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Holly Ann Garnett (ed.), Toby S. James (ed.)

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CHAPTER

Voter Education

Thessalia Merivaki, Mara Suttmann-Lea

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Abstract

Public understanding of how to vote and how the electoral process works is a fundamental tenet of healthy democracies with implications for formal political participation and perceptions of electoral integrity. Voter education—the provision of information to voters about how to participate in elections, the process of administering elections, and the significance of the vote for democratic representation—provides a foundation for this understanding. It helps empower voters to express their preferences with confidence at the ballot box, respect the outcomes of legitimately administered elections, and commit to future participation in the electoral process. At the same time, differences in rules, procedures, and levels of citizen knowledge shape the voter experience and perceptions of electoral integrity around the world, creating challenges for the effective measurement and assessment of voter education efforts in different electoral contexts. This chapter offers an operational definition of voter education as it relates to electoral integrity, introducing measurement and assessment challenges. It lays out the theoretical mechanisms through which voter education is related to electoral integrity and empirical evidence that assesses these mechanisms. Throughout, it highlights approaches to voter education by electoral management bodies and other actors in developed and developing democracies around the world, emphasizing how "best practices" in voter education strategies are often driven by the unique electoral and institutional context of democratic countries.

Keywords: voter education, election integrity, voter participation, democratic listening, voter confidence

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The Right to Be Informed—About Elections and Voting

During South Africa's transition to democracy in the early 1990s, the Independent Electoral Commission and civil society organizations faced the herculean challenges of not only administering free and fair elections after decades of apartheid but also launching mass education campaigns to build trust in the electoral process and to educate voters on how to formally participate in it by casting a vote. In this newly minted democracy, several factors hindered public engagement and trust in the system, particularly among Black and women voters. These included limited awareness of voting requirements, fear of political violence, distrust of the electoral process, and concern about the secrecy of the ballot (Møller and Hanf 1995; Ballington 2002).

In new and developing democracies, educating citizens about how to vote and why voting matters is a daunting task. But even in more established democracies, electoral reforms and unforeseen contingencies require evolving voter education strategies in response to changing information environments. For example, during the 2020 coronavirus pandemic wave that swept the globe, state and local electoral management bodies (EMBs) in the United States had to balance shifting voting operations to accommodate vote by mail and educating voters about how to cast mail ballots successfully without facing disenfranchising rejections or a time-consuming process to correct rejected ballots (see Alihodžić, in this volume). Although some states had experience administering elections by mail, others quickly pivoted their voting operations for the sake of public health, introducing the process to constituents otherwise used to voting in person (Tran 2023). Moreover, election officials had to navigate an election information environment riddled with misinformation about the security of mail voting and the integrity of post-election processes from political leaders at all levels of government, including the sitting president at the time, Donald J. Trump. Election officials' communication campaigns highlighted the role voter education can play in ensuring voters can navigate new methods of voting, as well as how their absence may increase the likelihood that voters are unfairly disenfranchised for mistakes made during the voting process (Shino, Suttmann-Lea, and Smith 2021; Suttmann-Lea and Merivaki 2022).

Although the contexts of South Africa's first democratic election in 1994 and the 2020 presidential election in the United States are distinctly different, both cases highlight the central role of voter education in democratic systems. Voter education plays a significant role in safeguarding electoral integrity by facilitating formal participation in democracy through voting (Maholtra, Michelson, and Valenzuela 2012; Mann and Bryant 2020; Suttmann-Lea and Merivaki 2022) and bolstering confidence in election administration and election outcomes (Suttmann-Lea and Merivaki 2023; Brown et al. 2024). If citizens do not know how to cast a vote or what their rights are as voters, they may be excluded from the democratic process (Neggers 2018; Baringer, Herron, and Smith 2020). Moreover, if they do not trust the security of the election administration (Hall, Monson, and Patterson 2009; Claasen et al. 2013; Levy 2021) or do not fully grasp the importance of political participation (Lestari 2019), they can decide to opt out of voting altogether (Birch 2010). In short, a lack of adequate citizen knowledge of how to vote in elections, why voting matters for democratic systems, and trust in the administration of elections threatens the electoral integrity of old and new democracies alike.

This chapter identifies voter education as a core component of electoral integrity in democratic systems: it ensures that citizens understand the importance of voting, can participate successfully in the formal democratic process, and have confidence that the election results accurately reflect the will of the people (Suttmann-Lea, Merivaki, and Orey 2025).[1] Voter education encompasses various facets, including factual information on navigating the voting process, complex communications about election security, and civic education-oriented messaging about the significance of the vote. Yet, each of these components intersects with the others and fosters a civic culture that promotes formal participation in democratic elections through voting. Voter education helps citizens make informed decisions and have confidence in election results, and it can ultimately strengthen the electoral integrity of democratic systems (Safdar et al. 2015; Boudreau and MacKenzie 2018; Suttmann-Lea and Merivaki 2023; Merivaki, Suttmann-Lea, and Orey 2025).

We proceed by defining and discussing the different approaches to measuring and assessing voter education. We emphasize the value of case-specific and experimental interventions in identifying effective strategies within countries. We also address the challenges associated with collecting observational data to determine which approaches are actually implemented by EMBs and other stakeholders in democracy around the world. As part of this discussion, we illustrate the opportunities and challenges posed by different political contexts and institutional structures of electoral systems for the measurement and evaluation of voter education.

We then introduce the theoretical frameworks that link voter education to electoral integrity. This framework highlights the role of positive voter experiences (Suttmann-Lea and Merivaki 2023) and trusted messengers (Brown et al. 2024) in supporting perceptions of electoral integrity, with the important caveat that the practical application of this theoretical framework is highly dependent on the context of implementation. Because effective voter education requires the interaction of multiple stakeholders whose actions shape the election information ecosystem, we also introduce the key actors in this ecosystem, positioning EMBs as the necessary —though by no means sufficient—actor at the heart of the election information ecosystem. In our conclusion, we lay out the main takeaways from existing voter education practices and assessments, emphasizing that while there may be general principles for voter education applicable to a range of democracies, the unique needs of countries make establishing best approaches to voter education highly context dependent.

