

THE INTEGRITY OF ELECTIONS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF MODERN THEORIES OF DEMOCRACY¹

Tatiana Tökölyová²

ABSTRACT

Trust in the integrity of electoral processes is crucial to democratic legitimacy. This article uses a comparative approach, drawing on both theoretical models and empirical data, to investigate electoral integrity from the perspective of contemporary democratic theory. The study examines how electoral fairness influences political trust and democratic stability in established and hybrid regimes, with a particular focus on the United States and Mexico. Employing the data available from a set of indices, the study proposes a new conceptual tool — the Electoral Integrity Vulnerability Index (EIVI) — to better understand systemic threats to electoral legitimacy. By integrating institutional, legal, informational and participatory dimensions, the EIVI enables a more nuanced assessment of electoral risks. The findings emphasise the importance of campaign finance regulation, electoral management independence and media freedom in ensuring electoral fairness. This article contributes to the ongoing debate about the causes and consequences of electoral decline, offering a roadmap for future research into institutional resilience in electoral democracies.

Keywords: *elections, electoral integrity, democratic legitimacy, public trust, EIVI*

INTRODUCTION

Although confidence in the integrity of electoral processes is essential for democracy to function, doubts about the legitimacy of elections are increasing in both established and emerging democracies. In recent years, denial of fair election results, questioning of vote counting reliability, and attacks on electoral institutions have become commonplace. This is a

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² Tatiana Tökölyová, Faculty of Arts, University of Constantine the Philosopher in Nitra, Hodžova 1, 94974 Nitra, Slovak Republic; E-mail: ttokolyova@ukf.sk; <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3367-7379>

particularly worrying trend in countries where democratic processes were previously considered stable (González, 2023).

In the US, the issue of electoral integrity has become a major political concern, particularly following the 2020 presidential election when Donald Trump and his supporters contested the outcome, culminating in the attack on the Capitol on 6 January 2021. As a result, electoral integrity has become the subject of legislative changes, legal disputes and disinformation campaigns, which affect citizens' trust in democratic institutions. As events in the USA demonstrate, a lack of confidence in elections and electoral authorities is increasingly being exploited as a tactic by candidates who have lost elections or their political opponents. Such accusations are often made without credible evidence or substantiated claims of electoral process irregularities. Furthermore, such allegations frequently persist even after the vote count is finalised, threatening not only the credibility of the elections themselves, but also the stability of the entire democratic system. The spread of such practices poses a serious threat to democratic institutions and undermines the fundamental principles of transparency and fairness.

This article examines the integrity of electoral processes in the context of modern theories of democracy, while secondary aim includes identification of key factors affecting electoral fairness, and to contribute to the debate on the protection of electoral mechanisms based on empirical studies and theoretical models, focusing on its relevance in contemporary political science discourse. These objectives guide the research and contribute to existing scholarly discussions. The research problem is grounded in a comparison of electoral processes in different countries, with particular emphasis on the United States and Mexico, where attempts to delegitimize electoral outcomes and weaken electoral institutions have been noted. The paper proceeds as follows: Section 1 presents methodology of the research, followed by Section 2 devoted to a literature review on of electoral integrity, highlighting key theoretical and empirical contributions. Section 3 discusses the findings, and Section 4 provides concluding discussion and recommendations for future research.

1 METHODOLOGY

Research introduced here is aimed at to contribute to the debate on the protection of electoral mechanisms based on empirical studies and theoretical models, focusing on its relevance in contemporary political science discourse. These objectives guide the research and contribute to existing scholarly discussions.

This article aims to develop the concept of the Electoral Integrity Vulnerability Index (EIVI) and propose it as a novel framework for assessing the resilience of electoral systems against internal and external threats. Unlike existing indices, which predominantly evaluate electoral outcomes or procedural elements, the EIVI focuses on the structural and contextual vulnerabilities that precede electoral breakdowns. By doing so, the article seeks to address critical shortcomings in existing comparative tools, particularly with regard to pre-electoral risks and the gradual erosion of institutional trust.

To fulfil this aim, the article pursues three objectives:

1. critically assessing the conceptual limitations of prevailing measures such as the Perceptions of Electoral Integrity (PEI), Freedom House ratings and V-Dem scores;
2. proposing an alternative, multidimensional model integrating institutional, informational, legal and historical indicators;
3. illustrating the analytical potential of the designed EIVI for future empirical applications and policy use.

These objectives are addressed through the following research questions:

RQ1: What conceptual and methodological gaps exist in existing electoral integrity indices that justify the development of a new, vulnerability-oriented model?

RQ2: Which institutional, legal, informational and historical factors are most critical for identifying early-stage threats to electoral integrity and how can these factors be operationalised within a coherent analytical framework?

The research is based on a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods that allow for a holistic analysis of the electoral process and its

integrity. The theoretical framework of this paper is based on the work of researchers who define electoral integrity and its relationship to democratic stable or eroding environments. The theoretical approach here is linked to an analytical approach, as the research presented here draws on data from:

- the Electoral Integrity Model (EIP) developed by the Electoral Integrity Project; Electoral Vulnerability Index,
- V-Dem (Varieties of Democracy),
- Freedom House,
- the Bertelsmann Transformation Index,
- IDEA Global State of Democracy Indices,
- theoretical analyses by Norris (2014a, 2014b), Birch (2008, 2011), Schnaudt, C. & Wolf, C. (2023), Garnett, H.A. & James, T.S. (2020), Lührmann and Lindberg (2019), Schedler (2009); González et al. (2023); see section 2 below)
- and a comparative analysis of electoral processes in the United States and Mexico.

The study includes secondary analysis of election records, media coverage of electoral controversies, and public polls focusing on winners and losers in electoral processes.

The United States and Mexico were chosen for a comparative analysis of electoral process integrity due to their different political regimes and historical experiences. While the US is an example of a mature democratic system with a long tradition of free elections, it has recently faced new challenges, including increasing political polarisation, the spread of misinformation, and a decline in public trust in institutions. In contrast, Mexico is characterised as a hybrid regime that, despite significant democratisation reforms, still struggles with corruption, violence, and low public trust in electoral processes. This diversity allows for a comparative analysis of electoral integrity threats.

Despite their political differences, these countries share strong regional ties, creating a complex context for examining electoral vulnerabilities. Trade and migration links, as well as security issues, affect each country's internal politics and their relations with each other. This interconnected

framework enables a better understanding of how different factors impact the integrity of elections in neighbouring states with different political systems. High-quality data on electoral processes in both countries enables a detailed empirical analysis and validation of the proposed Electoral Vulnerability Index (EIVI). Selecting the US and Mexico also reflects the current trends and challenges that international studies on electoral integrity focus on, thus increasing the relevance and contribution of the results. For this reason, these two countries are an appropriate sample on which to conduct a systematic examination of the different dimensions of electoral vulnerability in various democratic contexts. This comparison will contribute to a deeper understanding of the mechanisms that threaten electoral integrity while offering practical recommendations for improving electoral systems in different types of regimes. Perplexity AI supported the testing of the EIVI model by assisting with data processing and analysis. The results are presented in Tables 4 and 5.

