and building resilience through independent media, civil society, and government checks and balances.

Declining Voter Turnout

According to International IDEA, despite a significant increase in the global population with the right to vote, voter turnout has markedly decreased since 1990.⁷ Depending on the context, there are many root causes of this decline. Decreases in voter turnout can mean rejection or lack of trust in the effectiveness of democratic institutions to solve the problems of citizens, a broader crisis of trust among citizens, social groups and towards institutions or inequitable benefits from the status quo, or even complacency due to general satisfaction. As voter turnout has decreased around the world, authoritarianism and threats to democracy have increased. These threats include anti rights movements, the closure of civic space, and democratic backsliding globally. With the number of countries moving towards authoritarianism more than double the number moving towards democracy, the erosion of civic

⁶ A 2022 Report by V-Dem shows that governments successfully undermined EMB autonomy in 25 countries over the past decade and there is no sign that these attacks will be receding anytime soon. See “2022 Democracy Report: Autocratization Changing Nature?”, V-Dem Institute, March 2022 https://v-dem.net/media/publications/dr_2022.pdf

⁷ Abdurashid Solijonov. Voter Turnout Trends Around the World, International IDEA, 2016, www.idea.int/sites/default/files/publications/voter-turnout-trends-around-the-world.pdf.

freedoms often makes voting feel unsafe for women and other marginalized groups.⁸ They are discouraged from democratic participation through the threat of violence, both psychological or physical, including intimidation, assault, residential displacement, extortion and murder.⁹ The decline in electoral participation means that smaller interest groups, that do not necessarily reflect the will of the broader populace, can tip the balance in elections. This in turn creates room for the rise of populist and anti-democratic leaders in the public arena. And since social behavior can be contagious, declining participation can lead to long-term changes in civic behavior, as people begin to mirror the apathy of their friends, family members, and neighbors.

Coping with Manipulative Information

Elections around the world are now accompanied by large volumes of false and deliberately misleading information. Evolutions in technology, and the widespread use of social media, have made it easier to mislead citizens regarding the authenticity and credibility of information sources and content. Although elections and a competitive information environment have always coexisted, the ability to manipulate the information environment is now far easier, lower cost, more accessible, and possible on a far greater scale than ever before. Information operations that deceive and deliberately cast doubt on electoral institutions, officials, and results take a variety of guises, but their success has made them a standard tactic for anti-democratic actors seeking to gain or preserve power or fuel political dysfunction. In elections, identity and ideological triggers are mainstays of manipulative narratives. Information manipulation tactics range from unlabeled political advertising to systematic campaigns misusing data. Information manipulation narratives aimed at voter suppression, disseminating micro-targeted messages questioning eligibility, discouraging participation by women or minority groups, or sowing confusion about the voting process are becoming more common. These narratives undermine information integrity at all stages of the election cycle, from pre-election attempts to erode trust in legal frameworks to post-election efforts that may incite violence or distort election results.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is increasingly altering the information landscape. AI not only spreads but also generates information. It gives new power to malign actors by providing novel means of manipulation while simultaneously reducing the cost of conducting such operations at scale. The effects could be evidenced in declining trust in electoral institutions, the increased threat to election officials, and the growing complexity of the information environment that voters must navigate to meaningfully participate in electoral processes. Furthermore, there is a heightened concern regarding the accessibility of AI tools, with the capability to clone a candidate's voice, manipulate visual content, and create deepfakes. This

⁸ “Global State of Democracy Report 2022: Forging Social Contracts in a Time of Discontent.” *Global State of Democracy Report 2022: Forging Social Contracts in a Time of Discontent | The Global State of Democracy*, International IDEA Democracy Assessment Team, 2022, www.idea.int/democracytracker/g sod-report-2022.

⁹ *Preventing Violence Against Women in Elections*, United Nations Development Program, 2018, www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/publications/VAWE-Prog_Guide_Summary-WEB.pdf.

technological advancement raises alarm about the potential misuse of AI in distorting information related to historical events, propagating conspiracy theories, and disseminating hateful content targeting women and other groups based on factors such as ethnicity, religion, and gender. For instance, data shows that more than 70% of deepfakes on the web target women.¹⁰ AI's capacity for precise audience targeting also amplifies the risk of influencing swing voters, thereby posing a substantial disruption to the democratic process, particularly in the critical final days of a campaign. These combined factors underscore the urgent need for proactive measures to address the multifaceted challenges posed by the intersection of AI and information operations. It is also essential to seize the opportunities presented by AI to support democratic forces worldwide.

