

# CODE OF GOOD PRACTICE IN ELECTORAL MATTERS



COUNCIL OF EUROPE



CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

# CODE OF GOOD PRACTICE IN ELECTORAL MATTERS

Guidelines,  
explanatory report and  
interpretative declarations

Venice Commission  
Council of Europe  
Strasbourg

French edition:  
*Code de bonne conduite  
en matière électorale*

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venice@coe.int  
Council of Europe  
F-67075 Strasbourg Cedex  
<http://www.coe.int/>

Cover and layout: Documents and  
Publications Production Department  
(SPDP), Council of Europe

This publication has not been  
copy-edited by the SPDP Editorial  
Unit to correct typographical  
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Printed at the Council of Europe

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# Introduction

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On 8 November 2001 the Standing Committee of the Parliamentary Assembly, acting on behalf of the Assembly, adopted Resolution 1264 (2001) inviting the Venice Commission<sup>1</sup>:

- i. to set up a working group, comprising representatives of the Parliamentary Assembly, the CLRAE and possibly other organisations with experience in the matter, with the aim of discussing electoral issues on a regular basis;
- ii. to devise a code of practice in electoral matters which might draw, *inter alia*, on the guidelines set out in the appendix to the explanatory memorandum of the report on which this resolution is based (Doc. 9267), on the understanding that this code should include rules both on the run-up to the election, the elections themselves and on the period immediately following the vote;
- iii. as far as its resources allow, to compile a list of the underlying principles of European electoral systems by coordinating, standardising and developing current and planned surveys and activities. In the medium term, the data collected on European elections should be entered into a database, and analysed and disseminated by a specialised unit.

The following guidelines are a concrete response to the three aspects of this resolution. They were adopted by the Council for Democratic Elections – the joint working group provided for by the Parliamentary Assembly resolution – at its second meeting (3 July 2002) and subsequently by the Venice Commission at its 51st Session (5-6 July 2002); they are based on the underlying principles of Europe's electoral heritage; lastly and above all, they constitute the core of a code of good practice in electoral matters.

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1. Item 6; see Document 9267, Report by the Political Affairs Committee; Rapporteur: Mr Clerfayt.

The explanatory report explains the principles set forth in the guidelines, defining and clarifying them and, where necessary, including recommendations on points of detail. The report was adopted by the Council for Democratic Elections at its 3rd meeting (16 October 2002), and subsequently by the Venice Commission at its 52nd Session (18-19 October 2002).

The code of good practice in electoral matters was approved by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe at the first part of its 2003 session and by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe at its Spring session 2003.

As requested in the Parliamentary Assembly's resolution, this document is based on the guidelines appended to the explanatory memorandum to the report on which the Assembly resolution was based (Doc. 9267). It is also based on the work of the Venice Commission in the electoral field, as summarised in Document CDL (2002) 7.

# Guidelines

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*Adopted by the Venice Commission at its 51st  
Plenary Session ( Venice, 5-6 July 2002)*

## **I. Principles of Europe's electoral heritage**

The five principles underlying Europe's electoral heritage are universal, equal, free, secret and direct suffrage. Furthermore, elections must be held at regular intervals.

### **1. Universal suffrage<sup>2</sup>**

#### **1.1. Rule and exceptions**

Universal suffrage means in principle that all human beings have the right to vote and to stand for election. This right may, however, and indeed should, be subject to certain conditions:

##### **a. age**

- i. the right to vote and to be elected must be subject to a minimum age;
- ii. the right to vote must be acquired, at the latest, at the age of majority;
- iii. the right to stand for election should preferably be acquired at the same age as the right to vote and in any case not later than the age of 25, except where there are specific qualifying ages for certain offices (e.g. member of the upper house of parliament, head of state).

##### **b. nationality**

- i. a nationality requirement may apply;
- ii. however, it would be advisable for foreigners to be allowed to vote in local elections after a certain period of residence.

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2. See the Revised Interpretative Declaration on the participation of people with disabilities in elections, which addresses also equal, free and secret suffrage, p. 47.



**c. *residence***

- i. a residence requirement may be imposed;
- ii. residence in this case means habitual residence;
- iii. a length of residence requirement may be imposed on nationals solely for local or regional elections;
- iv. the requisite period of residence should not exceed six months; a longer period may be required only to protect national minorities;
- v. the right to vote and to be elected may be accorded to citizens residing abroad.

**d. *deprivation of the right to vote and to be elected***

- i. provision may be made for depriving individuals of their right to vote and to be elected, but only subject to the following cumulative conditions:
  - it must be provided for by law;
  - the proportionality principle must be observed; conditions for depriving individuals of the right to stand for election may be less strict than for disenfranchising them;
  - the deprivation must be based on mental incapacity or a criminal conviction for a serious offence;
- ii. furthermore, the withdrawal of political rights or finding of mental incapacity may only be imposed by express decision of a court of law.

**1.2. Electoral registers**

Fulfilment of the following criteria is essential if electoral registers are to be reliable:

- i. electoral registers must be permanent;
- ii. there must be regular updates, at least once a year. Where voters are not registered automatically, registration must be possible over a relatively long period;
- iii. electoral registers must be published;
- iv. there should be an administrative procedure – subject to judicial control – or a judicial procedure, allowing for the registration of a voter who was not

registered; the registration should not take place at the polling station on election day;

v. a similar procedure should allow voters to have incorrect inscriptions amended;

vi. a supplementary register may be a means of giving the vote to persons who have moved or reached statutory voting age since final publication of the register.

### **1.3. Submission of candidatures**

i. The presentation of individual candidates or lists of candidates may be made conditional on the collection of a minimum number of signatures;

ii. The law should not require collection of the signatures of more than 1% of voters in the constituency concerned;

iii. Checking of signatures must be governed by clear rules, particularly concerning deadlines;

iv. The checking process must in principle cover all signatures; however, once it has been established beyond doubt that the requisite number of signatures has been collected, the remaining signatures need not be checked;

v. Validation of signatures must be completed by the start of the election campaign;

vi. If a deposit is required, it must be refundable should the candidate or party exceed a certain score; the sum and the score requested should not be excessive.

## **2. Equal suffrage**

This entails:

**2.1. *Equal voting rights:*** each voter has in principle one vote; where the electoral system provides voters with more than one vote, each voter has the same number of votes.

**2.2. *Equal voting power:*** seats must be evenly distributed between the constituencies.

i. This must at least apply to elections to lower houses of parliament and regional and local elections.

- ii. It entails a clear and balanced distribution of seats among constituencies on the basis of one of the following allocation criteria: population, number of resident nationals (including minors), number of registered voters, and possibly the number of people actually voting. An appropriate combination of these criteria may be envisaged.
- iii. The geographical criterion and administrative, or possibly even historical, boundaries may be taken into consideration.
- iv. The permissible departure from the norm should not be more than 10%, and should certainly not exceed 15% except in special circumstances (protection of a concentrated minority, sparsely populated administrative entity).
- v. In order to guarantee equal voting power, the distribution of seats must be reviewed at least every ten years, preferably outside election periods.
- vi. With multi-member constituencies, seats should preferably be redistributed without redefining constituency boundaries, which should, where possible, coincide with administrative boundaries.
- vii. When constituency boundaries are redefined – which they must be in a single-member system – it must be done:
  - impartially;
  - without detriment to national minorities;
  - taking account of the opinion of a committee, the majority of whose members are independent; this committee should preferably include a geographer, a sociologist and a balanced representation of the parties and, if necessary, representatives of national minorities.

### **2.3. Equality of opportunity**

- a. Equality of opportunity must be guaranteed for parties and candidates alike. This entails a neutral attitude by state authorities, in particular with regard to:
  - i. the election campaign;
  - ii. coverage by the media, in particular by the publicly owned media;
  - iii. public funding of parties and campaigns.
- b. Depending on the subject matter, equality may be strict or proportional. If it is strict, political parties are treated on an equal footing irrespective of their current parliamentary strength or support among the electorate. If it is

proportional, political parties must be treated according to the results achieved in the elections. Equality of opportunity applies in particular to radio and television airtime, public funds and other forms of backing.

c. In conformity with freedom of expression, legal provision should be made to ensure that there is a minimum access to privately owned audiovisual media, with regard to the election campaign and to advertising, for all participants in elections.

d. Political party, candidates and election campaign funding must be transparent.

e. The principle of equality of opportunity can, in certain cases, lead to a limitation of political party spending, especially on advertising.

#### **2.4. Equality and national minorities**

a. Parties representing national minorities must be permitted.

b. Special rules guaranteeing national minorities reserved seats or providing for exceptions to the normal seat allocation criteria for parties representing national minorities (for instance, exemption from a quorum requirement) do not in principle run counter to equal suffrage.

c. Neither candidates nor voters must find themselves obliged to reveal their membership of a national minority.

#### **2.5. Equality and parity of the sexes<sup>3</sup>**

Legal rules requiring a minimum percentage of persons of each gender among candidates should not be considered as contrary to the principle of equal suffrage if they have a constitutional basis.

### **3. Free suffrage**

#### **3.1. Freedom of voters to form an opinion**

a. State authorities must observe their duty of neutrality. In particular, this concerns:

- i. media;
- ii. billposting;

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3. See the Interpretative Declaration on women's participation in elections, p. 46.

- iii. the right to demonstrate;
  - iv. funding of parties and candidates.
- b. The public authorities have a number of positive obligations; *inter alia*, they must:
- i. submit the candidatures received to the electorate;
  - ii. enable voters to know the lists and candidates standing for election, for example through appropriate posting.
  - iii. The above information must also be available in the languages of the national minorities.
- c. Sanctions must be imposed in the case of breaches of duty of neutrality and voters' freedom to form an opinion.

### **3.2. Freedom of voters to express their wishes and action to combat electoral fraud**

- i. voting procedures must be simple;
- ii. voters should always have the possibility of voting in a polling station. Other means of voting are acceptable under the following conditions:
- iii. postal voting should be allowed only where the postal service is safe and reliable; the right to vote using postal votes may be confined to people who are in hospital or imprisoned or to persons with reduced mobility or to electors residing abroad; fraud and intimidation must not be possible;
- iv. electronic voting should be used only if it is safe and reliable; in particular, voters should be able to obtain a confirmation of their votes and to correct them, if necessary, respecting secret suffrage; the system must be transparent;
- v. very strict rules must apply to voting by proxy; the number of proxies a single voter may hold must be limited;
- vi. mobile ballot boxes should only be allowed under strict conditions, avoiding all risks of fraud;
- vii. at least two criteria should be used to assess the accuracy of the outcome of the ballot: the number of votes cast and the number of voting slips placed in the ballot box;
- viii. voting slips must not be tampered with or marked in any way by polling station officials;

- ix. unused voting slips must never leave the polling station;
- x. polling stations must include representatives of a number of parties, and the presence of observers appointed by the candidates must be permitted during voting and counting;
- xi. military personnel should vote at their place of residence whenever possible. Otherwise, it is advisable that they be registered to vote at the polling station nearest to their duty station;
- xii. counting should preferably take place in polling stations;
- xiii. counting must be transparent. Observers, candidates' representatives and the media must be allowed to be present. These persons must also have access to the records;
- xiv. results must be transmitted to the higher level in an open manner;
- xv. the state must punish any kind of electoral fraud.

#### **4. Secret suffrage**

- a. For the voter, secrecy of voting is not only a right but also a duty, non-compliance with which must be punishable by disqualification of any ballot paper whose content is disclosed.
- b. Voting must be individual. Family voting and any other form of control by one voter over the vote of another must be prohibited.
- c. The list of persons actually voting should not be published.<sup>4</sup>
- d. The violation of secret suffrage should be sanctioned.

#### **5. Direct suffrage**

The following must be elected by direct suffrage:

- i. at least one chamber of the national parliament;
- ii. sub-national legislative bodies;
- iii. local councils.

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4. See the Interpretative Declaration on the publication of lists of voters having participated in elections, p. 49.

## **6. Frequency of elections**

Elections must be held at regular intervals; a legislative assembly's term of office must not exceed five years.

## **II. Conditions for implementing these principles**

### **1. Respect for fundamental rights**

a. Democratic elections are not possible without respect for human rights, in particular freedom of expression and of the press, freedom of circulation inside the country, freedom of assembly and freedom of association for political purposes, including the creation of political parties.

b. Restrictions of these freedoms must have a basis in law, be in the public interest and comply with the principle of proportionality.

