

XIV INTER-AMERICAN MEETING OF ELECTORAL MANAGEMENT BODIES

CONCEPT NOTE¹

The Inter-American Meetings of Electoral Management Bodies (RAE for its Spanish acronym) promote the exchange of knowledge, experiences and successful practices in electoral administration within the region. These meetings facilitate horizontal cooperation in order to continuously strengthen the institutional capacities of electoral bodies and further improve the way elections are conducted in the Americas. The XIV RAE, the only forum that brings together all the authorities of the hemisphere, seeks to provide an established space in which those authorities can identify and discuss the challenges they face.

To date, thirteen Inter-American Meetings of Electoral Management Bodies have been held, the most recent of which took place in the Dominican Republic in 2018. The fourteenth meeting offers, once again, an opportunity for the representatives of electoral management bodies to share and evaluate various experiences related to the following topics:

1. ***Good Practices and Lessons Learned from 2019 Presidential Elections***
2. ***Violence in the Context of Elections***
3. ***Good Practices in Electoral Reform Processes***
4. ***Political Communication for Electoral Authorities***
5. ***Political Strategies on Digital Media***

Four panels and a workshop on “Political Communication for Electoral Authorities” will allow participants to discuss achievements, trends and concerns in the above topics. Each panel will be preceded by an expert presentation that will allow authorities to share their knowledge and challenges regarding each topic, encouraging a substantive discussion among the delegates.

The topics that will be addressed during the plenary sessions are discussed below:

PLENARY I: Good Practices and Lessons Learned from 2019 Presidential Elections

Since November of 2017, Latin America has been in the midst of a “super election cycle”. During 2019 alone, presidential elections have been held in Argentina, Bolivia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Panama and Uruguay. Canada renewed its Parliament in October and Dominica will go to the polls in December. By the time the cycle draws to a close at the end of this year, most of the eighteen Latin American countries would have held presidential elections, while citizens of Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, and

¹ This document has been prepared by the General Secretariat of the Organization of American States (GS/OAS) for the XIV Inter-American Meeting of Electoral Management Bodies. OAS documents are independent of any national or political interests. Views expressed in this publication do not necessarily represent the views of the OAS or its Member States.

Grenada would have cast their ballots in parliamentary elections, making this one of the hemisphere's most significant electoral periods in decades.

In the Americas today, more than at any other point in history, people live in countries which hold regular and competitive elections, sustain democratic institutions, enable political discourse and participation by citizens, respect fundamental human rights and uphold the rule of law. Along with a healthy alternation in and peaceful transfer of power, these are the hallmarks of functioning democracies.

Representative democracy is the system of governance chosen by most countries in the hemisphere, and while democracy is more than elections, credible elections are the means by which legitimate power is acquired, and through which inclusive societies are built.

Electoral processes are complex events, with critical outcomes, which involve multiple stakeholders and the delivery of multiple, inter-related activities. Each election therefore presents varied challenges that must be addressed to ensure that democratic principles prevail, as well as new and different opportunities to strengthen electoral institutions, processes and frameworks. During this panel, representatives from Argentina, Bolivia, Canada, El Salvador, Panama and Uruguay will share their perspectives on their respective country's presidential electoral process, the lessons that were learned and the good practices that were implemented.

Country	Date of Poll	Positions Elected
Argentina	October 27 th	President, Vice President, Congress
Bolivia	October 20 th	President, Vice President, Plurinational Legislative Assembly, Representatives of Supranational Bodies
Canada	October 21 st	Parliament
El Salvador	February 3 rd	President, Vice President
Panama	May 5 th	President, Vice President, National Assembly, Mayors, Local Authorities and Deputies of the Central American Parliament
Uruguay	October 27 th and November 24 th (run-off)	President, Vice President, Congress

Issues to Consider

- What lessons and good practices were experienced / implemented in the presidential elections of 2019?
- Do sufficient opportunities exist for the electoral authorities of the hemisphere to share knowledge and experiences, as they seek to develop and strengthen their electoral institutions and processes?

PLENARY II: Violence in the Context of Elections

In democratic societies, the role of free and fair elections as a constructive process to guarantee peace and civility cannot be understated. Elections are a means of achieving and transferring governance, as they are intended to peacefully and inclusively resolve competition for power. Yet far too often in our region the use of force is engaged with the intent of distorting the electoral process or diminishing its legitimacy.