Building on data of the indices listed above and based on the identified gaps in current approaches, this article proposes the Electoral Integrity Vulnerability Index (EIVI) as a tool for systematic assessment of electoral risks, integrating institutional independence, media freedom, and historical polarization levels as predictors of electoral fairness. This is the author's version of the EIVI created as part of the article, i.e. the original draft, which is important to note to avoid confusion with the existing EVI index from the Kofi Annan Foundation. The Electoral Vulnerability Index (EVI), the best known of its kind, was developed by the Kofi Annan Foundation in collaboration with researchers from Uppsala University, UpSight QRA and Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem). The index was developed as a tool to predict electoral risk and violence using data from a variety of sources, including the V-Dem Institute, the Digital Society Project and the UN (in detail in the Foundation's technical reports).

The EIVI introduced by this article thus integrates institutional, legal, informational, and participatory dimensions to provide a comprehensive picture of a country's electoral integrity landscape. Future research should focus on operationalizing this index and empirically testing its predictive value across different democratic contexts.

2 THE STATE-OF-THE-ART RESEARCH

A single, universal definition of electoral integrity is still under debate, but within this paper, the 2012 notion of the authors Annan et al. is applied in the sense that electoral integrity is 'any election that is based on the democratic principles of universal suffrage and political equality, as expressed in international norms and agreements, and that is professional, impartial and transparent in its preparation and management throughout the electoral cycle' (Annan, K., Zedillo, E., Ahtisaari, M., Albright, M., Arbour, L., Helgesen, J. & Wirajuda, H., 2012) highlighted by famous Annan's definition 'Elections are at the heart of democracy. When conducted with integrity, they allow citizens to have a voice in how and by whom they are governed.' (Kofi Annan Foundation, 2024)

Electoral integrity is therefore a dynamic and complex phenomenon. Previous research shows that it encompasses multiple phases of the electoral process, from the legal framework and candidate registration to campaigning, voting and vote counting, and results recognition (Frank & Martínez i Coma, 2017; Goldberg & Plescia, 2024; Goodliffe, Herrnson & Niemi-Patterson, 2020; Garnett, James & MacGregor, 2023; Electoral Integrity Project, 2023, e.g.). Problems can arise at any stage and affect how legitimate elections are perceived. In 2014, Norris (2014b) took a critical look at the research to date, stating that, despite growing concerns about failing elections around the world, there had been little systematic understanding of this phenomenon. Indeed, past research has been fragmented across subfields and regions, poorly conceptualised and under-theorised, and many aspects of electoral management have been unduly neglected and relegated to the margins of public administration. This assertion is confirmed not only by book 'Electoral Integrity in America: Securing Democracy' (Norris, Cameron & Wynter, 2018), but also by similar academic research, such as that by Schnaudt & Weßels-Faas (2021), who examine how individual perceptions of electoral integrity and the actual quality of elections in a country affect citizen turnout, and by Goodliffe, Herrnson & Niemi-Patterson (2020), who examine the enduring effects of

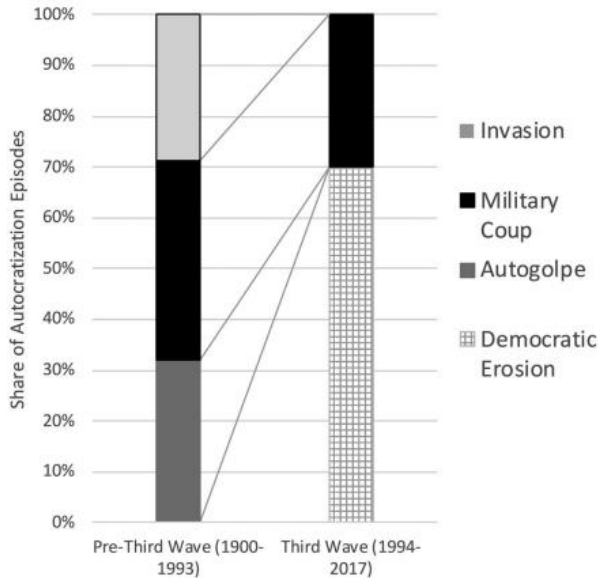
state party tradition on the voting experience, as well as by Schnaudt & Wolf (2023).

In addition to academic research, international projects are also important. These include several indices of the quality of democracy, such as the Freedom House Index and the V-Dem Index, as well as projects focusing directly on the quality of elections, such as the Electoral Integrity Project. The EIP is an international research project which analyses how electoral integrity is perceived at an individual level and the impact that systemic factors such as economics, education and history have on the quality of electoral processes in different countries.

These indices regularly analyse the quality of elections in dozens of countries and highlight regional differences and provide academic researchers with empirical data. Even such research (Garnett, H.A., James, T.S. & MacGregor, M.-S. Caal-Lam, 2023; Electoral Integrity Project, 2023) highlights that electoral integrity is a subject of growing academic and policy interest. This is despite Norris's (2014b) observation that 'over-simple "pass-fail" measures of the overall quality of elections provide insufficient detail for analysts and minimal guidance for policymakers'.

Lührmann and Lindberg (2019) use this model (Fig. 1) to illustrate historical examples of autocratisation, showing that democratic breakdowns in the past were often triggered by sudden events. They identify four impulses: the invasion of an external power; a military coup as a culmination of internal political disputes; democratic erosion; and the Spanish term 'autogolpe' to describe the phenomenon within so-called third-wave democracies. Put simply, it describes a situation in which a democratically elected political leaders use their position to illegally seize or maintain power, for example by dissolving or weakening the legislature, assuming extraordinary powers, or taking other measures to consolidate power illegally. Citizens' trust in the impartiality of electoral institutions, the regularity of electoral procedures and the transparency of electoral campaigns has become an important topic of political science and public debate.

Fig 1: Autocratisation Trends and Electoral Integrity (1900-2017)



Source: Lührmann, A., & Lindberg, S. I. (2019), p.10.

This graphical representation of the 1994–2017 period allowed us to fairly easily identify phenomena that Huntington also refers to as 'backsliding waves', as well as events in the democratic world from 2017–2024 (year of submission of this article manuscript). However, according to Lührmann and Lindberg (2019), what currently complicates electoral research and thus the formulation of applicable and relatively stable conclusions is that 'multi-party regimes slowly become less meaningful in practice, making it increasingly difficult to pinpoint the end of democracy' (p. 1095). This causes researchers to lack the appropriate conceptual and empirical tools with which they systematically analyse such ambiguous processes. According to Lührmann and Lindberg (2019), this aspect can be linked to the rise of autocracy worldwide. They note that 'a plethora of

autocracies defied the trend or made half-hearted reforms while remaining in the grey zone between democracy and autocracy' (pp. 2–3).

Figure 1 "Autocratisation Trends and Electoral Integrity" illustrates how autocratisation erodes electoral integrity. The decline in democratic quality in the USA (post-2016) aligns with the 'gradual erosion' pattern, mirroring challenges in Mexico."

The need for such research is demonstrated by debates on electoral integrity at societal and political levels in different countries. In countries with high levels of trust in institutions, such as Denmark, Sweden and Austria, electoral integrity is stable and discussion of threats to it is rather marginal (Garnett, H.A., James, T.S. & MacGregor, M.-S. Caal-Lam, 2023, Electoral Integrity Project, 2023). In contrast, in countries such as the USA, Mexico and some states in Africa and Eastern Europe, electoral integrity is the subject of intense public debate and often influences electoral campaigns and post-election processes. In the US, for instance, issues of electoral integrity have been at the centre of political discourse and social polarisation following the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections (Norris & Martínez i Coma, 2014; Daniller & Mutz, 2019; Bluth, 2023). In Brazil, President Bolsonaro questioned the credibility of electronic voting, leading to massive protests and debates about electoral integrity (Bluth, 2023).