### **2. Regulatory levels and stability of electoral law<sup>5</sup>**

a. Apart from rules on technical matters and detail – which may be included in regulations of the executive – rules of electoral law must have at least the rank of a statute.

b. The fundamental elements of electoral law, in particular the electoral system proper, membership of electoral commissions and the drawing of constituency boundaries, should not be open to amendment less than one year before an election, or should be written in the constitution or at a level higher than ordinary law.

### **3. Procedural guarantees**

#### **3.1. Organisation of elections by an impartial body**

a. An impartial body must be in charge of applying electoral law.

b. Where there is no longstanding tradition of administrative authorities' independence from those holding political power, independent, impartial electoral commissions must be set up at all levels, from the national level to polling station level.

c. The central electoral commission must be permanent in nature.

d. It should include:

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5. See the Interpretative Declaration on the Stability of Electoral Law, p. 45.

- i. at least one member of the judiciary;
- ii. representatives of parties already in parliament or having scored at least a given percentage of the vote; these persons must be qualified in electoral matters.

It may include:

- iii. a representative of the Ministry of the Interior;
- iv. representatives of national minorities.
- e. Political parties must be equally represented on electoral commissions or must be able to observe the work of the impartial body. Equality may be construed strictly or on a proportional basis (see point I.2.3.b).
- f. The bodies appointing members of electoral commissions must not be free to dismiss them at will.
- g. Members of electoral commissions must receive standard training.
- h. It is desirable that electoral commissions take decisions by a qualified majority or by consensus.

### **3.2. Observation of elections**

- a. Both national and international observers should be given the widest possible opportunity to participate in an election observation exercise.
- b. Observation must not be confined to the election day itself, but must include the registration period of candidates and, if necessary, of electors, as well as the electoral campaign. It must make it possible to determine whether irregularities occurred before, during or after the elections. It must always be possible during vote counting.
- c. The places where observers are not entitled to be present should be clearly specified by law.
- d. Observation should cover respect by the authorities of their duty of neutrality.

### **3.3. An effective system of appeal**

- a. The appeal body in electoral matters should be either an electoral commission or a court. For elections to Parliament, an appeal to Parliament may be provided for in first instance. In any case, final appeal to a court must be possible.



- b. The procedure must be simple and devoid of formalism, in particular concerning the admissibility of appeals.
- c. The appeal procedure and, in particular, the powers and responsibilities of the various bodies should be clearly regulated by law, so as to avoid conflicts of jurisdiction (whether positive or negative). Neither the appellants nor the authorities should be able to choose the appeal body.
- d. The appeal body must have authority in particular over such matters as the right to vote – including electoral registers – and eligibility, the validity of candidatures, proper observance of election campaign rules and the outcome of the elections.
- e. The appeal body must have authority to annul elections where irregularities may have affected the outcome. It must be possible to annul the entire election or merely the results for one constituency or one polling station. In the event of annulment, a new election must be called in the area concerned.
- f. All candidates and all voters registered in the constituency concerned must be entitled to appeal. A reasonable quorum may be imposed for appeals by voters on the results of elections.
- g. Time-limits for lodging and deciding appeals must be short (three to five days for each at first instance).
- h. The applicant's right to a hearing involving both parties must be protected.
- i. Where the appeal body is a higher electoral commission, it must be able *ex officio* to rectify or set aside decisions taken by lower electoral commissions.

#### **4. Electoral system**

Within the respect of the above-mentioned principles, any electoral system may be chosen.

# Explanatory report

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*Adopted by the Venice Commission at its 52nd  
Plenary Session ( Venice, 18-19 October 2002)*

Alongside human rights and the rule of law, democracy is one of the three pillars of the European constitutional heritage, as well as of the Council of Europe. Democracy is inconceivable without elections held in accordance with certain principles that lend them their democratic status.

These principles represent a specific aspect of the European constitutional heritage that can legitimately be termed the “European electoral heritage.” This heritage comprises two aspects, the first, the hard core, being the constitutional principles of electoral law such as universal, equal, free, secret and direct suffrage, and the second the principle that truly democratic elections can only be held if certain basic conditions of a democratic state based on the rule of law, such as fundamental rights, stability of electoral law and effective procedural guarantees, are met. The text which follows – like the foregoing guidelines – is therefore in two parts, the first covering the definition and practical implications of the principles of the European electoral heritage and the second the conditions necessary for their application.

## **I. The underlying principles of Europe’s electoral heritage**

### **Introduction: the principles and their legal basis**

If elections are to comply with the common principles of the European constitutional heritage, which form the basis of any genuinely democratic society, they must observe five fundamental rules: suffrage must be universal, equal, free, secret and direct. Furthermore, elections must be held periodically. All these principles together constitute the European electoral heritage.

Although all these principles are conventional in nature, their implementation raises a number of questions that call for close scrutiny. We would do well to identify the “hard core” of these principles, which must be scrupulously respected by all European states.

The hard core of the European electoral heritage consists mainly of international rules. The relevant universal rule is Article 25 (b) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which expressly provides for all of these principles except direct suffrage, although the latter is implied.<sup>6</sup> The common European rule is Article 3 of the Additional Protocol to the European Convention on Human Rights, which explicitly provides for the right to periodical elections by free and secret suffrage;<sup>7</sup> the other principles have also been recognised in human rights case law.<sup>8</sup> The right to direct elections has also been admitted by the Strasbourg Court, at least implicitly.<sup>9</sup> However, the constitutional principles common to the whole continent do not figure only in the international texts: on the contrary, they are often mentioned in more detail in the national constitutions.<sup>10</sup> Where the legislation and practice of different countries converge, the content of the principles can be more accurately pinpointed.

## 1. Universal suffrage

### 1.1. Rule and exceptions

Universal suffrage covers both active (the right to vote) and passive electoral rights (the right to stand for election). The right to vote and stand for election may be subject to a number of conditions, all of which are given below. The most usual are age and nationality.

a. There must be a minimum age for the right to vote and the right to stand for election; however, attainment of the age of majority, entailing not

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6. See Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

7. Article 3, Right to free elections: “The High Contracting Parties undertake to hold free elections at reasonable intervals by secret ballot, under conditions which will ensure the free expression of the opinion of the people in the choice of the legislature”

8. Where universality is concerned, cf. ECHR No. 9267/81, judgment in *Mathieu-Mohin and Clerfayt v. Belgium*, 2 March 1987, Series A vol. 113, p. 23; judgment in *Gitonas and others v. Greece*, 1 July 1997, No. 18747/91, 19376/92; 19379/92, 28208/95 and 27755/95, Collected Judgments and Decisions, 1997-IV, p. 1233; re. equality, cf. aforementioned judgment of *Mathieu-Mohin and Clerfayt*, p. 23.

9. ECHR No. 24833/94, judgment in *Matthews v. the United Kingdom*, 18 February 1999, Collected Judgments and Decisions 1999-I, paragraph 64.

10. E.g. Article 38.1 of the German Constitution, Articles 68.1 and 69.2 of the Spanish Constitution and Article 59.1 of the Romanian Constitution.

only rights but also obligations of a civil nature, must at least confer the right to vote. A higher age may be laid down for the right to stand for election but, save where there are specific qualifying ages for certain offices (senator, head of state), this should not be more than 25.

b. Most countries' legislations lay down a nationality requirement. However, a tendency is emerging to grant local political rights to long-standing foreign residents, in accordance with the Council of Europe Convention on the Participation of Foreigners in Public Life at Local Level.<sup>11</sup> It is accordingly recommended that the right to vote in local elections be granted after a certain period of residence. Furthermore, under the European integration process European citizens have been granted the right to vote and stand for election in municipal and European Parliament elections in their EU member state of residence.<sup>12</sup> The nationality criterion can, moreover, sometimes cause problems if a state withholds citizenship from persons who have been settled in its territory for several generations, for instance on linguistic grounds. Furthermore, under the European Convention on Nationality<sup>13</sup> persons holding dual nationality must have the same electoral rights as other nationals.<sup>14</sup>

c. Thirdly, the right to vote and/or the right to stand for election may be subject to residence requirements,<sup>15</sup> residence in this case meaning habitual residence. Where local and regional elections are concerned, the residence requirement is not incompatible *a priori* with the principle of universal suffrage, if the residence period specified does not exceed a few months; any longer period is acceptable only to protect national minorities.<sup>16</sup> Conversely, quite a few states grant their nationals living abroad the right to vote, and even to be elected. This practice can lead to abuse in some special cases, e.g. where nationality is granted on an ethnic basis. Registration could take place where a voter has his or her secondary residence, if he or she resides there regularly and it appears, for example, on local tax payments; the voter must not then of course be registered where he or she has his or her principal residence.

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11. ETS 144.

12. Article 19 of the Treaty establishing the European Community.

13. ETS 166, Article 17.

14. The ECHR does not go so far: Eur. Comm. HR No. 28858/95, decision of 25 November 1996, *Ganchev v. Bulgaria*, DR 87, p. 130.

15. See most recently ECHR No. 31891/96, judgment 7.9.99, *Hilbe v. Liechtenstein*.

16. See Eur. Comm. HR No. 23450/94, decision of 15 September 1997, *Polacco and Garofalo v. Italy* (re. Trentino-Alto Adige).

The freedom of movement of citizens within the country, together with their right to return at any time is one of the fundamental rights necessary for truly democratic elections.<sup>17</sup> If persons, in exceptional cases, have been displaced against their will, they should, provisionally, have the possibility of being considered as resident at their former place of residence.

d. Lastly, provision may be made for clauses suspending political rights. Such clauses must, however, comply with the usual conditions under which fundamental rights may be restricted; in other words, they must:<sup>18</sup>

- be provided for by law;
- observe the principle of proportionality;
- be based on mental incapacity or a criminal conviction for a serious offence.

Furthermore, the withdrawal of political rights may only be imposed by express decision of a court of law. However, in the event of withdrawal on grounds of mental incapacity, such express decision may concern the incapacity and entail *ipso jure* deprivation of civic rights.

The conditions for depriving individuals of the right to stand for election may be less strict than for disenfranchising them, as the holding of a public office is at stake and it may be legitimate to debar persons whose activities in such an office would violate a greater public interest.

## 1.2. Electoral registers

The proper maintenance of electoral registers is vital in guaranteeing universal suffrage. However, it is acceptable for voters not to be included automatically on the registers, but only at their request. In practice, electoral registers are often discovered to be inaccurate, which leads to disputes. Lack of experience on the part of the authorities, population shifts and the fact that few citizens bother to check the electoral registers when they are presented for inspection make it difficult to compile these registers. A number of conditions must be met if the registers are to be reliable:

- i. There must be permanent electoral registers.
- ii. There must be regular updates, at least once a year, so that municipal (local) authorities get into the habit of performing the various tasks

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17. See Chapter II.1 below page 33.

18. See e.g. ECHR No. 26772/95, judgment in *Labita v. Italy*, 6 April 2002, paragraphs 201 ff.

involved in updating at the same time every year. Where registration of voters is not automatic, a fairly long time-period must be allowed for such registration.

- iii. The electoral registers must be published. The final update should be sent to a higher authority under the supervision of the impartial body responsible for the application of the electoral law.
- iv. There should be an administrative procedure – subject to judicial control – or a judicial procedure enabling electors not on the register to have their names included. In some countries, the closing date for entry in the supplementary register may be, for example, 15 days before the election or election day itself. The latter case, whilst admirably broad-minded, relies on decisions made by a court obliged to sit on polling day, and is thus ill-suited to the organisational needs on which democracies are based. In any event polling stations should not be permitted to register voters on election day itself.
- v. Furthermore, inaccuracies in electoral registers stem both from unjustified entries and from the failure to enter certain electors. A procedure of the kind mentioned in the previous paragraph should make it possible for electors to have erroneous entries corrected. The capacity for requesting such corrections may be restricted to electors registered in the same constituency or at the same polling station.
- vi. A supplementary register can enable persons who have changed address or reached the statutory voting age since the final register was published to vote.

### **1.3. Submission of candidatures**

The obligation to collect a specific number of signatures in order to be able to stand is theoretically compatible with the principle of universal suffrage. In practice, only the most marginal parties seem to have any difficulty gathering the requisite number of signatures, provided that the rules on signatures are not used to bar candidates from standing for office. In order to prevent such manipulation, it is preferable for the law to set a maximum 1% signature requirement. The signature verification procedure must follow clear rules, particularly with regard to deadlines, and be applied to all the signatures rather than just a sample; however, once the verification shows beyond doubt that the requisite number of signatures has been obtained, the remaining signatures need not be checked. In all cases candidatures must be validated by the start

of the election campaign, because late validation places some parties and candidates at a disadvantage in the campaign.