According to the 2013-2014 UNDP Human Development Report, “throughout the last decade the region has suffered an epidemic of violence, accompanied by the growth and dissemination of crime, as well as an increase in fear among citizens”². Despite being home to just 9% of the global population, Latin America and the Caribbean account for 33% of all global homicides³.

This becomes relevant as scholars affirm that citizen insecurity negatively impacts democratic governance and might even undermine the public’s support for democracy. This creates an environment where insecurity is a daily reality that often spills over into electoral processes.

Furthermore, an analysis of forty-seven OAS Electoral Observation Mission (EOM) reports published in the past six years, reveals that twenty-two mention violent incidents either during the campaign period, on Election Day, or in the post-electoral phase. In general terms, OAS/EOMs have observed that incidents of electoral violence in our region are mostly nonlethal: “taking the form of voter intimidation, harassment, or the destruction of infrastructure, ballots, and information systems”. In many countries, these forms of violence had also impacted female candidates and voters, who are often targeted because of their gender. Nonetheless, in some exceptional occasions violence also became lethal: “candidates assassinated, violent protests or boycotts claim casualties, or insurgents target voting stations”⁴.

The acknowledgement that elections are turbulent, high-stakes processes in which political power is won and lost is fundamental in addressing the complexities of this issue. And though democratic processes inspire hope and opportunity amongst many participants, they inspire anxiety and fear amongst others. While elections are not typically the underlying cause of violence, they have the potential to exacerbate existing tensions, especially in contexts of existing security concerns such as the presence of organized crime.

The first challenge associated with political violence and its role in electoral processes is the lack of consensus about its definition. Secondly, it is difficult to effectively distinguish violent crime from political violence since the two are so often intertwined.

² United Nations Development Programme (2013). *Regional Human Development Report 2013-2014. Citizen Security with a Human Face: Evidence and Proposals for Latin America*.

³ Muggah, Robert and Aguirre Tobón, Katherine (2018). *Citizen security in Latin America*. Igarapé Institute

⁴ Claes, Jonas (2016). *Electing Peace: Violence Prevention and Impact at the Polls*.

For the purpose of this panel, we refer to electoral violence as “acts of violence directed against electoral actors, events, and materials in the context of electoral processes or its outcomes”⁵.

This panel wishes to address the types of violent incidents affecting elections in our region and the timing in which they take place, as well as review the strategies that have been proven to work as means of preventing electoral conflict.

Targets of Electoral Violence

Often, electoral violence is expressed in the following ways:

- Political actors: Attacks against candidates, campaign officials, and supporters of political parties;
- Electoral process: Impeding access to polls, attacks targeting election materials & officials;
- Voters: Coercion through violent means, especially in areas dominated by criminal organizations⁶.

Another aspect of electoral violence that must be addressed in this context is that which is directed towards women, as gender-based violence in elections has become increasingly visible throughout the region. According to the Inter-American Commission of Women, violence against women should be understood as “any act or conduct, based on gender, which causes death or physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, whether in the public or private sphere”.⁷ The means of targeting female political actors are often based upon gendered stereotypes that focus on women’s traditional social roles, as a tactic to deter female participation in politics. Acts of violence perpetrated against women in politics, including intimidation and coercion, embody a distinct form of backlash to women’s greater inclusion in politics, and diminish the legitimacy of the electoral process. Therefore, it is necessary to discuss further measures that can be taken to guarantee the unobstructed political participation of women in the region.

Besides the targets, the moment in which violence takes place is also pertinent to mention, as timing might indicate the motives for violent acts. Conflict that takes place prior to Election Day is often due to the belief that processes such as voter registration are unfair or biased, uncertainties surrounding some candidates, or with the intention to discourage potential candidates from running. Post-electoral conflict however, generally arises from disputes over uncertain or unpredicted outcomes of an election, refusals to accept results, and accusations of fraud⁸.

⁵ Alihodžić, Sead (2013). *The Guide on Action Points for the Prevention and Mitigation of Election-related Violence*.

⁶ De Icaza, Gerardo and Ferreiro, Martin (2019). *30 Años Después*.

⁷ Article 1, Belém do Pará Convention.

⁸ Claes, Jonas (2016). *Electing Peace: Violence Prevention and Impact at the Polls*.

