Evidence on Fostering Fair, Inclusive & Nonviolent Elections

As we reflect back on a record-setting year for elections and look ahead to future polls, how can we use research to identify interventions that governments, international partners, and NGOs can implement to strengthen the quality of elections?

Authors: Anna Mysliwiec and Aimee Barnes on behalf of the Governance, Crime, and Conflict Initiative

Overview: Evidence on Fostering Fair, Inclusive & Nonviolent Elections

Context

In 2024, a record-setting number of countries, covering over half of the world's population, held nationwide elections. Voters went to the polls in countries including the United States, Canada, Mexico, South Africa, Russia, and Indonesia. While billions of people had the opportunity to vote, the quality of democracy and of the polls varied considerably across the sixty-plus countries that held elections.

The "year of elections" shone a spotlight on the challenges to conducting polls that live up to their potential to enable citizens to hold leaders accountable. Freedom House estimates that 40 percent of these elections faced violence—ranging from attacks on polling places and politicians to crackdowns by security forces on protests to interference from criminal groups—which threatened people's lives and may have discouraged political participation. Violence was not the only challenge: citizens in many countries had to weed through misinformation when making choices at the ballot box, contestants sometimes turned to fraud or vote buying rather than campaigning on policy, and in some cases, marginalized and opposition groups could not fully participate. The challenges were even greater in electoral authoritarian regimes from Russia to Rwanda, where restrictions on political and civil rights— persecution of the opposition, media restrictions, lack of free speech and assembly, and lack of judicial independence—significantly constrained the quality of elections.

With dozens of countries voting in 2026, it is vital to ensure that elections are fair and well-administered, citizens can make informed choices at the ballot box, and the risk of election violence is minimized. Rigorous research has identified promising interventions to help ensure fair, transparent, and inclusive elections, facilitating the peaceful transfer of power. In this brief, we share evidence from randomized evaluations, along with other rigorous quasi-experimental studies, of programs that aim to strengthen the quality of elections.[1] Below, we present key recommendations for policy and research emerging from these evaluations. We then summarize evidence on strengthening election administration, mitigating election violence, empowering voters to make informed decisions, and bringing more citizens into the political process as voters and candidates. We conclude with a snapshot of ongoing research supported by the

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[1] This brief focuses on randomized evaluations, including but not limited to studies funded by the Governance, Crime, and Conflict Initiative (GCCI), alongside other quasi-experimental studies. Unless otherwise noted, all studies cited are randomized evaluations. This brief is not meant to stand alone but to complement other reviews of evidence on elections, such as 3ie's evidence gap map on political competition through elections and resources developed by organizations engaged in efforts to strengthen elections and/or collect data on elections, such as International IDEA, the National Democratic Institute, and the International Republican Institute.

Governance, Crime, and Conflict Initiative (GCCI) along with open questions for further exploration.

Key recommendations for policy and research

1. **Leverage technologies for effective election monitoring:** Capable and transparent election administration is required to ensure that elections are free and fair. Increasing transparency—including through leveraging technologies to report electoral fraud and inform voters—can reduce electoral irregularities and improve perceptions of the legitimacy of elections. In democracies, even imperfect ones, systematic independent election observation can reduce fraud. Parties and election officials can, however, shift fraud to unmonitored polling stations or to preelection activities, pointing to a need for holistic efforts to monitor the campaign period and the voter registration process, not just the polls.

2. **Invest in anti-vote-buying campaigns:** Vote buying can foster corruption, reduce politicians' incentives to deliver public goods, and weaken accountability. Several randomized evaluations have shown that campaigns against vote buying can reduce its impact on election results, but implementers should consider how voters and candidates will strategically respond. Informing parties of anti-vote-buying campaigns early in the electoral cycle, and combining them with other efforts to educate voters on the candidates, may support more programmatic competition.

3. **Invest in further research on mitigating election violence by politicians, state actors, and armed groups:** Some evidence suggests that it is possible to mitigate election violence through interventions such as voter information campaigns and election observation, but more experimental research is needed to understand which interventions may shift politicians' incentives to pursue violence. As it is not always feasible or ethical to conduct randomized evaluations on election violence, this should be complemented by further quasi-experimental work to explore its drivers.

4. **Increase voters' access to high-quality information on candidates:** For elections to deliver results, citizens must be able to make informed choices about who represents them. Providing citizens with access to information on candidates' policy positions and politicians' performance can, in some circumstances, increase the vote share for less corrupt, more qualified, and better-performing candidates.

5. **Support voters in weeding out misinformation:** Social media can help increase voters' access to information and ability to demand government accountability. However, online misinformation may exacerbate political polarization and even contribute to violence. Some evidence suggests that both fact-checking and media literacy campaigns can increase citizens' ability to recognize false information, especially when they are sustained over time, widely disseminated

from a trusted source, and tailored to the context. Evidence also points to the need to build the capacity of local independent media to be trusted adjudicators of the truth.

