



The Media and the Election Process

Reference material

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Reporting Elections: A Guide

Introduction

Elections are the cornerstone of any democracy, and the media has a vital role -- in informing the public about what the politicians are promising, in telling the politicians what ordinary people want, or do not want, and in ensuring that the polls are "free and fair". This is particularly important in countries lacking a solid background of democratic rule.

From the time that elections are announced to when they take place, usually between six



Woman voter, 30 January 2005.
(Reuters/Ali Jarekji)

and eight weeks, there is ample opportunity for incumbent leaders and parties to bend the rules to their advantage, in subtle and not-so-subtle ways. It is the journalist's task to deter them from doing this.

Good journalists should also report elections in a non-partisan way, suppressing their own political views in order to allow the public to make up their minds solely on the basis of what the various candidates are offering.

This guide looks at the various stages of the electoral process, and the areas where distortions can occur, either through deliberate actions or poor organisation.

Many of these areas are highlighted in guidelines given to observers from the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), which has monitored elections in ex-Communist European states. They were also invited by the Palestinians to observe their January, 2005, presidential poll.

Voting systems

These mainly fall under three categories:

Plurality -- A candidate who obtains more votes than any other is elected even if that candidate wins only a minority of votes cast. The most common form of this is the "first-past-the-post" system, sometimes known as "winner takes all", used in Britain, the United States and India, among others.

Majority -- The successful candidate must win more votes than those of all the others combined. This is normally achieved by a holding



a two-round contest in which the early loser is eliminated after the first.

Proportional (PR) – The most common version of this is when voters choose from party lists, and seats are awarded according to the votes going to each party. This is used in most continental European countries, South Africa and Israel.

There is also the so-called Single-Transferable Vote, where voters indicate an order of preference among candidates. Once a candidate has received enough votes to be elected outright, second preference votes are added to the totals of the remaining candidates.

Each system has its supporters and detractors. For arguments on both sides, a useful web-site is www.electoral-reform.org.uk.

Counting the vote

There are a number of ways of counting the vote. Increasingly there is a move towards some sort of mechanical and/or electronic systems. All systems have their advantages and drawbacks.

Manual counting – The simplest, votes can be counted on the spot, provided there are enough staff, the count can be witnessed, and if the result is challenged there is a re-count. However counting can take days, particularly if there are several challenges.

Counting with machines – Ballots, usually punched cards, are fed into a machine that counts them. It is quick, but the machines are



Election official advises a voter.
(Reuters/Tobias Schwartz)

expensive and not available in all polling stations, meaning moving ballots, and the danger this brings of tampering. They can also go wrong, as in the U.S. 2000 Presidential Election in Florida, and some machines leave no paper record in case of a challenge and re-count.

Electronic voting – This allows computers to count marks on a ballot with an optical sensor before they are put into the box. The original ballots are therefore retained in case there is a need for a re-count. Another version allows voters to input their vote directly into a counting machine. Also expensive

Internet and telephone voting – Widely used in some countries for popularity contests and company board elections, but ruled out for general elections because of the problems of verifying the identity of the voter and the threat of computer hackers.

The Basics

As soon as an election is announced and campaigning begins, newspapers should carry essential information on how many candidates are involved, how many parties, the number of eligible voters, the total of constituencies,



results of the last elections. This could be in a box to be included in every edition during campaigning, or in a special election supplement. It is important to get this information out early to the electorate, so they can prepare to digest the barrage of information they will receive over the next few weeks.

Media should also advise the public on how to register as voters, and remind them of their rights and responsibilities in the political process.

Electoral Commission

The body charged with organising the elections must be independent of the government. Made up of experienced, respected neutral individuals, or a balance of political party representatives. With an independent budget guaranteed by the government.

In the 2000 Yugoslav presidential elections, won by Slobodan Milosevic and branded a sham by the OSCE, who were refused permission to observe, the entire process was run by his government. His regime was also accused of ballot-stuffing, widespread intimidation and using state media and funds for one-sided political campaigning.

Journalists covering elections should know the electoral law by heart. If something is not right, it is up to them to call for a boycott or postponement.

