

Who runs elections and how can they be improved? Independence, resources and workforce conditions are essential for good election management

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By [Democratic Audit UK](#) 06/06/2019 [Read More](#) →

*In new research published today about how elections are run around the world, **Toby S. James, Leontine Loeber, Holly Ann Garnett and Carolien van Ham** find that organisational independence matters for well-run elections, and that election management could be improved with more resources, improved working conditions for election employees – and a better gender balance in electoral management bodies.*



Election officials, Nigeria 2019. Picture: [The Commonwealth](#)/(CC BY-NC 2.0) licence

Over 500 election officials were reported to have died delivering the combined Indonesian elections in April 2019. The cause wasn't election violence or riots from competing forces trying to seize power, but heart attacks, hepatic comas, strokes and respiratory failures, as employees laboured under extremely difficult conditions.

Although the precise number of deaths attributable to the election has been debated, the case shone a light on the much-overlooked area of how elections are run. The challenge of running elections amounts to the largest peacetime logistical operation, with the highest possible stakes. The Indonesian election involved over seven million officials, 810,000 polling stations and 193 million voters. The process included transporting votes from remote parts of the country via boat or horseback.

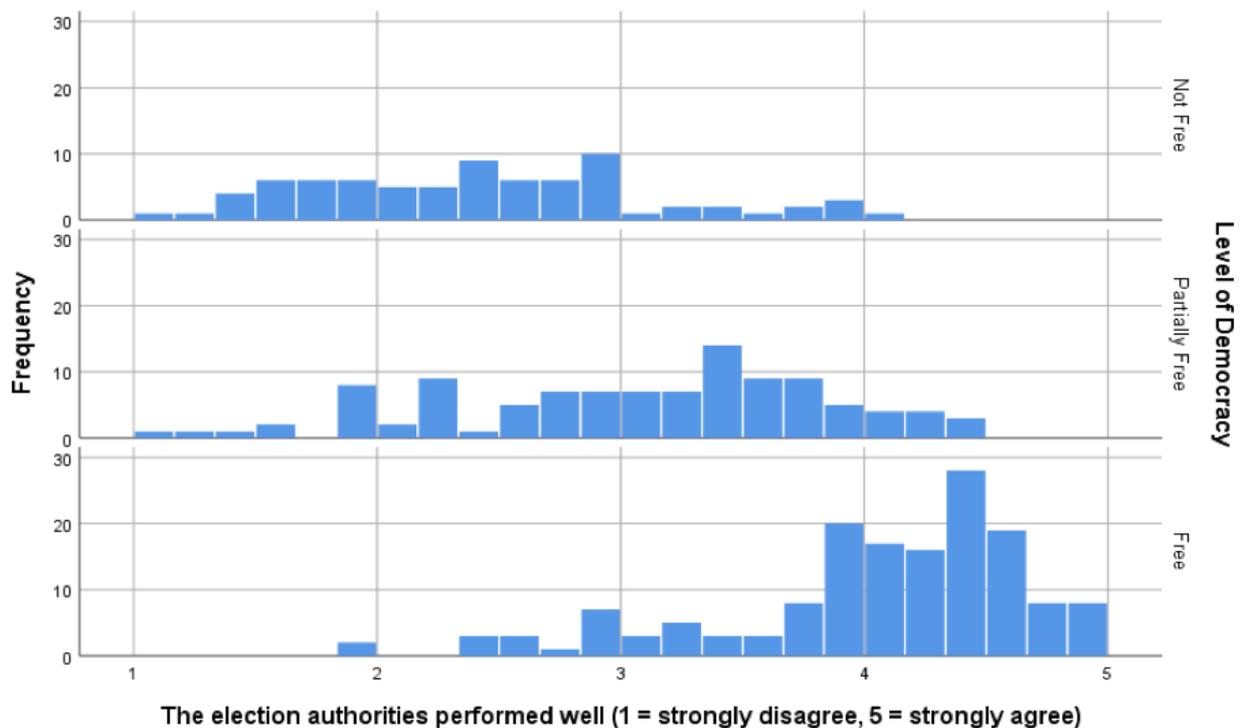
Indonesia is the world's third-largest democracy and might appear to be an extreme case, but the challenges of organising an election are echoed across the globe. UK electoral officials recently organised elections for the European Parliament, but with little more

