

Democratic Principles for Electoral Reform

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Electoral reform is an essential pathway for improving elections. However, the path to passing reforms to improve the quality of elections is laden with democratic trapdoors. This opening chapter reviews the literature on electoral reform and sets out some principles for undertaking electoral reforms democratically. The process should be driven by consensus, transparency, inclusion, evidence, timeliness, and accountability. These principles are embedded into a wider framework for understanding how electoral reform takes place, in order to open a research agenda on the reform process across the whole electoral cycle. Several initial propositions are set out about the (im)probability of creating electoral laws that are in line with the principles and conditions under which this might take place.

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Introduction

Elections should be moments where citizens are empowered to express their voice, shape the direction of their government, and choose their representatives. However, the quality of electoral integrity varies around the world. Citizens therefore often experience problems such as intimidation at the polls, gerrymandered electoral districts, or unregulated electoral finance (Birch 2011; Norris 2014; Garnett and James 2025). Given concerns about global democratic backsliding, the issue of how to improve and protect election quality is a pressing policy problem.

Electoral reform is a vital pathway for improving elections. Electoral laws can set sanctions for electoral intimidation, define the process for converting votes to seats, and prohibit/allow the use of money in elections. But electoral reform can also be a trapdoor for democracy. Electoral reform could be instigated by power-hungry politicians seeking to keep their seats in the next Parliament. Electoral reform could therefore be a tactical tool to bring about democratic backsliding. Debates about electoral reform could descend into shouting matches amidst polarised societies. Political opponents may make false claims about the motives of governments who are making genuine attempts to improve elections for political point-scoring. Electoral reform may also be dropped from the policy agendas of decision makers, being replaced by issues such as the economy, law and order, or education, which dominate the legislative agenda.

The aim of this book is to set out some principles for the electoral reform process, and map how and when these are followed around the world. It is not therefore the purpose of this book to evaluate the substance of the plethora of electoral reforms proposed by politicians, academics, and civil society - about which much has been said. This introductory chapter begins by reviewing the literature on electoral reform to highlight the gaps and establish some core research questions. It provides a general framework for understanding electoral reform, including six principles which should govern the process. It then introduces some conditions in which the principles are more likely to be followed.

Existing Approaches to Electoral Reform

Elections are indispensable for democracy. For some minimalist definitions of democracy, they *are* democracy. According to Adam Przeworski (2018, 118), ‘the miracle of democracy is that conflicting political forces obey the results of voting. People who have guns obey those without them. Incumbents risk their control of governmental offices by holding elections.’ Elections provide mechanisms for reducing conflict – or for changing the means of conflict from brutal physical force to peaceful conflict without the killing, since ‘[b]allots are “paper stones”’ (Przeworski 2018, 119). More expansive definitions of democracy see elections as one amongst many practices which provide human empowerment. Democracy can be considered a broader system in which the ‘preconditions exist to fully empower all citizens to realize their individual capabilities. This includes empowerment opportunities at the ballot box - but also other preconditions such as health, educational and living standards’ (James 2024, 228). Through this lens, elections still matter because they empower citizens against other more powerful actors, such as autocrats, corrupt representatives, party barons, or corporate interests (James and Garnett 2025b).

Elections and electoral rules have therefore been a central focus of study for political science, law, sociology, psychology, and cognate disciplines. There are five overlapping literatures from political science and related disciplines that have touched on electoral reform. Each has made essential inroads into understanding the importance of electoral rules, but none have set down a normative framework for how to undertake electoral reform.

Firstly, there is a long-established body of literature demonstrating that *electoral laws matter*. Electoral systems have profound consequences for turnout, party systems, and electoral outcomes (Duverger 1951; Herron, Pekkanen, and Shugart 2018; Grofman and Lijphart 2003). An American Political Science Association Presidential Taskforce declared that ‘electoral systems constitute one of the oldest and most prolifically studied subjects of our discipline’ (Htun and Powell 2013, 808). The literature covers the effects of many different types of electoral laws. The franchise can exclude people on the basis of age, ethnicity, gender, nationality or other criteria (Eichhorn and Bergh 2019). Voting procedures can be designed to ‘suppress’ the vote for some citizens by making voting unnecessarily difficult (Piven, Minnite, and Groarke 2009). Electoral finance laws can advantage or disadvantage to some candidates or parties – thereby making unfair playing field (Norris and van Es 2016).