Therefore, experts are increasingly interested in the integrity of elections as a dynamic and complex phenomenon. While discussion of electoral integrity is almost non-existent in some countries, it significantly influences election campaign dynamics and overall political processes in the period following such elections in others. Some research, including that referenced in this article, examine how voters perceive the electoral process and their individual role in it. Other authors take a more holistic approach, attempting to identify how state characteristics such as economic level, population education and historical experience with elections influence the formation of electoral processes. Current research trends also suggest that the quality of elections, and thus the quality of the associated democracy, is a topic of interest for political scientists, regardless of the level of democratisation in the countries under study. As Schedler (2002, p. 36) states: 'The idea of democracy has become so closely identified with

elections that we risk forgetting that the modern history of representative elections is a story of authoritarian manipulation as well as a saga of democratic triumphs'. Historically, elections have therefore been an instrument of authoritarian control as well as a means of democratic governance”.

It should be noted that elections are a process which ordinary citizens are more likely to understand than most state institution procedures. This is mainly due to the widespread attention they attract and the high level of participation. The USA is a case in point, confirming Birch’s (2008) claim that the media is an important factor in this attention. Through intensive reporting on elections and possible violations of electoral integrity, the press further increases the likelihood that ordinary citizens will pay attention to the elections. If elections are corrupt or fraudulent, it is highly likely that a significant proportion of the public will become aware of this. Consequently, citizens are better prepared to evaluate electoral procedures than other political processes (Birch, 2008, p. 307).

The electoral integrity model thus reflects current developments in both established and emerging democracies, representing an innovative theoretical and methodological framework for their investigation.

Therefore, the report of the Global Commission on Elections, Democracy and Security, 'Deepening Democracy: A Strategy for Improving the Integrity of Elections Worldwide (2012) defines electoral integrity as an election based on democratic principles such as universal suffrage and political equality, as set out in international norms and agreements. It must also be professional, impartial and transparent throughout the electoral cycle. This Report states that "At its root, electoral integrity is a political problem. Power, and the competition for power, must be regulated. It is not enough for governments to create institutions; politicians must respect and safeguard the independence and professionalism of election officials, judges and courts." (p.10)

The Electoral Integrity Model was developed by the Electoral Integrity Project (find out more about the project at <https://www.electoralintegrityproject.com/>). It was originally implemented by teams from the University of Sydney (Australia) and

Harvard University (United States). The main ambition was to answer the question, 'Why do elections sometimes fail, and what can be done about it?' Specifically, it addressed four fundamental issues in contemporary democracy:

a) What is the quality of elections worldwide throughout the entire electoral cycle?

b) How, when and why do elections empower or disempower citizens?

c) What are the consequences of failed elections, for example in terms of security, accessibility and trust?

d) What can be done to mitigate these issues based on academic research? The project's approach to examining 'fair' and 'honest' elections has gradually expanded. The current team continues the project and publishes the results of its research annually in a document called the 'Global Report on Electoral Integrity', which aims to provide data on the quality of elections based on expert opinion. The latest document provides analyses based on elections held in 2023. It analyses eight key elections held in 2023 in total: the general elections in Zimbabwe, Turkey, Argentina and Nigeria; the presidential elections in Egypt; and the parliamentary elections in the Netherlands and Poland (Toby, 2024).

2.1 ELECTIONS AS A KEY FACTOR OF STABILITY IN DEMOCRACY

Building on the notion of Western democracy based on citizen participation, Garnett and James (2020, p. 348) argue that the integrity of electoral processes is essential for democracy. For democracy to function, decision-making procedures must be binding on all members of society. Elections are a key stabilising mechanism because public loyalty to the regime is a precondition for democratic sustainability.

Lindberg (2006, p. 33) identifies three dimensions that are instrumental for democratic stability: elite legitimacy, equal participation and political competition. Elections reinforce these dimensions by demonstrating legitimacy through regular voter and elite engagement.

While electoral democracy ensures free and fair elections, it lacks certain liberal democratic features, such as checks and balances or judicial independence. Nevertheless, it is distinct from electoral authoritarianism

(Sartori). Various typologies of regimes attempt to capture such nuances. While stable institutional factors are important, it is often the subtle, hard-to-measure variables that determine whether a regime is genuinely democratic. Lindberg (2006, p. 102) considers the Civil Liberties Index to be the most effective tool for capturing these shifts.

Diamond (1996, p. 28) stresses that it is not the mere presence of elections in a country's political system that determines its democratic quality, but rather the freedom, fairness and comprehensiveness of those elections. He defines 'good elections' as those without coercion, organised by independent authorities and protected by impartial dispute resolution mechanisms. The violent response to Trump's defeat, including the storming of the US Capitol, illustrates the fragility of democratic norms, even in established democracies.

González et al. (2023) expand upon this analysis by conducting comparative research on the United States, Brazil and Mexico. In Brazil, for example, supporters of Bolsonaro stormed state institutions, while in Mexico, presidential hostility undermined trust in electoral oversight (Benassatto-Morais-Brito, 2024). These cases demonstrate that threats to electoral integrity frequently originate from incumbent leaders, thereby highlighting the structural vulnerability of democratic systems.

González et al. (2023) conducted post-election surveys in 18 countries to analyse how citizens' direct experiences of electoral malpractice (e.g. corruption and intimidation) affect their perceptions of fairness and their attitudes towards democracy. Surprisingly, the presence of independent electoral commissions had a limited impact. Their findings emphasise the pivotal role of citizen perceptions in sustaining electoral legitimacy and these findings provided a package of important data for the research presented here.

Finally, Franko and Coma (2017) examined electoral processes, investigating which stages are most critical for perceptions of fairness. Their perspective suggests that electoral cycles, rather than static institutional variables, shape democratic outcomes and representation.

2.2 LEGITIMACY OF THE ELECTORAL PROCESS AND THE QUALITY OF DEMOCRACY

The following section is structured to answer RQ1 (How do perceptions of electoral integrity affect democratic stability in established versus emerging democracies?).

Comparative political science is increasingly focusing on issues of electoral integrity, and this paper addresses these challenges. Several authors and studies, such as Elklit and Reynolds (2002) and Schedler (2002, 2006), have emphasised the importance of studying the legitimacy of the electoral process for creating and maintaining a healthy democratic state. This topic is frequently examined in the context of democratic transition — that is, the shift from a non-democratic regime to a democratic one — where elections play a pivotal role. The connection between studying transition and the importance of electoral behaviour is not surprising, given current democratisation processes in countries outside of traditional democracies (including several third-wave countries). However, as Fisher-Sällberg (2020) state, '... comparative rankings of electoral integrity reveal fairly significant variation between established democracies, with less established regimes sometimes scoring higher than more mature ones' (p. 404).

Developments in established democracies also demonstrate that electoral research frequently disregards the perception of the relationship between electoral legitimacy and procedural justice. As new research moves away from the traditional focus of political science (for example, the USA, where the integrity of electoral processes has historically been beyond reproach) under the influence of new transition circles, the scope of research is expanding. This new research is oriented towards collecting and analysing data from so-called 'new democracies', which in some cases can be described as 'fragile democracies' or 'hybrid regimes', i.e. countries with underdeveloped democratic systems. This contribution therefore discusses the issue of incorporating an assessment of the procedural fairness of elections into studies of the relationship between political support and voting behaviour.

