



## Why Elections Matter Strengthening Political Development in Democracy

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### Abstract

*Elections stimulate political growth by increasing institutional strength, accountability, and participation, but worldwide trends show that they are susceptible to polarization and manipulation. This study examines the challenges traditional theories in light of 2025's evidence of autocratization, contending that elections run the risk of strengthening elite dominance rather than promoting stability and pluralism in the absence of specific reforms. It calls for flexible tactics for real democratic advancement, drawing on scholars like Dahl and Huntington as well as current V-Dem data.*

*Keywords elections, political development, democracy, accountability, autocratization*

### Introduction

When citizens go to the polls and cast their votes, they aspire not only to elect their leaders, but to choose a direction for their nation. Kofi Annan warns that while elections with integrity can bolster democracy, flawed elections can undermine it. However, given that there are now more autocracies than democracies (91 versus 88 worldwide), an urgent question is Do elections actually advance political development in a time when almost half of the world's states are regressing, or do they frequently act as fronts for established power? Using Dahl's pluralism, Schumpeter's elite model, and Huntington's institutionalism, this paper transitions from rote affirmation to critical evaluation, incorporating recent V-Dem data to show how deteriorating integrity impedes advancement. In the end, it argues that the developmental promise of elections depends on addressing these realities.

### Background

Elections have evolved as defenses against absolutism from the direct assemblies of ancient Athens to contemporary representative systems. The Enlightenment and the American and French revolutions democratized choice and incorporated elections into constitutions all over the world. In



pre-modern times, monarchs and elites held power, marginalizing the populace. Suffrage increased after World War II, but Cold War manipulations revealed weaknesses (think Soviet-rigged polls or coups supported by the United States). Optimism was stoked by the "third wave" of democratization in the 1990s, with scholars such as Huntington hailing electoral cycles as sources of stability. However, the 21st century brought about reversals pandemics, populist upsurges, and digital disinformation put integrity under pressure. According to global indices, more than 40 states exhibited autocratic characteristics by 2024, casting doubt on the presumptive linearity of elections toward advancement. Our analysis is framed by this context. Elections are not inherently democratic; rather, they are context-shaped instruments that require consideration beyond idealism.

### **Participation Engagement or Illusion?**

According to Norris (2014), elections encourage political engagement through campaigns, discussions, and voting, resulting in the development of informed citizens. However, take note of the cracks Does involvement empower or merely mimic disinformation when it permeates discourse? According to recent statistics, by 2024, there will be fewer clean elections in 25 countries, alienating minorities and young people through barriers and echo chambers. From the perspective of a researcher, this raises a fundamental question If surveys don't encourage real discussion, they impede progress, necessitating interventions like mandatory civic literacy to heal divisions and develop engaged, thoughtful voters.

### **Accountability Check or Charade?**

In line with Schumpeter's (1942) competitive theory, elections, at their best, enforce accountability leaders must pay attention to voters in order to hold onto power. Diamond (1999) expands on this by pointing out that transitions that are peaceful foster legitimacy. However, the worldwide "super-election" year of 2024 revealed the opposite pervasive in more than 20 countries, vote-buying, intimidation, and disputes undermined trust. Crucially, how can electoral cycles actually discipline governance in divisive environments where opposition is repressed? In the absence of strong transparency mechanisms, such as independent audits, incumbents gain an advantage in accountability, which impedes political development.

### **Institutions Fortified or Fragile?**



According to Huntington (1968), repeated elections foster stability by maturing institutions like political parties and electoral bodies. Theoretically sound, but empirical trends make this more difficult. Only ten countries saw improvements in the midst of more widespread decline, which frequently concealed more serious problems like judicial capture. In general, does institutional "strengthening" through polling ignore the cost of polarization? In order to ensure resilience against the institutional hollowing-out observed in autocratic regimes, a hybrid approach combining elections with citizen assemblies becomes crucial.

### **Transitions and Values Harmony or Hierarchy?**

Elections foster Dahl's (1989) democratic ideals of equality and pluralism by facilitating peaceful transitions of power. While peaceful handovers encourage adherence to the rule of law, by 2024, 45 states will be autocratic, and faulty procedures will instead spark conflict. This is the pivot for analysis. Transitions maintain hierarchies rather than pluralism if underrepresented groups are not included. Real value is found in combating electoral violence and exclusion, turning polls from one-time occurrences into long-lasting pillars of justice.

### **Policy Implications and Future Directions**

This analysis provides practical strategies for reviving elections as genuine catalysts for political advancement. To rebuild confidence in digital-age polling, policymakers should give top priority to technological protections like blockchain-based voter verification and AI-driven disinformation monitoring. Adopting mandatory gender/ethnic quotas and mixed-member proportional systems are examples of institutional reforms that can increase representation, thwart elite capture, and give voice to underrepresented groups.

In addition, critical media literacy and deliberative skills should be emphasized in pre-election civic education campaigns to turn passive voters into involved citizens who can hold those in positions of authority accountable. By exchanging best practices from successful democracies, international cooperation through frameworks such as the UN's Electoral Assistance Division could standardize global integrity benchmarks.



In order to move forward, researchers must conduct mixed-methods longitudinal studies that compare autocratizing and consolidating states over decades and track the effects of reform in a variety of contexts. Experimental designs that provide causal insights into participation effects include randomized voter education trials. Last but not least, interdisciplinary integration that combines data science and political science can model polarization dynamics and anticipate flashpoints before they happen. In addition to addressing present shortcomings, these approaches present elections as flexible tools for addressing the governance issues of the twenty-first century.

## Conclusion

Elections continue to be the cornerstone of democracy for political development, but their effectiveness depends on how well they navigate a world of inequality, technological disruption, and autocratization. This analysis reveals a sobering reality elections, although theoretically transformative, frequently fail in the absence of intentional safeguards, sustaining elite entrenchment rather than widespread empowerment. Beyond polls, there are wider ramifications for governance itself. To combat global regression, where autocracies now outnumber democracies, reforms must incorporate civic education, technological safeguards, and inclusive design. Transforming elections from recurring rituals into ongoing engines of accountability and advancement is a clear challenge for scholars, policymakers, and citizens alike. Democracies can only thrive in the face of 21st-century challenges and fulfill their promise of responsive, just political systems across the globe by undergoing such a comprehensive evolution.

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