There is another procedure where candidates or parties must pay a deposit, which is only refunded if the candidate or party concerned goes on to win more than a certain percentage of the vote. Such practices appear to be more effective than collecting signatures. However, the amount of the deposit and the number of votes needed for it to be reimbursed should not be excessive.

## **2. Equal suffrage**

Equality in electoral matters comprises a variety of aspects. Some concern equality of suffrage, a value shared by the whole continent, while others go beyond this concept and cannot be deemed to reflect any common standard. The principles to be respected in all cases are numerical vote equality, equality in terms of electoral strength and equality of chances. On the other hand, equality of outcome achieved, for instance, by means of proportional representation of the parties or the sexes, cannot be imposed.

### **2.1. Equal voting rights**

Equality in voting rights requires each voter to be normally entitled to one vote, and to one vote only. Multiple voting, which is still a common irregularity in the new democracies, is obviously prohibited – both if it means a voter votes more than once in the same place and if it enables a voter to vote simultaneously in several different places, such as his or her place of current residence and place of former residence.

In some electoral systems, the elector nonetheless has more than one vote. In, for example, a system that allows split voting (voting for candidates chosen from more than one list), the elector may have one vote per seat to be filled; another possibility is when one vote is cast in a small constituency and another in a larger constituency, as is often the case in systems combining single-member constituencies and proportional representation at the national or regional level.<sup>19</sup> In this case, equal voting rights mean that all electors should have the same number of votes.

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19. See, for example, Article 64 of the Albanian Constitution and Section 1 of the German Federal Elections Act.

## 2.2. Equal voting power

Equality in voting power, where the elections are not being held in one single constituency, requires constituency boundaries to be drawn in such a way that seats in the lower chambers representing the people are distributed equally among the constituencies, in accordance with a specific apportionment criterion, e.g. the number of residents in the constituency, the number of resident nationals (including minors), the number of registered electors, or possibly the number of people actually voting. An appropriate combination of these criteria is conceivable. The same rules apply to regional and local elections. When this principle is not complied with, we are confronted with what is known as *electoral geometry*, in the form either of “active electoral geometry”, namely a distribution of seats causing inequalities in representation as soon as it is applied, or of “passive electoral geometry”, arising from protracted retention of an unaltered territorial distribution of seats and constituencies. Furthermore, under systems tending towards a non-proportional result, particularly majority (or plurality) vote systems, gerrymandering may occur, which consists in favouring one party by means of an artificial delimitation of constituencies.

Constituency boundaries may also be determined on the basis of geographical criteria and the administrative or indeed historic boundary lines, which often depend on geography.

The maximum admissible departure from the distribution criterion adopted depends on the individual situation, although it should seldom exceed 10% and never 15%, except in really exceptional circumstances (a demographically weak administrative unit of the same importance as others with at least one lower-chamber representative, or concentration of a specific national minority).<sup>20</sup>

In order to avoid passive electoral geometry, seats should be redistributed at least every ten years, preferably outside election periods, as this will limit the risks of political manipulation.<sup>21</sup>

In multi-member constituencies electoral geometry can easily be avoided by regularly allocating seats to the constituencies in accordance with the distribution criterion adopted. Constituencies ought then to correspond to administrative units, and redistribution is undesirable. Where a uninominal method of voting is used, constituency boundaries need to be redrawn at each redistribution of seats. The political ramifications of (re)drawing

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20. See CDL (98) 45, p. 3; CDL (99) 51, p. 8; CDL (2000) 2, p. 5; CDL-AD (2002) 9, paragraph 22.

21. CDL-AD (2002) 9, paragraph 23.



electoral boundaries are very considerable, and it is therefore essential that the process should be non-partisan and should not disadvantage national minorities. The long-standing democracies have widely differing approaches to this problem, and operate along very different lines. The new democracies should adopt simple criteria and easy-to-implement procedures. The best solution would be to submit the problem in the first instance to a commission comprising a majority of independent members and, preferably, a geographer, a sociologist, a balanced representation of the parties and, where appropriate, representatives of national minorities. The parliament would then make a decision on the basis of the commission's proposals, with the possibility of a single appeal.

### **2.3. Equality of opportunity**

Equality of opportunity should be ensured between parties and candidates and should prompt the state to be impartial towards them and to apply the same law uniformly to all. In particular, the neutrality requirement applies to the electoral campaign and coverage by the media, especially the publicly owned media, as well as to public funding of parties and campaigns. This means that there are two possible interpretations of equality: either "strict" equality or "proportional" equality. "Strict" equality means that the political parties are treated without regard to their present strength in parliament or among the electorate. It must apply to the use of public facilities for electioneering purposes (for example bill posting, postal services and similar, public demonstrations, public meeting rooms). "Proportional" equality implies that the treatment of political parties is in proportion to the number of votes. Equality of opportunity (strict and/or proportional) applies in particular to radio and television airtime, public funds and other forms of backing. Certain forms of backing may on the one hand be submitted to strict equality and on the other hand to proportional equality.

The basic idea is that the main political forces should be able to voice their opinions in the main organs of the country's media and that all the political forces should be allowed to hold meetings, including on public thoroughfares, distribute literature and exercise their right to post bills. All of these rights must be clearly regulated, with due respect for freedom of expression, and any failure to observe them, either by the authorities or by the campaign participants, should be subject to appropriate sanctions. Quick rights of appeal must be available in order to remedy the situation before the elections. But the fact is that media failure to provide impartial information about the election

campaign and candidates is one of the most frequent shortcomings arising during elections. The most important thing is to draw up a list of the media organisations in each country and to make sure that the candidates or parties are accorded sufficiently balanced amounts of airtime or advertising space, including on state radio and television stations.

In conformity with freedom of expression, legal provision should be made to ensure that there is a minimum access to privately owned audiovisual media, with regard to the election campaign and to advertising, for all participants in elections.

The question of funding, and in particular of the need for it to be transparent, will be considered later.<sup>22</sup> Spending by political parties, particularly on advertising, may likewise be limited in order to guarantee equality of opportunity.

## **2.4. Equality and national minorities**

In accordance with the principles of international law, the electoral law must guarantee equality for persons belonging to national minorities, which includes prohibiting any discrimination against them.<sup>23</sup> In particular, the national minorities must be allowed to set up political parties.<sup>24</sup> Constituency delimitations and quorum regulations must not be such as to form an obstacle to the presence of persons belonging to minorities in the elected body.

Certain measures taken to ensure minimum representation for minorities either by reserving seats for them<sup>25</sup> or by providing for exceptions to the normal rules on seat distribution, e.g. by waiving the quorum for the national minorities' parties<sup>26</sup> do not infringe the principle of equality. It may also be foreseen that people belonging to national minorities have the right to vote for both general and national minority lists. However, neither candidates nor electors must be required to indicate their affiliation with any national minority.<sup>27, 28</sup>

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22. See below, Chapter II.3.5, page 42.

23. Article 4.1 of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (ETS 157).

24. Re. bans on political parties and similar measures, see CDL-INF (2000) 1.

25. As is the case in Slovenia and Croatia.

26. As is the case in Germany and Poland. Romanian law even provides for representation of minorities' organisations if they have secured a number of votes equivalent to 5% (only) of the average number of validly cast votes required for the election of a deputy to the lower house country-wide.

27. Article 3 of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (ETS 157).

28. Re. electoral law and national minorities, see CDL-INF (2000) 4.

## 2.5. Equality and parity of the sexes

If there is a specific constitutional basis,<sup>29</sup> rules could be adopted guaranteeing some degree of balance between the two sexes in elected bodies, or even parity. In the absence of such a constitutional basis, such provisions could be considered contrary to the principle of equality and freedom of association.

Moreover, the scope of these rules depends on the electoral system. In a fixed party list system, parity is imposed if the number of men and women who are eligible is the same. However, if preferential voting or cross-voting is possible, voters will not necessarily choose candidates from both sexes, and this may result in an unbalanced composition of the elected body, chosen by voters.

## 3. Free suffrage

Free suffrage comprises two different aspects: free formation of the elector's opinion, and free expression of this opinion, i.e. freedom of voting procedure and accurate assessment of the result.

### 3.1. Freedom of voters to form an opinion

a. Freedom of voters to form an opinion partly overlaps with equality of opportunity. It requires the *state* – and public authorities generally – to honour their duty of even-handedness, particularly where the use of the mass media, billposting, the right to demonstrate on public thoroughfares and the funding of parties and candidates are concerned.

b. Public authorities also have certain positive obligations. They must submit lawfully presented candidatures to the citizens' votes. The presentation of specific candidatures may be prohibited only in exceptional circumstances, where necessitated by a greater public interest. Public authorities must also give the electorate access to lists and candidates standing for election by means, for instance, of appropriate billposting. The information in question must also be available in the languages of national minorities, at least where they make up a certain percentage of the population.

Voters' freedom to form an opinion may also be infringed by *individuals*, for example when they attempt to buy votes, a practice which the state is obliged to prevent or punish effectively.

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29. See Article 3.2 of the French Constitution; cf. judgment of 18 November 1982, *Recueil des décisions du Conseil constitutionnel*, 1982, pp. 66 ff.

c. In order to ensure that the rules relating to voters' freedom to form an opinion are effective, any violation of the foregoing rules must be punished.

### **3.2. Freedom of voters to express their wishes and combating electoral fraud**

#### **3.2.1. *In general***

Freedom of voters to express their wishes primarily requires strict observance of the voting procedure. In practice, electors should be able to cast their votes for registered lists or candidates, which means that they must be supplied with ballot papers bearing their names and that they must be able to deposit the ballot papers in a ballot box. The state must make available the necessary premises for electoral operations. Electors must be protected from threats or constraints liable to prevent them from casting their votes or from casting them as they wish, whether such threats come from the authorities or from individuals; the state is obliged to prevent and penalise such practices.

Furthermore, the voter has the right to an accurate assessment of the result of the ballot; the state should punish any election fraud.

#### **3.2.2. *Voting procedures***

Voting procedures play a vital role in the overall electoral process because it is during voting that election fraud is most likely to occur.

In some countries the implementation of democratic practices requires a radical change of attitudes, which must be actively promoted by the authorities. In this respect some measures have to be taken to control the habits and reflexes which have a negative impact on the elections. Most of these irregularities, such as "family voting"<sup>30</sup> occur during the voting procedure.

All these observations lead us to the following conclusion: the voting procedure must be kept simple. Compliance is therefore recommended with the criteria set out in the ensuing paragraphs.

If the polling station officials represent a proper balance of political opinion, fraud will be difficult, and the fairness of the ballot should be judged by two main criteria alone: the number of electors who have cast votes compared with the number of ballot papers in the ballot box. The first measure can be determined by the number of signatures in the electoral register. Human nature

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<sup>30</sup>. See section I.4 below, page 31.

being what it is (and quite apart from any intention to defraud), it is difficult to achieve total congruity between the two measures, and any further controls such as numbering the stubs of ballot papers or comparing the total number of ballot papers found in the ballot box plus those cancelled and unused with the number of ballot papers issued to the polling station may give some indication, but one should be under no illusion that the results of these various measures will coincide perfectly. The risk in multiplying the measures used is rather that the differences in the totals, and in the end the real irregularities, will not be taken seriously. It is better to have strict control over two measures than slack – and hence ineffective – control over a larger number of variables.

Any unused ballot papers should remain at the polling station and should not be deposited or stored in different premises. As soon as the station opens, the ballot papers awaiting use must be in full view on the table of the senior station official for instance. There should be no others stored in cupboards or other places.

The signing and stamping of ballot papers should not take place at the point when the paper is presented to the voter, because the signatory or the person affixing the stamp might mark the paper so that the voter could be identified when it came to counting the votes, which would violate the secrecy of the ballot.

The voter should collect his or her ballot paper and no one else should touch it from that point on.

It is important that the polling station officials include multi-party representatives and that observers assigned by the candidates be present.

Voters should always have the possibility of voting in a polling station; other means of voting are, however, acceptable on certain conditions, as indicated below.

#### 3.2.2.1. Postal voting or proxy voting in certain circumstances

Postal voting and proxy voting are permitted in countries throughout the western world, but the pattern varies considerably. Postal voting, for instance, may be widespread in one country and prohibited in another owing to the danger of fraud. It should be allowed only if the postal service is secure – in other words, safe from intentional interference – and reliable, in the sense that it functions properly. Proxy voting is permissible only if subject to very strict rules, again in order to prevent fraud; the number of proxies held by any one elector must be limited.