Authors such as Payne, Zovatto and Díaz (2007) point out that if citizens are not completely sure that elections in their countries are free and fair, it may result in a decline in their participation in elections. Schedler (2002) states that, in extreme cases, this situation can lead to public protests, as was recently witnessed in Georgia (2023-2024). Banducci and Karp (2003, p. 443) state that, even in established democracies, 'fairly conducted and regular elections create legitimacy for the system', and that trust in electoral processes is thus likely to be a prerequisite for public support of other institutions within representative systems.

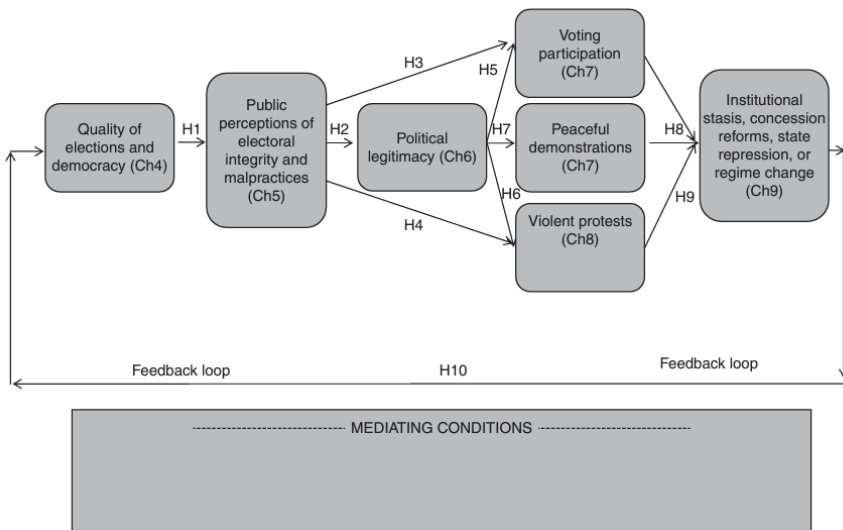
Schedler (2002) states that most of today's regimes are neither clearly democratic nor fully authoritarian. These regimes, he says, 'inhabit a broad and hazy zone between liberal democracy and closed authoritarianism' and that elections, generally recognized as one of the essential features of democracy, 'can also become a tool for authoritarian power holders who seek to legitimize their rule' (Schedler, 2002, p.36). And for the purposes of exploring this hazy zone, he proposes 'to fill the conceptual space between the opposite poles of liberal democracy and closed authoritarianism with two symmetrical categories: electoral democracy and electoral authoritarianism' (Schedler, 2002, p.37).

Weatherford (1992) offers a substantial analysis of the relationship between the concept of political support and the indicators typically employed to measure it. He identifies several dimensions of political support, including fairness. He emphasises that evaluating the 'fairness of the political process' — a variation on the traditional concept of procedural fairness — is crucial for examining how citizens judge the performance of the political system, i.e. how they judge the conversion of their contributions (preferences and expectations) into public goods. Fairness is typically evaluated using indicators that assess public institutions, such as representative and judicial bodies, as well as private entities, such as businesses. Although these indicators were originally developed in the USA, they have since been adapted and applied to different contexts through international survey projects, including the Eurobarometer, which is often used in our field. However, the procedural fairness of elections has largely been overlooked in these analyses, likely due to a lack of appropriate data.

2.3 ELECTORAL INTEGRITY RESEARCH

One of the first major international contributions to the study of electoral integrity in the context of democratic quality was Birch's (2008, 2011) and Norris' (2014a, 2014b) research, which addressed the insufficient coverage of factors influencing citizens' trust in the electoral process, as in Fig.2. Norris's (2014b) article examines the factors influencing public perception of voting behaviour in 28 countries. Using multilevel models that incorporate variables at both the individual and election levels, Norris' study (2014b) revealed that proportional electoral systems and public funding of political parties have a positive impact on trust in electoral processes. However, Birch (2008) found a negative correlation between this variable and the formal independence of electoral management bodies (p. 305).

Fig 2: Model of Electoral Integrity



Source: Norris, P. (2014b). *Why electoral integrity matters*, p. 11.

As Figure 2 shows, Norris (2014b) explains that 'electoral integrity and malpractices will have several instrumental consequences, at micro and macro levels. These predictions are tested systematically against new sources of empirical evidence' (p.11). Norris (2014a, 2014 b) belongs to a group of theorists (others e.g. Garnett, & Grömping, 2019) who examine the quality of elections and its connection to electoral integrity through the prism of public perception. Norris (2014b) assumes that elections are only as good as people believe them to be. Therefore, citizens' opinions about the quality of their elections can have serious consequences for democratic life. Another group of theoretical approaches can be identified in the work of authors who base their research on recognised indices of democratic quality, such as the V-Dem or Freedom House Index. This allows for the study of quality dynamics, as well as the identification of various malpractices or fraud (for example, Mechkova, Lührmann & Lindberg, 2017, based their study on V-Dem data). In the context of the third wave of transition, these authors also state that the obtained data show that 'Comparing liberal and electoral democracies, the percentage of states that are liberal democracies increased steadily until 2013, and then declined three years in a row. ' (p.163) They also justify the need for research on election integrity by finding that 'Among the countries that were liberal democracies in 2006, the main trend has been a weakening of their liberal-democratic character' (p. 165).

The international community is increasingly engaged in efforts to strengthen electoral integrity. Concern has grown over a series of events, notably the dramatic spread of multi-party contests in almost all countries around the world, combined with the continued occurrence of many common electoral malpractices.

In *The Pseudo-Democrat's Dilemma* (2011), Susan D. Hyde examines how international election monitoring serves as a tool for regimes seeking democratic legitimacy. She raises key questions, such as why undemocratic leaders invite observers despite the risk of being exposed for manipulation and whether monitoring supports democracy or legitimises authoritarian regimes. Drawing on data from 1960 to 2006, Hyde demonstrates that international observation became a norm-setting mechanism used by states

to signal democratic commitment and secure international benefits, without necessarily ensuring fair elections.

She introduces the concept of strategic manipulation (Ch.5), arguing that inviting monitors can mask electoral malpractice rather than demonstrate integrity saying '...observers sometimes legitimize flawed elections' (Hyde, 2011, p.127). Indeed, the presence of observers often serves as a mere symbolic gesture to deflect criticism, while flawed elections may still be legitimised. Thus, assessing electoral quality requires both procedural and substantive perspectives, as observation alone does not guarantee democratic standards.

In this regard, Norris (2014a, 2014b) argues that when elections do not meet international standards of electoral integrity, as evidenced by independent indicators, ordinary citizens are likely to recognise electoral flaws. Conversely, mass perceptions of electoral integrity are important for political legitimacy because they strengthen public trust in electoral institutions, foster a sense of external political effectiveness and satisfaction with the performance of democracy. The third proposition of the sequential model suggests that public perceptions of electoral integrity (and feelings of political legitimacy) are important in encouraging political activism by increasing voter turnout and reducing the likelihood of protest and violent conflict. Specifically, electoral integrity is expected to mitigate the injustices underlying intercommunal violence, popular uprisings and civil wars if it is embraced by all groups through electoral channels. Conversely, electoral malpractice is predicted to have negative consequences in all these respects (2014b, p. 12).