Registration of candidates and parties

Check that all candidates seeking to stand have been allowed to register. Make sure that the current electoral law does not discriminate against any individuals or groups. Watch out for unusual candidates, as in the following Reuter News Agency reports at the start of the Palestinian presidential elections in January 2005.

RAMALLAH, West Bank, Nov 25 (Reuters) - Firebrand uprising leader Marwan Barghouti has decided to run for Palestinian president from his Israeli jail cell, an official of his Fatah faction said on Thursday...

JERUSALEM, Nov 28 (Reuters) - A Palestinian journalist from Jerusalem's walled Old City said on Sunday she would run for president to succeed Yasser Arafat, becoming the first woman to enter the race...

Registration of voters

Voter lists should be posted well in advance, the registration process should be easily accessible for everyone, and there should be no restrictions according to gender, race, religion, ethnic origin, political affiliation, property ownership, qualifications or lack of money to pay a registration fee. Acceptable restrictions are those lacking proper citizenship or residency qualifications, criminals in jail for serious crimes, the mentally incapable. The registration process can be vulnerable to manipulation.



Journalists, along with observers, should be able to scrutinise and verify voters' rolls in advance. If registration is rushed and rolls are displayed after the official deadline, editors should be calling for a postponement of the vote.

Electoral boundaries

All votes should carry approximately the same weight, so the number of voters in each electoral district should not vary by more than 10%. Check that boundaries have not been altered by the ruling authorities, without proper consultation, for political advantage. There have in the past been many cases of "gerrymandering", in which election districts are manipulated by ruling authorities for electoral advantage by redrawing boundaries to include more supporters.

A classic case of gerrymandering was in Northern Ireland in the late 1960s, when Protestant Unionists succeeded in engineering the election of a Unionist-dominated city council in Londonderry, which has a solid Catholic majority. The Unionist move led to civil rights protests by Catholics in the city, spiralling into over 30 years of sectarian bloodshed.

The campaign

Election campaigns are exhausting for all journalists covering them. Since campaign rallies and televised debates are usually signalled well in advance, media organisations should draw up detailed daily schedules assigning reporters to the various events. If possible it is useful to have the same reporter covering each of the main candidates' rallies throughout the cam-

paign. Get them to do in-depth profiles of the leading candidates.

Decisions must be made on how many of the candidates/parties to cover regularly. While some individual candidates may look like com-



Campaign meeting in the Gaza Strip
(Reuters/Suhaib Salem)

plete outsiders, conscientious reporters should try to reflect the views of the smaller groups, which may be of interest to the public. And behind-the-scenes bargaining during campaigning could eventually propel some of the minor players to power in a coalition government.

Media

Is there unrestricted access for the media to all candidates/parties? All responsible media should report impartially about the election, particularly state-run media, since they are funded by the tax-payer.

Some governments have used media they control to attack opposition candidates, restrict the supply of newsprint and exclude opposition candidates from appearing on TV and radio. One frequent abuse by incumbent governments is to allow balanced coverage in designated elec-



tion broadcasts, but then show politically biased programmes on other programmes.

In Kyrgyzstan's Presidential elections in 2000, won by incumbent Askar Akayev, OSCE monitors complained that state-owned TV had allocated him nearly 70 per cent of its air-time devoted to the elections.

Conscientious newspapers and broadcasters should set up a monitoring system with daily assessments on the distribution of air-time and other issues.

The issues

Increasingly elections have been dominated by the personality of the candidates. Journalists should try to keep the focus on the issues, by talking to ordinary people, particularly those lacking a strong voice in society – the elderly and the young, women, in some countries, the poor, ethnic and religious minorities. Ask them if they are better or worse off since the last polls.

Put their views to the candidates, and report their responses.

Have your specialist correspondents look at the main issues arising during the campaign – the economy, law and order, transport, education, foreign policy, defence.

Select a representative sample of the general public at the start of the campaign, and return to them regularly to see how they have been influenced by the campaigning so far.

If you are a national paper based in the capital, ensure that reporters travel as widely as possible through the country to get the broadest selection of views. In France's 2002 presidential elections, the Paris-based national and international media failed to anticipate the rise of far-right leader Jean-Marie Le Pen in his southern power-base.