Neither of these practices should be widely encouraged if problems with the postal service are added to other difficulties inherent in this kind of voting, including the heightened risk of “family voting”. Subject to certain precautions, however, postal voting can be used to enable hospital patients, persons in custody, persons with restricted mobility and electors resident abroad to vote, in so far as there is no risk of fraud or intimidation. This would dispense with the need for a mobile ballot box, which often causes problems and risks of fraud. Postal voting would take place under a special procedure a few days before the election.

The use of mobile ballot boxes is undesirable because of the attendant serious risk of fraud. Should they nonetheless be used, strict conditions should be imposed to prevent fraud, including the attendance of several members of the polling station election commission representing different political groupings.

#### 3.2.2.2. Military voting

Where servicemen cannot return home on polling day, they should preferably be registered at polling stations near their barracks. Details of the servicemen concerned are sent by the local command to the municipal authorities who then enter the names in the electoral list. The one exception to this rule is when the barracks are too far from the nearest polling station. Within the military units, special commissions should be set up to supervise the pre-election period, in order to prevent the risk of superior officers’ imposing or ordering certain political choices.

#### 3.2.2.3. Mechanical and electronic voting methods

Several countries are already using, or are preparing to introduce mechanical and electronic voting methods. The advantage of these methods becomes apparent when a number of elections are taking place at the same time, even though certain precautions are needed to minimise the risk of fraud, for example by enabling the voter to check his or her vote immediately after casting it. Clearly, with this kind of voting, it is important to ensure that ballot papers are designed in such a way as to avoid confusion. In order to facilitate verification and a recount of votes in the event of an appeal, it may also be provided that a machine could print votes onto ballot papers; these would be placed in a sealed container where they cannot be viewed. Whatever means used should ensure the confidentiality of voting.

Electronic voting methods must be secure and reliable. They are secure if the system can withstand deliberate attack; they are reliable if they can function on their own, irrespective of any shortcomings in the hardware or software. Furthermore, the elector must be able to obtain confirmation of his or her vote and, if necessary, correct it without the secrecy of the ballot being in any way violated.

Furthermore, the system's transparency must be guaranteed in the sense that it must be possible to check that it is functioning properly.

#### 3.2.2.4. Counting

The votes should preferably be counted at the polling stations themselves, rather than in special centres. The polling station staff are perfectly capable of performing this task, and this arrangement obviates the need to transport the ballot boxes and accompanying documents, thus reducing the risk of substitution.

The vote counting should be conducted in a transparent manner. It is admissible that voters registered in the polling station may attend; the presence of national or international observers should be authorised. These persons must be allowed to be present in all circumstances. There must be enough copies of the record of the proceedings to distribute to ensure that all the aforementioned persons receive one; one copy must be immediately posted on the notice-board, another kept at the polling station and a third sent to the commission or competent higher authority.

The relevant regulations should stipulate certain practical precautions as regards equipment. For example, the record of the proceedings should be completed in ballpoint pen rather than pencil, as text written in pencil can be erased.

In practice, it appears that the time needed to count the votes depends on the efficiency of the presiding officer of the polling station. These times can vary markedly, which is why a simple tried and tested procedure should be set out in the legislation or permanent regulations which appear in the training manual for polling station officials.

It is best to avoid treating too many ballot papers as invalid or spoiled. In case of doubt, an attempt should be made to ascertain the voter's intention.

#### 3.2.2.5. Transferring the results

There are two kinds of results: provisional results and final results (before all opportunities for appeal have been exhausted). The media, and indeed the

entire nation, are always impatient to hear the initial provisional results. The speed with which these results are relayed will depend on the country's communications system. The polling station's results can be conveyed to the electoral district (for instance) by the presiding officer of the polling station, accompanied by two other members of the polling station staff representing opposing parties, in some cases under the supervision of the security forces, who will carry the records of the proceedings, the ballot box, etc.

However much care has been taken at the voting and vote-counting stages, transmitting the results is a vital operation whose importance is often overlooked; it must therefore be effected in an open manner. Transmission from the electoral district to the regional authorities and the Central Electoral Commission – or other competent higher authorities – can be done by fax. In that case, the records will be scanned and the results can be displayed as and when they come in. Television can be used to broadcast these results but once again, too much transparency can be a dangerous thing if the public is not ready for this kind of piecemeal reporting. The fact is that the initial results usually come in from the towns and cities, which do not normally or necessarily vote in the same way as rural areas. It is important therefore to make it clear to the public that the final result may be quite different from, or even completely opposite to, the provisional one, without there having been any question of foul play.

#### **4. Secret suffrage**

Secrecy of the ballot is one aspect of voter freedom, its purpose being to shield voters from pressures they might face if others learned how they had voted. Secrecy must apply to the entire procedure – and particularly the casting and counting of votes. Voters are entitled to it, but must also respect it themselves, and non-compliance must be punished by disqualifying any ballot paper whose content has been disclosed.<sup>31</sup>

Voting must be individual. Family voting, whereby one member of a given family can supervise the votes cast by the other members, infringes the secrecy of the ballot; it is a common violation of the electoral law. All other forms of control by one voter over the vote of another must also be prohibited. Proxy voting, which is subject to strict conditions, is a separate issue.<sup>32</sup>

Moreover, since abstention may indicate a political choice, lists of persons voting should not be published.

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31. CDL (2000) 2, p. 9.

32. See above, Chapter I.3.2.2.1, page 28.



Violation of the secrecy of the ballot must be punished, just like violations of other aspects of voter freedom.

## 5. Direct suffrage

Direct election of one of the chambers of the national parliament by the people is one aspect of Europe's shared constitutional heritage. Subject to such special rules as are applicable to the second chamber, where there is one, other legislative bodies, like the Parliaments of Federate States,<sup>33</sup> should be directly elected, in accordance with Article 3 of the Additional Protocol to the European Convention on Human Rights. Nor can local self-government, which is a vital component of democracy, be conceived of without local elected bodies.<sup>34</sup> Here, local assemblies include all infra-national deliberative bodies.<sup>35</sup> On the other hand, even though the President of the Republic is often directly elected, this is a matter for the Constitution of the individual state.

## 6. Frequency of elections

Both the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights<sup>36</sup> and the Additional Protocol to the European Convention on Human Rights<sup>37</sup> provide that elections must be held periodically. General elections are usually held at four or five-yearly intervals, while longer periods are possible for presidential elections, although the maximum should be seven years.

# II. Conditions for implementing the principles

The underlying principles of European electoral systems can only be guaranteed if certain general conditions are fulfilled.

- The first, general, condition is respect for fundamental human rights, and particularly freedom of expression, assembly and association, without which there can be no true democracy;
- Second, electoral law must enjoy a certain stability, protecting it against party political manipulation;

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33. See ECHR No. 9267/81, *Mathieu-Mohin and Clerfayt v. Belgium*, judgment of 2 March 1987, Series A No. 113, p. 23; Eur. Comm. HR No. 27311/95, 11.9.97, *Timke v. Germany*, DR 82, p. 15; No. 7008/75, 12.7.76, *X v. Austria*, DR 6, p. 120.

34. Article 3 of the European Charter of Local self-government (ETS 122).

35. Article 13 of the European Charter of Local self-government.

36. Article 25 b.

37. Article 3.

- Last and above all, a number of procedural guarantees must be provided, especially as regards the organisation of polling.

Furthermore, elections are held not in a vacuum but within the context of a specific electoral system and a given party system. This second section will conclude with a number of comments on this aspect, particularly on the relationship between electoral and party systems.

## 1. Respect for fundamental rights

The holding of democratic elections and hence the very existence of democracy are impossible without respect for *human rights*, particularly the freedom of expression and of the press and the freedom of assembly and association for political purposes, including the creation of political parties. Respect for these freedoms is vital particularly during election campaigns. *Restrictions* on these fundamental rights must comply with the European Convention on Human Rights and, more generally, with the requirement that they have a basis in law, are in the general interest and respect the principle of proportionality.

The fact is that many countries have legal limitations on *free speech*, which, if restrictively interpreted, may just be acceptable – but may generate abuses in countries with no liberal, democratic tradition. In theory, they are intended to prevent “abuses” of free speech by ensuring, for example, that candidates and public authorities are not vilified, and even protecting the constitutional system. In practice, however, they may lead to the censoring of any statements which are critical of government or call for constitutional change, although this is the very essence of democratic debate. For example, European standards are violated by an electoral law which prohibits insulting or defamatory references to officials or other candidates in campaign documents, makes it an offence to circulate libellous information on candidates, and makes candidates themselves liable for certain offences committed by their supporters. The insistence that materials intended for use in election campaigns must be submitted to electoral commissions, indicating the organisation which ordered and produced them, the number of copies and the date of publication, constitutes an unacceptable form of censorship, particularly if electoral commissions are required to take action against illegal or inaccurate publications. This is even more true if the rules prohibiting improper use of the media during electoral campaigns are rather vague.

Another very important fundamental right in a democracy is freedom of movement within the country, together with the right for nationals to return to their country at any time.

## 2. Regulatory levels and stability of electoral law

Stability of the law is crucial to credibility of the electoral process, which is itself vital to consolidating democracy.<sup>38</sup> Rules which change frequently – and especially rules which are complicated – may confuse voters. Above all, voters may conclude, rightly or wrongly, that electoral law is simply a tool in the hands of the powerful, and that their own votes have little weight in deciding the results of elections.

In practice, however, it is not so much stability of the basic principles which needs protecting (they are not likely to be seriously challenged) as stability of some of the more specific rules of electoral law, especially those covering the electoral system *per se*, the composition of electoral commissions and the drawing of constituency boundaries. These three elements are often, rightly or wrongly, regarded as decisive factors in the election results, and care must be taken to avoid not only manipulation to the advantage of the party in power, but even the mere semblance of manipulation.

It is not so much changing voting systems which is a bad thing – they can always be changed for the better – as changing them frequently or just before (within one year of) elections. Even when no manipulation is intended, changes will seem to be dictated by immediate party political interests.

One way of avoiding manipulation is to define in the Constitution or in a text higher in status than ordinary law the elements that are most exposed (the electoral system itself, the membership of electoral commissions, constituencies or rules on drawing constituency boundaries). Another, more flexible, solution would be to stipulate in the Constitution that, if the electoral law is amended, the old system will apply to the next election – at least if it takes place within the coming year – and the new one will take effect after that.

For the rest, the electoral law should normally have the rank of statute law. Rules on implementation, in particular those on technical questions and matters of detail, can nevertheless be in the form of regulations.

## 3. Procedural safeguards

### 3.1. Organisation of elections by an impartial body

Only transparency, impartiality and independence from politically motivated manipulation will ensure proper administration of the election process, from the pre-election period to the end of the processing of results.

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38. On the importance of credibility of the electoral process, see for example CDL (99) 67, p. 11; on the need for stability of the law, see CDL (99) 41, p. 1.

In states where the administrative authorities have a long-standing tradition of independence from the political authorities, the civil service applies electoral law without being subjected to political pressures. It is therefore both normal and acceptable for elections to be organised by administrative authorities, and supervised by the Ministry of the Interior.

However, in states with little experience of organising pluralist elections, there is too great a risk of government's pushing the administrative authorities to do what it wants. This applies both to central and local government – even when the latter is controlled by the national opposition.

This is why independent, impartial electoral commissions must be set up from the national level to polling station level to ensure that elections are properly conducted, or at least remove serious suspicions of irregularity.

According to the reports of the Bureau of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe on election observations, the following shortcomings concerning the electoral commissions have been noted in a number of member states: lack of transparency in the activity of the central electoral commission; variations in the interpretation of counting procedure; politically polarised election administration; controversies in appointing members of the Central Electoral Commission; commission members nominated by a state institution; the dominant position of the ruling party in the election administration.

Any central electoral commission must be permanent, as an administrative institution responsible for liaising with local authorities and the other lower-level commissions, e.g. as regards compiling and updating the electoral lists.

The composition of a central electoral commission can give rise to debate and become the key political issue in the drafting of an electoral law. Compliance with the following guidelines should facilitate maximum impartiality and competence on the part of the commission.