However, this theory predicts that this process will have macro-level consequences for regimes' willingness to respond to mass discontent. However, the type of response depends on several contextual factors and is by no means straightforward or automatic. In some cases, mass protests against electoral malpractice may simply fade away over time as other, more pressing issues emerge in the public sphere. However, if the protests are persistent and widespread, several alternative outcomes may occur. In some cases, particularly in more democratic states, public concern about electoral malpractice — such as financial scandals or ballot box fraud — is

likely to put pressure on the government to make policy concessions, typically in the form of institutional and procedural reforms. Alternatively, more authoritarian regimes may respond to persistent public discontent with further state repression, typically in the form of armed crackdowns on protest rallies, in an attempt to silence critics and opposition forces. In exceptional circumstances, deep public dissatisfaction with elections can occasionally fuel popular uprisings with the power to catalyse regime change (p.12).

As early as 2019, Daniller and Mutz (2019) stated that 'Americans face a potential crisis of faith in the electoral process.' (p.46). This is illustrated not only by Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro's reaction after the 2022 elections, when he refused to publicly acknowledge his defeat and travelled to the United States shortly before Luiz's inauguration (Cantú & García-Ponce, 2015), but also by the actions of US President Donald Trump. Following the 2020 US presidential election, incumbent President Donald Trump, who was running as the Republican candidate, refused to concede defeat to Joe Biden, repeatedly claiming that there had been irregularities during the vote count. Similarly, Reyes (2024) highlights Mexico's long-standing distrust of elections, with the 2012 presidential election being a prime example of perceptions of electoral integrity. These examples reveal a worrying trend of questioning the legitimacy of democratic elections and undermining the institutions responsible for maintaining their credibility. And as Daniller and Mutz (2019) add, 'Concerns of this kind should influence perceptions of electoral integrity. But it is more troubling if perceptions of electoral integrity depend not only on the quality of the process, but also on the outcome.' (p. 47). One such theorist is Carothers (2002), who, by questioning the basic premise of democratisation efforts at the end of the 20th century, challenges the position of elections in the democratisation process, emphasising the necessity of other factors that influence a successful transition (pp. 14–16).

However, as Norris (2014b) states, all of these complex relationships are expected to be mediated by several intervening conditions at macro and micro levels, although the type of conditions is expected to vary according to the dependent variables. At the individual level in particular, two

important factors condition these relationships: support for winning or losing parties, and the level of political awareness (measured by factors such as political interest, education, attention to the news media, and socio-economic status, p. 12).

As discussed above, Daniller and Mutz (2019) found that, when political leaders are chosen through democratic means, the electoral process supposedly legitimises their authority, regardless of the outcome. However, negative democratic outcomes can instead lead to the electoral process being denigrated. If positive reactions to winning and negative reactions to losing ultimately balance each other out, then perceived electoral integrity should remain roughly constant in a highly competitive political environment such as that in the United States. The authors concluded that their research showed that the effects on people's perceptions of electoral integrity are surprisingly persistent. We found that repeated defeat has particularly important long-term consequences for how citizens perceive elections. And according to Garnett and James (2020, pp. 349) operationalizing the 'success' or 'integrity' of an election remains a challenge for political scientists and practitioners alike.

The theoretical insight provided in the text answers RQ1 formulated as follows: Perceptions of electoral integrity directly affect citizens' trust in democratic institutions, which has implications for the legitimacy of ruling elites and regime stability. Current indices underestimate structural and pre-electoral threats, especially in hybrid regimes where democratic erosion is gradual and legal. RQ1 shows that, in established democracies (e.g. the USA), declining trust in electoral institutions due to polarisation can destabilise democratic norms. In emerging democracies (e.g. Mexico), however, structural weaknesses and legacy factors dominate vulnerabilities.

3 KEY FINDINGS

In answering RQ2 ('What institutional factors (e.g. campaign financing and electoral management) are most critical for ensuring electoral fairness?'), the most critical factors need to be identified. RQ2 is addressed by analysing the individual dimensions of existing (traditional) indices and

the modelled EIVI index. It was found that the most relevant dimensions for anticipating electoral breakdowns were rule of law stability, administrative capacity, information resilience and historical delegitimation trends. The analysis suggested that institutional independence and transparency in campaign financing were the most critical institutional safeguards for electoral fairness in both democratic and hybrid regimes.

The following data-sets can be applied to research on elections and electoral integrity:

- The Electoral Integrity Project (EIP) is the most well-known and scientifically recognised project of its kind, producing the Perceptions of Electoral Integrity Index (PEI). This index rates elections in different countries based on expert judgements relating to areas such as the legal framework, election administration, campaign finance, the media and voter registration.
- V-Dem (Varieties of Democracy) offers a number of indicators and indices covering electoral processes, the rule of law, media independence, and other aspects of democracy.
- Freedom House and the Bertelsmann Transformation Index: these institutions also assess the quality of democracy and electoral processes, but not in the form of a single index focusing on the vulnerability of electoral integrity.

While the Electoral Integrity Project and other international datasets offer valuable insights into electoral quality, they do not address electoral vulnerability directly (RQ2). In response to the limitations of existing frameworks, this study introduces the Electoral Integrity Vulnerability Index (EIVI): a new diagnostic tool designed to systematically evaluate the systemic risks to electoral integrity. The EIVI framework encompasses four core dimensions — institutional, legal, informational and participatory — to provide a comprehensive overview of electoral ecosystems. The Electoral Integrity Vulnerability Index (EIVI), which is proposed here, builds on these existing frameworks by uniquely integrating the most critical risk factors into a single, dynamic measure. In this context (based on EVI by Kofi Annan Foundation), **vulnerability** refers to the susceptibility of electoral processes or systems to damage, disruption or weakening due to various

threats, weaknesses or external influences. It encapsulates the notion that a system (e.g. an electoral process or a democratic institution) possesses vulnerabilities that could be exploited or manipulated, thereby compromising its integrity, reliability, or credibility.

To our knowledge, no such comprehensive index focused specifically on vulnerabilities has yet been developed in the literature, making the EIVI a valuable and original contribution to comparative research and policy analysis.'

The following criteria were included when comparing the EIVI (Electoral Integrity Vulnerability Index) with existing indices (such as the PEI/EIP, V-Dem and Freedom House indices) identified here as the **key criteria** (dimensions) for comparing electoral process indices:

- a) **The primary objective and focus of the index.** When developing the EIVI, consideration was given to whether the index should assess the quality/integrity of elections, or specifically the vulnerability of the electoral process to manipulation, delegitimation and loss of trust.
- b) **Eight dimensions and areas covered in the EIVI** (when describing each dimension of the EIVI, focus is on identifying the key areas of vulnerability — namely, the aspects of electoral processes and institutions that are most susceptible to compromise or disruption. This enables us to systematically assess the extent to which electoral systems can withstand various risks and threats; left-hand column in Tables 1, 2 and 3)
 - ✓ Institutional independence (e.g. electoral commissions, courts).
 - ✓ Transparency and access to information (openness of data and funding).
 - ✓ Freedom of the media and information space (media independence, disinformation).
 - ✓ Historical polarisation and trends of delegitimation (experience of crises of confidence and repeated contestation of elections).
 - ✓ Legal framework and enforceability (quality and application of electoral laws).

- ✓ Civic participation and public trust: participation in elections and trust in the process.
- ✓ The ability to dynamically monitor over time (tracking the evolution of risks and trends).
- ✓ Focusing on vulnerability (identifying the aspects that are most susceptible to compromise or disruption).
- ✓ Practical applicability for prevention (early warning tool and recommendations for politicians).