Protecting Independent Media

Ensuring access to a diverse, high quality, and balanced media diet is crucial for voter education, their ability to hold public actors accountable at the ballot box, and the credibility of elections. A variety of media perspectives, addressing local concerns, prevents undue concentration of power, fosters transparency, and reduces the risk of misinformation. Citizens are better able to make informed choices, enhancing civic engagement. To safeguard these benefits, it is imperative to prioritize and ensure access to independent media sources that cover local and national issues, at a time when political independence and business models are too often under relentless assault.

Journalist safety is another threat to quality independent media and its ability to hold the powerful accountable. Journalists today, and especially female journalists, face rising physical, digital, and psychosocial threats. According to a report from Reporters Without Borders (RSF), a record 533 journalists were detained worldwide in 2022, with 57 killed, 65 held hostage, and 49 missing.¹¹ Many more face regular threats of physical harm, cyberattacks, and blackmail. One result of these techniques is self-censorship, by which journalists avoid reporting on certain topics for fear of reprisal. To ensure that citizens have access to quality independent media, and reporting on sensitive issues, it is essential to provide journalists with the training, support networks, and equipment necessary to protect themselves and their data. Laws against journalist intimidation and threats must also be enforced.

Challenges for Women and other Marginalized Groups

Elections that truly represent the will of the people require the participation of all groups in society. This can be particularly challenging to groups that are marginalized due to their identity, income level, age, disability, or geographic location. Women, who comprise half of the world's population, youth, LGBTQ+ populations, persons with disabilities, refugees and displaced persons, and ethnic, religious, and racial minorities, and others frequently find themselves grappling with systemic disadvantages in their pursuit of

¹⁰ <https://www.technologyreview.com/2021/02/12/1018222/deepfake-revenge-porn-coming-ban/>

¹¹ "New Record Number of Journalists Jailed Worldwide." RSF, Reporters Without Borders, Dec. 2022, rsf.org/en/new-record-number-journalists-jailed-worldwide.

equitable participation and influence. They may also be most at risk to efforts by more powerful actors to minimize their civic participation through threats or use of violence, intimidation, and economic incentives or disincentives.

According to the United Nations Development Program, women and marginalized groups can be excluded from running for office in a number of ways, including proportional representation rules, candidate selection processes, and the delineation of electoral districts. Minorities, and particularly minority women, unilaterally lack equitable representation in government, both at local and national levels. Marginalized groups regularly face more limited opportunities to contribute to the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of governmental policies and development programs.¹²

Intimidation can also occur online and target any societal group. One trend of particular concern is the rise of technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) targeting women's civic and political engagement. Not only does it push women's voices out of political participation and discourage other women from entering politics, but it also uses gendered narratives to drive authoritarian agendas by "othering" women leadership, juxtaposing "traditional" gender roles and women empowerment narratives, and radicalizing conversations around gender.

Another trend is the increased marginalization and potential endangerment of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) individuals. According to Outright International, a non-profit organization that advocates for the rights of the communities worldwide, taking part in the electoral process can be unsafe in places where the rights of LGBTQ+ people are not guaranteed.¹³ Additionally, the absence of comprehensive data collection on LGBTQ+ individuals and their engagement in voting (and other political activities) complicates the assessment of the true extent of inclusion for this population in civic and political spheres. LGBTQ+ issues are also increasingly being used as a wedge issue by coordinated anti rights movements and actors, to mobilize certain voters.

Displaced people could play a crucial role in the 2024 political and electoral processes in their home countries, but they often face obstacles to exercising their right to vote, from lack of documentation to strict residency requirements and lack of access to voter information. For instance, more than 20 percent of the Venezuelan population has fled the country, and this diaspora should have strong incentives to participate in the 2024 elections given that many fled due to political reasons. Yet, only about two percent of Venezuelans of voting age living abroad were on the official voters list due to restrictive out-of-country voting provisions.