As a general rule, the commission should consist of:

- a judge or law officer: where a judicial body is responsible for administering the elections, its independence must be ensured through transparent proceedings. Judicial appointees should not come under the authority of those standing for office;
- representatives of parties already represented in parliament or which have won more than a certain percentage of the vote. Political parties should be represented equally in the central electoral commission; "equally" may be interpreted strictly or proportionally, that is to say, taking or not

taking account of the parties' relative electoral strengths.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, party delegates should be qualified in electoral matters and should be prohibited from campaigning.

In addition, the electoral commission may include:

- representatives of national minorities; their presence is desirable if the national minority is of a certain importance in the territory concerned;
- a representative of the Ministry of the Interior. However, for reasons connected with the history of the country concerned, it may not always be appropriate to have a representative of the Ministry of the Interior in the commission. During its election observation missions the Parliamentary Assembly has expressed concern on several occasions about transfers of responsibilities from a fully-fledged multi-party electoral commission to an institution subordinate to the executive. Nevertheless, co-operation between the central electoral commission and the Ministry of the Interior is possible if only for practical reasons, e.g. transporting and storing ballot papers and other equipment. For the rest, the executive power should not be able to influence the membership of the electoral commissions.<sup>40</sup>

Broadly speaking, bodies that appoint members to electoral commissions should not be free to recall them, as it casts doubt on their independence. Discretionary recall is unacceptable, but recall for disciplinary reasons is permissible – provided that the grounds for this are clearly and restrictively specified in law (vague references to “acts discrediting the commission,” for example, are not sufficient).

In the long-standing democracies where there are no electoral commissions but where another impartial body is competent in electoral matters, political parties must be able to observe the work of that body.

The composition of the central electoral commission is certainly important, but no more so than its mode of *operation*. The commission's rules of procedure must be clear, because commission chairpersons have a tendency to let members speak, which the latter are quick to exploit. The rules of procedure should provide for an agenda and a limited amount of speaking time for each member – e.g. a quarter of an hour; otherwise endless discussions are liable to obscure the main business of the day.

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39. See above, Chapter I.2.3, page 24.

40. Cf. CDL-AD (2002) 7, paragraph 5, 7 ff, 54.

There are many ways of making decisions. It would make sense for decisions to be taken by a qualified (e.g. two-thirds) majority, so as to encourage debate between the majority and at least one minority party. Reaching decisions by consensus is preferable.

The meetings of the central electoral commission should be open to everyone, including the media (this is another reason why speaking time should be limited). Any computer rooms, telephone links, faxes, scanners, etc., should be open to inspection.

Other electoral commissions operating at regional or constituency level should have a similar composition to that of the central electoral commission. Constituency commissions play an important role in uninominal voting systems because they determine the winner in general elections. Regional commissions also play a major role in relaying the results to the central electoral commission.

Appropriate staff with specialised skills<sup>41</sup> are required to organise elections. Members of central electoral commissions should be legal experts, political scientists, mathematicians or other people with a good understanding of electoral issues.

Members of electoral commissions have to receive standardised training at all levels of the election administration. Such training should also be made available to the members of commissions appointed by political parties. There have been several cases of commissions lacking qualified and trained election staff.

The electoral law should contain an article requiring the authorities (at every level) to meet the demands and needs of the electoral commission. Various ministries and other public administrative bodies, mayors and town hall staff may be directed to support the election administration by carrying out the administrative and logistical operations of preparing for and conducting the elections. They may have responsibility for preparing and distributing the electoral registers, ballot papers, ballot boxes, official stamps and other required material, as well as determining the arrangements for storage, distribution and security.

### **3.2. Observation of elections**

Observation of elections plays an important role as it provides evidence of whether the electoral process has been regular or not.

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41. See CDL (98) 10, p. 5.

There are three different types of observer: partisan national observers, non-partisan national observers and international (non-partisan) observers. In practice the distinction between the first two categories is not always obvious. This is why it is best to make the observation procedure as broad as possible at both the national and the international level.

Observation is not confined to the actual polling day but includes ascertaining whether any irregularities have occurred in advance of the elections (e.g. by improper maintenance of electoral lists, obstacles to the registration of candidates, restrictions on freedom of expression, and violations of rules on access to the media or on public funding of electoral campaigns), during the elections (e.g. through pressure exerted on electors, multiple voting, violation of voting secrecy, etc.) or after polling (especially during the vote counting and announcement of the results). Observation should focus particularly on the authorities' regard for their duty of neutrality.

International observers play a primordial role in states which have no established tradition of impartial verification of the lawfulness of elections.

Generally, international as well as national observers must be in a position to interview anyone present, take notes and report to their organisation, but they should refrain from making comments.

The law must be very clear as to what sites observers are not entitled to visit, so that their activities are not excessively hampered. For example, an act authorising observers to visit only sites where the election (or voting) takes place could be construed by certain polling stations in an unduly narrow manner.<sup>42</sup>

### **3.3. An effective system of appeal**

If the electoral law provisions are to be more than just words on a page, failure to comply with the electoral law must be open to challenge before an appeal body. This applies in particular to the election results: individual citizens may challenge them on the grounds of irregularities in the voting procedures. It also applies to decisions taken before the elections, especially in connection with the right to vote, electoral registers and standing for election, the validity of candidatures, compliance with the rules governing the electoral campaign and access to the media or to party funding.

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42. Re. election observation, see *Handbook for Observers of Elections*, Council of Europe, 1996.

There are two possible solutions:

- appeals may be heard by the ordinary courts, a special court or the constitutional court;
- appeals may be heard by an electoral commission. There is much to be said for this latter system in that the commissions are highly specialised whereas the courts tend to be less experienced with regard to electoral issues. As a precautionary measure, however, it is desirable that there should be some form of judicial supervision in place, making the higher commission the first appeal level and the competent court the second.

Appeal to parliament, as the judge of its own election, is sometimes provided for but could result in political decisions. It is acceptable as a first instance in places where it is long established, but a judicial appeal should then be possible.

Appeal proceedings should be as brief as possible, in any case concerning decisions to be taken before the election. On this point, two pitfalls must be avoided: first, that appeal proceedings retard the electoral process, and second, that, due to their lack of suspensive effect, decisions on appeals which could have been taken before, are taken after the elections. In addition, decisions on the results of elections must also not take too long, especially where the political climate is tense. This means both that the time limits for appeals must be very short and that the appeal body must make its ruling as quickly as possible. Time limits must, however, be long enough to make an appeal possible, to guarantee the exercise of rights of defence and a reflected decision. A time limit of three to five days at first instance (both for lodging appeals and making rulings) seems reasonable for decisions to be taken before the elections. It is, however, permissible to grant a little more time to Supreme and Constitutional Courts for their rulings.

The procedure must also be simple, and providing voters with special appeal forms helps to make it so.<sup>43</sup> It is necessary to eliminate formalism, and so avoid decisions of inadmissibility, especially in politically sensitive cases.

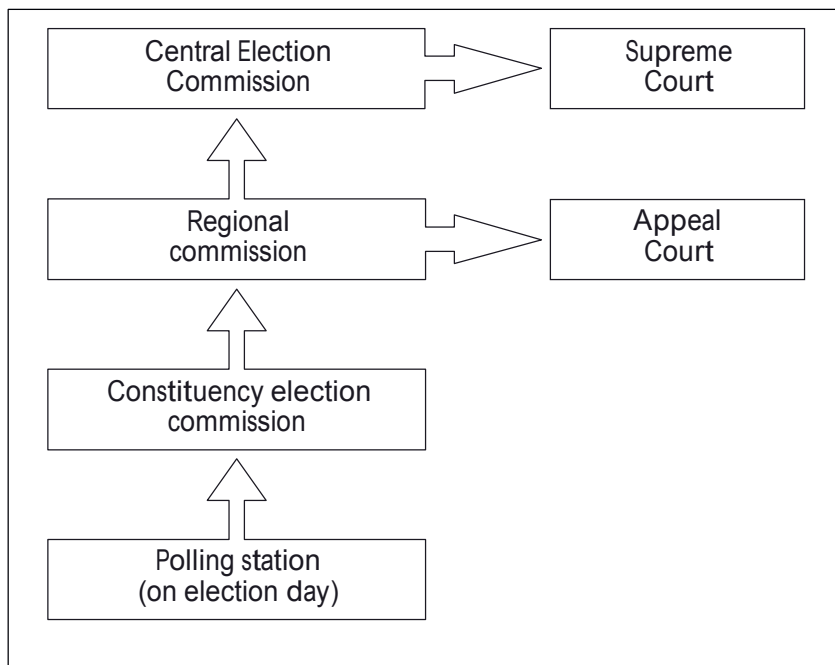
It is also vital that the appeal procedure, and especially the powers and responsibilities of the various bodies involved in it, should be clearly regulated by law, so as to avoid any positive or negative conflicts of jurisdiction. Neither the appellants nor the authorities should be able to choose the appeal body. The risk that successive bodies will refuse to give a decision is seriously increased where it is theoretically possible to appeal to either the courts

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43. CDL (98) 45, p. 11.



or an electoral commission, or where the powers of different courts – e.g. the ordinary courts and the constitutional court – are not clearly differentiated.



Disputes relating to the electoral registers, which are the responsibility, for example, of the local administration operating under the supervision of or in co-operation with the electoral commissions, can be dealt with by courts of first instance.

Standing in such appeals must be granted as widely as possible. It must be open to every elector in the constituency and to every candidate standing for election there to lodge an appeal. A reasonable quorum may, however, be imposed for appeals by voters on the results of elections.

The appeal procedure should be of a judicial nature, in the sense that the right of the appellants to proceedings in which both parties are heard should be safeguarded.

The powers of appeal bodies are important too. They should have authority to annul elections, if irregularities may have influenced the outcome, i.e. affected the distribution of seats. This is the general principle, but it should be open to

adjustment, i.e. annulment should not necessarily affect the whole country or constituency – indeed, it should be possible to annul the results of just one polling station. This makes it possible to avoid the two extremes – annulling an entire election, although irregularities affect a small area only, and refusing to annul, because the area affected is too small. In zones where the results have been annulled, the elections must be repeated.

Where higher-level commissions are appeal bodies, they should be able to rectify or annul *ex officio* the decisions of lower electoral commissions.

Some points deserve to be developed.

### **3.4. Organisation and operation of polling stations**

The quality of the voting and vote-counting systems and proper compliance with the electoral procedures depend on the mode of organisation and operation of the polling stations. The reports of the Bureau of the Assembly on the observation of elections in different countries have revealed a series of logistical irregularities. For example, significant differences between polling stations across different regions of the same State were noted.

Assembly observation missions have also noticed several cases of technical irregularities such as wrongly printed or stamped ballot boxes, overly complex ballot papers, unsealed ballot boxes, inadequate ballot papers or boxes, misuse of ballot boxes, insufficient means of identification of voters and absence of local observers.

All these irregularities and shortcomings, in addition to political party electioneering inside the polling station and police harassment, can seriously vitiate the voting process, or indeed undermine its integrity and validity.

### **3.5. Funding**

Regulating the funding of political parties and electoral campaigns is a further important factor in the regularity of the electoral process.

First of all, funding must be *transparent*; such transparency is essential whatever the level of political and economic development of the country concerned.

Transparency operates at two levels. The first concerns campaign funds, the details of which must be set out in a special set of carefully maintained accounts. In the event of significant deviations from the norm or if the statutory expenditure ceilings are exceeded, the election must be annulled. The second level involves monitoring the financial status of elected representatives before and after their term in office. A commission in charge of financial

transparency takes formal note of the elected representatives' statements as to their finances. The latter are confidential, but the records can, if necessary, be forwarded to the public prosecutor's office.

In unitary states, any expenses incurred by local authorities in connection with the running of a national election, the payment of election commission members, the printing of ballot papers, etc, should normally be borne by the central state.

It should be remembered that in the field of public funding of parties or campaigns the principle of equality of opportunity applies ("strict" or "proportional" equality).<sup>44</sup> All parties represented in parliament must in all cases qualify for public funding. However, in order to ensure equality of opportunity for all the different political forces, public funding might also be extended to political formations that represent a large section of the electorate and put up candidates for election. The funding of political parties from public funds must be accompanied by supervision of the parties' accounts by specific public bodies (e.g. the Auditor General's Department). States should encourage a policy of financial openness on the part of political parties receiving public funding.<sup>45</sup>

### **3.6. Security**

Every electoral law must provide for intervention by the security forces in the event of trouble. In such an event, the presiding officer of the polling station (or his or her representative) must have sole authority to call in the police. It is important to avoid extending this right to all members of the polling station commission, as what is needed in such circumstances is an on-the-spot decision that is not open to discussion.