6. **Deepen political inclusion by building women and marginalized groups' skills and networks:** For elections to be truly representative, they must be inclusive, bringing traditionally marginalized groups into the political process as full participants. In addition to institutional design features like gender quotas, programs such as civic education and women's self-help groups can enhance the ability of women, and potentially of other marginalized groups, to participate in politics by increasing civic skills, expanding social networks, and stimulating collective action.

State of the evidence

While elections serve as an opportunity for citizens to channel their preferences into policy, there are many challenges that prevent them from serving this aim. Electoral malpractice—including ballot stuffing and other forms of fraud and corruption—may alter election outcomes and contribute to perceptions that elections are not free, fair, and transparent, undermining their credibility and potentially leading to violent forms of protest. Even when elections are credible and competitive, vote buying and patronage or favor-based politics—pervasive practices in many low- and middle-income countries (LMICs)—may result in the election of leaders who are not accountable to citizens.

Free, fair, and peaceful elections require more than ensuring that people can cast ballots on election day: competing political parties must be able to campaign freely leading up to the election, citizens must be able to make free and well-informed choices at the ballot box, and a wide swath of society must be able to participate fully, as voters and candidates. Below, we present experimental evidence, supplemented by quasi-experimental studies, on each of these topics. We start with evidence relevant to the "day of" an election—ensuring election integrity, mitigating violence, and countering vote buying—before moving to evidence on equipping voters to make informed choices and, zooming out even further, on ensuring that all citizens can participate in election processes.

Strengthening election integrity

Election malpractice—including vote buying, voter intimidation, and ballot stuffing—can worsen the quality of elected officials and reduce their accountability to citizens. Perceptions that electoral processes were not impartial and credible can, in some cases, lead to election violence. Randomized evaluations suggest that monitoring of

the polls, by both domestic and international observers, can help to ensure elections are free and fair. By ensuring mechanically that certain procedures are followed, new technologies can make it harder to tamper with elections and easier to detect fraud when it occurs. They can also contribute to the legitimacy of the electoral process in the eyes of voters.

One important caveat is that the effectiveness of election observation varies by regime type. In electoral autocracies in particular, election observation may have little impact.[2] Ruling parties may deploy various means of rigging elections to predetermine their outcomes: preventing opposition candidates from running and/or from organizing rallies, using state media and bureaucrats to openly back the ruling party, and directing state resources toward party activities and ruling party strongholds.[3] By contrast, in democracies (even illiberal ones), systematic independent election observation can be impactful.

Leveraging technology for monitoring elections

Election monitoring technologies offer an evidence-based way to strengthen electoral integrity at relatively low cost.
- A randomized evaluation in Afghanistan found that a camera monitoring technology—researchers took photos of the declaration of results forms posted at each polling center and compared them to the forms submitted to the national count—reduced damage of election materials by 11 percentage points (from a base of 19 percent in the comparison group) and reduced the number of votes changed during the aggregation process at the provincial level (Callen and Long 2015). Announcing the monitoring program also reduced fraud in neighboring polling stations. In areas of the country that saw lower electoral fraud as a result of the technology, voters reported higher support for the government (Berman et al. 2019).
- During Uganda's 2011 presidential elections, researchers sent letters to a random sample of polling officers—who are required by law to publicly post their polling centers' vote tallies—informing them that tallies would be photographed by smartphone and compared to official results. Letters increased the frequency of posted vote tallies, decreased fraudulent vote tallies, and, by some measures, decreased the vote share for the incumbent president (Callen et al. 2015).

Social media can also enable crowdsourcing of election monitoring. During the 2019 mayoral elections in Colombia, researchers launched a large-scale Facebook ad campaign that encouraged citizens to report election irregularities via an NGO

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website. Citizens in municipalities randomly exposed to the campaign were more likely to file reports, and this increase in reporting reduced electoral irregularities and decreased the vote share of candidates who engaged in them (Garbiras-Díaz and Montenegro 2022). Effects were larger in municipalities where researchers notified candidates running in these elections about the campaign beforehand, suggesting that citizen monitoring deterred politicians from engaging in irregularities.

To reduce electoral fraud and strengthen the legitimacy of elections, technology must be reliable and trusted by both governments and citizens. During the 2013 elections in Kenya—the first major election since the 2007 electoral violence that killed thousands and displaced hundreds of thousands more—the election commission sent text messages to nearly two million registered voters to encourage turnout. It also introduced a biometric ID system and invested in electronic systems that would publicly release real-time results from polling stations. However, both of these technologies malfunctioned on election day. As a result, the intervention increased voter turnout but decreased trust in the election commission and satisfaction with the functioning of democracy in Kenya. This reduction in trust was greater in constituencies that experienced election-related violence. These results suggest that raising expectations about the quality of elections may reinforce distrust in democracy if election institutions do not deliver on their promises: the text message campaign suggested the election commission had high capacity, and subsequent failures may have led citizens to believe that the election was unfair (Marx, Pons, and Suri 2021).