¹² "Burkina Faso Campaign Brings 16,000 Women Closer to Voter Registration." National Democratic Institute, 2012, <https://www.ndi.org/burkina-faso-birth-certificates>

¹³ Veado, Luiza. "How Access to Elections Affects LGBTIQ PEOPLE." Outright International, 2022, outrightinternational.org/insights/how-access-elections-affects-lgbtqi-people

Key Opportunities in the 2024 Elections

The 2024 elections will create opportunities to strengthen democracy and political inclusion. Credible elections foster positive civic norms by drawing attention to political issues, sparking community engagement, emphasizing voting as a civic duty, and encouraging public education initiatives. Thus, the elections in 2024 hold the potential to cultivate a more informed, engaged, and participatory citizenries.

Engaging Global Youth Populations

Tens of millions of young people will be eligible to vote and hold office for the first time in 2024. There is a critical need for electoral bodies, political parties, and other civic actors to engage them more effectively in formal political processes and build long-term habits of civic engagement. It is important to mobilize young people to participate in upcoming elections, ensuring that elected governments' policies and strategies better reflect young people's voices, concerns, and opinions, for instance around climate change, technology, and the future of work. Despite documented disengagement by young people in formal political processes in many countries, young people are increasingly amplifying issues they care about through non-formal mechanisms, such as public protests and social media advocacy. The use of social media is worth following closely considering it is the primary source of news for young people. This offers an opportunity to understand how social media affects the level of civic engagement and voting patterns among youth and to use it more effectively to support civic engagement by youth.

Elections as an Opportunity for Media

Elections are an opportunity for local and independent media to broaden their audiences, increase revenue, diversify formats, deepen community connections, and organize or host forums/events that improve their standing in their communities. Even in environments where politicians will avoid certain independent voices, the ability for local and independent media to increase the volume and quality of their coverage, attract new audiences, and expand their technical capabilities during election cycles can boost voter interest and participation, but also offer an opportunity for media to boost revenue and take a next step in their development. Enabling/encouraging them to use these moments wisely can pay off in the short and medium/long-term.

Opportunities to build good norms and habits of civic engagement

Elections can cultivate and reinforce positive civic norms and habits. They draw attention to political issues, prompting individuals to delve into the political landscape, policies, and candidates. Elections also foster community engagement, turning activities like engaging with neighbors and attending town hall meetings into habitual practices, creating a sense of shared responsibility. Further, emphasizing voting as a civic duty instills a sense of responsibility and encourages regular participation, aligning with democratic principles.

Elections are also opportunities for educational initiatives and open dialogue, promoting political and media literacy and informed conversations. In addition, actively participating in elections builds trust in democratic processes, fostering a positive attitude towards civic engagement as citizens witness the tangible impact of their involvement. They can be ways to productively engage civic actors, including religious leaders. Successful elections can advance existing democratic “bright spots” and create new ones, in line with USAID’s [Democracy Delivers Initiative](#).

Recommendations

Mobilize USAID to prepare for 2024 elections around the world

USAID can use its extensive geographic and online presence to support credible, transparent, competitive, and inclusive elections around the world. It can do this by creating online or in-person venues for local actors who support democratic values and processes. It can also organize internally to help USAID missions prepare for, communicate about, and support global elections in 2024 while rapidly shining a spotlight on any potential abuses and supporting local actors who do as well.

USAID should consider:

- Communications from the USAID Administrator, senior officials, and mission directors in support of democratic elections around the world as well as high level attention to proactively seize the strategic opportunity of 2024
- Weekly calls and online forums to convene relevant internal audiences to proactively plan and to share best practices and resources, and lessons learned in real time
- Shared talking points and communications toolkits
- Regular and high level outreach to other US government agencies to coordinate support for elections, well in advance
- Evidence-based analysis of the different audiences that would benefit from enhanced USAID communications, the most appropriate content for communications, and the most appropriate means of communication depending on the audience and context
- Encouragement for other US government leaders and agencies to develop coordinated communications campaigns, that make clear the incentives and disincentives for states that support democratic accountability (economic, legal, travel, visa, etc)

Mobilize bilateral, multilateral, philanthropic, business, and civic organizations worldwide to promote democratic elections globally in 2024

USAID can use its extensive presence and relationships to help mobilize further support for free, fair and inclusive elections globally in 2024. USAID should:

- Plan strategically for the 2024 Democracy Summit and other global forums, and determine how they could more effectively be leveraged to support democratic elections in 2024 and beyond
- Encourage coordinated financial, communications, and diplomatic support from allied governments, multilateral organizations; relevant businesses, philanthropic organizations, and global, regional, and local civic organizations
- Highlight and amplify success stories as the year goes on; Encourage news media to tell stories of democratic wins and participation, not just infractions and problems
- Recognize and reward democratic champions that can serve as models to others

Support robust long-term, independent observation, particularly by nonpartisan civic groups, but reinforced by international observation. Credible election observation -- particularly in the pre-election period where most risk factors take shape -- can help build greater accountability and transparency in the process, and serve as an early warning mechanism for future planning and intervention. Election day observation, in particular safeguards to and analysis of the results and tabulation process, remains critical to build confidence in election outcomes and to identify fraud if it occurs.