Campaign financing

Is there a system of state financing for political parties, as exists in many countries? Is there a limit to business/private donations to party campaigns? And is there an obligation for parties to declare them?

The public should be entitled to know if candidates are receiving significant cash from narrow business interests, with the potential for influencing the policy of a future government.

Nowadays the main tools of election campaigning are the broadcast media, particularly TV. In Britain, all broadcast media are barred from carrying election advertising apart from brief party political broadcasts which are carried simultaneously by all principal TV channels. There are also restrictions on how much each candidate can spend on campaigning, based on the size of the electoral district, as well as national spending limits on each party. Most campaigning is done by door-to-door or telephone canvassing by party workers, election rallies and leaflets through letter-boxes.

In the United States, there are no limits to campaign spending, the bulk of it on TV.





A boy stands in the shadow of a queue of voters in Basra. (Reuters/Toby Melville)

For newspapers, the question is whether they should accept paid political advertisements, assuming the law permits this, and, if so, whether all the main parties should be allowed equal exposure.

Election observers/ monitors

If the election is being attended by international monitors and observers, such as from the OSCE, or independent domestic groups, keep in regular contact with individuals, and their headquarters, through their mobile telephones,

as they spread across the country in bigger numbers than most papers can afford. Contact with them is particularly useful on election day as they observe the crucial voting and counting process. However they may be reluctant to talk to the media as individuals.

International observers are normally deployed for a few days, before and after the elections. Monitors tend to be in the country for longer periods, looking at the whole electoral process, including the election laws and the influence of the media on campaigning.

Crowd estimates

Be very wary of using organisers' estimates of crowds attending political party rallies, which can be wildly exaggerated, aimed at inflating their support. If you can't do your own count, try and check with independent sources such as monitors, or police, though they may also have reasons to inflate or deflate crowd figures. You can also check with other reporters if they are reliable.

The most accurate way of estimating crowds is from aerial photographs, but these may not be readily available.

On-the-spot counting is best done from a high point. One rough method is to divide the space into sections, count 100 people in one section, then multiply it to take in the whole area.

Another method is to work out the size of the crowd area, in square metres, and assign three people per square metre. Thus a road five kilometres long and 30 metres wide, if



packed with demonstrators, will contain roughly 450,000.

Opinion polls

Widely used by media on a daily basis during campaigning to gauge the public's reaction to campaign issues, and their likely voting intentions. Many media engage a polling organisation to work for them throughout the campaign. They should however be reputable, using scientific methods to reflect the broadest spectrum of public opinion.

Some broadcasting networks organise exit polls, asking people at polling stations how they voted, and declaring the winner immediately after the polls close. However such polls can be unreliable – in the 2000 U.S. presidential election a polling organisation called Democrat Al Gore the winner in Florida 12 minutes before the close, which could have affected the result in the crucial and tightly-fought contest. An exit poll at the 1987 British general election saw incumbent Margaret Thatcher re-elected with the narrowest of margins. When all the votes had been counted, she had won by a landslide.

Some countries have a ban on publishing opinion polls in the last few days before the election, to allow voters make up their own minds.

Security

The ruling authorities have a duty to ensure that political rallies can take place without intimidation from rival groups. But at the same time

they should not be deployed in such numbers and in such a way as to discourage people from attending such events – a tactic often used by authoritarian regimes.

In the first round of Ukraine's presidential election in September 2004, which OSCE observers criticised as seriously flawed, opposition campaign events were regularly disrupted. The ruling authorities were also accused of bias in state media and of using state funds in campaigning, among other things.

Postal ballots

Many countries allow a proportion of voting to be done by post, despite criticism that the process is open to fraud and intimidation, particularly in collecting votes from military personnel who might feel under pressure to vote for the ruling authorities. There have been cases of ruling authorities requiring signatures on absentee military ballots after they have been cast, but before they have been counted.

After postal elections for local authorities in Britain there were allegations that some sections of society, particularly immigrant women, had been effectively disenfranchised after their ballot papers were collected and filled in by local community leaders.