Deploying observers to monitor elections
There is evidence that election observation, whether or not it incorporates technological innovations, can reduce electoral fraud. In Mozambique, Russia, and Armenia, **randomized evaluations found that domestic or international election observers reduced fraud** (Leeffers and Vicente 2019; Enikolopov et al. 2012; Hyde 2007). An important caveat is that election officials and party agents can circumvent election monitoring efforts and technologies. During the 2008 elections in Ghana, a randomized evaluation found that, while the presence of observers during voter registration did decrease irregularities, it also displaced them to nearby registration centers that were not under observation, suggesting coordination among political party agents (Ichino and Schündeln 2012).

Similarly, even if elections appear to be clean on the day of, parties can also shift irregularities to earlier in the process—such as to the voter registration phase—in response to election monitoring (Yukawa and Sakamoto 2024). In field experiments across Kyrgyzstan, Georgia, and Azerbaijan, Sjoberg (2012) found that domestic election observation reduces fraud but that autocrats may substitute it with other forms of manipulation, including vote buying and intimidation.[4]

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[4] Nonexperimental evidence suggests that as governments shift manipulation to the preelectoral period—such as through restricting media freedom and judicial independence—the quality of governance may worsen (Simpser and Donno 2012).

In addition to these effects on parties, randomized evaluations of election observation have sometimes yielded unexpected results on voter behavior.

- During the 2004 presidential elections in Indonesia, even in the absence of significant election day fraud, a randomized evaluation found that international observers impacted election-day behavior. The incumbent candidate performed better where observers were present, potentially because polls stayed open until their designated closing time, giving her supporters longer to turn out the vote (Hyde 2010).
- During the 2008 parliamentary elections in Georgia, an NGO informed citizens of how to file complaints of voter fraud. While the intervention increased citizen activism as measured by registered complaints, it also decreased voter turnout in program precincts, which the authors suggest may be due to voters' interpretation of the intervention as a signal that there would be increased state attention to their vote in a post-Soviet context (Driscoll and Hidalgo 2014).

These findings point to the importance of considering how existing political beliefs and practices may interact with election interventions (Driscoll and Hidalgo 2014).

There is some evidence to suggest that fairer elections could lead to greater democratic responsiveness. During Ghana's 2012 elections, incumbents from constituencies that were randomly selected for election-day monitoring subsequently spent more of their constituency funds while in office, with some evidence that this was driven by their expectation of being held accountable at the ballot box (Ofusu 2019).

Countering vote buying

Vote buying can foster corruption, reduce politicians' incentives to deliver public goods, and weaken accountability. Voter education campaigns, which may encourage citizens to refuse to accept gifts from politicians, or alternatively, to vote with their conscience regardless of whether they accept gifts, have been the subject of several randomized evaluations. **These anti-vote-buying campaigns can reduce the frequency of vote buying or, even if it continues unabated, can reduce the vote share for parties that engage in it.**

Ahead of the 2006 presidential election in São Tomé and Príncipe, the National Electoral Commission conducted a door-to-door campaign that stressed the illegality of vote buying and stressed that voters should vote their conscience, even if they accepted gifts. The campaign reduced the frequency and price of vote transactions as well as the influence of money offered on voting. It also decreased voter turnout and shifted the vote share from the challenger to the incumbent, suggesting that in this context, vote buying both drove election participation and was employed by the challenger to counteract the incumbency advantage (Vicente 2014). A similar intervention in the Philippines during municipal elections in 2013 reduced the impact of

vote buying (measured by the likelihood that citizens switched their vote). In this case, an invitation to citizens to promise not to sell their vote was more effective than a message that they should vote with their conscience (Hicken et al. 2018).

Campaigns against vote buying can reduce its electoral impact even when they do not reduce its frequency. In Uganda, researchers studied a large-scale, multipronged anti-vote-buying intervention—including meetings in which activists invited communities to designate themselves as "no vote-buying villages"—that took place in the month before the 2016 national elections. The campaign did not reduce the extent of vote buying but did have substantial effects on electoral outcomes. Challengers, who had fewer resources for vote buying than incumbents, saw the vote-buying campaign as leveling the playing field and intensified both their vote buying and campaigning efforts—pointing to the fact that vote buying may serve as a complementary strategy rather than a substitute to campaigning. At the same time, the campaign weakened norms of reciprocity: citizens accepted gifts from politicians but voted for their preferred candidates, and votes swung from incumbents to challengers. Researchers posit that in contrast to the aforementioned studies, this campaign took place at a large scale and was highly visible, motivating candidates to respond (Blattman et al. 2024). Informing parties of anti-vote-buying campaigns early in the electoral cycle, and combining them with other efforts to educate voters on the candidates, may support more programmatic competition.

Mitigating election violence

Electoral violence is coercive force—including physical attacks, threats, intimidation, unlawful detention, and forced curtailment of movement or displacement—that occurs during the election cycle. It is directed toward electoral actors, including candidates, voters, and polling staff, and serves to manipulate competitive electoral processes (Birch 2020; Birch et al. 2020). Beyond the human toll in casualties and displacement, electoral violence can prevent citizens from voting or participating as candidates, inflict economic costs, alter election outcomes, and impede a peaceful transfer of power. Perceptions that elections were illegitimate can also spur violence after the polls, highlighting the need for interventions that improve the administration, fairness, and transparency of elections to build their legitimacy and citizens' trust in government (Dercon and Gutiérrez-Romero 2012).