Secondly, a body of literature developed in the 1990s on the causes of *electoral system reform*. Electoral system reform was generally thought to be improbable and limited to exceptional circumstances that required great exogenous shocks such as a war or major political crisis (Katz 1980, 123). Inspired by the major changes in electoral systems in Italy, Japan, New Zealand, and Israel in the 1990s, research has proliferated on why electoral system reform occurs (Renwick 2010; Renwick, Hanretty, and Hine 2009; Rahat 2008; Blais 2008; Lundell 2009; Benoit 2004). The reform process was widely characterised to be elite driven, since ‘turkeys don’t vote for Christmas’; hence politicians would be unlikely to change the rules which brought them to power. Electoral systems, according to Benoit, simply ‘result from the collective choice of political parties linking institutional alternatives to electoral self-interest in the form of maximising seat shares’ (Benoit 2004, 373-4). However, other factors that were increasingly noted to be important in causing change were the rules themselves. Shugart argued that some electoral systems had inherent conditions which might cause political tensions or failure. Systemic failure of the electoral system occurs when there is an “incapacity of the electoral system to deliver the normatively expected connection between the vote and the formation of executive authority” (Shugart 2008, 13). Electoral systems could produce plurality reversals (the candidate with the most votes does not win) and lopsided majorities, which would cause debate about the proper functioning of the system (Shugart 2008). Renwick distinguished between exogenous (‘fixed or changing only in response to the factors outside of the process itself’ (p.69), such as office-seeking, uncertainty, legitimacy constraints, cognitive constraints, and misperception) and endogenous (‘amenable to change within the reform process’ (p.69), such as leadership and path dependency) factors (Renwick 2010). Norris argued that the electoral reform process could be considered to be subject to a policy cycle (Norris 2011). She also examined whether public views matter, and reported that ‘democratic aspirations are a strong, significant and robust predictor of the occurrence of subsequent electoral reforms’ (Norris 2011, 531).

Thirdly, a growing body of literature has considered electoral reform as a tool of autocraticisation; that is, as part of the tools being undertaken by autocrats during the ‘third wave of autocraticisation’ (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). Democratic backsliding, according to Nancy Bermeo (2016), includes strategic election manipulation – ‘a range of actions aimed at tilting the electoral playing field in favor of incumbents’ (Bermeo 2016, 13). This includes ‘media access, using government funds for incumbent campaigns, keeping opposition candidates off the ballot, hampering voter registration, packing electoral commissions, *changing electoral rules to favor incumbents*, and harassing opponents—but all done in such a way that the elections themselves do not appear fraudulent’ (Bermeo 2016, 13) (my italicisation). They contrast with more blatant attempts to seize power through classic coups d’état, executive coups, and election-day vote fraud. Incumbents who propose electoral reform, by implication, should be treated critically. However, as Bermeo notes, there is a ‘vexing ambiguity’ because reforms are ‘not, in themselves, antidemocratic’ and it can be difficult to distinguish between those which are, and those which are not (Bermeo 2016, 16).

Fourthly, the literature on *electoral governance* has expanded. Research in this area began in the early 2000s and aimed to map the range of institutional actors involved in rule making, rule adjudicating, and rule implementing. Electoral governance was originally defined ‘as a set of related activities that involves rule making, rule application, and rule adjudication’ (Mozaffer and Schedler 2002, 5). Subsequent research mapped out the range and form in which electoral management bodies came, noting variation in independence, capacity, and the use of technology (Lopez-Pintor 2000; James et al. 2019; Garnett 2019). More recently, there has been a focus on the networks of actors that work together or compete to decide the rules surrounding elections. Electoral management bodies and other state agencies play an indispensable role in shaping policy, but there is also a role for civil society, the private sector, international organisations, and a multitude of other bodies. Electoral governance can instead be defined ‘as the decision-making process for determining how elections are run’ (James and Matlosa 2025). Electoral network governance analysis involves assessing the ‘network of actors involved in setting the rules for running elections, the degree of contestation and the power relationships between them’ (James and Matlosa 2025). According to this approach, the network might be busy and involve a large number of organisations and actors who are seeking to change electoral rules, with highly partisan debates about whether change is good or bad. Alternatively, there might be a quiet consensus about the rules which are widely accepted and not considered as objects for possible change in the future. The power resources within the governance network might also be varied. Electoral governance network analysis therefore goes beyond the traditional research on electoral system reform to provide a more nuanced framework of the range of actors involved in electoral reform. However, it is not necessarily prescriptive about how electoral reform should be undertaken. It instead draws attention to empirical and theoretical power imbalances.