Organized Electoral Violence

There is a strong link between organized crime and election-related violence, usually the result of efforts by criminals to obtain power over local governments by exploiting political connections⁹. The presence of organized crime groups and drug cartels throughout localities prompts uncertainty and fear during electoral periods. It is when existing criminal violence spills over into electoral processes and affects electoral actors, facilities, and materials that specific instances of *electoral* violence become especially difficult to measure.

When analyzed in this context, it is apparent that organized electoral violence remains a strategic and effective way for political and criminal elites to maintain power and influence at the local level. A common practice of criminal organizations is to threaten candidates, offering “protection” and allowing them to campaign in exchange for their assurance of territorial authority, provided they win. Refusal to negotiate with these organizations occasionally ends with violent attacks and even assassinations. This type of intimidation and lethal attacks serves to undermine and delegitimize the electoral process, and should be addressed in order to facilitate the development of long-term strategies for combating electoral violence.

Nevertheless, it is imperative that the potentially criminal nature of some instances of electoral violence does not diminish the overall attention allocated to these cases by both law enforcement and electoral authorities.

Addressing Violent Electoral Conflict

The best tools to ensure peaceful and nonviolent elections are strong structural attributes within a political society as well as a robust legal structure so that perpetrators of violent crimes do not act with impunity. Establishing the precedent that violent acts will be met with prosecution is thus an important step in deterring future violence.

There are several additional measures that have been proven to be effective in mitigating electoral violence that merit discussion. OAS Electoral Observation Missions have found that one of the most important prevention mechanisms in the electoral process is effective coordination and cooperation between state security agents and the Electoral Management Body (EMB). While this may seem like a straightforward step, in the past, OAS/EOMs have observed a lack of cooperation and communication – inaccurate risk maps, for example – which resulted in the misallocation of security personnel and resources to incorrect municipalities, when perhaps their presence in other areas could have been more beneficial to help prevent violent incidents.

Best practices indicate that the prevention of electoral violence is based upon the capacity building of state actors, in tandem with long-term voter education. Previous observations have indicated that poorly coordinated EMB’s and security institutions have the potential to facilitate ripe conditions for

⁹ Alihodžić, Sead (2013). *The Guide on Action Points for the Prevention and Mitigation of Election-related Violence*.

violence. Therefore, as previously mentioned, strong performances by election authorities working in conjunction with security sector agencies are crucial to the prevention of electoral violence.

Another good practice is the institution and the work of the Political Ombudsman in Jamaica. This figure occupies a neutral space between the political forces in Jamaica and seeks to mediate and moderate unhelpful attitudes and actions in the political and electoral context. In countries where political polarization is present this role can be especially valuable in embedding a positive, inclusive and peaceful ethos in the country's political process.

Organized national and international electoral observation missions undertaken by nonpartisan entities increase voter confidence and therefore could also be a tool to discourage electoral violence¹⁰. Also, when initiated correctly, the element of monitoring and mapping –identifying geographic areas at a higher risk for violence – has been shown to reduce instances of electoral violence as well.

Regarding the issue of gender-based political violence, a legal framework aimed at detecting, preventing, and sanctioning this type of behavior is necessary to promote gender equity and to encourage the greater participation of women in politics. OAS/EOMs have consistently recommended such measures in many countries, in order to effectively dissuade gender-based violence. While Bolivia remains the only country in our Hemisphere to have a specific law against political violence and/or harassment against women¹¹, other countries are following its example. In Latin America, six¹² other countries have taken the initiative to design a legal strategy (whether already adopted or under discussion) against political violence and harassment against women.

Understanding the dynamics surrounding electoral violence has become increasingly important in improving the quality of democracy in the region. The international community, as well as domestic electoral authorities, have a responsibility to both acknowledge and take action on the issue of electoral violence, so as to enhance democratic principles, foster security within the Hemisphere, and reduce uncertainty that voters may have while taking part in electoral processes.

In this respect, participants may wish to consider:

Issues to Consider

- Has your country adopted a definition of electoral violence in general and gender-based electoral violence in particular?
- How can electoral management bodies promote measures to mitigate violence against women in the context of elections?
- How can coordination between EMB's and security agencies be established and improved?
- What other initiatives have proven to be successful in preventing election violence and / or stemming its escalation?

¹⁰ Claes, Jonas (2016). *Electing Peace: Violence Prevention and Impact at the Polls*.