Previous research points to multiple drivers of election violence. Violence may be more likely to occur in majoritarian, winner-takes-all elections where competition is intense, where incumbents stand a real chance of losing power, and where there is a history of civil conflict and weak democratic institutions. Ultimately, violence serves to exclude candidates and voters from fully participating in elections (Asunka et al. 2019; Hafner-Burton et al. 2013; Höglund 2009; Marx et al. 2021; Birch et al. 2020). Even so, citizens may still vote for politicians accused of electoral violence, corruption, or crime despite

the costs, potentially due to poor information about candidates, limited alternative candidates with a clean record, the promise of favors in exchange for votes, ethnic politics, or authoritarian coercion (Gutiérrez-Romero and LeBas 2020).

Reducing election violence by politicians

While there is a wide body of quasi- and nonexperimental work on election violence, including the studies cited above, experimental evaluations of programs to reduce it are limited. The experimental evidence suggests that voter education campaigns and election observation could reduce electoral violence committed by politicians, though findings on the impact of civic education on citizens' attitudes toward violence are somewhat mixed.

Civic education programs may aim to reduce violence by reducing uncertainty in weakly institutionalized settings and by challenging notions about the viability of violence as an election strategy (Pruett et al. 2024; Birch and Muchlinksi 2018). **One randomized evaluation found that a voter education campaign reduced perceived and actual violence.** During the 2007 elections in Nigeria, which were marked by significant violence, ActionAid International Nigeria carried out a campaign to reduce the threat that voters perceived from violence and thereby the effectiveness of voter intimidation. The two-week campaign consisted of posters and clothing with anti-violence slogans, town meetings, and public theater. A randomized evaluation found that the campaign led to a decrease in citizens' perceptions of violence—measured as the frequency with which they reported hearing about physical threats or intimidation in their area—and to a 47 percentage point reduction in the likelihood of physical violence occurring (from a base of 50 percent), based on reports by independent local journalists.[5] The campaign also increased voter turnout and decreased the vote share of the opposition presidential candidate, who was associated with violence (Collier and Vicente 2014). There is evidence that information from the campaign spread through social networks: citizens who were not targeted by the campaign but lived close to or had family ties to those who were also had reduced perceptions of violence (Fafchamps and Vicente 2013).

Several additional randomized and quasi-experimental evaluations have examined how civic education and voter information programs—implemented before or after an outbreak of election violence—impacted citizens' political attitudes and behaviors but did not directly measure the incidence of violence. The results have been somewhat mixed:

- In Liberia, a series of community dialogues for the actors most likely to perpetrate opportunistic election violence—police and youth-wing party activists—had null results (Pruett et al. 2024).

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[5] In total, 131 violent incidents were identified before and after the campaign.

- A civic education program in the lead-up to Côte d'Ivoire's 2015 presidential election, after violence in the 2010 elections reignited civil conflict, increased turnout but left citizens more pessimistic toward elections ([Arriola et al. 2017](#)).[6]

Another study measured the impact of election day observation on fraud, violence, and intimidation in the context of Ghana's 2012 elections. Researchers partnered with the Coalition of Domestic Election Observers to randomly assign observers to polling stations across four of Ghana's ten regions, varying the proportion of polling stations in each constituency that received an observer. In monitored polling stations, election observation reduced the probability of intimidation during the voting process by 7 percentage points, from a base of 12 percent in the comparison group. It also reduced voter turnout (unusually high turnout may be an indicator of election fraud) by 4.5 percentage points, from a base of 86 percent in the comparison group.

Researchers also studied polling stations that observers did not visit to see if election violence or fraud was displaced from observed to unobserved stations in the same constituency. In single-party-dominant constituencies, parties leveraged their network of local brokers to shift electoral fraud to unmonitored polling stations. By contrast, in competitive constituencies, violence and voter intimidation increased in unobserved polling stations. This may be because parties could not easily shift fraud, given the greater oversight from the competing party, and could more easily shift violence. These findings underscore that parties may respond to civil society efforts to reduce violence by shifting it to other geographies. They also suggest that the structure of party organizations and the incentives that they face shape how parties trade off electoral strategies, including fraud and violence, as well as campaigning and vote buying ([Asunka et al. 2019](#)).[7,8]

Limiting the influence of violent nonstate armed actors on elections
Politicians are not the only actors to turn to violence to influence elections. Paramilitaries, extremist groups, criminal organizations, and others may have similar

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[6] One quasi-experimental study did find that civic education may reduce support for violence. While violence following the 2007 elections undermined Kenyans' faith in democracy, citizens exposed to a national civic education program in the run-up to the election were "inoculated" against some of these effects. Specifically, program participants who were later exposed to election violence were less likely to express support for the use of violence ([Finkel et al. 2012](#)).