Finally, we might also look at the literature on the *concept of democracy and good elections* themselves. Definitions of democracy and electoral integrity should provide an anchoring statement of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ practices. Elections are integral to democracy, but concepts of democracy say nothing specific about how electoral laws should be produced. Democracy is characterised as a system usually defined with institutional practices and mechanisms, such as who can vote and which parliaments and other institutions should be present, as well as wider sets of principles such as representation, deliberation, and equality. However, there is little prescription on electoral rule making processes. For example, the minimalist definition of democracy, suggested by Adam Przeworski (2018), sets no requirements for how electoral rules should be made, just that electoral rules of some sort should be used to decide who governs (and therefore makes those rules). Robert Dahl’s requirements for a polyarchy include a range of institutional practices that states must exhibit to be considered a democracy (Dahl 1971). These include requirements for citizens to be able to formulate their preferences, signal their preferences, and have their preferences weighted equally in the conduct of government. But there is no detail as to how wider constitutional and electoral rules should be established, except that the final rules should uphold democracy. International standards on elections are set out in treaties such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, regional treaties, and national constitutions (Carter Center et al. 2024; Norris 2014). They include provisions, for example, that elections should be genuine, built from a clear legal framework, have universal suffrage run by independent electoral management bodies, and have open access to information.

These five research agendas have produced major steps forward in the literature. We know more about the effects of laws and reforms, why they might occur, and the range of actors involved in pushing for electoral reform. However, we do not have established prescriptive principles for identifying how electoral reform *should* be undertaken. Existing work has sought to be explanatory, not prescriptive. Yet at the same time, international standards and scholars often stress that there is not a ‘one size fits all’ solution. The constitutional and electoral rules to deliver

democracy may need to be adapted to historical and political circumstances. International standards do not state which specific electoral system should be adopted—they only address general principles. For example, according to the United Nations (Committee on Civil and Political Rights):

‘Although the Covenant does not impose any particular electoral system, any system operating in a State party must be compatible with the rights protected by article 25 and must guarantee and give effect to the free expression of the will of the electors. The principle of one person, one vote, must apply, and within the framework of each State’s electoral system, the vote of one elector should be equal to the vote of another’ (United Nations (Committee on Civil and Political Rights) 1996).

There is therefore always discretion, ambiguity, and choice in designing and redesigning electoral practices. The process of crafting electoral laws is therefore an indispensable area for study.

Research questions

This gives rise to several key research questions. Given that the stakes are high, it is important to ensure that the reform process has political legitimacy and is in line with the principles of democracy itself. The first is a normative question:

- Research Question 1: what principles should underpin the electoral reform process?

The second, third and fourth questions are empirical:

- Research Question 2: To what extent are these principles followed globally?
- Research Question 3: What are the barriers to ensuring that they are followed?
- Research Question 4: What are the consequences of not following the principles?
- Research Question 5: What interventions can be adopted to help ensure that the principles are followed?

The latter questions, is a more policy-oriented question which can be used by constitutional designers and civil society to build more democratic electoral reform processes in the future.

The book will enable these questions to be answered by providing a rich set of country cases. These will be written by experts on the electoral reform process for each respective country. The chapters will be historical case studies written using documentary analysis of electoral reform proposals, policy documents, parliamentary debates, media sources, secondary literature, and other relevant materials. A most different systems design is therefore used to explore electoral reform in a wide variety of contexts. Most different systems designs choose cases which are maximally different, which is appropriate when little is known about their universality (Mills, Durepos, and Wiebe 2010).

These cases are framed by an analysis of original data from the Perceptions of Electoral Integrity Dataset – an expert-based survey on the extent to which the consensus was followed. This dataset contains a question on the extent to which electoral reform followed the consensus for elections held from 2023 onwards (Garnett, James, and Caal-Laam 2024). Cross-national data analysis will be undertaken to identify the determinants of consensus-oriented electoral reform processes. The final chapter will draw out lessons learned from the case studies and empirical analysis.

Types of electoral laws

To understand electoral reform, it is important to distinguish between different types of rules.

Electoral cycle

In order to fully understand electoral reform, we need to take an electoral cycle approach. The study of electoral laws has often been segmented into the study of specific types of these laws. The majority of attention has tended to focus on electoral systems. The study and political debate around electoral reform has tended to focus on electoral system change to such an extent that 'electoral reform' in much of the Anglophone world has been treated synonymously, in political debate, to 'electoral system reform.' Debates about how to reform electoral law may also be centered on other specific aspects of elections, such as electoral finance regulations, voting day fraud or suppression (Hasen 2012) or electoral management.