¹¹ Law 243/2012

¹² Argentina, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Honduras, México and Panamá.

- Has your government implemented strategies to ensure the safety of electoral officials who may encounter violence during electoral processes?

PLENARY III: Good Practices in Electoral Reform Processes

Without question, electoral reform is a key element in the ongoing consolidation of democratic elections throughout the Hemisphere. Efforts to reform electoral processes, which most commonly include changes to political party financing, media and advertising regulations, dispute resolution mechanisms and the regulatory/oversight powers of electoral institutions themselves, are instrumental in raising electoral standards, safeguarding existing democratic principles, as well as maintaining public trust in the capacity of electoral officials to ensure the validity of election results. In this context, it is no surprise that there has been a growing commitment by Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs) to promote electoral reforms.

To be certain, the administration of multiparty democratic elections is already a complex task; one that is highly scrutinized by political parties, the media, civil society and both domestic and international electoral observers. Likewise, the implementation of reforms is often accompanied by significant challenges to EMBs', as they require major internal structural changes that may place pressure on election administration, causing unanticipated consequences. As such, the capacity of EMBs to proactively and effectively address these challenges by using successful approaches to reform is critical to continue to move forward with oftentimes complex changes under already heavy workloads.

There are numerous recent examples in the region of good practices by EMBs in instituting reform that have increased the equity and transparency with which electoral processes are being carried out. Emphasizing and encouraging good practices in electoral reforms in the region reinforces the importance of democratic electoral processes that are transparent, inclusive and impartial.

For the purposes of this panel, electoral reform is defined as “changes targeted at improving implementation of the guiding principles of electoral administration,”¹³ and will address the issue by considering the following key topics:

- Main actors and mechanisms in successful reform processes;
- Key elements of managing electoral reforms;
- The role of recommendations of international electoral observation missions in reform;
- Challenges of reform processes.

Main Actors and Mechanisms in Successful Reform Processes

The complexities of electoral management naturally require that the relevant, designated institutions and entities assume responsibility for all electoral activities, including evaluating, recommending and implementing electoral reforms. With their solid base of individuals with significant knowledge of electoral fundamentals, EMBs are one of the primary actors in electoral reform processes.

¹³ ACE Electoral Knowledge Network

An analysis¹⁴ of recommendations made by OAS electoral observation missions (EOMs) from 1999-2015, found that EMBs and the national legislature were the most common actors responsible for implementation of recommendations that require electoral reforms. Further analysis revealed that recommendations are implemented more frequently when they are addressed by the EMB (54%) than by other actors (46%)¹⁵.

Furthermore, coordination between the different entities that are involved in the reform efforts – such as EMBs, electoral review commissions, etc. – is essential to ensure that reforms are designed with a long-term vision and are sustainably implemented. This type of systemic thinking and institutional coherence is necessary to protect and improve upon democratic electoral processes.

Several other essential elements of successful reform include timing, support from stakeholders, and allocation of resources. Timing, in particular, is crucial as best practices indicate that when electoral reform is implemented before an election cycle begins, the effects are more likely to be positive. Likewise, political will and unanimous (or at the very least) widespread political support for reform is necessary. If this aspect is absent and reform fails, opponents may be inclined to condemn these efforts and the reform process will be stalled.

A key way to ensure strong political support for electoral reform is to provide political parties with a role to play. A sound practice of such participation can be seen in Panama, where, in the implementation of the 2017 electoral reforms, legislation was passed to create the National Electoral Reform Commission. This body included political party representatives and its role was to carry out a review of the substantial changes made in these reforms to regulations governing political party financing, electoral justice mechanisms, rules governing primaries, and electoral advertising regulations, among others.

Managing Electoral Reforms

As discussed in the previous section, it is imperative that electoral reform be carefully and correctly managed so that it fulfills its intended purpose and does not cause confusion and disruption within EMBs and an electoral process itself.

The management of electoral change is dependent on the extent of the proposed reforms and the specific electoral processes that are involved. Reforms may be directed at the political, legal, administrative, and technical framework of electoral activities and entities, including the structure of the EMBs. Incremental pursuits of these reforms tend to minimize the risk that they may fail, whereas simultaneous implementation of large scale reforms throughout different areas generally does not encourage sound execution.