In the 2004 U.S. Presidential Election, over 50,000 postal ballots were reported to have gone missing in Florida.



Absentee ballots

Another potential opportunity for unscrupulous governments to influence the vote. Many countries have expatriate communities dotted around the world large enough to have a significant bearing on the vote. Checks need to be made by journalists on whether they received their absentee ballots in time, whether their vote was cast in polling stations set up in their country of residence, or sent in by post. And whether the numbers of absentee votes tally with latest figures on expatriate numbers.

Staggered voting – In some countries with multiple time zones, such as Canada, voting is staggered to allow all voters to cast their ballots without being influenced by the re-



A family of Iraqis registers to vote in Amman. (IOM)

sults or trends in other parts of the country. In some countries with remote communities and lack of communications, voters in these areas are allowed to cast their ballots days or even weeks early to allow them to reach the nearest counting office.

As with postal and absentee ballots, it is crucial for a truly free and fair vote that these early results be kept secure, and are not published

before the others, so as not to influence voting behaviour.

Election eve

Media should carry balanced reports summing up the programmes of the leading candidates, the main issues as expressed by ordinary people, prospects for the future, and the standing of the candidates/parties in the latest opinion polls.

RAMALLAH, West Bank, Jan 6 (Reuters)
– *A champion of non-violence is set to succeed Yasser Arafat in Sunday's Palestinian elections but hopes of peace pinned to his victory may be short-lived...*

The reports must also include detailed information on voting procedure, with the location and opening and closing times of polling stations. They should also report when first unofficial results can be expected, if exit polls are being organised, and when first official results are likely.

They could also carry a fact-box with all the essential details of the election.

Reuters carried the following before the Palestinian presidential elections.

RAMALLAH, West Bank, Jan 6 (Reuters) – *Palestinians vote on Sunday in a presidential election to choose a successor to Yasser Arafat. Below are some facts about the election:*



- The presidential election is the second since the Palestinian authority was established under interim peace agreements with Israel.

- Seven candidates are standing and Mahmoud Abbas, a relative moderate from the dominant Fatah movement, is tipped to win. His latest opinion poll rating is 65 percent.

- In second place is human rights activist Mustafa Barghouti with 22 percent in the most recent poll. The other candidates are expected to get only a few percent between them.

- The powerful Islamic militant group Hamas is boycotting the election.

- There are about 1.8 million eligible voters in the West Bank, Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem from an estimated population of 3.6 million.

- Voting will take place at about 3,000 polling stations between 7 a.m. and 7 p.m.

- Voters in East Jerusalem, annexed by Israel in a move not recognised internationally, will cast ballots at Israeli post offices.

- Votes will be counted at polling stations before being fed to the independent Central Elections Commission.

- Results are expected by Jan. 10.

- Some 800 international observers, including former U.S. President Jimmy Carter and former French Prime Minister Michel Rocard, will join 20,000 local monitors.

There is also always room for a human interest piece focussing on an ordinary citizen expressing his hopes and fears for the future. The Reuters example:

KHAN YOUNIS, Ghaza Strip, Jan 8 (Reuters) – Years of Israeli raids have left Essam Abu Odeh weary but on Saturday the school caretaker again took up bricks and mortar for a job he hoped would help build a better Palestinian future through elections.....

Final Checklist

(Questions reporters should be asking themselves):

- + Is the electoral commission organising the poll independent of the government and balanced/neutral in its composition?
- + Have all candidates seeking to stand been allowed to register. Does the electoral law discriminate against any individual or group?
- + Is the registration process easily accessible to all and free of restrictions related to race, gender, or political or financial status?
- + Are the numbers of voters in each electoral district more or less equal? Could the authorities have changed boundaries for political advantage?
- + Does the media have unrestricted access to all candidates/parties? Any sign that government is using state-run media to attack opposition candidates or restricting their exposure on radio/TV?
- + Are political parties state financed? Is there a limit to business/private donations and must parties declare them?





Election day (Reuters)

- Can all political rallies take place without intimidation by ruling authorities or rival groups?

Election day

For broadcasters, news agencies and evening papers, a report when the polls open in the early morning.