An electoral cycle approach was developed by the international practitioner community during the early 2000s to emphasise the importance of studying elections as continuous processes rather than isolated events (ACE 2017). Elections did not only involve the casting and counting of votes over the course of a few days. They involved a pre-election period in which electoral laws were designed to specify who was eligible to vote, when voter registration was undertaken, and how electoral personnel were appointed and trained. They involved an electoral period in which the candidate nomination process was undertaken, candidates campaigned, and voting took place. The post electoral period included counting, auditing, and, ideally, reviewing the electoral process. The electoral cycle approach emphasised that development agencies, electoral authorities, and stakeholders needed to plan for an election 'by thinking ahead 5 to 10 years, rather than reacting to each electoral event as it occurs' (ACE 2017).

The electoral cycle approach was embedded into the literature on electoral integrity by Pippa Norris (Norris 2014, 33-34), but was also apparent in earlier work, such as Andreas Schedler's menu of manipulation (Schedler 2002). This approach has the advantage that it recognises that a would-be autocrat may seek to introduce power-centralising measures at any aspect of the election cycle to gain strategic advantage. Meanwhile, those making genuine attempts to improve electoral integrity must also focus on the entire cycle because the quality of the election may only be as strong as the weakest part of the cycle. Electoral integrity is widely measured using an electoral cycle approach (Norris, Frank, and i Coma 2014; Garnett, James, and Caal-Laam 2024). Figure 1 summarises the stages of the electoral cycle where electoral reform might occur and which therefore are included within the scope of study on electoral reform. All of these can powerfully empower or disempower citizens on election day.