[7] In addition to these findings on spatial displacement of violence, violence may be temporally displaced. Nonexperimental studies suggest that international observation missions may create incentives for political parties to shift violent manipulation earlier in the election cycle ([Daxecker 2014)](#) and that postelection violence becomes more likely when international observers cast doubt on an election's credibility ([Borzyskowski 2019](#)).

[8] [Birch and Muchlinksi 2018](#) leverage a dataset of election violence prevention strategies undertaken by the United Nations Development Programme between 2003 and 2015 to identify which are most effective. They find that capacity-building programs, which use training and institution-building to help key election actors hold credible elections, reduce violence by nonstate actors. Additionally, attitude-transformation programs—which aim to shape the preferences of relevant actors through "peace messaging," pacting, dialogue, and mediation—are associated with a reduction in violence by state actors and their allies.

objectives and means to sway voters—from community support to the threat or use of violence. Further, politicians favored by these groups may lack incentives to combat their influence if they deliver votes, contributing to the persistence of violent groups in some cases. For instance, in Colombia from 2002 to 2006, up to one-third of the legislature may have been elected in elections heavily influenced by armed paramilitary groups (Acemoglu, Robinson, and Santos 2013). Armed groups vary in how directly and openly they involve themselves in elections and in many cases even form their own political parties (Matanock and Staniland 2018; Matanock 2016).

While there is little experimental evidence on reducing the role of nonstate armed groups in elections specifically, there is a growing body of evidence on countering their influence more generally. The Governance, Crime, and Conflict Initiative Evidence Wrap-up (Chapter 4) summarizes interventions that aim to counter the influence of nonstate armed groups through improving the state's ability to deliver services and hence perceptions of its legitimacy. Another strategy is to shift citizens' support away from nonstate armed groups through interventions such as religious sensitization campaigns (Vicente and Vilela 2022) or intergroup community dialogues (Barros 2024). Recent quasi-experimental evidence also shows that electoral reforms can reshape how criminal organizations intervene in politics: reforms that make it harder for politicians to accept bribes may lead criminal organizations to instead use violence to influence politicians (Ramón Enríquez 2025).

There is a need for more evidence on how to directly prevent nonstate armed actors from influencing elections, such as evaluations of peacekeeping missions in post-conflict elections.[9] Experimental research may not always be appropriate—for instance, it would be unethical to randomize peacekeeper deployments. In these cases, researchers could conduct survey or lab-in-the-field experiments or randomized evaluations without a pure comparison group (such as randomizing specific peacekeeping tactics to determine which are most effective).

Empowering voters to make informed choices

Even when elections are free and fair, they may not result in elected officials who are responsive to the will of voters if voters are not informed about their options at the ballot box. In many LMICs, voters may not have access to information about candidates. They may then vote based on observable characteristics such as ethnicity, caste, or other identity groups, which may reduce electoral accountability. Voters may also be more easily swayed by the promise of clientelist benefits or the exchange of rewards for voter support. These benefits reward loyalty, encourage corruption, and exclude segments of the population to retain political power and may ultimately contribute to electoral violence. Increasing citizens' access to information about candidates may equip them to vote for politicians who are not associated with violence and to vote on the basis of policy rather than the promise of clientelist benefits.

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[9] See Fjelde and Smidt (2021) for a nonexperimental examination of this topic.

A growing body of evidence suggests that **providing citizens with access to information on candidates' policy positions and politicians' performance can shape voters' choices at the ballot box and increase the vote share for less corrupt, more qualified, and better-performing candidates.** This information can take the form of leaflets, politician performance scorecards, voice and SMS messages, candidate debates, town hall meetings, and beyond. In some circumstances, however, these campaigns can have limited or negative impacts: if voters are unreached by the campaign or do not find the information credible; if information confirms voters' preexisting negative perceptions of the political process; or if the delivery of information is ill-timed for the context. In lieu of summarizing this literature here, we refer interested readers to J-PAL 2019 for a longer overview.

Countering misinformation

Social media—increasingly a leading source of news for citizens around the world—has become an important tool for increasing voters' access to information, especially in areas that are not well-served by traditional media, and enabling citizens to organize to demand government accountability.[10] Several studies point to the efficacy of using Facebook ads to inform citizens about incumbents' performance in office (Enriquez et al. 2023), to help young voters find the party most aligned with their policy views (Ferrali et al. 2023), and to encourage citizens to report electoral irregularities (Garbiras-Díaz and Montenegro 2022).

But with the rise of social media has come the increasingly widespread challenge of misinformation, which can distort citizens' political decisions and drive affective polarization, or negative perceptions of opposing groups or parties. Polarization, and the politicization of communal or ethnic identities, may contribute to election violence by creating the perception that elections are zero-sum contests. Indeed, misinformation has undermined trust in elections and fomented violence in multiple contexts, from hate speech against the Rohingya in Myanmar to violence against migrants in Côte d'Ivoire (Blair et al. 2024).