The **dimensions** were selected based on the following:

- a) theoretical and empirical research: institutional independence and the legal framework are crucial for election integrity, according to IVIS and Freedom House; transparency and media freedom are critical for preventing disinformation, as confirmed by IDEA reports and analysis by Norris (2014b) and others listed under the tables; historical polarisation was added as a new dimension, based on studies of recurrent crises (e.g. the US in 2020–2024 and Slovakia in 2023);
- b) comparisons with existing indices. The V-Dem, PEI and other indices listed in section Introduction of this article provided the basis for the traditional categories (e.g. electoral process and civil rights), but the EIVI extends these dimensions to include vulnerability. For instance, 'civic participation and trust' is based on the finding that declining participation and distrust in elections are key risks.
- c) The EIVI's specific focus on vulnerability - dimensions such as 'historical polarisation' or 'media/information freedom' have been explicitly added because other indices do not reflect them sufficiently.

The comparison (Table 1) was based on whether the index:

- assesses only current quality, or also risk trends;
- integrates historical and contextual factors;
- can be used practically for prevention and policy-making.

Table 1: Comparison Table - The EIVI vs. Existing Electoral Process Indices

Dimension Index	EIVI (Electoral Integrity Vulnerability Index)	PEI (Perception s of Electoral Integrity Index, EIP)	V-Dem Electoral Democracy Index	Freedom House Electoral Process Score
Institutional independence	Separate dimension, emphasis on risks of interventions	√ (electoral commissions, administration)	√ (independence of electoral authorities)	√ (independence of electoral authorities)
Transparency and access to information	Evaluates data availability and openness	√ (transparency of the process)	√ (transparency)	√ (access to information)
Freedom of the media and information space	Separate dimension, emphasis on desinformation	√ (media, campaign environment)	√ (media, plurality)	√ (media, information)
Historical polarisation and trends of delegitimisation	New feature, assesses past crises and trends	Not explicitly included	Only partially included (in the context of stability)	Not explicitly included
Legal framework and enforceability	Evaluates the quality and application of laws	√ (legal framework, dispute resolution)	√ (rule of law)	√ (electoral laws)
Civic participation and public trust	Evaluates citizen participation and trust	√ (perceptive evaluation of voters)	√ (turnout, trust)	√ (turnout, trust)

Focusing on vulnerability	Primary	X (rather quality assessment)	X (rather the level of democracy)	X (rather freedom of elections)
The ability to dynamically monitor over time	√ (recommended component)	√ (annual reports)	√ (annual data)	√ (annual evaluation)
Practical applicability for prevention	Emphasis on risk identification and recommendations	Rather descriptive function	Rather descriptive function	Rather descriptive function
Synthesising index *	One score from multiple risk areas	One score + sub-scores	One score + subindicators	One score (0-4 points)

Source: Author based on methodologies of the Electoral Integrity Model (EIP), Electoral Vulnerability Index (EVI), V-Dem, Freedom House Index, the Bertelsmann Transformation Index, IDEA Global State of Democracy Indices, Norris (2014b), Birch (2008, 2011), Schnaudt, C. & Wolf, C. (2023), Garnett, H.A. & James, T.S. (2020), Schedler, (2009); González et al. (2023).

Notes:

Green colour/√: dimension is present/yes

Grey colour/X: dimension is absent

* This is common in most indices (e.g. the Democracy Index and Freedom House), but EIVI applies it specifically to identify systemic risks rather than simply describing the current state of affairs.

Compared to the indices presented in Table 1, the EIVI differs primarily in that it a) it explicitly integrates historical polarisation and trends in the delegitimation of elections as a separate dimension; b) it focuses on identifying vulnerabilities and risk factors rather than merely describing the current level of integrity, c) it suggests practical applications in

prevention, early warning and policymaking. The primary objective was to develop a future-proof instrument to:

- a) measure the vulnerability of election integrity
- b) assess the quality and integrity of elections
- c) measure the level of electoral democracy
- d) assess the freedom and fairness of elections

Thus, the EIVI builds on existing indices by measuring and synthesising risk factors and dimensions that threaten electoral integrity, integrating historical context and offering a practical tool for prevention and early intervention. One of its main advantages is that the index can provide a basis for hypothesis generation, empirical testing and policy development for its usability on different countries and in different time periods.

In response to RQ1, this article demonstrates that the current measurement approaches (e.g. PEI and V-Dem) are inadequate due to their retrospective methodology, insufficient consideration of pre-election dynamics and limited recognition of institutional fragility.

Regarding RQ2, the article has proposed a conceptual framework based on four dimensions of vulnerability: erosion of the rule of law, manipulation of information ecosystems, institutional imbalance of power and historical patterns of contestation. These dimensions inform the proposed EIVI model for the anticipatory assessment of electoral risks.

The proposed EIVI framework directly addresses the research questions posed in this article. Firstly, in addressing RQ1, the index explicitly identifies and categorises the key systemic risks that precede observable electoral manipulation or democratic erosion. These include deficiencies in the independence of electoral bodies, the politicisation of the judiciary, the normalisation of disinformation and recent trends in executive overreach. These vulnerabilities are often overlooked in existing integrity indices, which tend to focus on the procedural aspects of elections rather than long-term structural decline. Secondly, in answering RQ2, the EIVI framework provides a conceptual instrument that enables researchers to detect and compare these risks prior to elections, thereby shifting the focus from ex post facto assessments to anticipatory diagnostics. This has significant

implications for academic and policy efforts to safeguard electoral processes and democratic transitions of power.

4 DISCUSSION

Growing concerns about declining voter turnout have prompted political leaders and scholars to seek ways to restore or strengthen citizens' trust in political institutions. Without electoral integrity, leaders and officials are not accountable to the public, trust in election results is weak, and government lacks the necessary legitimacy. Electoral integrity enables peaceful conflict resolution, open dialogue, debate, and information exchange between leaders and the public. Integrity depends on public trust in electoral and political processes. It is not enough to reform institutions; citizens must be convinced that the changes are real and worthy of their trust. To ensure electoral integrity, other factors beyond the electoral institutions themselves need to be considered and strengthened. Election officials, judges and courts must have independence that is respected by politicians (Annan, K., Zedillo, E., Ahtisaari, M., Albright, M., Arbour, L., Helgesen, J. & Wirajuda, H., 2012).

Of the existing approaches, the PEI (EIP) is the closest to the proposed EIVI, but it aims to assess the quality of choices rather than vulnerabilities. Similarly, V-Dem and Freedom House are broader democracy indices where electoral processes form only one part.

The main advantages of the EIVI (Electoral Integrity Vulnerability Index) over existing indices (such as the PEI/EIP, V-Dem and Freedom House indices) are as follows and illustrated in Table 2 below:

1. **A focus on vulnerability rather than quality** - the EIVI not only describes the current level of electoral integrity, but also identifies and assesses risk factors and vulnerabilities that can lead to delegitimation, manipulation, or loss of trust. Other indices (PEI and V-Dem) primarily assess 'quality' or 'integrity', rather than vulnerability to attack, polarisation, or the erosion of democratic mechanisms specifically.
2. **Integration of historical and contextual dimensions** - the EIVI is unique in incorporating historical polarisation and delegitimation

trends (e.g. repeated contestation of elections and past crises of trust) to improve its ability to predict future risks. Existing indices mainly assess the current state rather than long-term trends or risk accumulation.