Defining and Measuring Voter Education: Challenges and Research Innovation

The precise definition of voter education varies depending on the governing body or organization involved in voter education efforts. Here, we discuss a range of definitions used by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), the United Nations, and other democracy stakeholders that fall under the umbrella of voter education. These definitions reflect broader normative aims of voter education, namely, to produce civically engaged citizens who understand the value of participating in democratic elections. However, they also speak to basic factual objectives: ensuring that all citizens eligible to vote have access to and understand the information needed to cast a ballot successfully, and to ensure that they are adequately informed about votes actually translated into election outcomes through the process of administering elections.

Voter information, which includes basic facts about how to participate in elections such as the date, time, and places to vote; the identification needed; registration requirements; how to mark a ballot; and how votes are actually translated into election results by election administrators, is also essential to voter education campaigns. Thus, we define voter education as public information campaigns and outreach efforts that aim to educate citizens about the normative significance of voting, the basic mechanics of how to participate in the electoral process, and the means through which votes are translated into election outcomes in that process. We place EMBs as central actors in voter education efforts, but also acknowledge the role of other democracy stakeholders like civil society organizations, political parties, and the media.

Central to our understanding of voter education is the ability of citizens to access this information. In their *Handbook on International Human Rights Standards on Elections*, the United Nations argues that voter education, "including through media education and digital literacy programs—is essential to ensure the effective exercise of the right to vote by an informed community. Voters need to be confident in the integrity of the electoral process and their right to participate in it. The public should be well informed about why voting is important, as well as where, when and how to vote" (Bachelet 2021, 140). Similarly, the Carter Center states that entities engaged in voter education "should ensure that all potential voters, including women, minorities, and people with disabilities, have access to this information.[2]

Although this definition of voter education suggests citizens generally require access to the same type of information across democracies (how to vote, why voting matters, how elections are administered), the substantive content of this information will naturally vary from country to country depending on factors like the structure of election administration or how long the country has held democratic elections. This variation makes the development of consistent over-time measures to compare voter education efforts across countries challenging.

These challenges are well-illustrated in federalist systems, where the infrastructure of election administration is bifurcated between different levels of government. Unlike centralized EMBs, where election administration is managed at the national level, in federalist or otherwise decentralized systems, EMBs operate separately at the national, state, or provincial level. The United States is indicative of the challenges associated with measuring voter education programs in systems where election management is spread across different levels. Researchers studying voter education in the United States must account for fifty six different sets of state and territory election laws, each with its own unique local implementation practices. This not only means identifying the state and territory level offices responsible for informing voters but also navigating thousands of local offices alongside the patchwork of election laws that shape voter access and election security (Merivaki et al. 2024; Suttmann-Lea and Merivaki 2024). Although the US Election Assistance Commission serves as the federal entity that oversees elections in the United States, its role is largely advisory and guidance-based when it comes to matters of voter education; except for the country's Help America Vote Act of 2002, it does not have any regulatory or compulsory authority in matters of voter education (Merivaki and Suttmann-Lea 2021).

In countries where the structure of election administration is more centralized, voting options and access policies are more consistent throughout the country, making the measurement of voter education efforts and programs more manageable. For example, in Sweden, while the electoral management structure is still decentralized, a national EMB deals with the coordination of policy across regional and local jurisdictions, meaning voters are essentially encountering the same access options and requirements across the country. Unlike the United States, the national EMB in Sweden shares responsibility for voter education with regional and local governments.[3] Finally, in the world's largest democracy, India, the structure of election administration is highly centralized and managed by the Election Commission of India. Here, the Election Commission runs and coordinates Systematic Voters' Education and Electoral Participation (SVEEP), a national program aimed at supporting local EMBs and other democracy stakeholders in the education of voters to increase participation in and understanding of democracy in India (Sampath et al. 2014).

Outside of variation in the institutional setup of election administration and election policy, voter education needs will vary depending on the age and health of a democracy. In newer democracies, citizens require education not only on the mechanics of voting as new voters but also on the significance of the act in and of itself. These democracies also face challenges of reassuring the public that the election process is free, fair, and secure; that their vote will be kept secret; that political violence is not a threat; and that the ballots, once cast, will translate into meaningful representation (Møller and Hanf 1995; Ngwoke and Agusi 2018). This challenge is even more acute for the inclusion of marginalized and first-time voters, for whom the barriers to trusting the security of their participation and the belief that participation will translate into substantive representation are greater (Ballington 2002; Gunawan and Genoves 2024).

Developed democracies may not have to navigate the same challenges faced by new and developing democracies. However, evolving information environments and the threat of election disinformation require voter education programs that can rapidly respond to these changes. Disinformation creates similar barriers to participation faced by newer democracies and can negatively impact confidence in election outcomes. It generates skepticism about the integrity of the electoral process and concerns about the accuracy of election outcomes, which can give rise to threats and political violence (Bryant 2020; Persily and Stewart III 2021; Hasen 2022). As such, while basic information needs about the requirements of voting, the significance of the act, and the administration of elections may be similar from country to country, the nuances and prioritization of

specific communication needs will vary substantially depending on the structure of the country and the age and health of its democratic system. This variation makes the measurement and assessment of voter education programs highly dependent on the institutional and political context under consideration.