The presence of skilled electoral managers is crucial if long-term reforms are to be implemented successfully. This is why establishing a strong talent base amongst EMBs continues to be a crucial component of electoral management. Furthermore, EMBs should assume an active role not only as implementers of institutional reforms, but also as advocates for administrative, technical and procedural

¹⁴ Ferran Martinez i Coma, Alessandro Nai, Pippa Norris (2016). *Democratic Diffusion: How regional organizations strengthen electoral integrity*

¹⁵ OAS Electoral Observation Missions: Recommendations and Reforms (2018).

reforms. Such behavior serves to foster trust among the public in their election officials, and by extension, elections themselves.

It is not unusual for electoral entities to struggle with the implementation of some new provisions, particularly if the changes are extensive. For this reason, it is critical that EMBs are staffed with properly trained individuals, and that training is updated and adapted to accommodate changes in provisions.

The Role of Recommendations of International Electoral Observation Missions in Reforms

International electoral observation is now a widely employed manner of ensuring confidence in elections. Impartial, credible electoral observation missions (EOMs) play a key role in shaping public perceptions regarding the quality and legitimacy of electoral processes.

Ideally, international observation should not only be an effective detector and deterrent of electoral integrity problems, but also serve as a mechanism to assist participating states in the implementation of their election-related commitments and obligations. In this sense, a core part of election observation is the recommendations that are offered to improve the conduct of a country's election.

While the scope of recommendations varies, studies have shown that some recommendations are more likely to be implemented than others. According to an independent study conducted by the Universities of Harvard and Sidney¹⁶, approximately 50% of 1,006 OAS/EOM recommendations from the period spanning 1999-2015 were implemented. Of these reforms, the majority took an average of four years to implement completely, confirming that the reform process is indeed substantial and complicated.

Challenges to Reform

Increasingly, the legitimacy of elections is tied to the efforts of electoral authorities to implement electoral reforms. When EMBs make a concerted effort to identify, assess and prioritize flaws in their electoral systems and set realistic goals for improvement, the prospects for successful reform are greatly increased; however, these pressures can create additional workloads for electoral authorities.

Trying to solve the wrong problem may also exacerbate existing challenges and divert limited resources, both human and financial, away from areas that deserve priority, diminishing the prospects for long-term improvement.

In the aforementioned independent study, it was observed that reforms which require the allocation of at least some resources (financial, human, etc.) were more likely (60%) to be implemented than those requiring legal changes (47%).

In addition, it is important to consider that many EMBs in the region do not have the legal authority to initiate electoral reforms, which may only be initiated by the legislative bodies in those countries. Furthermore, legislatures oftentimes carry out reforms without consulting EMBs on which, or how, reforms should be implemented. As a result, such reforms are not usually successful as they often do not address an actual need (some may even run contrary) and prove to be unviable.

¹⁶ Ferran Martinez i Coma, Alessandro Nai, Pippa Norris (2016). *Democratic Diffusion: How regional organizations strengthen electoral integrity*

Electoral reforms that emanate from the legislative body, or are coupled with political initiatives, also run the risk of being politicized, which can limit the possibility of their success. In 2016 highly creditable efforts to enact electoral reform in Grenada, which would have created an Elections and Boundaries Commission and introduce fixed dates for elections, were unsuccessful, as the process became mired in controversy over other, more political, reform proposals.

Another challenge that has become more evident in recent years has to do with reforms that are initiated as a response to judicial or constitutional rulings. In many cases, these changes have to be implemented during an ongoing electoral process, which not only causes undesired uncertainties in the election, but also puts additional strains on EMBs. In this scenario, OAS/EOMs have recommended that legislative bodies maintain their role in leading the discussions on political and electoral reforms that are aimed at strengthening a country's electoral system.

The process of electoral reform should be one that is viewed as ongoing and continuous. Electoral reform is a gradual process in which legislation evolves over time, encompassing both political and social changes. However, such implementation processes must also make efforts to adhere to good practices in electoral matters, which recommend that changes to voting systems should not be carried out within one year of an election so as not to seem to be mandated by political interests.¹⁷ Further complicating the timing of electoral reform is the fact that many countries have frequent, almost yearly elections, which does not allow for sufficient time to have an inclusive dialogue as well as a comprehensive analysis of areas that need improvement.

As such, and to promote effective reforms, it is paramount for institutions to:

- Identify and address the correct problems;
- Maintain realistic expectations;
- Maintain flexibility to achieve and sustain long-term results.

