

Understanding Free and Fair Elections

Although elections play a crucial role in a democratic society and are now held world-wide, only about 50% of them are conducted in a manner that could be considered "free and fair". Election misconduct twists both the quality of elections and the power of citizens to hold their leaders accountable. Elections have significant political, social, and economic implications. The constitutional system of government that the United States uses depends on "we the people" granting the government its power through consent in the form of elections. In order



for American citizens to trust the democratic institutions we have placed these elected officials in, we must feel confident in the trustworthiness of the election. Merely conducting an election is insufficient. It is crucial that the election is conducted freely and fairly, allowing all citizens to cast their votes and ensuring that every vote is accurately counted and holds equal importance.

According to researchers Sylvia Bishop and Anke Hoeffler, "**freeness**" of the election refers to the processes and rules leading up to the election, while "**fairness**" pertains to the events on election day. As society advances, ensuring quality elections has become a more difficult task. Most of the time, if there are any problems they mainly arise before the actual election. To ensure a free and fair election, governments must comply with specific standards before, during, and after the election process. Although not all countries can meet every standard listed, the more they follow, the more accurately the election will reflect the will of the people.

Here are some examples of the standards that governments must meet before, during, and after an election to ensure that it can be called "free and fair":

Before the Election:

1. **Voter Registration:** Governments need to ensure that all eligible voters have the ability to register to vote and that the process is accessible and transparent.
2. **Equal Access:** Governments need to ensure that all political parties and candidates have equal access to resources, including funding, media, and public space. Voters need access to reliable, unbiased information. All citizens also need equal access to be allowed to run for office if they meet office requirements.
3. **Impartial Electoral Administration:** Governments need to establish an independent and impartial electoral administration responsible for organizing and conducting the election.

During the Election:

1. **Secret Ballot:** Governments need to ensure that voters can cast their ballots in secret without any interference or intimidation. Polling stations need to be easy to access and alternate options (like mail-in ballots) must be provided for citizens who

may not be able to vote in person for a variety of reasons.

2. **Polling Station Management:** Governments need to ensure that polling stations are properly managed, with adequate staffing, supplies, and security.
3. **International and Domestic Observers:** Governments need to allow independent domestic and international observers to monitor the electoral process to ensure it is free and fair. Each eligible voter should only get one vote, and ineligible voters must be prevented from voting.

After the Election:

1. **Timely Results:** Governments need to ensure that election results are promptly released and accurately reflect the will of the people. All ballots must be counted and should be kept for records.
2. **Transparency:** Governments need to ensure that the election process is transparent and that any irregularities or complaints are properly investigated and addressed.
3. **Peaceful Transition of Power:** Governments need to ensure a peaceful transition of power, regardless of the outcome of the election.

This list may not be sufficient in all cases, as different countries have unique circumstances and/or requirements that may necessitate additional criteria.

Application Questions:

Directions: Apply your knowledge from the reading to answer the following questions.

Additional research will be required.

1. What are some of the challenges that governments may face in meeting these standards?
2. Does the internet make accessing information about an election easier or harder? Why?
3. Look at the Supervisor of Elections website for your area and list some of the steps one must take to register to vote. Are there any restrictions?
4. According to your Supervisor of Elections website, what steps are taken to avoid and/or handle fraud?
5. According to your Supervisor of Elections website, who counts ballots and how are they counted?

Adapted from the following sources:

Author Unknown: *Free and Fair Elections*. Retrieved from <https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/free-fair-elections> ; Author(s): Bishop, Sylvia and Hoeffler, Anke: *Free and Fair Elections: A New Database*. Journal of Peace Research, Vol. 53, No. 4 (July 2016), pp. 608-616. Sage Publications, Ltd. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43920613>