Moreover, especially in decentralized systems where subnational officials have the authority to implement voter education programs with limited oversight, there are challenges in capturing representative observational data of what EMBs are actually doing on the ground to communicate with their constituents (Suttmann-Lea 2022). Currently, no consistently maintained centralized repository of EMB communications exists, similar to data collection undertaken for projects such as the Wesleyan Media Project, which collects data on political advertising during elections in the United States, or the EUDigiParty dataset, which captured the digital campaigning presence of over four hundred parties during the European Parliament elections of 2024 on major social media platforms.[4]

Researchers have circumvented the difficulties of systematically observing how EMBs across countries and localities educate voters by focusing on core aspects of voter education, such as information available on election websites and social media activity. This approach certainly has some pitfalls—in a country like the United States, this involves scouring the online presence of not only states and territories but the thousands of local election jurisdictions by hand; once complete, the process of updating and maintaining the data is more straightforward and provides an invaluable "living" database of EMB communications over time (Garnett 2020; Merivaki et al. 2024). At the same time, these data should not be considered indicative of the universe of EMB communications, particularly in countries with decentralized election administration, where voter education efforts vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. For example, while nearly all fifty states in the United States have some active presence on at least one social media platform, only a little over 30 percent of the more than eight thousand local offices have a presence on at least one platform as of 2024 (Suttmann-Lea 2022; Merivaki et al. 2024).

Outside of observational research, a standard approach for assessing the effects of voter education interventions often relies on partnerships between researchers and EMBs or third-party organizations that help identify practical solutions using field experiments. This is an effective way to assess the impact of messages and interventions on the outcomes of voting within specific jurisdictions or contexts. In the United States, for example, low-cost postcard mailers are an effective intervention that EMBs can use to bolster registration and turnout. There is also evidence in the United States that outreach from election officials themselves (as opposed to third-party organizations or campaigns) is also more effective in ensuring voter success by fulfilling the requirements necessary to successfully cast a ballot (Maholtra, Michelson, and Valenzuela 2012; Citrin, Green, and Morris 2015; Herrnson et al. 2015). Interventions that are effective in one context may not be effective in others, however. Stakeholders involved in other countries that have undergone more recent democratization processes require interventions that are sensitive to the potential for political violence, the relative newness of the voting process itself, or citizen apathy in democratic countries where ruling parties have consolidated significant degrees of power (Aker, Collier, and Vincente 2017; Kouba and Lysek 2023; Gunawan and Genoves 2024; Kadir et al. 2024).

The Theoretical Linkages between Voter Education with Electoral Integrity

The scholarship that examines the mechanisms linking voter education to electoral integrity is relatively new within the broader investigations of how voter education should be approached empirically and theoretically. In some cases, it focuses more on identifying interventions specific to a given country or jurisdiction's context-dependent needs that do not necessarily allow for a more generalizable set of assumptions of the linkage between voter education and electoral integrity. For example, a case study assessing the impact of different outreach modes on participation in Mozambique identified cell phone outreach as less effective for women than through newspapers, as women in Mozambique may be less likely to own a cell phone (Aker, Collier, and Vincente 2017). Similarly, in Indonesia, the reliance on voter education through family networks has been explored as a means to increase participation in elections, particularly among women in the electorate (Kadir et al. 2024).

The relationship between voter education and citizens' readiness for an election is an important question to address, particularly in emerging democracies struggling to limit illegal practices and corruption in voting. A study of public preparedness for the 2019 general election in Nigeria identified low levels of awareness of registration deadlines, the time and places to vote, and the illegality of certain practices such as voting buying, carrying more than one voter identification card, or falsely registering to vote among respondents. These perceptions shaped the willingness of respondents to register and vote in the upcoming general election that year (Ngwoke and Agusi 2018).

Much of the theoretical development on the relationship between voter education and electoral integrity comes from studies that leverage the variation offered by the patchwork of state election policy and administration in the United States. Some of this work focuses on outcomes related to the act of voting, or different aspects of the voting process, such as mail balloting or successful registration, and does not theoretically consider the broader implications of their findings for matters of electoral integrity (Mann and Bryant 2020; Shino, Suttmann-Lea, and Smith 2021). At the same time, it offers the theoretical foundation for our broader understanding of this relationship. Experimental evidence suggests that EMB communications can have an educational effect on recipients, increasing their probability of successful registration and voting (Mann and Bryant 2020). There is also evidence to suggest that EMBs in the United States have source credibility that improves the effects of educational communications about registration, navigating new voting technologies, or overall trust in the administration of elections (Malhotra, Michelson, and Valenzuela 2012; Herrnson et al. 2015; Brown et al. 2024).

Source credibility of EMBs is not a panacea for effective voter education communications. In the context of the United States, where many EMB officials serve in elected partisan positions, a potential concern is that the quality of election administration, including how to inform voters, is shaped by partisanship. However, there is little evidence of partisan gamesmanship by EMBs in the United States (Ferrer, Geyn, and Thompson 2024). On the other hand, the threat and amplification of misinformation and disinformation about election administration can drive negative perceptions of electoral integrity, limiting the effectiveness of EMBs as credible messengers (Persily and Stewart III 2021; Merivaki, Suttmann-Lea, and Orey 2025). In other contexts, corruption and partisan influence over EMBs can influence their independence and public perceptions of electoral integrity (Partheymüller et al. 2019; van Ham and Garnett 2019).

Work that directly assesses theories on the relationship between voter education and electoral integrity suggests that one of the primary mechanisms through which voter education can shape perceptions of electoral integrity is through the voter experience. Voters who are equipped with accurate information about how to successfully cast a ballot are less likely to have problems while voting due to errors in their voter status, the return of their ballots, or a lack of information about when, where, and how to cast a ballot (Suttmann-Lea

and Merivaki 2022; Merivaki and Suttmann-Lea 2023). By consistently infusing the electoral information ecosystem with accurate information about how to vote successfully, EMBs can increase the likelihood of successful, positive voting experiences. With positive voting experiences, voters are more likely to express confidence in the administration of elections, specifically that their and others' ballots were counted as intended and that the reported results of elections accurately reflect the will of the people (Barreto, Cohen-Marks, and Woods 2009; Claasen et al. 2013; Suttmann-Lea and Merivaki 2023).