USAID should pay particular attention to monitoring issues that represent the greatest threat to electoral integrity in a given electoral context, for instance, abuse of state resources, social media and the information environment including online violence against women, transparency of electoral data, or the ballot qualification process. This may include supporting stronger partnerships between election observers and other watchdogs such as media institutions or human rights advocates. In addition to election monitoring, democratic champions should monitor what may seem like relatively minor, highly technical, and seemingly arcane changes in laws, rules, processes, and norms in the period surrounding elections to make sure they are not violating democratic principles. Media outlets, civil society groups, and citizen watchdogs must then sound the alarm so the public knows when these shifts occur.

Prioritize voter education, digital literacy, and resilience to manipulative information. In order to participate effectively in elections, voters must know how and where to vote, what their rights are, and how to navigate any obstacles. They must also be equipped to evaluate the credibility of information and recognize false, manipulative, or emotionally laden content. Countries that want fair and free elections must engage in short- and long-term strategies to educate publics about how to recognize manipulative information, ensure access to high quality independent journalism, and decide what limits, if any, to place on harmful content.

USAID should support collaboration with a wide range of agencies and bureaus as well as the private sector to develop more holistic programs, policies, and diplomacy aimed at promoting information integrity, raising election awareness/civic education, rule of law/legal advocacy, anti-corruption, education campaigns, investigative journalism, independent fact checking, and media monitoring. Concurrently,

independent fact-checking institutions, particularly those forming regional networks, contribute to resilience against manipulative information. In spaces where fact-checking institutions exist but lack independence, reinforcing their autonomy is crucial. Direct engagement with technology platforms, where appropriate, can address potential information manipulation targeting upcoming elections, requiring proactive messaging. USAID's role in this landscape should leverage extensive research and case studies, synthesizing this knowledge to identify targets, topics, and issues of particular interest to women and marginalized communities.

Encourage Youth Engagement. The largest global youth cohort ever is not represented in elections in a way that reflects their potential assets and contributions to authentic, inclusive participation. As positive agents of change, youth are key advocates of peaceful elections and have a critical role in elections and broader political and peacebuilding processes. Young people are not a homogenous demographic and do not operate in a vacuum; it is essential for them to collaborate with diverse state and non-state actors to promote elections that are inclusive of all young people- especially of young women and youth from traditionally marginalized groups. Expectations are high that the inclusion of youth in electoral processes will increase, and significant frustration will arise if this does not happen, leading to potentially destabilizing effects on democratization. To increase youth participation:

- **Partner** with young people and their organizations, movements, and initiatives: election-related programs to create space for intergenerational dialogue on electoral issues and violence prevention. Support engagement mechanisms such as youth councils/caucuses/platforms and include young people in the design of electoral education and outreach programs.
- **Include** youth by opening avenues for youth participation in decision-making processes through youth-friendly policies, enhancing transparency and accountability of institutions, and addressing social and cultural norms relating to gender and age that may create a barrier for the implementation of legislation and policies relating to youth participation during elections.
- **Invest** in youth leadership and youth engagement. Election-related programs can support awareness-raising through social media and radio programs about electoral processes, youth-led peace efforts in communities such as theaters for peace, dialogues on rights, and educational activities on non-violent action, among others.

Increase support to independent media. Independent media require sustained support beyond election cycles to enhance their impact and contribute to the democratic process. Recognizing the pivotal role of media in elections, it is imperative to reframe broader support to media as essential for ensuring effective electoral assistance. Independent media organizations should receive backing to expand their platforms and diversify their formats. Even in challenging political environments, supporting local and independent media during election cycles enables them to amplify coverage, attract new audiences, and enhance technical capabilities. This not only boosts voter interest and participation but also provides an opportunity for media to augment revenue and advance their long-term development.