RAMALLAH, West Bank, Jan 9 (Reuters) - *Palestinians began voting on Sunday for a successor to Yasser Arafat widely expected to be Mahmoud Abbas, a pragmatist they hope will revive a peace process with Israel after years of bloodshed....*

Start checking with your reporters, police and international and domestic monitors for indica-

tions of the size of the turnout, which will help determine the success of the whole electoral process and could provide a first hint of who is likely to win, as well as any early signs of violence, intimidation or other irregularities.

Follow the main candidates to the polling stations as they vote, for their early comments and local colour.

RAMALLAH, West Bank, Jan 9 (Reuters) - *Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas, front-runner in Sunday's presidential election, said the voting to choose a successor to Yasser Arafat was going smoothly.*

"We heard that there is a high turnout, especially by women, and this is a very good thing," Abbas said after casting his ballot in the Muqata headquarters in Ramallah under a portrait of Arafat...



During the day of voting, check constantly with your reporters and monitors for irregularities.

Things to look out for:

Multiple voting – All functioning voting systems include a mechanism aimed at ensuring that people vote only once. However none of them are absolutely fool-proof. There have been frequent cases of dead people being registered as voters, or of individuals finding ways of recording multiple votes.

Journalists should look closely at voters' rolls at polling stations to look out for repeats of names, addresses or occupations which could suggest multiple voting. One system used in several countries is to mark voters' fingers with indelible ink which stays visible for up to a week.

This system, used in Iraq's milestone January 2005 Presidential vote, can however leave voters vulnerable to retaliation from extremists opposed to the democratic process.

A possible solution to this is to use a mechanism used by the OSCE in local elections in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo following the break-up of Yugoslavia, where the paint contained silver nitrate that only shows up under ultra-violet light.

Getting out the voters – Candidates and parties can organise their own transport to polling stations on election day, particularly for the elderly and disabled. But the ruling authorities should not use state transport facilities for this, which would represent an unfair advantage.

Inside the polling centre. (IOM)



Security presence – A heavy presence of police and security forces in and around polling stations could be construed as intimidation. In the first round of Ukraine’s 2004 presidential election, the OSCE reported a police presence in over 60 per cent of polling stations.

Transparency – Are the ballot boxes sealed? Are they located out of sight of election officials? Are the voting booths unscreened, undermining the secrecy of the ballot, leaving voters vulnerable to discrimination post-election.

Other things to watch out for:

- People with valid voting papers being turned away.
- Officials demanding extra identification documents.
- Long queues at polling stations, indicating a lack of organisation.
- Campaign posters prominently displayed outside and inside polling stations

Check that the transport of the ballot boxes to the central counting office is monitored in all cases by international and domestic observers.

The count

Check that the count is done by an independent body, and monitored at all times by qualified observers and representatives of all main political parties and groups.

Cross-check that local counts at polling stations or district counting centres tally with published national figures.

The result

When the result is clear, seek comments from the winners and losers, the final turnout figure, quick reaction from all of society including the man-in-the-street and independent analysts, and comments from international and domestic monitors as to the fairness of the poll.

Also seek reaction from abroad, particularly neighbouring states, and from domestic and international financial markets, if available.

Reuters put out a report including reaction when it was clear Abbas was heading for victory on the basis of an exit poll. An abridged version follows:

RAMALLAH, West Bank, Jan 9 (Reuters)
- Mahmoud Abbas, a Palestinian moderate aiming to talk peace with Israel, was on course for a landslide victory in Sunday’s election for a successor to Yasser Arafat

The following is reaction to the exit poll result:

Israeli Vice-Premier Ehud Olmert: *“It’s a democratic process and this is in itself enormously important because it proves to be the only democratic process taking place in any Arab country.*

“The main challenges are still ahead. Will he fight against terrorists and try to stop the bloody war against the state of Israel.”

Former Palestinian Security Minister Mohammad Dahlan: *“I hope Palestinian factions will reconsider their relations with*



the Palestinian Authority and seek better and more serious relations...It was a vote for the future and for hope."