Of course, the voter experience is not the only pathway through which perceptions of electoral integrity should be fostered. Confidence in the electoral process is an important precursor to the decision to vote in the first place (Alvarez, Hall, and Llewellyn 2008; Birch 2010). In developing democracies, it is necessary to first establish trust in and understanding of the electoral process (Ballington 2002). Furthermore, in developed democracies, even well-established systems of election administration can be undermined by unfounded attacks on the integrity of election officials and the processes by which they run and secure elections. In some cases, such as with the 2023 elections in Nigeria, this skepticism is warranted (EU 2023). However, in other contexts, such as the 2020 US presidential election or the 2022 Brazilian elections, narratives in the public imagination of mismanaged or outright rigged elections ran counter to expert analysis and observation of those elections (Persily and Stewart III 2021; OAS 2022; Kerr, King, and Wahman 2024).

Although much of the existing theoretical development and assessment centers around voter education campaigns in the United States (Brown et al. 2024; Jaffe et al. 2024; Lockhart et al. 2024), research findings nevertheless validate existing recommendations by international stakeholders who state that consistent, localized, and transparent messaging campaigns can be effective both in encouraging reestablishing public trust in EMBs and in key election processes.[5] Moreover, voter education efforts can protect even those most prone to questioning the validity of election results, such as those who select losing candidates, from negative perceptions of election administration (Suttmann-Lea and Merivaki 2023; Suttmann-Lea, Merivaki, and Orey 2025).

These campaigns emphasize the officials tasked with running EMBs as the authoritative sources of election information, encouraging citizens to consider them as their first source of information about what is needed to vote and key election processes. Specifically, one of the mechanisms through which these kinds of communication campaigns can help bolster perceptions of election administration is through messaging that emphasizes local connections—specifically, that the officials who administer elections are your "friends and neighbors" (Brown et al. 2024). This mechanism is reflected in evidence suggesting that people who prefer information from their local EMBs in the United States, as opposed to EMBs overseeing at the state level, are also more likely to have positive perceptions of election administration (Merivaki, Suttmann-Lea, and Orey 2025). Finally, simple communications that offer public transparency and insight into key election administration processes, such as vote counting processes and post-election audits, can also improve public perceptions of election administration (Jaffe et al. 2024; Lockhart et al. 2024).

Thus, there is evidence to suggest that perceptions of electoral integrity, specifically of the integrity with which elections themselves are administered, can be shaped by voter education efforts from EMBs. The pathways through which voter education is theorized to shape these perceptions include access to accurate information about how to participate in elections that cultivate positive voting experiences, and encouraging citizens to look to their EMBs as trusted sources of information, and communications that offer transparency about non-voting-related election processes such as vote counting and audits. That said, much of this theoretical work and evidence comes from one specific context—the United States—where the patchwork, decentralized nature of election administration and reliance on local EMBs do not apply to other democratic countries.

Key Actors in the Election Information Ecosystem

In a voter-centric electoral information ecosystem, the voter experience is highly dependent on access to accurate, timely, and neutral information about how to register and vote, and how election processes are kept safe and secure. In this ecosystem, election officials are typically the central actors and authoritative sources of accurate and reliable information on how to formally participate in the democratic process and on issues of election administration and integrity (Merivaki and Suttmann-Lea, 2021, 2023).

At the same time, limited resources, capacity, and public awareness of or even trust in EMBs as information sources mean that they cannot be solely responsible for voter education efforts in their country. There is also a wide variation in the structure of EMBs that has implications for the efficacy of their voter education efforts, particularly the extent to which they operate as independent entities engaged in the administration of elections. EMBs may be partisan, bipartisan, or nonpartisan, centralized or decentralized; a part of a special judicial body, or a combination of these structures.[6] EMBs whose operations are intertwined with political parties, electoral politics, or other government bodies may struggle to operate independently, which in turn can damage their credibility among lawmakers and the public (Rosas 2010; van Ham and Garnett 2019). Even in countries where partisan EMBs by and large effectively function independently from political parties (Ferrer, Geyn, and Thompson 2024), there may still be divisions among citizens driven by misinformation campaigns over the extent to which they truly operate elections independently and in a nonpartisan way (Persily and Stewart III 2021; Kerr, King, and Wahman 2024). While we position EMBs as the central actor involved in voter education efforts, we also highlight the important role of other actors in addressing the challenges and shortcomings posed by differences in EMB resources, capacity, and structures around the world.

Electoral Management Bodies and Election Administrators

EMBs and election administrators are the primary actors responsible for managing elections and ensuring that voters have the necessary information to participate in elections. These agencies, elected or appointed, with full-time or part-time workloads, and, in some contexts, responsibilities split between elections and other administrative functions, are tasked with disseminating official information about voting procedures, registration deadlines, polling locations, and identification requirements, among other relevant processes and procedures that relate to the administration of elections and counting of ballots. Outside of informing citizens about the mechanics of voting and election administration, many also take on the task of informing voters about the broader significance of voting, including messaging that highlights the role of the vote in the process of democratic representation and addresses not only the question of “how to vote” but also “why to vote” (Lewis 2015; Suttmann-Lea and Merivaki 2024).

In terms of how election-related information flows from EMBs to voters, an important consideration is how centralized communication channels are across EMBs. In countries where the administration of elections is the responsibility of a single entity, communications about the election process for all voters, regardless of where they reside and vote, are managed by the EMB. A helpful example is Australia’s Electoral Commission (AEC), whose media team is responsible for sharing information with voters, political parties, the media, and community stakeholders such as educators and civil society.[7] In Brazil, the Superior Electoral Court (TSE) manages all electoral communications related to the election. The efforts of the TSE are supplemented by the Electoral Transparency Commission, which is tasked with making the election process more transparent to the public.[8]

In India, the Election Commission of India (ECI) employs a variety of strategies to educate voters. Among these strategies is the aforementioned SVEEP, a robust initiative designed to increase voter awareness through culturally resonant activities such as street plays, folk songs, and the distribution of educational pamphlets, particularly targeted at remote and rural communities. In addition, the ECI maintains a comprehensive website

and has developed the Voter Helpline app, which provides essential services such as voter registration, polling station locators, and detailed voting guides. To further support voters, a toll-free Voter Helpline is available to answer questions and offer information about the voting process (Sampath et al. 2014).