In some states, having a police presence at polling stations is a national tradition, which, according to observers, does not necessarily trigger unrest or have an intimidating effect on voters. One should note that a police presence at polling stations is still provided for in the electoral laws of certain western states, even though this practice has changed over time.

## **Conclusion**

Compliance with the five underlying principles of the European electoral heritage (universal, equal, free, secret and direct suffrage) is essential for democracy.

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44. See section I.2.3 above, page 24.

45. For further details on funding of political parties, see CDL-INF (2001) 8.

It enables democracy to be expressed in different ways but within certain limits. These limits stem primarily from the interpretation of the said principles; the present text lays out the minimum rules to be followed in order to ensure compliance. Second, it is insufficient for the electoral law (in the narrow sense) to comprise rules that are in keeping with the European electoral principles: the latter must be placed in their context, and the credibility of the electoral process must be guaranteed. First, fundamental rights must be respected; and second, the stability of the rules must be such as to exclude any suspicion of manipulation. Lastly, the procedural framework must allow the rules laid down to be implemented effectively.



# Interpretative declarations

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## Stability of the electoral law<sup>46</sup>

A. The Code of good practice in electoral matters (CDL-AD(2002)023rev2-cor, item II.2.b) states:

“II.2.Regulatory levels and stability of electoral law

(...)

b. The fundamental elements of electoral law, in particular the electoral system proper, membership of electoral commissions and the drawing of constituency boundaries, should not be open to amendment less than one year before an election, or should be written in the constitution or at a level higher than ordinary law.”

This paragraph was completed by paragraph 66 of the Explanatory Report stating that a “solution would be to stipulate in the Constitution that, if the electoral law is amended, the old system will apply to the next election – at least if it takes place within the coming year – and the new one will take effect after that.”<sup>47</sup>

B. The Venice Commission interprets this text as follows:

1. The principle according to which the fundamental elements of electoral law should not be open to amendment less than one year prior to an election does not take precedence over the other principles of the Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters.

2. It should not be invoked to maintain a situation contrary to international electoral standards, to prevent amendments in accordance with these standards based on consensus between government and opposition and on

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46. Document CDL-AD(2024)027, Revised interpretative declaration on the Stability of electoral law, approved by the Council for Democratic Elections at its 80th meeting (Venice, 20 June 2024) and adopted by the Venice Commission at its 139th Plenary Session (Venice, 21-22 June 2024).

47. See also Venice Commission, CDL-AD(2022)015, Revised Code of Good Practice on Referendums, Guideline II.3.b.: “The fundamental aspects of referendum law should not be open to amendments to be applied during the year following their enactment or should be written in the constitution or at a level superior to ordinary law.”

broad public consultations, or to prevent the implementation of decisions by national constitutional courts or supreme courts with equivalent jurisdiction, international courts or of recommendations by international organisations.

3. The one-year principle aims at ensuring legal certainty, which is a key element of the Rule of Law. In the electoral field, legal certainty means that the confidence in democratic elections in line with international standards should not be undermined by late amendments to primary or secondary legislation, including from electoral bodies.

4. The principle concerns the fundamental rules of electoral law. Other changes to electoral law may be subject to the principle if the scope or timing of the changes may negatively affect legal certainty for voters, candidates or the electoral administration.

5. In particular, the following are considered fundamental rules:

- rules that determine the right to vote and stand for election, including voter and candidate registration;
- the drawing of constituency boundaries and rules relating to the distribution of seats between the constituencies;
- the electoral system proper, i.e. rules relating to the transformation of votes into seats;
- essential elements of the voting process;
- rules relating to the membership, independence and impartiality of electoral commissions or another body which organises the ballot or can decide on electoral rights;
- rules guaranteeing the effectiveness of election dispute resolution;
- electoral contestants' access to public media.

6. In addition to the one-year principle:

a. once elections have been called, no amendments to electoral law should be made, unless they are strictly necessary to comply with binding decisions by national constitutional courts or supreme courts with equivalent jurisdiction, or by international courts;

b. any reform of electoral legislation to be applied during an election should occur early enough to allow candidates and voters to understand the changes and the electoral management bodies to understand and apply them.

## Women's participation in elections<sup>48</sup>

Item I.2.5 of the Code of the Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters provides as follows:

"Legal rules requiring a minimum percentage of persons of each gender among candidates should not be considered as contrary to the principle of equal suffrage if they have a constitutional basis."

The following completes this principle:

- a. Implementation of the parity principle may lead to admit:
  1. Elections by a list system
    - The obligation to ensure a composition of the candidates' lists alternating men and women
    - The refusal to register lists which do not respect such an alternating composition
  2. Elections in single-member constituencies
    - The obligation to ensure a balanced percentage of women and men amongst candidates of the same party
    - Dissuasive sanctions in case of non-respect of this obligation
- b. Suffrage should be individual and secret, which excludes any form of "family voting," whether committed in the form of group voting (where a [male] family member accompanies one or more [women] relatives into a polling booth), in the form of open voting (when family groups vote together in the open), or in the form of proxy voting (where a [male] family member collects ballot papers belonging to one or more [women] relatives and marks those papers as he sees fit).

## Participation of people with disabilities in elections<sup>49</sup>

I. The Code of good practice in electoral matters, as adopted by the European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission) in October 2002, states that "the five principles underlying Europe's electoral

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48. Document CDL-AD (2006) 020, adopted by the Venice Commission at its 67th plenary session (Venice, 9-10 June 2006).

49. Document CDL-AD(2011)045 adopted by the Venice Commission at its 89th plenary session (Venice, 16-17 December 2011)



heritage are universal, equal, free, secret and direct suffrage” (item I). The Code further states in item I.1.1 that “Universal suffrage means in principle that all human beings have the right to vote and to stand for elections”.

1. People with disabilities should therefore be able to exercise their right to vote and participate in political and public life as elected representatives on an equal basis with other citizens. The participation of all citizens in political and public life and the democratic process is essential for the development of democratic societies.

II. The following completes the principles stated in the code:

## 1. Universal suffrage

2. Universal suffrage is a fundamental principle of the European Electoral Heritage. People with disabilities may not be discriminated against in this regard, in conformity with Article 29 of the Convention of the United Nations on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities<sup>50</sup> and the case-law of the European Court of Human Rights.<sup>51</sup>

3. Voting procedures and facilities should be accessible to people with disabilities so that they are able to exercise their democratic rights, and allow, where necessary, the provision of assistance in voting, with respect to the principle that voting must be individual (the Code, item I.4.b).

4. The application of Universal Design principles<sup>52</sup> and direct and/or indirect participation of the user in all design stages are effective means for improving the accessibility of polling stations and election procedures to cast one’s vote and for getting access to information on elections.

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50. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities was adopted on 13 December 2006 by the United Nations in New York. See in particular par. 43-44, with a reference to Article 29 of the UN Convention.

51. European Court of Human Rights, case of *Kiss v. Hungary*, application No. 38832/06, judgment 20 May 2010.

52. 3 Recommendation CM/Rec(2009)8 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on achieving full participation through Universal Design: Universal Design is a strategy which aims to make the design and composition of different environments, products, communication, information technology and services accessible and understandable to, as well as usable by, everyone, to the greatest extent in the most independent and natural manner possible, preferably without the need for adaptation or specialised solutions. The terms “design for all”, “integral accessibility”, “accessible design”, “inclusive design”, “barrier-free design”, “transgenerational design” and “accessibility for all” are regarded as converging towards the term “Universal Design” used in this text.

## 2. Equal suffrage

5. The principle of “equality of opportunity must be guaranteed for parties and candidates alike” (The Code, item I.2.3.a). The application of this principle should be extended to include equality of opportunity for people with disabilities who stand for elections.

## 3. Free suffrage

6. In the duty to “enable voters to know the lists and candidates standing for elections” (The Code, item I.3.1.b.ii), the public authorities must ensure that the above information is available and accessible, to the greatest extent possible and taking due account of the principle of reasonable accommodation,<sup>53</sup> in all necessary alternative formats under restriction of commensurability, legal regulation and realistic feasibility. The information provided shall be easy to read and to understand.

## 4. Secret suffrage

7. The right of people with disabilities to vote by secret ballot should be protected, inter alia, by “guaranteeing the free expression of the will of persons with disabilities as electors and to this end, where necessary, at their request, allowing them to use assistance technologies and/or to be assisted in voting by a person of their own choice<sup>54</sup>” in conditions which ensure that the chosen person does not exercise undue influence.

## Publication of lists of voters having participated in elections<sup>55</sup>

I. The *Code of good practice in electoral matters*, adopted by the European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission) in October 2002 (CDL-AD(2002)023rev2), states, under the principle of “*Secret suffrage*” (item I.4.c), that:

“c. The list of persons actually voting should not be published.”

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53. Article 2 – Definitions of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities; “reasonable accommodation” means necessary and appropriate modification and adjustments, not imposing a disproportionate or undue burden, to ensure to people with disabilities the enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms on an equal basis with others.

54. (Article 29 (iii) of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities; cf. item II.2 above, and the Code, item I.4.b).

55. Document CDL-AD(2016) 028, adopted by the Venice Commission at its 108th Plenary Session (Venice, 14-15 October 2016)

II. The Explanatory Report to the *Code of good practice in electoral matters* further states that “since abstention may indicate a political choice, lists of persons voting should not be published”.<sup>56</sup> More generally, making personal data from the voters’ lists broadly available would raise problems of data protection.<sup>57</sup>

III. A balance needs to be struck between data protection and secrecy of the vote on the one hand and stakeholders’ interest in consulting the signed (or stamped) voter lists on the other.<sup>58</sup> The publication of the lists of voters having participated in the elections could be considered as a measure capable of deterring electoral fraud, but it could also be seen as a tool to control or pressure voters and publishing the list could also have an impact on voter participation.

IV. Therefore, the Venice Commission makes the following *interpretative declaration* regarding item I.4.C of the *Code of good practice in electoral matters*:

A.1. The publication of the lists of voters having participated in elections should be avoided.

2. However, access to the lists of voters having participated in elections may be granted to certain electoral stakeholders, for example:

- to candidate proxies and observers;
- to an electoral stakeholder who alleges irregularities in a given list of voters having voted, when preparing an appeal as well as during the appeal process.

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56. Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters (CDL-AD(2002)023rev2), para. 54.

57. See for instance the joint Opinion on the revised Electoral Code of “the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” (CDL-AD(2011)027), para. 20: “The issue of use or abuse of information from the voter lists is not sufficiently addressed by the amendments. Article 55(1) stipulates that the personal data contained in the voter lists must be protected in line with the law and cannot be used except for the purpose of “exercising the citizens’ right to vote.” However, Article 55(2) requires the State Election Commission (“the SEC”) to supply all of the data from the voter lists to any registered political party or independent candidate, upon request. The legal framework should clearly state the permitted usage of information obtained from the voter lists and whether the information can be used for the campaign activities of political parties and candidates. At a minimum, more guidance should be provided to political parties and candidates by providing a concrete definition for the term “exercising the citizen’s right to vote”.”

58. CDL-AD(2016)019, para. 61; CDL-PI(2016)008, para. 38. The concerns regarding the accuracy of the lists of voters have been an issue raised in several countries. The consultation of the lists of voters having participated in the elections is intended at making it possible to deter fraud, through the identification of the number of those who did not vote, but were impersonated during the elections.

3. Such access to the list of voters having voted should be meaningful, should be granted for a sufficient period of time and should take place under controlled conditions.

4. These rules do not modify the right of every voter to access his/her own data.

B. If irregularities are alleged, it is recommended that an independent review of the lists of voters having participated in elections be authorised without making these lists public.

## **Digital technologies and artificial intelligence<sup>59</sup>**

I. Free suffrage: the freedom of voters to form an opinion (see the Code, guideline I.3.1)

1. The freedom of voters to form an opinion includes the right to have access to all kinds of information enabling them to be correctly informed before making a decision, the right to private online browsing, and the right to make confidential communications on the internet.

2. It is necessary to ensure that obligations on personal data protection are observed, in line with international standards. In particular, individuals should not be subject to a decision based solely on automated processing of data which significantly affects them or which entails whichever restriction of lawful content.

3. To protect the freedom of voters to form an opinion, the free exchange of opinions and ideas online and open public debate should be facilitated. This requires internet access and the effective right to seek, receive, and share information of all kinds. The principle of non-discriminatory treatment of internet traffic and the users' right to receive and impart information and to use services of their choice should be upheld.