There is thus a need for evidence-based approaches to help citizens weed out misinformation. A range of approaches have been tested: debunking efforts, like fact-checks and content labels, which aim to correct misinformation after it has been seen; "prebunking" or inoculation efforts, which provide citizens with accurate information or warn them about misinformation they may encounter; and media literacy training, which provides citizens with skills to identify misinformation.[11] However, the majority of

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[10] These and similar reasons can also encourage autocrats to restrict access to social media. A recent evaluation in the GCCI portfolio showed the trade-offs in political support that autocrats face when deciding to limit access to social media (Bowles et al. 2024).

[11] Among several meta-analyses on the subject of misinformation, Kozyreva et al. (2024) provide a toolbox of strategies to counter misinformation drawn from 81 academic papers. Blair et al. (2024) synthesize evidence from 176 randomized evaluations across 155 unique studies and note that the more extensive evidence base from high-income countries should not be assumed to generalize to LMICs.

studies have been conducted in the United States and Europe. Findings may not generalize to LMICs, where closed, encrypted platforms like WhatsApp and Telegram are prevalent; where low state capacity may increase the relative importance of informal networks for information sharing; and where access to the internet is not as widespread (Badrinathan and Chauchard 2024). Below, we focus on takeaways from randomized evaluations conducted in LMICs.

Several meta-analyses have shown that fact-checking and debunking can be effective in correcting misinformation, though less so in changing behavior (Blair et al. 2024). **Their effectiveness is constrained by participants' preexisting beliefs, ideology, and knowledge** (Walter et al. 2020). For instance, Porter and Wood (2021) delivered fact-checking interventions in Argentina, Nigeria, South Africa, and the UK, finding that fact-checks reduced belief in misinformation at least two weeks after exposure.

In South Africa, Bowles et al. (2025) partnered with Africa Check, the first fact-checking organization serving sub-Saharan Africa, to evaluate an intervention that encouraged individuals to consume biweekly fact-checks—which took the form of text messages and podcasts and covered politics, health, and other topics—sent via WhatsApp over a six-month period.[12] The program increased citizens' ability to discern between true and false stories but had little effect on their media consumption patterns. The study also found that small incentives were helpful in inducing people to consume fact-checks.

While fact-checking interventions may lead participants to better discern between true and false news, and can reduce how often they share false statements (Henry et al. 2022; Guriev et al. 2025), this updated knowledge may not affect their voting behavior. In a study in France, exposure to false statements about immigration by presidential candidate Marine Le Pen increased respondents' intention to vote for her, even when they had received fact-checks and improved their knowledge—potentially because the intervention raised the salience of immigration as an issue (Barrera et al. 2020).

Some research points to the effectiveness of prebunking and media literacy interventions, which are delivered before citizens are exposed to misinformation, particularly when they are sustained over the course of at least several weeks and disseminated from a trusted source (Blair et al. 2024). In São Paulo, Brazil, Pereira et al. (2022) found that an awareness and media literacy campaign in partnership with a national newspaper led respondents to better identify misinformation, without increasing their skepticism to true news. Other studies, by contrast, have found that receiving fact-checks may increase people's ability to correctly identify misinformation but also increase their skepticism about true news (see Blair et al. 2024).

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[12] Such sustained exposure to fact-checks can be seen as a form of both debunking, by correcting specific pieces of misinformation, and prebunking, by raising awareness of misinformation and verification strategies.

It is also important to account for the digital literacy of the target population; several studies point to the efficacy of media literacy interventions among educated and tech-savvy participants (Blair et al. 2024). In a low-literacy population in Pakistan, for instance, Ali and Qazi (2023) found that showing respondents informational videos alone had no effect. However, when these messages were accompanied by personalized feedback based on the user's past engagement with fake news, participants in the treatment group became better able to discern fake news—pointing to the need to customize interventions to the target population.

Interventions that engage norms, social identities, and emotions may be more effective than information alone (Badrinathan and Chauchard 2024). In Kenya, researchers found that a five-day, text-message-based educational course decreased misinformation sharing—and more so when the course addressed the emotional drivers of misinformation sharing, not just reasoning-based techniques (Athey et al. 2023). Similarly, in South Africa, researchers tested different versions of a fact-checking podcast and found that an emotional version, which highlighted the role of fear and concern for loved ones in believing misinformation, was the most effective podcast format for improving listeners' discernment (Bowles et al. 2025).

In Côte d'Ivoire, researchers found that a standard, video-based digital literacy intervention had no effect on respondents' ability to discern misinformation. Social identity-based interventions—which encouraged participants to empathize with members of the out-group—curbed belief in and likelihood of spreading misinformation, pointing to the need to engage the underlying reasons that individuals are motivated to consume misinformation (Gottlieb et al. 2022).

Taken together, this research—along with insights from the broader body of work on voter information interventions—suggests that while prior beliefs and social identities may affect individuals' readiness to recognize misinformation, individuals are more likely to believe information widely disseminated from a credible source. This highlights the importance of building the capacity of local independent sources of media to be trusted adjudicators of the truth.