In countries where the administration of elections is federalized, like Germany and the United States, the task of informing the public about what is needed to vote is shared among different election offices and administrators. In the United States, the chief election official in each state is responsible for overseeing elections, while local election officials within each US state and US territory are responsible for administering them. The hyperfederalized nature of US elections brings in multiple election administrators at different levels together, with an inherent expectation that voter education is part of their day-to-day job (Suttmann-Lea and Merivaki 2024). Even though federal legislation requires that each US state has a voter education plan, this requirement does not include a mandate for implementation, and there is significant ambiguity as to who is the designated officer in charge of voter communications (Merivaki and Suttmann-Lea 2021).

Given this ambiguity in federal US law, voter education efforts are conducted by officials at all levels. Voters in Arizona, for example, can receive information about elections from the Secretary of State's office. However, depending on the local election jurisdiction in which they reside, they may also receive more geographically specific information from their local election official, such as which polling place they should turn out to vote or who to call to request a mail ballot. The US Election Assistance Commission, which is the federal agency tasked with assisting state and local election officials in administering elections, does not have election administration management responsibilities. In the absence of a centralized EMB in the United States, therefore, the burden of educating voters is largely on state and local election officials to inform voters about how and when to register to vote and how and when they can cast their vote (Suttmann-Lea and Merivaki 2024).

Political Parties

As part of their mobilization efforts, political parties also engage in communications that reflect the broader definition of voter education outlined in this chapter. Political parties and their affiliated candidates may have the closest relationship with supporters. In some cases, they can help fill gaps left by EMBs. In Nigeria, for example, political parties are expected to complement efforts by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) to help ensure that citizens make fewer mistakes on their ballots that ultimately lead to rejection, such as double thumbprints on paper ballots or using unofficial ballot paper. Evidence from the 2023 elections in Nigeria suggests that social media voter education campaigns by political parties were particularly successful in encouraging participation in the election among younger voters (Wonuola and Ajijola 2025).

Of course, political parties have strategic incentives to ensure that their supporters understand the requirements to vote and will typically focus on ensuring that supporters are not mistakenly disenfranchised for mistakes such as missed registration deadlines, errors on return envelopes for mail voting, or incorrectly marking ballots. Empirical evidence from the United States suggests that certain electoral reforms—such as early voting, which is available in 38 percent of countries around the world—will not have a significant effect absent communication efforts from political parties to educate and mobilize their supporters to take advantage of the reform (Hamel, Leighley, and Stein 2024; Silva-Leander and Joseph 2024).

Although political parties do not engage in nonpartisan voter education efforts, we nevertheless consider them relevant actors in the voter education ecosystem because they can fill important information needs for citizens and may be more likely to reach them with information about how to cast a vote successfully. At the same time, given their strategic electoral goals, there are natural limitations in their capacity—and perhaps interest—to facilitate the larger goals of voter education, to inform all citizens about the voting process. In the United States, for example, where political parties and other actors are not active in campaigning, public

understanding and use of electoral reforms designed to make voting more accessible are less likely (Hamel, Leighley, and Stein 2024). Although this research focuses largely on the turnout implications of the interaction between political actors and electoral reforms, their theoretical expectations suggest that political parties and campaign activity play an important role in raising voter awareness and understanding of options for voting and voting requirements.

Another challenge political parties face in the broader electoral information ecosystem is that of limited resources. For example, during South Africa's first democratically held elections, unlike the National and Democratic parties, the African National Congress and Pan Africanist Congress parties, both liberation organizations well-versed in organizing other forms of political action, had never encouraged their supporters to participate in elections formally. They faced an uphill battle to organize supporters to move beyond forms of mass action such as boycotts, marches, and demonstrations to the voting booth. They required resources and training to ensure that, as political parties, they were ready to participate in the electoral process and successfully educate supporters about how to cast a ballot (Ballington 2002).

Outside of the resources challenges parties themselves may face, there are real concerns about communications from party organizations that are deliberate efforts to misinform opponents' supporters in an effort to directly disenfranchise them by providing them with false information about key dates like registration deadlines or election day, or encouraging them to question the security of election processes as a means to discourage turning out to vote (Hasen 2020). These tactics are especially concerning when they are systematically targeted at minority groups with suffrage rights only recently realized.

Even innocent mistakes made by party organizations that lack an understanding of the intricacies of election law can unintentionally disenfranchise their supporters through incorrect voter education. In an era of heightened scrutiny over voting materials, such mobilization can run the risk of voter confusion if political parties themselves are not educated on the bureaucratic specifics of what is needed to register successfully, or to cast a valid ballot. This dynamic is not new in American elections; during the notorious post-election chaos in Florida during the 2000 presidential election, Democrats attempted to have thousands of Republican mail ballots disqualified. The issue arose because these ballot requests lacked the required voter registration numbers, a detail presumably omitted in the instructions provided by the Republican Party on how to cast a valid mail ballot. This oversight contributed to the widespread confusion and legal challenges that characterized that election's aftermath.[9]

Civil Society

International election observers see civil society organizations as playing a vital role in educating voters about elections and voting processes worldwide, with the ability to reach traditionally underserved populations such as racial and ethnic minorities, language minorities, youth voters, and women.[10] Organizations such as the League of Women Voters in the United States, the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) in India, or YIAHA Africa in Nigeria actively engage in getting accurate, timely, and nonpartisan information to voters, and helping them navigate election processes such as registering to vote and getting to their polling place. Historically, these organizations are motivated by an interest in fostering nonpartisan civic engagement and inclusion in the democratic process. Aside from the direct benefits to voters, outreach efforts by civil society are often well received, not to mention welcome, by election officials and political parties, particularly for the former, which may not have enough resources to reach all voters effectively.