Questions to consider:

- How can barriers to successful electoral reforms be overcome or reduced?
- What are some of the key elements of successful examples of electoral reform?
- What kinds of review processes and pre-implementation testing exist in the region to ensure that the correct procedural and technical specifications for reforms are chosen and correctly implemented?
- How do electoral authorities maintain strong relationships with other political actors to ensure support for reforms? How can EMBs be proactive agents for electoral reform?
- What types of tools and resources do electoral authorities need to develop, implement and evaluate reform?

¹⁷ Code of Good Practices in Electoral Matters: Guidelines and Explanatory Report, European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission), Strasbourg, October 25, 2018.

- How can recommendations of international electoral observation support electoral reform?
- How can EMBs better anticipate unintended consequences of electoral reforms?

SOCIAL MEDIA LAB: Political Strategies on Digital Media

We live in a globally connected society and the point at which democracy intersects with digital technology is an area of critical concern. The digital revolution and the tools and platforms that it facilitates are undeniably beneficial to the democratic process, largely because they expand the reach of democracy. There is now unprecedented access to a wealth of information about political candidates, elections, and electoral processes, as well as the opportunity for direct engagement between candidates and voters, all of which have helped to produce a more participatory and active citizenship in democracies throughout the region.

The digital revolution has been especially advantageous for political candidates. They can now successfully leverage popular social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp to communicate their message in a much broader fashion, thus achieving significantly higher returns. These tools have proven to be valuable for candidates of newer or smaller parties, who have traditionally had less access to the resources necessary to reach a wide-ranging audience. This was the case in the 2019 Presidential election in El Salvador, where a political outsider was able to successfully engage millions of younger voters through social media to ultimately win the election.

The new standards of transparency and accountability born out of the digital era also serve, in theory, to enhance public trust in democratic institutions by involving citizens in the debate over issues of public interest.

As digital technology evolves however, it is imperative to consider its impact on – and risk to – the democratic process. Risks that include the capacity of misinformation to skew the electoral process, mistrust in democratic processes exacerbated by digital information, and the dilemma of regulating misinformation while simultaneously protecting the right to freedom of expression.

The Challenges to Democracy in the Digital Age

There is a broad consensus that reliance on digital technologies is redefining modern democracy, particularly the way that free and fair elections are conducted. Advances in digital technology have made millions of users and consumers susceptible to **disinformation** (false information circulated with intent to deceive) and **misinformation** (false information circulated without intent). Often, pseudo-facts are created and disseminated for political purposes, targeting specific audiences with the aim of generating a certain outcome, such as influencing voting behavior.

The escalation of disinformation has resulted in the rise of an “election interference industry” which encourages and facilitates the manipulation of elections using social media to spread fake news,

polarizing speech, and false rumors. In a recent article for Project Syndicate¹⁸, former President of Costa Rica, Laura Chinchilla, highlighted this issue, as well as the emergence of the “deep-fake” phenomenon (use of artificial intelligence and image synthesis to create fake video material). Because deep-fakes are indistinguishable from authentic material, they further challenge our ability to differentiate between what is real and what is simulated online. This recurring pattern in Latin America and the Caribbean has enormous implications for the state and maintenance of democracy throughout the Hemisphere.

In 2018, Latin America’s three largest democracies – Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico – experienced this growing phenomenon in their electoral processes. In all three countries, significant efforts were undertaken to disseminate disinformation and polarizing speech via social media in order to undermine certain candidates, misinform voters, and discredit the electoral processes. In Brazil, in particular, where the campaign focused intensely on the use of the Internet rather than traditional forms of media, false information surrounding candidates and political parties proliferated, and proved a serious challenge for the Electoral Management Body (EMB).¹⁹

On platforms, like Whatsapp, where partisan content can circulate quickly, digital echo chambers are easily created, leading to rapid increases in polarization. According to the Atlantic Council’s March 2019 report “Strengthening Digital Resilience in Latin America”²⁰ polarization caused by organic disinformation and automation was prolific in the 2018 Brazilian elections, and currently poses the greatest threat to democracy in the region. The report noted the tendency of political actors to exacerbate narratives of disinformation and spread fake news via social media throughout the 2018 elections in Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico, and emphasized the underlying threat that the massive consumption of intentionally misleading information presents to democracy.