Strengthening the information environment

Toward the goal of strengthening media as trusted sources of information for citizens, **several randomized evaluations have identified ways to strengthen journalism and the media environment to better inform voters and counter misinformation.** In Tanzania, journalists from local radio stations visited randomly selected communities to investigate the source of a service delivery problem (such as issues with roads or water points) and broadcast news stories on regional radio. When visited by independent auditors, program communities received higher scores on service delivery. Investigative reports seem to have spurred action by unelected government ministries (Groves 2022). In Mexico, where reports of municipal malfeasance are released before elections, Larreguy et al. (2020) found that each additional local radio or television station

increased electoral accountability, as stations reported on the audits. Evidence suggests that electoral accountability relies on media market structures that incentivize local stations to supply politically relevant information to their audiences.

Bringing more citizens into the political process

The right to vote alone does not guarantee that marginalized groups will be able to meaningfully participate and see their preferences translated into policy. For elections to be truly representative, they must be inclusive, bringing traditionally marginalized groups into the political process as full participants. Randomized evaluations point to several strategies that can strengthen women's political participation in particular.[13]

Gender quotas are one well-known way to increase not only the number of women in elected office but also the provision of public goods aligned with female voters' preferences and improve perceptions of women as leaders (J-PAL 2018). Gender quotas may not be politically feasible to implement in every context, but randomized evaluations have demonstrated a variety of other avenues to strengthen political participation.

Multifaceted Graduation programs, which provide training and assets to households living in extreme poverty, can also increase political engagement. Graduation participants, who are often among the most marginalized within their village, increased their involvement in political activity a year later across six countries, with the exception of voting (Banerjee et al. 2015).

Norms are a key constraint on women's political participation; engaging men may be critical to addressing them. A randomized evaluation in Pakistan found that a get-out-the-vote campaign targeting women had no effect on their turnout, but women's turnout increased significantly when male household members were also canvassed—highlighting the "gatekeeping" role that men play in some patriarchal settings (Cheema et al. 2022).

Expanding beyond women's participation in politics, there is some evidence that **civic education programs can increase participants' political self-efficacy and willingness to engage in politics**. In Tunisia, an online civic education program reduced participants' authoritarian nostalgia and increased their democratic values, political efficacy, and intentions to register and engage in political activities outside of just voting (Finkel et al. 2023). A middle school civic education program, in which students carried out collective citizenship projects in their communities, studied across three European countries, increased students' altruism, political self-efficacy, and relationships with their peers (Briole et al. 2022).

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[13] There is a broader literature on strengthening women's political participation that extends beyond the scope of this brief's focus on elections. For more, see the Governance Initiative Review Paper and its executive summary.

Finally—connecting back to the conduct of elections—**the electoral process itself must be accessible, including to citizens with disabilities and low-information voters.** One study in Brazil found that the use of electronic voting machines, which displayed photos of candidates and alerted voters if their ballot was filled incorrectly, effectively enfranchised many low-income and illiterate voters ([Fujiwara 2015](#)). Overall, there is a need for more research on strengthening political participation among marginalized groups other than women.

Emerging experimental evidence

With support from FCDO, the Governance, Crime, and Conflict Initiative—a joint research program of J-PAL and IPA—is supporting rigorous research to fill evidence gaps on strengthening participation in political and electoral processes. Within the GCCI portfolio of funded studies, exciting work is emerging in two areas: 1) deepening political inclusion and 2) strengthening media, informing voters, and countering polarization.

Several studies are examining **political inclusion** from a variety of angles, including increasing women's political participation and voters' support for gender equity, encouraging more high-quality individuals to put themselves forward as candidates, and exploring how sectarianism constrains political participation.

- [Edutainment to Increase Women's Political Participation in Tanzania](#) (Green, Levy Paluck, and Abwe): In Tanzania, researchers are drawing on social learning and narrative persuasion techniques to develop a radio drama that will promote participation in local politics, especially by women.

- [Voting Behavior and Female Representation](#) (Baysan, Paredes-Haz, Molina, and Zeki): One reason for ongoing gender inequality could be that political elites in conservative countries underestimate voters' demand for gender equity. This project is randomly assigning voters to receive a door-to-door campaign focused on gender issues, testing its impact on local election vote shares.

- [Candidate Entry into Local Government](#) (Casey, Kamara, Meriggi, and Rodriguez): This pilot considers the governance challenge of getting high-skilled, high-integrity, representative citizens to put themselves forward for consideration as political candidates. In connection with the 2023 Local Council Elections in Sierra Leone, researchers identified, screened, and encouraged high-quality potential candidates to enter politics, and shared information about these potential candidates with political parties, exploring their role as gatekeepers.

- [Women's Empowerment and Local Governance in Indonesia](#) (Paul): Women's interests remain underrepresented in local policymaking in Indonesia. Even when women attend village planning and budgeting meetings, men may dominate them, making it difficult for women's voices to be heard. This study evaluated the

impact of training 1) neighborhood-level women's groups and 2) neighborhood association leaders about the importance of gender inclusivity and strategies for increasing women's participation and better representing women's interests at the local level.