There are important nuances in how civil society strategically approaches voter education, in the context of which a group of voters is considered more likely to be underserved, and therefore in a higher priority position for outreach. Past elections highlight efforts of nonpartisan advocacy groups to inform eligible voters who have been historically marginalized and disenfranchised, such as racial and ethnic minorities in the United States

and women in South Africa.[11] In some election contexts where the risk of conflict is high, the work of civil society in informing voters and fostering de-escalation and conflict resolution norms should be underscored, because these efforts not only build an informed electorate but also improve the quality of participatory democracy. For example, the KwaZulu-Natal Democracy and Elections Forum (KZNDEF) has been actively involved in voter education in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, to reduce election-related violence (Mottiar 2010).

Some civil society organizations may have an ideological bent that orients citizens toward specific courses of action or perspectives, limiting their effectiveness as truly "neutral" or "nonpartisan" voter education entities. That said, within the broader information ecosystem of voter education, we treat civil society organizations and their varying objectives similarly to political parties. They are organizations that may have other strategic aims in their voter education efforts, but can fill important information vacuums for voters that may not be otherwise filled. As with political parties, collaboration with EMBs and education about voting requirements and electoral processes are important for the success of civil society organizations in their voter education efforts (Mottiar 2010; Mbowela and Mwalubunju 2015).

News Organizations

By design, news organizations are key actors in the election information ecosystem, since they participate in the dissemination of information about the voting process, by summarizing important information about elections; amplifying information shared by EMBs, parties, or civil society; or highlighting important changes in voting requirements that can occur in the mid-election cycle in some countries as the result of legal challenges. News organizations may be more accurately characterized as intermediaries in this environment; there is significant variation between newsrooms in what kind of election-related information will be shared and whether it is accurate. Traditionally, information about how elections are conducted is not covered in news, and reporting on important election information, like when to register to vote and how to find one's polling location, is not consistently covered in national or local media, although there has been a shift toward more voting process coverage in the United States (Searles, Maki, and Mann 2024).

The methods and effectiveness of news organizations can vary significantly depending on whether they are government-owned or privately owned, as well as whether they are operating nationally or regionally/locally. Government-owned news organizations may have a mandate to provide comprehensive and impartial information to all citizens. They may focus on ensuring that all voters are informed about the electoral process, key issues, and candidate positions, aiming for a balanced representation of all political parties. For example, the BBC in the United Kingdom strives to adhere to strict impartiality guidelines, offering in-depth coverage and educational programs about the election process.[12] In Kenya, local radio stations such as Radio Citizen and KBC Radio play a crucial role in voter education, especially in rural areas where literacy rates may be lower and access to other forms of media is limited. These radio stations broadcast in various local languages, providing information on how to register to vote, the importance of voting, and how to cast a ballot. Similarly, in the Philippines, community newspapers and local TV networks offer extensive election coverage, including voter education campaigns that explain the voting process and promote electoral participation. By addressing the unique concerns and informational needs of their specific audiences, local media worldwide help to ensure that all voters are well informed and prepared to participate in the electoral process.

In contrast, privately owned news organizations, which market forces and editorial biases may drive, can vary widely in their coverage. Some may prioritize sensational stories or focus on the interests of their target audience, potentially leading to a skewed presentation of information. In countries with a highly polarized media landscape, such as the United States, private news outlets often align with specific political ideologies, which can affect how they educate voters about voting processes and the significance of elections. Although they can still provide valuable information, the perspective might be more partial, focusing on certain

narratives over others. This divergence highlights the importance of media literacy among voters in discerning and critically evaluating the information presented to them (Iyengar et al. 2010; Fraile 2013).

Tech Platforms

Tech platforms can be instrumental in facilitating access to accurate election-related information, but also face significant limitations in their effectiveness given how many are used to proliferate mis- and disinformation about elections. As such, we highlight their use as a key component of voter education toolkits, while recognizing the challenges actors engaged in voter education face in saturating the electoral information ecosystem with voter education.

Social media platforms like Facebook, X (formerly known as Twitter), Instagram, and newer platforms are used by different actors in the election information space to run information campaigns about voting procedures, registration deadlines, and polling locations, allowing for real-time updates and interactions with voters. A report by the EU Parliamentary Research Service in 2024 documented the dramatic increase in the youth's engagement with election content on social media, which showcases the adaptation of public information campaigns to reach voters where they are, in this case, on platforms like TikTok (EU 2024). This example highlights the opportunities and challenges associated with using social media as a tool for voter education; political candidates and influencers may be more effective in engaging their audiences than EMBs. In countries where election administration is decentralized, such as the United States, ensuring that voters are aware that their election official is present on social media, which is necessary to receive information from them about elections and voting through these platforms, is such a challenge that led civil society advocates to argue that "democracy needs a marketing department."[13]

Video platforms like YouTube offer opportunities for content that generates greater user engagement by producing instructional videos to visually explain voting processes, such as postal voting and how secure it is, as in the case of the Australian Election Commission. In addition to EMB's usage of YouTube to demystify electoral processes, several actors in the information ecosystem leverage the popularity of the platform to disseminate information about elections. A useful example is a public service announcement (PSA) campaign by a third-party organization to inform voters about mail voting in Pennsylvania in 2020 and make them aware that they should not cast their ballot "naked," meaning without the secrecy envelope. The campaign recruited celebrities who gave the impression of being naked to more effectively send the message.[14]

While social networks are a free and widely accessible tool for political actors to use in their voter education toolkits, they should also be used in conjunction with other technological innovations and applications. Tech platforms have democratized the production and dissemination of content to facilitate both static and real-time engagement with the audience. Online livestreams and webinars are increasingly popular and often designed to effectively reach diverse demographics of voters. Other tech-driven tools include direct email communications through newsletters and dedicated election websites where voters can provide comprehensive resources, including voter registration forms, eligibility criteria, and details about candidates and ballot measures.