3. **Complexity and synthesis of several areas** - the EIVI combines institutional independence, transparency, media freedom, the legal framework, civic participation, and historical experience into a single aggregate score. Other indices either divide these domains into separate sub-scores or do not consider some dimensions at all.
4. **Practical applicability for prevention and policymaking** - the EIVI is designed as an early warning tool, allowing the identification of countries or periods at highest risk of electoral integrity breaches and enabling the design of targeted measures. The other indices compared here are better suited to descriptive analysis or qualitative comparison than proactive risk management.
5. The possibility of **dynamic comparisons over time** - if data available, the EIVI is designed to track the evolution of vulnerability (not just integrity status) over time, enabling countries to be compared by risk factors. PEI, V-Dem and Freedom House do provide time series, but not with an emphasis on vulnerability dynamics.

The EIVI enables us to track changes in vulnerability in response to current events, such as the introduction of new laws, media campaigns and increases in misinformation. Traditional indices often only capture these changes with a delay or in aggregate. This is particularly important during political crises or in the run-up to elections, when new risks need to be addressed quickly. Another advantage is that the EIVI offers an original analytical framework, synthesising multiple dimensions such as institutional independence, transparency, media freedom, historical experience and civic trust, into a single score. This allows for easier comparison and interpretation of results. Consequently, it can facilitate the development of new hypotheses, empirical research and methodological innovations in the study of electoral processes.

Table 2: The Criteria Overview Table

Criterion	EIVI	PEI/EIP	V-DEM	Freedom House
Institutional independence	√	√	√	√
Transparency and access to information	√	√	√	√
Freedom of the media and information space	√	√	√	√
Historical polarisation and trends of delegitimisation	√	X	X	X
Legal framework and enforceability	√	√	√	√
Civic participation and public trust	√	√	√	√
Focusing on vulnerability	√	X	X	X
The ability to dynamically monitor over time	√	√	√	√
Practical applicability for prevention	√	X	X	X

Source: Author based on methodologies of the Electoral Integrity Model (EIP), Electoral Vulnerability Index (EVI), V-Dem, Freedom House Index, the Bertelsmann Transformation Index, IDEA Global State of Democracy Indices, Norris (2014b), Birch (2008, 2011), Schnaudt, C. & Wolf, C. (2023), Garnett, H.A. & James, T.S. (2020), Schedler, (2009); González et al. (2023).

Notes:

Green colour/√: dimension is present/yes

Grey colour/X: dimension is absent

The gap analysis in Table 2 shows that the EIVI can detect and quantify risks that traditional indices often underestimate or capture too late. In practice, this means better prevention, a faster response to new threats and more accurate recommendations for protecting the integrity of elections. The EIVI can therefore facilitate the transition from descriptive quality assessment to proactive election risk management.

The following analysis of the Electoral Integrity Vulnerability Index (EIVI) for Mexico and the U.S., based on data from V-Dem and Freedom House for the years 2014–2024, illustrates the use of the index. The analysis follows the recommended procedure for index analysis and focuses on reliability validation, risk trends and comparison with traditional indices.

Table 3: Selected EIVI dimensions and indicators used

EIVI Dimension	V-Dem/Freedom House Indicator
Institutional independence	v2elembaut (EMB autonomy), v2elembcap
Transparency and access to information	v2eltrnout (voter turnout), v2elvotbuy
Freedom of the media and information space	v2mefree, v2mecenefm, v2mebias, FH Media Freedom
Historical polarisation and trends of delegitimisation	v2cacamps (polarization), v2elviol (election violence)
Legal framework and enforceability	v2cl_rol (rule of law), v2elrfair
Civic participation and public trust	v2eltrnout, v2peprel, FH Electoral Process

Source: Author based on V-Dem, Freedom House Index.

Notes:

The terms “v2elembaut, v2elembcap, v2mefree“, etc., in the right-hand column of the table, stand for specific indicators (variables) from the V-Dem (Varieties of Democracy) dataset (for more see: V-Dem Codebook v14 (2024) –available online at: [84](https://v-dem.net/documents/38/V-</p>
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Dem_Codebook_v14.pdf, see from p. 41). This is one of the most widely used international projects for measuring the quality of democracy and electoral processes. These codes are unique abbreviations for each variable in the V-Dem database. Each indicator has a name, a description, and a precise measurement methodology which was a base per each index compared here.

To facilitate comparison with traditional indices, Perplexity AI was used to rescale all indicators to a 0–10 scale. An average was then calculated for each year and country to derive an overall EIVI score to test the proposed EIVI model. This step was taken to standardise the data and enable direct comparison with other indices.

Thus, based on the available data, we worked out the evolution of EIVI over time (2014-2024) for the two countries we studied, namely the USA and Mexico given in Table 4 below.

Therefore, monitoring the evolution of the EIVI over time allows trends in electoral integrity to be identified, helping to highlight areas where action is required to mitigate risks and reinforce democratic processes.

Table 4: EIVI for the USA and Mexico(2014-2024)

Country	USA	Mexico	
Years			
2014-2016	EIVI indicates relatively low vulnerability (score 3-4), stable institutions, high confidence in the process.	2014-2017	EIVI at 6-7, long-standing problems with electoral corruption, low trust in institutions, election-related violence.
2017-2019	Increasing polarization (Trump administration), deterioration of media freedom and increase in	2018	presidential elections, increased participation but also an increase in violence and

	delegitimization. EIVI rises to 5-6.		contestation of results (EIVI 7-8).
2020	Significant increase in vulnerability (EIVI 7-8) - pre-election questioning of the process, attacks on electoral institutions, increase in disinformation, record polarization.	2019-2024	EIVI remains high (7-8), continued weak law enforcement, high polarization, continued attacks on journalists and electoral institutions
2021-2024	EIVI declines slightly (6-7) but remains higher than in the previous decade, reflecting continued mistrust and polarisation.		

Source: Author’s work.

Based on these finding, a summarising Table 5 was prepared, as below.

Table 5: Comparison of EIVI, V-Dem Electoral Democracy and Freedom House Electoral Process Indices – USA and Mexico during 2014 - 2024

Year	Country	EIVI	V-Dem Electoral Democracy	FH Electoral Process
2014	USA	3.5	0.85	4
2014	Mexico	6.4	0.58	2
2018	USA	5.5	0.80	4
2018	Mexico	7.2	0.55	2
2020	USA	7.8	0.72	3
2020	Mexico	7.9	0.53	2
2024	USA	6.2	0.75	3
2024	Mexico	7.7	0.51	2

Source: Author’s word based on V-Dem, Freedom House Index.

Notes: V-Dem scores are on a scale of 0-1 (higher = better), FH on a scale of 0-4 (higher = better).

Comparing data in Table 4 and Table 5, the years differ from those in Table 4. This is because different indices use different timeframes and update frequencies according to their methodologies and data availability. For instance, V-Dem and Freedom House may have assessments for different years or at different frequencies to the EIVI, which is specifically designed to track electoral vulnerability between 2014 and 2024. Therefore, different time periods may appear in different sections of the report, reflecting the specific objectives and methodology of each index.

As clear from Table 5, the EIVI values indicate the vulnerability of a country's electoral processes — higher scores indicate a greater risk of electoral fraud.

Moreover, to confirm the reliability and validity of the EIVI (Electoral Integrity Vulnerability Index) in the context of the Electoral Integrity Project (EIP) or V-Dem data, a number of statistical tests and analytical procedures should be used, such as an internal consistency test, a construct validity test, or a convergent validity test.