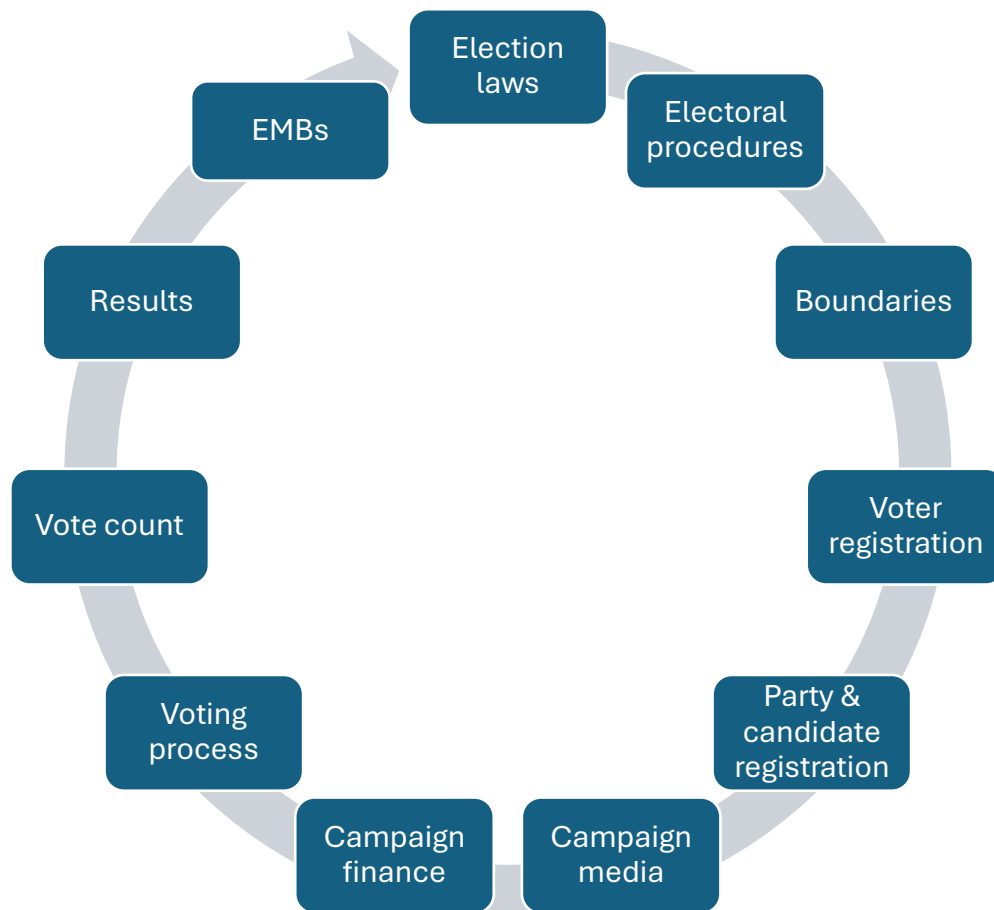


Figure 1: The Electoral Cycle

Constitutions

Electoral reform may also involve changing electoral rules, which can come in multiple forms and at different spatial levels. At the highest level, we might expect the laws governing elections to be set out in national *constitutions*. These may set out general principles to be followed but may also include more specific requirements. The Basic Law of Germany (‘Grundgesetz’) is the constitution adopted in 1949 after the Second World War.¹ This sets out general principles such as equality before the law, equal rights, and freedom of expression. Section 3 sets out rules for elections to the Bundestag which must be followed. This includes provisions, for example, for campaign finance. Under article 21, political parties must publicly account for their assets and for the sources and use of their funds. Some countries do not have formal codified constitutions. For example, the United Kingdom’s constitution is not codified in one place, but is made up of Acts of Parliament, commonly held understandings and practices, and decisions made by the judiciary on how decisions should be made.

Primary legislation

Electoral laws might also be set out in *primary legislation*. Primary legislation tends to refer to laws which are voted on within legislatures, which set out general principles or overall rules for elections. For example, a Federal Political Parties Act was passed in Germany in 2004 that

¹ https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/englisch_gg/englisch_gg.pdf

provided rules for political parties, such as principles and the extent and calculations for public funding.²

Secondary legislation

Electoral rules can also come in the form of *secondary legislation*. Secondary legislation tends to involve rules which are set by government ministers or other bodies under powers given to them in primary legislation. These rules therefore tend not to require full discussion and approval by a parliament. The aim is to 'fill in the gaps' set out in an original Act. Statutory instruments are a form of secondary legislation. In the UK Parliament, they are 'documents drafted by a government department to make changes to the law.'³ For example, the UK minister of state proposed a statutory instrument to increase the value of election expenses for parties and candidates for elections in 2023.⁴ This change (Representation of the People (Variation of Election Expenses, Expenditure Limits and Donation etc. Thresholds) Order 2023) could be made because of powers granted by primary legislation (The Representation of the People Act 1983 the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000). It increased spending limits from £18.96 million per party at a general election, by 80% to £34.13 million.⁵

Electoral rules can be changed by *relevant electoral authorities*, where they are delegated powers in law to do so. These changes may not be debated widely, but could be decided in behind closed doors or in committee meetings.

Judicial rulings

Electoral rules can also be set by judicial decisions. For example, the Indian Supreme Court ruled in *Democratic Reforms v. Union of India* that Indian electoral finance laws were unconstitutional. An Electoral Bonds Scheme was announced by the Indian government in Finance Bill 2017, which allowed citizens to buy bonds and contribute them to political parties anonymously and without limits. The Supreme Court ruled in 2024, however, that the scheme and amendments to the Representation of People Act, Companies Act, and Income Tax Act were unconstitutional because they were "violative of RTI (Right to Information)" and of voters' right to information about political funding under Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution.⁶

Electoral rules and spatiality

Electoral rules may be set in national institutions, but they may also be partially devolved to subnational institutions. There might be constitutions at the sub-national level which provide guidance for regional or local elections. For example, Hamburg is a city-state within the Federal Republic of Germany. The constitution of the Free and Hanseatic city of Hamburg ('Verfassung der Freien und Hansestadt Hamburg') provides an overall framework for governance. Articles 6-12 of the Hamburg Constitution set out that Parliament shall consist of at least 120 Members of Parliament, who shall be elected by general, indirect, free, equal, and secret suffrage. Provisions include the electoral system, the size of the parliament, the day of the election, and the appeals process. However, the Hamburg Constitution thereafter allows for laws to determine the details of elections. The Act on the Election to the Hamburg Parliament (Gesetz über die Wahl zur Hamburgischen Bürgerschaft (BüWG)) and the Hamburg Citizenship Election Regulations

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https://www.bmi.bund.de/SharedDocs/downloads/DE/gesetzestexte/Parteiengesetz_PartG_engl_042009.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=2

³ <https://www.parliament.uk/about/how/laws/secondary-legislation/>

⁴ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2023/1235/made>

⁵ <https://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/publications/briefings/general-election-rules-and-regulations>

⁶ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/2/15/indias-supreme-court-scraps-electoral-bonds-calls-it-unconstitutional>

(Ordinance for the Elections to the Hamburg Parliament - Hamburg Citizenship Electoral Regulations - HmbBüWO) were laws passed by the Parliament. Reforms to these included the lowering of the franchise to 16 and over for those who have lived in Hamburg for at least three months.