Mobile applications are also used to offer portable solutions for voters to access personalized voting information, including polling places and candidate details. For example, the Louisiana Secretary of State (in the United States) employs a state-specific mobile application called Geaux Vote, where users can use the application on their device to access voter registration information, information about upcoming elections, such as dates, times, and voting locations, as well as sample ballots. Similarly, Brazil launched its own mobile app called e-Título prior to the 2022 election, which has been downloaded by over fifty million voters. In some specific contexts, information on how to vote depends exclusively on mobile apps; according to the Asia

Foundation, reliable candidate information was only available via online apps, through the Asia Foundation's Mae Pay Soh ("Let's Vote") voter information database.[15]

Outside of new technologies, it is important for EMBs and other actors to still use "old-fashioned" technologies for their voter education efforts. Ballot tracking via email, voice, and text messaging is a helpful information source for voters that gives them transparency into the processing of mail ballots. They can see the progress of their ballots throughout the process and have greater confidence that their ballot was received and counted (Meier and Romero 2024). More broadly, in the midst of evolving technologies, social media platforms, and artificial intelligence, older technologies like cell phones and email can be particularly effective in reaching voters who live in remote, rural, or otherwise difficult-to-access places (Aker, Collier, and Vincente 2017).

Best Practices and the Interaction of Voter Education Actors

There are no uniform sets of approaches to voter education used by actors embedded in election information ecosystems. Rather, as illustrated by the research and practices laid out in this chapter, efforts are highly contingent on the context in which a given political actor is operating. However, there are principles for effective voter education that EMBs and other actors in the information ecosystem can consider that are adaptable to a range of voter education needs. For example, similar to the Voters' Education and Electoral Participation resources developed by the Indian Election Commission (Sampath et al. 2014), the US Election Assistance Commission (EAC) encourages state and local EMBs to follow principles that (1) center the voter experience; (2) break down information into bite-, snack-, and meal-sized content; (3) make information easy to understand; (4) present information clearly; and (5) test their materials before widespread dissemination. Bite-sized pieces of information, for example, might reflect simple, straightforward, factual details about a registration deadline or where to return a mail ballot, whereas snack- or meal-sized pieces of information add more detail and context depending on the topic and content (EAC 2024). There is also a range of nonprofits and other democracy stakeholders who have generated helpful guides for designing and disseminating voter education materials, like the Center for Civic Design in the United States.[16]

Although the basic communication principles identified in these guides may be applicable in a variety of countries, there are also additional challenges certain countries may face that require best practices and interventions tailored to the context of their elections. In developing democracies that struggle with corruption, vote buying, fears of electoral violence, or difficult-to-reach populations, voter education interventions may have to go beyond a more generalizable list of best practices in communication that speak to the unique needs of a given country.[17]

Voter education practices and the actors we have identified are embedded in a broader election information ecosystem that simultaneously supports and challenges their efforts to connect with voters and ensure timely access to information critical to exercising their right to vote. As central actors in this ecosystem, EMBs have increasingly relied on the influence of other stakeholders from the democracy and civil society, as well as popular opinion leaders, to expand the reach of their message to voters. Collaboration between these actors can fill important information gaps, particularly in countries where EMBs may have limited resources or reach with their constituents (Mbowela and Mwalubunju 2015). Although this research is not related to information on how to vote or the process of election administration, findings show that a combination of nonpartisan and partisan education guides and interactive information on candidates' policy views can be an effective way of helping voters make decisions that best align with their policy positions (Boudreau and MacKenzie 2018). This approach may also apply to voter information shared by EMBs and other stakeholders.

Coordination between EMBs as central actors in the election information ecosystem and other actors is not always direct. They can also form organically based on the common mission to educate the public about their rights as voters, how to access the election process, becoming a poll worker or an election observer, and

sharing information about political candidates and ballot initiatives or referenda. For example, the League of Women Voters, a well-established voting rights organization in the United States, operates VOTE411.org. This comprehensive online platform offers nonpartisan information about elections, including candidate details, polling locations, and voter registration.[18] The Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy (EISD) in Africa, whose headquarters are in Johannesburg, South Africa, launched the first e-toolkit for civic and voter education called CVElog, a searchable online repository of voter education materials from several African countries. EISD also launched an "Online Integrity Tool," which is designed to be used by election observers to assess the general integrity of the overall election process in the African Union.[19]

In addition to efforts to increase voters' access to accurate election-related information, voter education campaigns have expanded to include coordinated trust-building initiatives in contexts where election denial is persistent and has distorted the election information ecosystem.[20] Trust-building campaigns highlight the importance of cross-stakeholder cooperation and messaging strategy coordination, placing election management bodies as authoritative sources of election-related information. In the United States, the National Association of Secretaries of State (NASS), the country's oldest nonpartisan professional organization for public officials, has been engaging in consistent trust-building efforts since 2019. The central message of their campaign is that election officials are trusted sources of information, and their efforts keep elections safe and secure. Reflective of the network in which EMBs in the United States operate, this campaign has been adopted by multiple stakeholders, including federal agencies, such as the EAC[21] and the Cybersecurity & Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA),[22] national organizations, such as the National Association of Secretaries of State (NASS) and the National Association of State Election Directors (NASED)[23]; and civic organizations, such as the Brennan Center for Justice and the R Street Institute.[24]

These types of coordinated campaigns can face challenges if messaging approaches are not adequately tested. For example, explicit use of the hashtag #TrustedInfo actually decreased trust in election officials and confidence in election administration, creating a sort of backlash effect where recipients felt as if they were told to trust information sources they were unfamiliar with. Instead, more implicit trust-building messages that emphasize local connections appear to be more successful in strengthening public perceptions of electoral processes in the United States (Brown et al. 2024; Suttmann-Lea, Merivaki, and Orey 2025).