USAID's funding strategy should extend beyond election years and locations, emphasizing general/core grants to media organizations and supporting burden-sharing arrangements like IFPIM.

Ensure inclusion of women and marginalized populations. USAID missions should support efforts that enable the full participation and enfranchisement of eligible voters, particularly women and marginalized populations who might not otherwise participate due to intentional or unintentional obstacles. This includes advocating for enhancing awareness of and protections against online hate speech, threats, and information manipulation that particularly affects women. Additional support should be allocated to internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees. There is a need for regular engagement between electoral management bodies and various citizen groups that could be sidelined, identifying pressure points within the electoral process. Citizen and voter education play a crucial role in achieving this objective, and can be facilitated through social media campaigns and media literacy programs, ensuring voters are equipped to discern credible information.

Leverage and support platforms and networks for transnational learning. USAID and other supporters can create opportunities for grassroots organizations to learn from and support each other as they work for elections that are credible, transparent, and inclusive. This could include pre-existing networks like the Global Network for Electoral Justice (GNEJ), the endorsing community of the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation (DOP), the International Fact-Checking Network, the Global Network for Domestic Election Monitors (GNDEM) and others, as well as emerging opportunities like the Summit for Democracy and the Global Network for Securing Electoral Integrity (GNSEI). USAID can also compile, translate, and share resources created by the agency or other like-minded organizations. And they can build transnational networks that can support each other going forward.

Enhance responses to closing civic space. Closing civic space depresses participation in elections, limits citizens' ability to promote transparency and hold institutions accountable, and leaves the electoral process more vulnerable to manipulation. Stronger diplomatic pressure against proposed repressive NGO laws, restrictions on freedom of expression and movement, internet throttling or burdensome accreditation requirements may be necessary. Meanwhile, democratic activists and advocates in closing spaces may require greater and more creative avenues for support. This may also include increased planning for and sensitizing of crisis response mechanisms for missions and allies in at-risk countries, particularly in preparation of political retaliation, intimidation, arrests, and election-related violence.

Invest in countering foreign malign influence in elections. USAID should support civil society and media outlets that expose foreign malign influence and design approaches to counter these tactics. AI can be used to conduct electoral forensics and detect data manipulation, detect illicit foreign funding, and monitor harmful disingenuous content while also acknowledging the inherent risks of these technologies.

Support greater transparency regarding digital platforms and their roles during election periods. USAID can support civil society organizations and researchers around the world that work for greater understanding, transparency, risk management, and contingency planning related to the role of digital platforms during critical elections. A goal should be to improve real-time understanding of information across global platforms during elections, as well as longitudinal research to improve our future understanding of how the use of generative AI tools is being used to manipulate democratic processes.

Plan now for the post election period. USAID should begin now to plan for the period following elections, promoting smooth transitions of power after elections that are fair and credible, and responding immediately to elections that fail to meet international democratic standards. This should include support for election management bodies and other stakeholders to conduct genuine and inclusive lessons learned and reform processes for future credible elections. Other steps include preparing new governments, educating citizens, and using USAID's communications and convening power to support peaceful and credible transitions. In the aftermath of elections, when international interest and investment may wane, USAID can support independent observation of political transitions as a safeguard against potential backsliding on democratic principles. USAID can also support local civic groups, through long-term engagement, to sustain democratic values and ensure that the government remains responsive to the needs of the community.

Given the possibility of post-election violence or a failed election, and the potential for violence, USAID should prepare contingency plans to leverage existing US government resources and civil society organizations that can prevent violence and maintain a focus on good governance and transparency. Sustaining engagement and accountability funding during the unpredictable transition period is crucial. This includes support for watchdog organizations to pivot their focus from solely monitoring elections to ongoing corruption monitoring during the transition period. Beyond monitoring, USAID can play a key role in enabling accountability and systemic reforms during transitions by providing tools, guides, and trainings focused on the judiciary, executive oversight, and key economic sectors also undergoing transitions.

Prepare for the future. While 2024 will include an exceptional number of elections, it is not unusual for many important elections to occur within a short period of time. USAID should make election planning and support for credible and professional election administration (including the full cycle of managing election transitions and governance) an ongoing priority. Perhaps the most important thing USAID can do in the medium to longer term, along with a coalition of partners and allies, is to help make sure democracy delivers for citizens and to more effectively address democratic backsliding.

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