Rule absence

Establishing rules sets formal requirements about what is permissible and what is not during the electoral cycle. The reform of electoral rules is proactive and is visible in the form of a written rule or practice. However, the absence of rules is as notable and important as their presence. Non-decisions are equally as important in shaping electoral rules. Decision makers may choose not to entertain the prospect of electoral reform. This might be because election quality is already perceived to be high. Incumbent elites may also be satisfied with the status quo. The existing rules may have advantaged them in the last election, or they might be risk adverse and perceive change as electorally dangerous. However, there may be other reasons as well. It may be that electoral reform does not gather sufficient attention relative to the wide range of other policy issues demanding attention, such as the economy, foreign policy, or immigration. A variety of factors will effect whether electoral reform has a policy window (Kingdon 1984). Crucially, analysing the absence of electoral reform is as important as the act of electoral reform.

The effects of existing electoral laws can also change without legislative modification. Institutional drift occurs 'when institutions or policies are deliberately held in place while their context shifts in ways that alter their effects' (Hacker, Pierson, and Thelen 2015, 180). In the years after an election law is set in stone, populations can move or change size, or electoral cleavages may reshape. The effects of electoral boundaries, for example, will not remain constant over repeated elections and parties may accrue growing (dis)advantages in their vote efficiency (Johnston et al. 2002).

Principles for electoral reform

As noted above, the existing literature has predominantly focussed on describing how electoral reform has previously been undertaken, and how it is likely to be done in the future. It has therefore followed an implicit behaviouralist approach to political science in which the aim is to explain the world rather than to prescribe action. Behaviouralism sought to be 'scientific,' meaning that the scholar would not be involved in any moralising about the actions of individuals. As David Truman put it, the values of 'how men ought to act is not a concern of research in political behaviour' (Truman 1951 cited in Dahl, 1961: 768).

Normative theory is important, however, to provide a moral compass for human action. Distinguishing between autocracy and democracy is not just an empirical activity. It matters because there is something which we value in the world. This could be that democracy has an intrinsic value or that democracy (or autocracy) has instrumental value because it brings about greater economic growth, a better environment, or some other outcome. It is therefore necessary to set out some principles for undertaking electoral reform.

Where should these principles come from? One source could be international standards. These have been articulated by many as being an important anchor for best practices (Norris 2014; Davis-Roberts and Carroll 2010). However, a challenge is that there are few specific standards to guide the reform practice. Moreover, a weakness of using international standards is that they can reflect the power balance between those designing the standards, rather than normative principles (James and Garnett 2025a). Democratic theory is an alternative. This has the

advantage of providing some normative philosophical underpinning for principles. However, it can be criticised for introducing ambiguity and uncertain empirical relevance.

Principles to guide electoral reform can be based both on international standards and democratic theory, however, if they are aligned. Six principles to inform electoral reform are included below, which were set out by members of the international community in consultation with academics. The Global Network for Securing Electoral Integrity involved a wide range of international NGOs and INGOs that sought to improve election quality worldwide. They published *Principles for Democratic Electoral Reform* in 2024 (GNSEI 2024). However, they are also anchored here in democratic theory. A maximalist approach to democracy is used here, which conceives of the various strands of democracy that have been articulated as additive (James 2024).

The six principles are as follows:

1. Political consensus building is foundational to any electoral reform process

Electoral reform can create electoral winners and losers. There are therefore incentives for various actors to take a partisan approach to the electoral reform process, seeking to maximise their own electoral needs. However, democracy is not a zero-sum game. All parties, candidates, and stakeholders benefit from a political system in which there is mutual trust and all parties are able to compete fairly. Striving to form a political consensus is the highest priority. This can be achieved by following other principles: transparency, inclusion, evidence, adequate timeframes, and accountability. However, consensus should be the starting point for all actors.

2. Electoral reform processes should be transparent

Transparency is central to the practice of democracy. Freedom of information is prescribed as a best practice by many international government agencies and is embedded widely in definitions of democracy (Marciel 2023). It follows that all information related to the reform of elections should be made publicly available. This should include information relating to meetings, agendas, minutes, and other relevant documents. Those organising the electoral reform process should also ensure transparency regarding the motivations for reform, the timelines, the actors involved, the funding used, and the content of proposed reforms.