- [Political Consequences of Perceived Inequality Across Ethno-Religious Groups: Experimental Evidence from Lebanon](#) (Bergeron, Mousa, Bucione, and Assouad): In Lebanon, researchers are testing the impact of correcting misperceptions about other sects, as distrust toward out-groups may constrain civic and political participation.

- [Advancing Women's Political Representation Through Cross-Party Caucuses in Nepal](#) (Callen, Pande, Prillaman, Fiorin, Bhandari, and Khadka): Given that gender quotas alone are insufficient, and parties serve as key gatekeepers to women's political opportunity, researchers are testing whether cross-party caucuses can strengthen women's political empowerment.

- [First-Time Voters, Lasting Democracy: Social Media and Political Participation in Bangladesh's Landmark 2026 Elections](#) (Sukhtankar, Kosec, Mahzab, and Mobarak): Researchers are exploring whether video narratives of contemporary and historic political events can shift political attitudes among underrepresented groups, particularly women and youth, ahead of Bangladesh's 2026 national election.

Another set of emerging studies focuses on **strengthening media, equipping citizens with information, and reducing polarization**:

- [Promoting Independent Media in an Autocracy: Evidence from an E-Newspaper Distribution Experiment](#) (Rahmani and Green): How does access to independent digital media affect citizens' knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors in an autocracy? In this project, Tanzanian citizens will be randomly selected to receive one month of free daily access, via smartphones, to two local independent newspapers known for their unbiased political reporting.

- [How Does Exposure to Discordant Media Sources Affect Political Attitudes to Behavior?](#) (Larreguy, Akbiyik, Bowles, and Liu): When citizens lack exposure to media sources that offer contrasting perspectives, biased information consumption diets risk entrenching political views and exacerbating polarization, especially in dominant party settings. In Turkey, researchers used social media to expose citizens to media sources from across the political spectrum, including views that diverged from their own. The intervention increased consumption of moderating news and reduced some measures of polarization in the short term, though these effects were not sustained—pointing to the need to strengthen the independent media ecosystem.

- [Decreasing Polarization and Instilling Civic Values at Scale](#) (Seira and Simpser): While civic education programs are a popular measure to strengthen democracy, there is little evidence on whether they work, whether they can work online, and which pedagogy is most effective. In Mexico, researchers are

testing whether an online civic education program and direct out-group contact can decrease polarization and increase civic participation, including voting, donating time and money to democratic causes, and signing petitions to members of congress.

- [Independent Media, Fact-Checking, and Political Engagement in an Autocracy: Evidence from Kazakhstan](#) (O'Brien and Baysan): Researchers are exploring how independent media counters disinformation in an autocratic state, partnering with an independent media organization to randomly assign access to nonmainstream political information while providing fact-checks of state media.

- [Breaking the Bubble: The Determinants and Effects of Political Deliberations](#) (Blattner and Rasocha): In Brazil, researchers are evaluating whether political deliberations between opposing political groups impacts their political participation, vote choices, and support for democracy.

Open questions

While there is an extensive body of rigorous research on strengthening elections and equipping voters to make informed decisions, emerging opportunities and challenges—such as the growing prominence of social media as a news source, and rising polarization and democratic backsliding—demand further research. As we have highlighted, there is also relatively little experimental research that directly tests the impact of interventions on election violence. Open questions that randomized evaluations may help to unpack include the following:

- **How can we better leverage new technologies to strengthen political participation?** The rise of social media and swift spread of mobile phone usage in LMICs has offered new opportunities to spread information and coordinate political participation. Understanding how new technologies can strengthen participation and accountability, and how citizens and politicians behave in response, are important areas for new research.

- **How can we develop media and information campaigns to combat election misinformation and fake news?** What are the most effective ways to combat misinformation in LMICs? Can social media platforms be regulated to curb the dissemination of harmful disinformation while preserving freedom of expression? Can scalable, light-touch interventions be effective in curbing misinformation? While most of the existing research has taken place in high-income countries, misinformation is a global challenge, and there is a need for more research in LMICs, particularly on interventions other than prebunking and media literacy interventions.

- **How can we counter polarization?** Countries around the world are grappling with polarization, which is [associated](#) with worse democratic performance and weaker institutions. What factors drive ideological and affective polarization, and what interventions are effective in countering it? How does polarization shape

how citizens form political beliefs and evaluate the performance of politicians, and how does it affect accountability dynamics?

- **How can we strengthen the ability of women and other marginalized groups to participate fully in political and electoral processes?** While women's political participation has been the subject of many randomized evaluations, there is a need for further research on gender norms as informal institutions that constrain women's political participation, even where institutional reforms like gender quotas are in place.

- **How can we prevent politicians from engaging in election violence, and mitigate the threat of nonstate actors interfering in elections?** What interventions can shift the incentives and dynamics that allow politicians to "get away" with election violence? What kinds of programs can reduce the influence of armed groups and discourage them from disrupting elections?

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