Senior Islamic Jihad Leader Khaled Al-Batsh: *"We hope Mr Abbas would begin to carry out the reforms he promised, including reaching an agreement with factions over the formation of a national unity leadership to protect out internal front, our Intifada and our resistance."*

Dr Stephen P. Cohen, President Of U.S.-Based Institute For Middle East Peace And Development: *"I think the fact that he's getting such a big percentage is a very encouraging sign."*

DIAA RASHWAN, AL-AHRAM CENTRE FOR STRATEGIC AND POLITICAL STUDIES, CAIRO: *"Mahmoud Abbas will be under real pressure from the Israelis, the Americans to end the conflict. But I don't think he can make the concessions, on the right of return of refugees, on borders, on Jerusalem and on the sovereignty of the Palestinian state demanded by the Israelis and Americans."*



Collecting registration papers. (IOM)

Look beyond the immediate figures of the result for the stories behind it, which could be more interesting in the longer term than a widely expected victory.

Was the turnout low, suggesting general voter disillusionment with politics, and possible rough times ahead for the victor?

Was there a surprisingly strong showing by a hitherto unheralded group, indicating a major political shift in the near future?

Is there a likelihood that defeated parties might agree to work together in coalition, which could dramatically alter the political balance?

In 1969 U.S. President Richard Nixon sent a message congratulating West German Chancellor Kurt Georg Kiesinger after his conservative coalition appeared to have won elections. However it failed to get an overall majority and the Social Democrats came to power with the help of the tiny Free Democrats.

The day after

Reporters do more in-depth interviews of the winners and losers, as well as further reaction from ordinary people, in particular those chosen earlier in the campaign for special attention. Political correspondents, with the help of independent analysts and others, to look closely at the election results for any voter patterns or changes in voter behaviour.

How did women/young people/the elderly/ethnic minorities/ the different regions vote,



and what does this mean for the future of the country?

Specialist correspondents to look at future prospects for the country under the new leadership in their various fields – foreign affairs, defence, the economy, law and order.

All of this information to be included in a final wrap-up piece looking at the election, the reaction, including from abroad, and future prospects.

As an example of the number of news angles that can be covered after an election, the following are headlines of stories covered by Reuters in the immediate aftermath of the Israeli elections in February 2001 that brought Ariel Sharon to power.

Reuters Israeli Election coverage - Headlines

- Sharon claims all Jerusalem, Palestinians defiant
- Bush urges calm, says give Sharon chance for peace
- Victorious Sharon prays at Jerusalem Western Wall
- Sharon aide says Arafat sent letter to new leader
- Arafat's Fatah says Intifada will topple Sharon
- Israel's Barak concedes, to quit as Labour leader
- Arabs slam Sharon win, U.S. and EU plead for peace
- Larsen says U.N. urges Sharon to move on peace
- Sharon urges Palestinians to pursue dialogue

- Palestinians grim on Sharon, joyful on Barak defeat
- Arafat hopes peace talks will continue under Sharon
- Lebanon urges world to restrain Sharon
- Israel's Sharon has tough coalition-building task

ANALYSES/BACKGROUND

- Israel's Sharon has big challenges, little time
- Sharon may find no partners for changed peace term
- Israeli markets, economy want unity government
- Israel's northerners recall Sharon the general
- Sharon's bleak legacy lives on in Lebanon
- Sharon is Palestinian nightmare
- Can Sharon make peace without even a handshake?
- Israelis see "Arafat factor" in Sharon triumph
- Failure to make peace costs Barak dearly
- Israeli left scrambles for new direction, leader
- Sharon, an old soldier who wouldn't fade away
- Possible candidates to replace Barak at Labour
- Chequered career of Israel's Sharon



Useful Web-sites

www.osce.org/odhr/?page=election - Guide to OSCE election observer activity, and their reports, handbook for observers.

www.psr.keele.ac.uk - Lots of links to election-related sites.

www.aceproject.org - Joint project to provide information on electoral systems worldwide.

www.electoral-reform.org.uk - Web-site of Britain's electoral reform society – supports change to proportional representation, but gives arguments for and against all main systems.

www.cnn.com/WORLD/election.watch - CNN's guide lists election results around the world.

www.ifes.org - Calendar of elections across the world, other data.