Additional transparency measures, remaining mindful of timing and inclusion, include: an open consultation process, which involves a call for relevant evidence; holding hearings and/or meetings in public and/or making the minutes publicly available; and publishing submissions of evidence and official correspondence related to the reform process.

3. Electoral reform processes should be inclusive

Democracy is a system in which everyone is considered equal (Dahl 1971; James 2024; Birch 2023; Beetham 1994). It follows that all have a right to be involved in the making of constitutions and electoral laws. The reform process should therefore include all main political—and all other relevant—societal actors, including representatives from key segments of society. Care should also be undertaken to include women and marginalized populations. This may mean using a variety of bespoke approaches to reach out to communities. It also means that there should be a proactive attempt to foster wider public awareness of the reforms, rather than trying to sneak them onto the statute book.

4. Electoral reform processes should be informed by evidence and a long-term vision.

Democracy involves deliberation, discussion, listening, and reflection (Parkinson 2018; LeDuc 2015; Gutmann and Thompson 2009; Dryzek 2000). This process of deliberation can be enriched if there is commonly shared and reliable evidence available about the issues under consideration (Parkhurst 2017; Cairney 2016). Although this evidence does not guarantee a consensus, it can enable common understandings and empower all actors to have a better understanding of the system and their own interests. High-quality and well-presented information is important for an electoral reform process to build a shared understanding of the issues at stake and the options available. Electoral processes and the reasons reform may be needed can be easily misunderstood, which in turn can lead to problems not being addressed, reforms being introduced that do not “fix” the problem, or openings for influential actors to misrepresent the issues and options for personal gain. Thus, electoral reform processes should incorporate credible expert input to enable evidence-based discussion. These processes should consider credible sources of evidence and data, including, international and citizen election observation reports and recommendations, reports published by election management bodies, public opinion research over multiple electoral cycles (including opinion research that shows longer-term democratic aspirations), post-election audits, academic studies, and comparative international indicators on election quality. It should also design public communication that emphasizes the long-term vision for electoral reform and that allows for the evidence to be shared, read, and understood.

5. Adequate timeframes and resources for a viable and democratic electoral reform process.

Literature on the policy making process and the design of legislation emphasise the importance of time and resources. Laws can be hastily designed, pushed through legislatures with little scrutiny, or have little connection between goals and measures, and this can adversely affect the implementation of laws (Sebok and Kiss 2025; Vanterpool 2007; Zamboni 2017). It follows that the inadequate time and resources for developing electoral laws can cause flawed electoral laws.

International best practices commonly reflect that there should not be late changes in electoral laws and that legal stability is crucial. The Venice Commission Code of Best Practice suggests that there should not be changes within a year of the election (Venice Commission 2002, 26). Late changes can give disadvantages to some candidates and parties, make the implementation of new laws difficult for EMBs, and leave voters unsure about the new rules.

Electoral reform should therefore ideally be undertaken early in the electoral cycle. Noting the policy cycle set out above, the ideal time to commence the electoral reform consultation process would be immediately after an election. Any defects in the electoral process will be foremost in the minds of the stakeholders and they will therefore be easier to address.

6. Clear accountability structures are essential for electoral reform processes

Accountability for public bodies is a widely established principle in democratic theory. For David Beetham, an open and accountable government is a central dimension of democracy (Beetham 1994). For him, accountability should work in several directions: between government, the legislature, courts, and the electorate. Accountability has been upheld as a central aim for all public agencies such as QUANGOs (Flinders and Smith 1999) and is embedded into World Bank Governance Indicators (World Bank 2018).

It follows that there should be accountability processes put in place for any secretariat body responsible for overseeing the electoral reform process. This should require that there be opportunities for public scrutiny of decisions. There should be a clear leadership structure,

assignment of responsibilities, and reporting structure. There is a requirement for regular reporting and clear communication to the public.

Principle	Key Indicators
Consensus	- Actors showed good will to achieve political consensus about the reforms - Political consensus was achieved
Transparency	- The motives, timelines and nature of the reform process is made clear and public - The hearings and submissions of evidence are publicly available
Inclusion	- There were opportunities for all actors to be involved - All actors were genuinely listened to
Evidence	- High-quality evidence was made available to actors - High-quality information was used throughout the reform process
Timeliness	- There were adequate timeframes and resources for a viable and democratic electoral reform process
Accountability	- Those conducting the reform process were subject to clear leadership and lines of accountability

Table 1: indicators of democratic electoral reform

The impossibility of democratic electoral reform?