4. Whenever artificial intelligence systems are being used in elections, voters should be informed that they are interacting with such systems rather

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59. Document CDL-AD(2024)044, Interpretative declaration of the Code of good practice in electoral matters as concerns digital technologies and artificial intelligence, approved by the Council for Democratic Elections at its 81st meeting (Venice, 5 December 2024) and adopted by the Venice Commission at its 141st Plenary Session (Venice, 6-7 December 2024).

than with a human. Political “deep fakes”, namely the distribution of deceptive artificial intelligence-generated content to influence an election or to infringe voters’ freedom to make informed decisions, should be prohibited and sanctioned.

II. Equal suffrage: equality of opportunity (see the Code, guideline I.2.3)

5. Equality of opportunity also applies to the use of digital technologies and artificial intelligence in the electoral campaign, including the functions and services of internet intermediaries.

6. Candidates and/or parties must be granted fair and equitable access to public media, ensuring representation without discrimination. Legal provisions should also be adopted to ensure that there is a minimum access to privately owned online media and to the functions and services provided by internet intermediaries. In the digital realm, equality of opportunity also encompasses the principle of fairness in content dissemination and access.

7. Online electoral advertising must always be identified as such and must be transparent regarding the identity of its sponsor and the dissemination technique being used. Funding of online activities must be transparent, with potential limits on political parties’ spending on digital advertising. Social media platforms should be required to consistently disclose data on political advertising and their sponsors. Banning certain forms of paid political advertising on social media during electoral periods may be an option, particularly when automated mass dissemination or micro-targeting techniques based on artificial intelligence are being employed. The option to prohibit political parties and candidates from campaigning anonymously could also be justified.

III. The positive obligations of public authorities and the co-responsibility of private actors (see the Code, guidelines I.2.3.a and I.3.1.c)

8. The State has an obligation to take effective steps to ensure a supportive environment for robust public debate, preventing and punishing infringements of the voters’ freedom to form an opinion, including by private actors, as well as to prevent inequality in media coverage during elections.

9. An independent body should be mandated to enforce these regulations.

10. State authorities should address the challenge posed by organised information disorder campaigns, which have the potential to undermine the integrity of electoral processes.

11. Electoral integrity on the internet should be guaranteed on the basis of law, inter alia with specific rules against cyberthreats. Providing for criminal sanctions may be justified to deal with the most serious cases.

12. Specific rules should make it clear who is accountable for decisions made by artificial intelligence systems.

13. The State's duty of neutrality also includes an obligation to build resilience among voters and to raise public awareness about the use of digital technologies in elections, including through the provision of appropriate information and support.

14. Cooperation between different public authorities, including across borders, ought to be strengthened.

15. Provisions should be established to ensure the cooperation of internet intermediaries and other private actors with governments, among themselves, and with academia and civil society.

IV. Respect for fundamental rights (see the Code, guideline II.1)

16. The positive responsibility of the State to prevent undue interference with the principles of the European electoral heritage must not lead to undue state intervention.

17. Democratic elections are not possible without respect for inter alia freedom of expression, including media freedom. Any restrictions to these rights must have a basis in law, be necessary and in the public interest, and comply with the principle of proportionality (see the Code, guideline II.1.b).

18. Sanctions should be imposed by an independent and impartial body and subject to an effective system of appeal.

V. Specific provisions on the use of digital technologies by Election Management Bodies

19. Nothing in the Code nor in this interpretative declaration prevents the introduction of digital technologies in elections, provided that their use complies with respect for human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. The adoption of any technology should be done transparently, by broad consensus after extensive public consultations with all relevant stakeholders, and with the political commitment to fully implement it in good faith, with adequate procedural and judicial safeguards and means by which to evaluate in a timely manner any alleged failure to do so.

20. Digital technologies and artificial intelligence should only be used when appropriate safeguards are in place, particularly to ensure secure, reliable and transparent use. Use of digital technologies and artificial intelligence should be made in full respect of the principles of individual autonomy, privacy, equality and non-discrimination.

21. Universal suffrage also requires that the use of digital technologies is sufficiently easy to access and user-friendly to enable members of all groups, including persons with disabilities and older persons, to vote independently.

22. Removal from the electoral register shall not be subject to a decision based solely on automated processing of personal data, unless explicit consent is provided by the individual concerned, or when it is based on law with suitable safeguards that ensure the respect for the rights and freedoms of the individuals concerned.

23. When digital technologies are used in elections, specific provisions should additionally be foreseen to sustain the procedural guarantees in the Code:

a. The impartiality, independence and professionalism of election management bodies should be reinforced.

b. The use of digital technologies and artificial intelligence should be transparent to ensure electoral integrity and impartiality, especially in the processing of votes. Opportunities for election observers to monitor the use of digital technologies and artificial intelligence may need to be balanced against cybersecurity considerations and/or protection of sensitive personal data.

c. Digital technologies should be independently audited, and the findings of the auditing body should be public.

There should be a possibility to challenge before an independent body both the process of adoption of the tool by the electoral management body and the concrete decisions taken by or on the basis of a recommendation of an artificial intelligence system.

## Explanatory report

### I. General Remarks

24. Advancements in digital technologies and artificial intelligence<sup>60</sup> have introduced new opportunities and challenges for democracies that were scarcely imaginable when the 2002 Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters was adopted.

25. According to the 2019 Joint Report of the Venice Commission and of the Directorate of Information Society and Action against Crime of the Directorate General of Human Rights and Rule of Law (DGI), on Digital Technologies and Elections, “[d]igital (or “new”) technologies and social media [...] have revolutionised the way people interact and exercise their freedom of expression and information, as well as other related - and sometimes conflicting - fundamental rights. People who engage in social media may use the internet to organise and demand better services, more transparency and meaningful participation in the political arena. Individuals all over the globe are now able to shape global perceptions, position topics in their national agendas and foster political activism. This digital transformation is recasting the relation between states and citizens.”<sup>61</sup>

26. As noted later in the 2020 Study - Principles for a fundamental rights-compliant use of digital technologies in electoral processes, a debate has emerged regarding the relationship of technology to democracy between “apocalyptic and integrated” views.<sup>62</sup> On the one hand, “the new virtual tools may be used, and sometimes are indeed used against elections to suppress voter turnout, tamper with election results, and steal voter information; against political parties and politicians to conduct cyber espionage for the purposes of

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60. II references to artificial intelligence in this interpretative declaration are based on the definition of “artificial intelligence systems” in the Council of Europe Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence and Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law (CETS 225). These are understood as a “machine-based system that, for explicit or implicit objectives, infers, from the input it receives, how to generate outputs such as predictions, content, recommendations or decisions that may influence physical or virtual environments”, art. 2. See also the Explanatory Report, paras 23-25.

61. Venice Commission and Directorate of Information Society and Action against Crime of the Directorate General of Human Rights and Rule of Law (DGI), CDL-AD(2019)016, Joint Report on Digital Technologies and Elections, para. 4.

62. Venice Commission, CDL-AD(2020)037, Study - Principles for a fundamental rights-compliant use of digital technologies in electoral processes, paras 5-6. The terms between inverted commas have been used by Umberto Eco.



coercion and manipulation, and to publicly discredit individuals; and against both traditional and social media to spread disinformation and propaganda, and to shape the opinions of voters.”<sup>63</sup>

27. On the other hand, digital tools and technologies provide a range of opportunities and can improve efficiency and effectiveness in numerous fields, including electoral processes. As noted in the recently adopted Council of Europe Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence and Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law (CETS 225), “developments in science and technology and the profound changes brought about through activities within the lifecycle of artificial intelligence systems, [...] have the potential to promote human prosperity as well as individual and societal well-being, sustainable development, gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls, as well as other important goals and interests, by enhancing progress and innovation.”<sup>64</sup>

28. The principles enshrined in the Code take on a special meaning in a digital environment in so far as the use of digital technologies may offer unprecedented opportunities to achieve their full realisation. At the same time, however, digital technologies also have the potential to pose aggravated risks to these very same principles and to the conditions for their implementation, including the procedural guarantees.

29. In general, States are required to adopt and maintain measures that seek to ensure that digital technologies (including artificial intelligence) are not used to undermine the integrity, independence and effectiveness of democratic institutions and electoral processes. One modality is to entrust an electoral management body with the task of ensuring the integrity of the electoral system and thereby ensuring the reliability of the electoral processes and its outcomes.

30. Unlike previous exercises, this interpretative declaration is not restricted to a specific provision of the Code. Instead, it seeks to provide an updated framework for the guidelines throughout the entire Code. The declaration begins with guideline I.3.2 on the freedom of voters to form an opinion, as this issue is particularly affected by the use of digital technologies and artificial intelligence in electoral processes. Due to the prevalence of digitally-driven

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63. Venice Commission and Directorate of Information Society and Action against Crime of the Directorate General of Human Rights and Rule of Law (DGI), CDL-AD(2019)016, Joint Report on Digital Technologies and Elections, para. 143.

64. See the preamble of the Council of Europe’s Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence (CETS 225).

information disorders and plethora of information available online, voters are not only hindered in their ability to form opinions about candidates and electoral alternatives, but they are sometimes also misled about registration, voting procedures, or even the integrity of election results.<sup>65</sup> For this reason, this guideline becomes central to this declaration. The declaration further proposes expanding the scope of guideline I.2.3 on equality of opportunity, since this guideline partly overlaps with the freedom of voters to form an opinion.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, it provides a comprehensive interpretation of the positive obligations of public authorities in relation to both guidelines and emphasises the importance of respecting fundamental rights as a prerequisite for the effective implementation of the Code's principles. Lastly, it elaborates on the provisions governing the use of digital technologies by electoral management bodies.

## **II. Comments to the interpretative declaration on digital technologies and artificial intelligence**

### ***Free suffrage: the freedom of voters to form an opinion (see the Code, guideline I.3.1)***

31. One aspect of free suffrage is the free formation of the elector's opinion.<sup>67</sup> The freedom of voters to form an opinion includes the right to be correctly informed before making a decision, the right to private online browsing, and the right to make confidential communications on the internet.<sup>68</sup> More specifically, the freedom of voters to form an opinion entails the right to have access to all kinds of information from online sources, the right to private browsing and to confidential communications on the internet, as well as the protection from undue influence on voting behaviour.

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65. Through the interpretative declaration and the explanatory report, "information disorders" should be understood broadly at the challenges related to mis-, dis- and malinformation. See Wardle, Claire and Derakhshan, Hossein, Council of Europe report DGI(2017)09, Information Disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making.

66. Venice Commission, CDL-AD(2002)023rev2-cor, Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters, para. 27.

67. Venice Commission, CDL-AD(2002)023rev2-cor, Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters, guideline I.3.1 and para. 26. Similarly, the Explanatory Report to the Council of Europe's Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence stresses that the integrity of democracy and its processes is based on the assumptions that "individuals have agency (*capacity to form an opinion* and act on it)", para. 47 [emphasis added]. See also footnote 34 below.

68. Venice Commission and Directorate of Information Society and Action against Crime of the Directorate General of Human Rights and Rule of Law (DGI), CDL-AD(2019)016, Joint Report on Digital Technologies and Elections, para. 122.

32. The voter's freedom to form an educated opinion may be affected by online information disorders, including the distribution of false information about election campaigns of political opponents. These phenomena have worsened as a result of the use of digital technologies (sometimes with the use of deep fake audio, photos, and videos, automated generated 'comments' under posts to manipulate public opinion, etc.). This freedom may be also infringed by the monitoring of people's online activity without their consent and for the purpose of understanding and exploiting their behavioural paths, by the misuse of personal data facilitating micro-targeting as well as targeted messages which allow political candidates and parties to make different promises to different people, or by the use of ranking mechanisms in search engines.<sup>69</sup> Information disorders have also been a leverage to discredit the objectivity and reliability of news coverage, usually through automated means such as bots. The use of paid influencers' accounts by government actors and political parties to spread their views or campaign for them is yet another concerning practice. Political advertising can thus "be a vector of disinformation, in particular where the advertising does not disclose its political nature, comes from [foreign] sponsors [...] or is subject to targeting techniques or ad-delivery techniques."<sup>70</sup>

33. Most breaches of the freedom of voters to form an opinion are the result of misuses of personal data. For this reason, it is necessary to ensure that obligations on personal data protection are observed, in line with international standards.<sup>71</sup> Likewise, individuals should not be subject to a decision based solely on automated processing of data which significantly affects them without having their views taken into consideration.<sup>72</sup> This provision therefore

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69. See, for example, Venice Commission and Directorate of Information Society and Action against Crime of the Directorate General of Human Rights and Rule of Law (DGI), CDL-AD(2019)016, Joint Report on Digital Technologies and Elections, paras 43, 122, and 127. On micro-targeting, see the Judgment of the Court of Justice of the EU (CJEU) in the case of *Maximilian Schrems v. Meta Platforms Ireland Ltd*, formerly Facebook Ireland Ltd, 4.10.2024, Case C-446/21.

70. See also the Regulation (EU) 2024/900 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 March 2024 on the transparency and targeting of political advertising, para 4.

71. These include, but are not limited to, the Council of Europe CM/Inf(2018)15, Modernised Convention for the Protection of Individuals with Regard to the Processing of Personal Data as amended by the Protocol CETS No 223. For more specific guidance, see also the Guidelines on the Protection of Individuals with regard to the Processing of Personal Data by and for Political Campaigns, adopted by the Consultative Committee of the Convention for the Protection of Individuals with regard to Automatic Processing of Personal Data, and Venice Commission, CDL-AD(2020)037, Study - Principles for a fundamental rights-compliant use of digital technologies in electoral processes, paras 65-71.

72. Art. 9(1)(a) of the modernised Convention 108.

applies, but is not limited, to both automated procedures for micro-targeting by internet intermediaries, as well as to their content moderation methods. Individuals also have the rights to obtain, on request, knowledge of the reasoning underlying data processing where the results of such processing are applied to them; as well as to object at any time, on grounds relating to their situation, to the processing of personal data concerning them, unless the controller demonstrates legitimate grounds for the processing which override their interests or rights and fundamental freedoms.<sup>73</sup>

34. Individuals should neither be subject to a decision that entails whichever restriction of lawful content. While artificial intelligence can help moderate harmful content on digital platforms, there is also a risk that automated monitoring will result in whichever restriction of lawful content.<sup>74</sup>

35. To protect the freedom of voters to form an opinion, the free exchange of opinion and ideas online and open public debate should be facilitated. Even if these are not unique to electoral periods, this freedom also entails a right to access to the internet. This right has been recognised in the case-law of the European Court of Human Rights,<sup>75</sup> while the Venice Commission has previously acknowledged that the internet has become one of the principle means of exercising the right to receive information and ideas “regardless of frontiers.”<sup>76</sup> Open access to the internet has the potential of informing voters about electoral issues who would otherwise not likely be informed about such matters.

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73. Arts. 9(1)(c) and (d) of the modernised Convention 108.

74. Council of Europe's Ad hoc Committee on Artificial Intelligence, Feasibility study on a legal framework on AI design, development and application based on Council of Europe's standards adopted by the CAHAJ, para. 27.

75. See *Ahmet Yıldırım v. Turkey*, Application No. 3111/10 (ECtHR, 18 December 2012), para. 53, and *Cengiz and Others v. Turkey*, Application nos. 48226/10 and 14027/11 (ECtHR, 1 December 2015).

76. See, for example, Venice Commission, CDL-AD(2013)024 Opinion on the Legislation pertaining to the Protection against Defamation of the Republic of Azerbaijan; Venice Commission, CDL-AD(2015)015 Opinion on Media Legislation (ACT CLXXXV on Media Services and on the Mass Media, Act CIV on the Freedom of the Press, and the Legislation on Taxation of Advertisement Revenues of Mass Media) of Hungary; and Venice Commission, CDL-AD(2016)011 on Turkey - Opinion on Law No. 5651 on regulation of publications on the Internet and combating crimes committed by means of such publication (“the Internet Law”), para. 98. See also, Venice Commission and Directorate of Information Society and Action against Crime of the Directorate General of Human Rights and Rule of Law (DGI), CDL-AD(2019)016, Joint Report on Digital Technologies and Elections, para. 54, and Venice Commission, CDL-AD(2020)037, Study - Principles for a fundamental rights-compliant use of digital technologies in electoral processes, principle 3 (paras 59-64).

36. In the case of measures addressing the online information disorders, net neutrality should be upheld. The principle of network neutrality underpins *non-discriminatory treatment of internet traffic* and the users' right to receive and impart information and to use services of their choice.<sup>77</sup> However, net neutrality is not absolute, nor should it be used as a liability shield to exempt internet intermediaries from accountability for user-generated content on their platforms (e.g., those protections typically under Section 230 of the United States' Communications Decency Act of 1996).<sup>78</sup>

***Equal suffrage: equality of opportunity (see the Code, guideline I.2.3)***

37. The Explanatory Report to the Code states that "[f]reedom of voters to form an opinion partly overlaps with equality of opportunity."<sup>79</sup>

38. Media failure to provide impartial information about the election campaign and candidates is one of the most frequent shortcomings arising during elections.<sup>80</sup> This issue has become even more salient in the online media, where professional journalists no longer act as information gatekeepers and new actors do not necessarily ensure adherence to the statutory requirements.<sup>81</sup> In turn, the distinction between political communication, political advertising and the individual expression of opinions becomes blurred.<sup>82</sup>

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77. Recommendation CM/Rec(2016)1 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on protecting and promoting the right to freedom of expression and the right to private life with regard to network neutrality, para. 4. See also Venice Commission and Directorate of Information Society and Action against Crime of the Directorate General of Human Rights and Rule of Law (DGI), CDL-AD(2019)016, Joint Report on Digital Technologies and Elections, para. 139 and CDL-AD(2020)037, Study - Principles for a fundamental rights-compliant use of digital technologies in electoral processes, principle 3 (paras 59-64).

78. For example, Recommendation CM/Rec(2016)1 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on protecting and promoting the right to freedom of expression and the right to private life with regard to network neutrality already notes that equal treatment of Internet traffic "does not preclude Internet traffic management measures which are necessary and proportionate to [inter alia]: give effect to a court order or an order of a regulatory authority", para. 2.2.

79. Venice Commission, CDL-AD(2002)023rev2-cor, Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters, para. 27.

80. Venice Commission, CDL-AD(2002)023rev2-cor, Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters, para. 19.

81. See Venice Commission and Directorate of Information Society and Action against Crime of the Directorate General of Human Rights and Rule of Law (DGI), CDL-AD(2019)016, Joint Report on Digital Technologies and Elections, paras 12 and 15.

82. See Venice Commission and Directorate of Information Society and Action against Crime of the Directorate General of Human Rights and Rule of Law (DGI), CDL-AD(2019)016, Joint Report on Digital Technologies and Elections, para. 64.

39. Equality of opportunity also applies to digital technologies and artificial intelligence, including the functions and services of internet intermediaries.<sup>83</sup> References to “radio and television air-time” in guideline I.2.3.b of the Code should therefore not be interpreted as restricted to these media outlets.<sup>84</sup> References to “audiovisual media” in guideline I.2.3.c should also be understood as applying to online and digital media.<sup>85</sup> When ensuring equality of opportunity online, however, due account should be taken of the significant differences as regards the influence between traditional (broadcast) media and new (online) media.<sup>86</sup>

40. Candidates and/or parties must be granted fair and equitable access to online media, ensuring representation without discrimination.<sup>87</sup> Legal provisions should also be adopted to ensure that there is a minimum access to privately owned online media and to the functions and services provided

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83. According to Recommendation CM/Rec(2018)2 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on the roles and responsibilities of internet intermediaries, internet intermediaries are “[a] wide, diverse and rapidly evolving range of players [that] facilitate interactions on the internet between natural and legal persons by offering and performing a variety of functions and services. Some connect users to the internet, enable the processing of information and data, or host web-based services, including for user-generated content. Others aggregate information and enable searches; they give access to, host and index content and services designed and/or operated. Some facilitate the sale of goods and services, including audio-visual services, and enable other commercial transactions, including payments” (para. 4). Internet intermediaries may include, but are not limited to, social media platforms, search engines, as well as chatbots and other forms of generative artificial intelligence. See also Venice Commission and Directorate of Information Society and Action against Crime of the Directorate General of Human Rights and Rule of Law (DGI), CDL-AD(2019)016, Joint Report on Digital Technologies and Elections, para. 12.

84. Venice Commission, CDL-AD(2002)023rev2-cor, Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters, guideline I.2.3.b. The same applies to the “public facilities for electioneering purposes” mentioned in paras 18 and 19 of the Explanatory Report.

85. Venice Commission, CDL-AD(2002)023rev2-cor, Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters, guideline I.2.3.c.

86. In the case *Animal Defenders Intl v. UK*, Application No. 48876/08 (ECtHR, 22 April 2013), para. 119, the European Court of Human Rights considered coherent a distinction based on the particular influence of the broadcast media vis-à-vis newer media such as the Internet. In particular, the Court noted that the information emerging from the internet and social media did not have the same synchronicity or impact as broadcasted information, given the continuing function of radio and television as familiar sources of entertainment in the intimacy of the home and because of the choices inherent in the use of the internet and social media. See also Venice Commission, CDL-AD(2020)037, Study - Principles for a fundamental rights-compliant use of digital technologies in electoral processes, para. 65.

87. Venice Commission, CDL-AD(2002)023rev2-cor, Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters, paras 18 and 19.

by internet intermediaries, as well as to digital tools and artificial intelligence technologies to manage their campaigns.<sup>88</sup>

41. Additionally, fairness in content dissemination and access should be observed. Namely, regulations should be implemented to ensure that artificial intelligence algorithms by internet intermediaries do not favour certain parties or candidates over others, maintaining a balance in the visibility of electoral content. To this end, independent and ongoing audits of the artificial intelligence algorithms used in electoral campaigns should be enforced.

42. Regulating the funding of political parties and electoral campaigns remains an important factor in the regularity of the electoral process.<sup>89</sup> Funding of online activities must also be transparent.<sup>90</sup> Online electoral advertising must always be identified as such and must be transparent regarding the identity of its sponsor and the dissemination technique being used. Social media platforms should be required to consistently disclose data on political advertising and their sponsors.

43. Notwithstanding the foregoing, existing regulations on electoral campaigns in times of digital political advertising have turned out to be severely limited.<sup>91</sup> Spending by political parties on digital advertising may therefore be limited.<sup>92</sup> Banning certain forms of paid political advertising on social media during electoral periods may be an option, particularly when automated mass dissemination or micro-targeting techniques based on artificial intelligence are being employed.<sup>93</sup> The option to prohibit political parties and candidates from campaigning anonymously could also be justified.

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88. The Explanatory report to the Code states that “[i]n conformity with freedom of expression, legal provision should be made to *ensure that there is a minimum access to privately owned audiovisual media*, with regard to the election campaign and to advertising, for all participants in elections” [emphasis added]. See Venice Commission, CDL-AD(2002)023rev2-cor, Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters, para. 20.

89. Venice Commission, CDL-AD(2002)023rev2-cor, Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters, para. 107.

90. Venice Commission, CDL-AD(2002)023rev2-cor, Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters, para. 108.

91. See Venice Commission, CDL-AD(2020)037, Study - Principles for a fundamental rights-compliant use of digital technologies in electoral processes, para. 72.

92. Venice Commission, CDL-AD(2002)023rev2-cor, Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters, guideline I.2.3.e) and para. 21.

93. See Venice Commission, CDL-AD(2020)037, Study - Principles for a fundamental rights-compliant use of digital technologies in electoral processes, para. 68.

***The positive obligations of public authorities and the co-responsibility of private actors (see the Code, guidelines I.2.3.a and I.3.1.c)***

44. The State has an obligation to take effective steps to ensure a supportive environment for robust public debate, preventing and punishing infringements of the voters' freedom to form an opinion as well as for preventing inequality in media coverage during elections.<sup>94</sup> The fight against information disorders, including disinformation explicitly aimed at questioning or misleading about the basic aspects of electoral procedures, calls for regulation by the state and an independent body with adequate resources and powers to enforce such regulation.

45. Electoral integrity on the internet should be guaranteed on the basis of law, *inter alia* with specific rules against cyberthreats.<sup>95</sup> Electoral integrity can be defined as the set of norms, principles and values inherent to democratic elections and which apply to the entire electoral process. It is, in particular, the ethical behaviour of all electoral actors as well as the respect of the principles of equity, transparency and accountability during the entire electoral process.

46. A regulation aimed at removing content that could be considered distortions of freedom of speech, such as false information and hate speech, would in principle appear justified. However, collaboration with internet intermediaries and monitoring of dissemination techniques may be appropriate measures,

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94. See, respectively, Venice Commission, CDL-AD(2002)023rev2-cor, