



RESEARCH IN BRIEF

*Election
observation
during health
crises and
pandemics*



This research brief summarises new and existing research on the impact of pandemics and health crises on the work of election observation missions.

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**FEBRUARY
2022**

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HIGHLIGHTS



- Health crises - including the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic – pose major challenges for election observers, heightening the risks and challenges of ‘traditional’ in-person missions.
- Research summarised in this brief focuses on using the impact of the pandemic as a starting point to ‘build back better’ and generate innovative approaches that will strengthen election observation.
- Election observers should refrain from cancelling observation during health crises and pandemics; incumbents may exploit this lack of scrutiny to rig elections and subvert the democratic process.
- Health crises and pandemics, with all the challenges and hardship they present, are nevertheless an opportunity for election observers to work more closely with local civil society organisations (CSOs) that can provide on-the-ground observation when international observers are unable to enter the country.
- This may require greater specialisation of tasks, with international election observers monitoring digital forms of rigging as well as the spread of disinformation across social media.



COVER

A polling station in Tashkent, Uzbekistan in 2021.

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P.2

A voter deposits and absentee ballot in the US Presidential Election, 2020

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P.3

Votes are counted in Uzbekistan in 2021.

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P.5

A woman votes while men look on during the DRC's election in 2011.

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RATIONALE AND OBJECTIVE

Health crises – most particularly the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic – have presented election observers with serious challenges as to how to conduct their observation missions abroad. The research summarised in this brief presents options to mitigate the impact of health crises on election observation missions, and highlights opportunities for observers to ‘build back better’ by incorporating methods and practices trialled by observers prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Sarah Birch et al. have produced a systematic briefing for observers and local election staff on the impact of COVID-19 on election observation. They provide a range of options that would enable observers to ‘build back better’ from the pandemic.

Toby James and Sead Alihodzic explore diverse scenarios in which elections are postponed. Their paper explores the nuance between election postponement as a genuine humanitarian response, given the risks involved, and more malicious efforts to use postponement as a tool to rig an election.

Finally, Khabele Matlosa depicts election observation prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic as a process in crisis, struggling with inefficiency and an unwillingness to engage with local observation groups. Matlosa sees the pandemic as an opportunity – and evidence of the need – for reforms to the processes and approaches taken by observers during election observation missions.

METHOD

Birch et al. draw upon a wealth of experience in their report to produce recommendations on how to build back better on election observation missions beyond COVID-19. Several of the report’s authors have participated in election observation missions themselves, and the report draws upon case studies of observation missions during the pandemic.

Similarly, James and Alihodzic draw upon a diverse range of case studies to inform their findings. Their paper explores the reasons why elections may be postponed, with health crises being one factor among many. The authors produce a typology of reasons for postponement, as evidenced through case studies, and assess the impact of COVID-19 on voter turnout through a case study of US presidential primaries.

To guide his conclusions and recommendations for improving electoral observation missions during pandemics, Khabele Matlosa undertakes a detailed literature review of scholarly research on the subject, producing a set of recommendations from his overview of this research area.



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There are opportunities for observers to ‘build back better’ by incorporating methods and practices trialled by observers prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

KEY FINDINGS

Election observers face several risks and challenges during health crises and pandemics, which are captured by Birch et al. In particular, observers may be unable to attend elections because of quarantine requirements and travel restrictions, and may also face broader health risks when they do attend polling stations. Additional challenges are associated with data collection and the effective monitoring of electoral processes. Risks for other actors involved in the electoral process, such as members of Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs) and citizens may also pose further challenges to the way in which observers operate in countries that are experiencing health crises.

Birch et al. note that the challenges posed by pandemics for international election observers can also present opportunities to adapt and implement novel approaches to election observation. Among their findings, the authors highlight how local CSOs can play a key role by working with observers in situations where international observers cannot be there in person because of pandemic-related restrictions.

James and Alihodzic craft a typology of motivating factors for the postponement of elections, which can be used as a way to rig a postponed election when it happens, or to shore up support for authoritarian incumbents. The authors also argue, however, that natural disasters and health crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic are compelling reasons for postponement, given the impact the crisis may have on voters, as well as the logistical challenges for the relevant EMBs in managing and safeguarding the electoral process. Nevertheless, the authors stress that election postponements can easily lead to political infighting and democratic breakdown if there is little vigilance and effective accountability by election observers and local CSOs.

Matlosa highlights problems that he and other scholars have identified in relation to existing observation practices during the COVID-19 pandemic. These include a failure to fully integrate local in-country civil society organisations (CSOs) into the election observation process, operating alongside international observers. Local CSOs can also act as a complementary body to expand the geographical range of election observation within a country by, for example, attending a greater number of polling stations and scrutinising practices.

The COVID-19 pandemic has, according to Matlosa, exacerbated some of these problems, with election observation missions unable to proceed as they did prior to the pandemic. For example, smaller missions were deployed by the African Union to elections in Tanzania and the Central African Republic, while in many cases international observers did not send missions at all.

Matlosa notes that observers may settle for lower standards and smaller missions during times of crisis. This, he argues, would exacerbate the problems that are already associated with electoral observation. Similarly to Birch et al., Matlosa call for the implementation of alternative methods of observation that pandemics and crises may actually encourage, such as increased collaboration with local CSOs, or the increased use of digital technology to monitor social media for disinformation campaigns and signs of electoral fraud. This approach, working in tandem with greater cooperation with local CSOs, can provide a comprehensive and robust form of election observation during health crises and pandemics.



Increased collaboration with local CSOs, together with greater use of digital technology, can produce a comprehensive and robust form of election observation during health crises and pandemics.



IMPLICATIONS FOR OBSERVERS

For observers, the research in this brief emphasises that the COVID-19 pandemic – hugely damaging though it has been – represents a good opportunity for observers to build back better. They can do so by making more and better use of additional measures to ensure election observation can be rigorously undertaken during future health crises.

Birch et al. outline a set of options for election observers. Observers could choose to not attend elections at all during health crises, which would avoid all health risks but would also remove any electoral scrutiny, permitting a greater risk of authoritarian manipulation of the electoral process. Alternatively, observation missions could attempt to carry on as normal, which allows for a good level of scrutiny over the electoral process, but also presents significant health risks for observers, local staff, and voting citizens. As such, the research summarised here suggests some innovative ways forward.

First, observers can recruit expatriates in-country to undertake election observation on behalf of international missions. Such an approach is beneficial as it avoids issues of quarantine for observers and restricted international travel, as seen

during the COVID-19 pandemic. Expatriates also have a more nuanced understanding of local political dynamics and can access more remote areas of the country than international observers to provide a greater level of scrutiny over the electoral process during crises. It is important to note, however, that some expats may not meet the eligibility criteria to work as observers; they may be accused of being politically partisan or be ineligible to work as observers if they can vote in the country concerned.

Second, one innovative way forward is to partner with local CSOs to provide observation groups on the ground, with data shared among international observer missions. With international support and funding, local CSOs can cover an extensive geographic range of polling stations and attend elections when international observers cannot. They may also have a better understanding of the context and the ways in which elections have been manipulated in the past. The risk here is that international observers may find it hard to verify the information they receive and assess its quality, but this is something they themselves can influence by investing in domestic processes.



Greater specialisation between domestic and international observers may reduce overlap and inefficiencies, improving observation in the future.

Third, the virtual monitoring of social media and the use of crowdsourced data is another innovative way forward. Issues like electoral disinformation can be tracked effectively throughout the electoral cycle, with little need for many observers in-country. This can allow for a specialisation of tasks between domestic and international observers and across different groups. One benefit of this would be to reduce overlap and inefficiencies. A focus on the development of ways to digitally monitor elections is also seen as a way to future-proof election observation, reflecting the move away from the manipulation that happens in the polling stations towards the digital forms of manipulation that are becoming increasingly common.

The research summarised in this brief acknowledges that none of these options are perfect, and each has its limitations. The options outlined in this brief – particularly the collaborative approach with local CSOs – have emerged from prior trials and methods of working used by international election observation missions. Adopting and institutionalising such approaches means that election observers are not only better prepared during crises, but that they can also better reflect the changing dynamics of how digital technology is changing the electoral process.

CITATIONS

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Toby S. James and Sead Alihodzic. 2020. 'When Is It Democratic to Postpone an Election? Elections During Natural Disasters, COVID-19, and Emergency Situations' *Election Law Journal* Vol. 19, No. 3, pp. 344-362

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ELECTOR is the Election Observation Research Network, based at the University of Birmingham. ELECTOR aims to foster a constructive and mutually supportive relationship between civil society groups, election experts, and international and domestic observers, enabling those working at the coal face of election observation to shape the direction of new academic research. ELECTOR is funded by the Open Society European Policy Institute (OSEPI). More information about ELECTOR is available on the website: www.elector.network



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