While technology has made more individuals active participants in the public debate, it has also turned them into “passive receptors of information”²¹. Digital echo chambers not only isolate individuals from competing viewpoints, but have the potential to prevent them from accessing verified information. This is particularly the case in countries in Latin America, where the majority of mobile phone users are subject to “zero-rating” policies - data plans that exempt certain content from counting against a user’s data cap and prevent them from incurring any excess usage charges. Users with such plans do not even have the opportunity to access authentic information. Because access to content outside zero-rating data is costly, this policy and others similar to it have created an incentive for users to share less informative and often inaccurate information.

¹⁸ Project Syndicate. (2019). Digital Dangers to Democracy | by Laura Chinchilla . [online] Available at: <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/technology-social-media-elections-democracy-by-laura-chinchilla-2019-01> [Último ingreso: 28 Mar. 2019].

¹⁹ Final Report of the OAS Electoral Observation Mission to the General Elections in Brazil, October 2018. [online] Available at: <http://www.oas.org/eomdatabase/MoeReport.aspx?Lang=en&id=410&MissionId=489>

²⁰ Atlantic Council. (2019). Disinformation in Democracies: Strengthening Digital Resilience in Latin America - Atlantic Council. [online] Available at: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/disinformation-democracies-strengthening-digital-resilience-latin-america/> [Accessed 1 Nov. 2019].

²¹ Informe Final, Desinformación en contextos electorales, Octubre de 2019.

Confronting the phenomenon of disinformation and the threat it poses to democracy requires a concerted, multilateral approach and the cooperation of a variety of different actors. Because there is a difficult balance between strengthening regulations on the criminalization of forms of digital speech and protecting freedom of expression, this issue must be addressed inter-regionally, through the collective efforts of actors in both the public and private sectors. This includes governments, technology companies, telecommunications providers, the media, academia, and civil society.

Such an initiative was seen in the 2018 Brazilian elections. As misinformation proliferated, the electoral authorities, along with fact-checking agencies, digital media platforms, and the media mobilized to respond to the challenges that quickly mounted, while also adopting new initiatives to counter false information and disseminate truthful, substantiated information.²²

Though Brazil's collective efforts are commendable, numerous obstacles were encountered throughout this process and relevant actors must therefore continue to work to address these issues.

In short, urgent action is necessary to combat the dissemination of disinformation and fake news, to mitigate their effects not only on democratic processes in the Americas, but in democracies around the globe.

Final Considerations

The relative anonymity that is provided by the Internet has created an environment that is conducive to incivility and polarization, thereby facilitating the ease with which false information can flourish and be spread. It is imperative that as the region approaches higher levels of connectivity, appropriate action is taken to diminish the negative effects of disinformation and misinformation, while taking steps to ensure that privacy and freedom of expression are also protected.

As mentioned above, there are numerous actors involved in this phenomenon, but perhaps those that have the greatest responsibility are the citizens. As the primary users of the internet and social media they are consequently the primary receptors and transmitters of disinformation. Increased digital literacy amongst consumers that would allow them to verify the accuracy and credibility of information before they pass it along would reinforce the promotion of civil and productive democratic discourse. Political parties and candidates also have an important role to play, as they can choose not to distribute false information and engage in defamation and negative campaign tactics.

Finally, it must be emphasized that the digital revolution offers both great challenges and great opportunities. In the coming years, targeted political messaging facilitated by digital media will become more sophisticated. In order to safeguard our democracy, it is crucial that the means of navigating and addressing these issues evolve as well, to properly ensure that electoral processes in the Hemisphere are carried out in a context where truthfulness and impartiality are respected and protected.

²² Final Report of the OAS Electoral Observation Mission to the General Elections in Brazil, October 2018. [online] Available at: <http://www.oas.org/eomdatabase/MoeReport.aspx?Lang=en&Id=410&MissionId=489>

Having consideration to the above, participants may wish to consider:

Issues to Consider

- How can we protect the electoral process and attempt to ensure access to verified information, while simultaneously protecting the democratic rights of citizens to express themselves digitally?
- How have digital media impacted electoral processes in your country and how has your institution adapted to these changes?
- What actions can electoral authorities take to ensure the dissemination of accurate information?
- As electoral authorities, what steps do you think social media platforms should take to mitigate the impact of disinformation?