than two weeks' notice that the election would take place. Initially, the government was adamant there would be no election and there was therefore no need to prepare anything. The announcement there would be an election after all came only days after officials had organised local elections. The European Parliament elections gained global news coverage as many EU citizens were unsuccessfully registered and so denied a vote and electoral officials were caught in the storm. Problems are also commonly reported at election time in other countries such as the US.

It's a global problem

The challenge of organising elections is a global problem. It is also one that citizens take for granted until things go wrong, and one that researchers thus-far have widely overlooked. But as figure 1 below shows, there is enormous variation in the quality of electoral management in different types of society, whether free, partially free or not free.

Figure 1: The performance of electoral authorities in in 166 countries, from 1 July, 2012 to 31 December, 2018



Source: authors, using PEI 7.0. Countries classified by Freedom House.

Analysis of the organisations that run elections has been very limited, however. At the start of the 1990s, in the so-called third wave of democratisation, many more states around the world began to run elections. There was an urgent need for electoral advice. The consensus amongst the international community at the time was that having an independent electoral commission was important to prevent government interference in elections in these fragile, new democracies. Academic knowledge lagged behind, however. Most studies, when they emerged many years later, produced very mixed results about whether it was worth having an independent body or not.

Building better elections from research

In our newly published research in *International Political Science Review*, however, we are able to provide a global view of how elections are run, why it matters and how it can be improved. We undertook surveys of electoral management bodies (EMBs) around the world to work out systematically who they are, what their organisational features are and who the staff are that run elections.

This is the most detailed picture of how the world runs elections to date. It allows us to identify ‘what works’ which could inform practice worldwide.



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We argue that there are seven ways in which EMBs vary. The degree of centralisation, independence, administrative capacity, the scope and division of tasks, relations to external actors, their use of technology and the characteristics of the workforce. All of these affects electoral integrity in different ways.

Insisting that the administrators that run elections are independent of government is not such a waste of time after all, we show. When electoral management bodies are able to operate independently from governments, elections are of significantly higher integrity. However, such de facto independence is only weakly related to the institutional design of the electoral management body, hence changes in institutional design should probably be considered as only one of multiple interventions to strengthen the de facto independence of electoral management.

The resources electoral management bodies have matter too. There are varying degrees of capacity around the world and within countries too, such as the UK, where there are considerable differences in the distribution of resources. But capacity isn't just about

cash. There are many ways to measure it and an innovative method is introduced – by evaluating the websites of the EMBs.

Meanwhile election workforces vary enormously around the world, from just a handful of permanent officials in some states, to hundreds in another. There are some common truths, however. There remains a considerable gender bias in the profession with women less likely to feature in senior positions, and women employees describe a more critical working environment. Working in elections involves teamwork and strong civic duty, but also stress and high workloads. And these things matter, not just to the workers themselves, but to voters. We find that states that have better working conditions, lower levels of stress in the workforce, and which involve their workers in decision-making processes, run elections better.

Policy recommendations

1. Improve independence
2. Build EMB capacity
3. Address internal gender inequality
4. Tackle employee stress
5. Establish a greater voice for election staff

Electoral commissions may rarely feature in the headlines, apart from when they are accused of being at fault, but they are nonetheless fundamental for democracy. Policy-makers worldwide should promote the independence, capacity and gender equality within EMBs; employee stress should be tackled; and a greater voice should be given to those working on elections.



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This article gives the views of the authors, not the position of Democratic Audit. It draws on a special issue of [International Political Science Review](#).

About the authors

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