What are the prospects of these principles being followed in practice around the world? Is it naïve and unrealistic to suggest that actors living in the real world of power-politics might consider these norms aspirational?

The framework set out so far is normative: it aims to prescribe how electoral reform should be undertaken in the future. However, this book also aims to be empirical and consider when and why these principles are likely to be followed and the possible barriers to them. This book therefore sets out some propositions to be returned to in the conclusion, following the empirical analysis.

Proposition 1: Democratic electoral reform is unlikely because of partisan interests and low public knowledge and interest

The first proposition is that we would expect the electoral reform principles not to be followed because of the raw nature of electoral politics. Electoral laws create winners and losers. Based on the existing literature on electoral reform, we expect that rational, self-interested actors would therefore prioritize laws which would make it easier for them to win future elections. The dividends of prioritizing more altruistic goals, such as meeting the principles, might be comparatively lower.

Proposition 2: Democratic electoral reform is more likely in democratic systems

The second proposition is that stakeholders will be more likely to follow the principles in democracies. The mechanisms here are twofold. On the one hand, the *incentives* for reformers are shaped by the overall system. Reformers might be aware that if they do not follow the principles in a democratic system, they might receive criticism from the media, public, and other stakeholders. If they do not include civil society groups or hold transparent reform processes,

this may lead to negative news stories. On the other hand, democratic systems may have stronger *norms and institutions* in place which serve to shape the electoral reform process.

Proposition 3: Political culture may play an important role for democratic reform

Political culture –such as norms, beliefs and values–varies enormously around the world. Welzel (2013) argues that emancipatory values are those which focus on democratic voice, sexual choice, gender equality, and child autonomy. These vary in their presence around the world. As noted earlier, Norris argued that political culture, framed in terms of citizen dissatisfaction with regime legitimacy, can be important in making electoral reform salient (Norris 2011). We might therefore expect political culture to also shape how electoral reform is undertaken. If wider democratic values are shared across a society, then the principles might be more likely to be followed.

Proposition 4: Constitutional systems may play an important role for democratic reform

The overall nature of the constitutional system may also play a role. Political systems are often divided up into those which have majoritarian constitutions and those which have consensus designs (Lijphart 2012). Majoritarian political systems have fewer checks and balances on the government of the day. There might therefore be less of a need, politically speaking, to seek consensus and demonstrate accountability in order for electoral reforms to pass. By contrast, consensus constitutions are famously thought to foster collaboration and consensus (Lijphart 2004). They also have more veto-points, which means that consensus is necessary for reforms to progress (Tsebelis 2002). It is therefore logical to expect that countries with consensus constitutions will be more likely to generate democratic electoral reform processes.

Proposition 5: Institutional practices may be an important pathway for democratic reform

Constitutions provide meta level rules about how politics is conducted. However, electoral reform is also shaped by meso and micro level rules and sites. For example, countries vary in the extent to which they have independent electoral management bodies (James et al. 2019). The presence of these independent electoral agencies may be important in shaping rules. The legislative process also varies, with some legislative bodies requiring laws to be put before cross-party parliamentary committees before they are progressed to the main chambers (Siefken and Rommetvedt 2022). Election law is devolved to sub-national entities in some countries. These specific sites and protocols may provide opportunities for deliberation, debate, and consensus which are not present elsewhere. Studying these reforms in detail around the world is therefore a vitally important, but often overlooked, phenomenon.

Book approach

The book will enable these questions to be answered by providing a rich set of country cases. These will be written by experts on the electoral reform process for each respective country. The chapters will be historical case studies written using a documentary analysis of electoral reform proposals, policy documents, parliamentary debates, media sources, secondary literature, and other relevant materials. A most different systems design is therefore used to explore electoral reform in a wide variety of contexts. Most different systems designs choose cases which are maximally different, which is appropriate when little is already known about the universality of cases (Mills, Durepos, and Wiebe 2010).

These cases will be framed by an analysis of original data from the Perceptions of Electoral Integrity Dataset – an expert-based survey on the extent to which consensus was followed. This dataset contains a question on the extent to which electoral reform followed consensus for elections held from 2023 onwards. Figure 1 illustrates data collected so far from countries which held elections in 2023. Data from 2024 will be included in the final book. Cross-national data

analysis will be undertaken to identify the determinants of consensus-oriented electoral reform processes. The final chapter will draw out lessons learned from the case studies and empirical analysis.

Conclusions and findings in summary

[To follow following project completion]

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