In established democracies such as the United States, perceptions of declining electoral integrity (e.g. following the events of 2020) have demonstrably eroded trust in democratic institutions. In emerging democracies such as Mexico, these perceptions often reinforce structural weaknesses and public cynicism towards institutions, creating further instability (RQ1). In answering RQ2, our analysis identified the following as the most critical institutional factors: the independence of electoral bodies; transparent campaign financing; media freedom; and historical levels of electoral contestation. These factors are reflected in the newly proposed EIVI model, which provides a framework for evaluating systemic risks to electoral integrity.

RQ1 focuses on characterising and identifying key electoral process factors and is addressed through a theoretical section and subsequent empirical analysis. In conclusion of RQ1, the research confirms that the key

factors influencing electoral integrity include not only formal institutions and legal frameworks, but also broader social, cultural, and technological contexts. The analysis showed that these factors manifest differently in different political regimes; for example, hybrid regimes face specific challenges, such as the manipulation of electoral rules or low public trust. The results thus provide a comprehensive picture of electoral system vulnerabilities, enabling more targeted measures to be taken to strengthen electoral processes.

The findings (RQ1) suggest that perceptions of electoral integrity have a significant impact on democratic stability. In established democracies such as the United States, rising polarisation and conspiracy narratives have eroded public trust, resulting in democratic backsliding. By contrast, emerging democracies such as Mexico are affected by long-term structural vulnerabilities, with public trust being undermined by institutional fragility and historical patterns of contestation. It demonstrates that when election results are questioned (as in the USA in 2020 and Mexico), trust in institutions weakens and protests or the delegitimisation of the system can be provoked. The discussion in the first part of the text states that electoral integrity enables peaceful conflict resolution and trust in the government. Where it is lacking, regime stability is also lacking. An important empirical basis for answering RQ1 is the research conducted by González et al. (2023) in 18 countries, which shows that failures in the electoral process, such as corruption and intimidation, undermine perceptions of integrity and democratic legitimacy.

RQ2, concerning the assessment of changes and their impact on electoral integrity, is reflected in the comparative analysis section and the subsequent discussion of the results. In conclusion of RQ2, a comparative analysis of changes in electoral integrity over time highlights dynamics influenced by internal and external factors, including political crises, technological innovations and societal changes. The results show that electoral process vulnerability is not static, but subject to fluctuations that can lead to a weakening of trust in democratic institutions. These dynamics emphasise the importance of regularly monitoring and adapting tools such

as the proposed EIVI index in order to effectively reflect current risks and enable early intervention.

In answering RQ2 ('What institutional factors (e.g. campaign financing and electoral management) are most critical for ensuring electoral fairness?'), this article identified the most critical factors in the 'Key Findings' section. These include the independence of election commissions, transparent campaign financing, media freedom and the quality of the legal framework. This finding was based on an examination of the key factors influencing integrity, particularly according to PEI, V-Dem and Freedom House: the legal framework, administration, media and finance. The proposed EIVI index precisely defines the dimensions it takes into account: institutional independence, legal norms, the information space, historical polarisation, participation and public trust. This is also illustrated by the model tables comparing the indices, which show that the EIVI includes dimensions that other tools overlook, including the ability to track trends over time.

This analysis reveals the differences between the EIVI and traditional indices in practice, as demonstrated by the sample of countries presented here. It reveals several key insights that could have important implications for the research, monitoring and protection of electoral processes. For instance, the EIVI enables risks that are often overlooked by traditional indices to be identified early on. The PEI/EIP, V-Dem and Freedom House indices included in this comparison focus on assessing the quality or integrity of elections according to standard criteria (e.g. the legal framework, the independence of electoral commissions and media freedom). However, the proposed EIVI also purposely tracks dynamic and historical factors, such as long-term polarisation, delegitimisation trends and repeated contestation of elections. Consequently, it can highlight growing risks before they manifest as actual disruptions to electoral processes. In the US, for instance, the EIVI would have detected increased vulnerability in the lead-up to the 2020 election due to rising polarisation, conspiracy theories, and attacks on the credibility of electoral institutions — issues that traditional indices only capture retrospectively through a post-election drop in integrity scores.

EIVI has the potential to reflect specific contexts and hybrid threats more accurately. The indices that are often compared have a one-size-fits-all methodology which may not capture the specifics of countries with hybrid regimes, strong historical mistrust, or repeated attempts to delegitimise elections. By integrating historical and contextual variables, the EIVI can discern the reasons why a particular system is vulnerable, such as prolonged attacks on the media, repeated changes to electoral laws and past experience with electoral crises. In countries such as Mexico or Brazil, for example, the EIVI will highlight risks associated with a tradition of electoral protests, weak law enforcement or media manipulation, which may only be marginally captured by traditional indices.

CONCLUSION

The impact of the integrity of elections on political processes is evidenced by current debates and studies that show that repeatedly questioning election results can undermine citizens' trust in the democratic system and the legitimacy of governing officials in the long term. In some countries (e.g. Mexico, USA, Brazil and others), the debate on electoral integrity is becoming a key issue in campaigns and is also influencing post-election protests and the behaviour of political actors.

This article identifies critical conceptual and methodological gaps in the dominant indices of electoral integrity, particularly their limited sensitivity to pre-electoral risks and structural threats that do not immediately manifest as electoral fraud. The article outlines an alternative approach based on institutional capacity, the rule of law, stability, informational resilience and historical patterns of electoral disruption through the proposed Electoral Integrity Vulnerability Index (EIVI). These dimensions enable a more anticipatory perspective, aiming to detect vulnerabilities before they result in visible breakdowns in democratic competition.

Although the EIVI model is still in the theoretical stage, it has the potential to offer scholars, civil society and international actors a comparative, forward-looking diagnostic tool. Future research should focus on operationalising and empirically testing the model, including addressing

issues of data availability, calibrating the weight of variables, and establishing its applicability to different regions. Additionally, the role of new threats, such as platform manipulation or the obstruction of electoral oversight by the executive, warrants further conceptual integration. Rather than providing definitive answers, this article initiates a broader scholarly and policy debates about how electoral resilience can be better understood, measured and safeguarded.

The answers to the research questions highlight the need to rethink electoral integrity as a dynamic, multidimensional phenomenon requiring tools that can detect systemic threats before they materialise fully.

This article highlighted the conceptual limitations of the current approaches. Therefore, when developing the EIVI, it was built on existing indices (EIP and V-Dem). However, for the aforementioned reasons, a new, comprehensive index was proposed that integrates all key vulnerabilities into a single analytical framework. The EIVI addresses the need to identify risks that could lead to the delegitimation of elections at an early stage, a need that is not adequately covered by existing indices. This is a conceptual proposal that should be empirically tested and developed in future.

Future research should prioritise the operationalisation and rigorous testing of the proposed Electoral Integrity Vulnerability Index (EIVI) in a variety of political regimes and geographic regions, particularly those facing emerging threats to electoral credibility. Analyses should be extended to broader time periods and a wider range of countries to capture the dynamic trends and specificities of electoral vulnerability in evolving democratic contexts. This will deepen our understanding of the mechanisms that undermine electoral integrity and contribute to the validation and refinement of the index. Furthermore, future studies should empirically examine the relationship between campaign finance transparency and voter trust, particularly in hybrid regimes. Additionally, a typology of election denial tactics should be developed to inform preventive policies. Employing mixed methodological approaches that combine quantitative data with qualitative case studies will enable regional, cultural and technological factors affecting electoral integrity to be considered. Key areas of focus should include the impact of new challenges, such as

disinformation, digital manipulation and campaign finance. Finally, research should emphasise the practical implications for policymakers, electoral authorities and international organisations, equipping them to enhance election administration and bolster public confidence in democratic processes.

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