Outside of the United States, similar agencies and civic organizations are involved in efforts to inform voters and connect them with official sources of election information. For example, in January 2024, Eurodesk Brussels Link, an organization dedicated to supporting the information and experiences of young people, put out an ad campaign in the lead up to the European Union Parliamentary elections. The ad connected viewers to an official source of information through the European Union, where they could learn about the voting rules in their own country as they prepared to participate in the elections.[25] And as global crises create refugees out of many voters around the world, international coordination is increasingly needed to ensure citizens displaced by war have the support and information needed to cast ballots in elections. One powerful illustration of this comes from cooperation between Ukraine and Spain, facilitated by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA). In late 2023, Spain hosted one of the largest number of Ukrainian refugees and was thus chosen as a destination for out-of-country voting efforts. International IDEA facilitated visits between a Ukrainian electoral delegation and their counterparts in Spain, providing insight into how they themselves register Spanish voters overseas, organize postal voting, and conduct voter education campaigns (Shypilova 2023).

EMBs must simultaneously respond to pressures from influential political actors in the election information ecosystem who are committed to willful misinterpretation of election administration and the spread of disinformation about the integrity of election systems. While the disinformation-fueled 2020 presidential election in the United States garnered global attention, EMBs around the world have to contend with bad-faith actors who infect the election information environment with false information about voter fraud and poor security in election systems. Indeed, with the rise of artificial intelligence (AI) and the continued attacks on

election administrators by authoritarian figures and other political candidates, 2024 represented a watershed year for the threats posed by disinformation and attacks on election officials and workers for countries holding elections around the world (Kerr, King, and Wahman 2024). These challenges also highlight the persistent need to establish and maintain partnerships with tech companies. Drawing from guidelines developed by key democracy stakeholders like the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), tech companies are increasingly partnering with election practitioners to amplify access to authoritative and official sources of key information about how to participate in elections.[26]

Discussion: What We Know, What We Don't, and the Future of Voter Education Research

Because of variation across democracies and their electoral systems, what we "know" about voter education in a generalizable sense is highly dependent on the country in question, the age and health of their democratic system, the structure of their election administration, and specific election policies. Even within the same country, the substance of voter education campaigns and the effectiveness of efforts can vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction if election policy and administration are decentralized (Suttmann-Lea and Merivaki 2022; Merivaki and Suttmann-Lea 2023; Merivaki et al. 2024). Although there is consistent recognition by governments, NGOs, and other democracy stakeholders about the importance of voter education for well-functioning democracies, what this does and should look like cannot be boiled down to a basic set of approaches that are applicable in all democratic systems, even if the principles and definitions of voter education remain consistent.

One of the biggest takeaways from established research and practices is that ensuring a robust relationship between voter education, participation in the democratic process through elections, and perceptions of electoral integrity is contingent on the political, institutional, and electoral context of voter education campaigns themselves. New democracies may face the challenges of generating an entirely new culture of democratic participation alongside educating citizens about the mechanics of voting itself, ensuring citizens that their vote will remain secret, and that political violence will be limited (Møller and Hanf 1995; Ballington 2002). Even years after the establishment of democracy, there is no guarantee that citizens in developing democracies will understand voting rules and regulations (Ngwoke and Agusi 2018). Furthermore, in developed democracies, evolving misinformation threats from bad-faith actors can threaten established understandings of the nuances of how to vote, as well as public perceptions of the integrity of even exceptionally well-administered elections (Persily and Stewart III 2021; Kerr, King, and Wahman 2024).

Given the variation and complexity of electoral systems around the world, future research should continue to explore the effectiveness of voter education interventions that are rooted in the needs of a specific country by leveraging experimental methods that better allow the causal identification of practices that are effective for a given context (Aker, Collier, and Vincente 2017; Mann and Bryant 2020). At the same time, it is important to pair this evidence with observational data on the extent to which these kinds of practices are actually in use by EMBs and other actors in the country's election information ecosystem (Merivaki and Suttmann-Lea 2023; Brown et al. 2024).

One important caveat is collecting meaningful, reliable cross-sectional and over-time data on the scope of voter education activities by EMBs and other actors in a given country. Given its widespread and cost-effective availability for researchers and EMBs alike, future research should consider ways to assess whether social media activity and website content might be a reasonable proxy measurement for at least some levels of voter education efforts, such as in countries where all subnational EMBs have an active social media presence. Of course, since social media is not ubiquitous in voter education efforts, it is more likely that a combination of approaches is needed, such as the use of EMB surveys, the evaluation of press releases and news appearances,

or paid advertisements to measure, describe, and assess the approaches to voter education used in different countries around the world.

Finally, future research should consider not just the effectiveness of different messengers, modes, and message content and the variation in these efforts across place and over time, but more precisely how the scope of actors involved in voter education comes together to constitute the broader electoral information ecosystem in a given country. For example, while elections are formally run by EMBs at the subnational level in the United States, there is actually a dense network of federal agencies that are involved in the process of supporting election administrators (Gordon 2023). Broadly, however, there is limited descriptive work or empirical assessments of how the interaction of different actors within the broader electoral information ecosystem shapes the effects of voter education on voter access to elections and perceptions of electoral integrity.

Voter education is more than just another technical aspect of election administration that removes information barriers for prospective voters. It involves educating voters not about how to vote, but how elections are secured and the broader value of the vote itself. It is an activity deeply related to the broader health of electoral information ecosystems and perceptions of electoral integrity, requiring buy-in from a diversity of actors, not just EMBs tasked with overseeing and administering elections.

Finally, although voter education is seen by different governing bodies and democracy stakeholders as a universally important component of electoral integrity in democratic systems, much of the research directly assessing the theoretical relationship between voter education and electoral integrity is centered within the United States. This work suggests that it can improve the electoral integrity of democratic systems by encouraging successful participation in elections (Aker, Collier, and Vincente 2017; Suttmann-Lea and Merivaki 2022; Merivaki and Suttmann-Lea 2023) and increase confidence in the administration of elections by cultivating positive voter experiences and through transparent messages from trusted sources of information (Suttmann-Lea and Merivaki 2023; Brown et al. 2024; Jaffe et al. 2024; Lockhart et al. 2024). At the same time, much more research is needed to understand whether and how these mechanisms can be successfully applied to different electoral systems and democracies around the world.

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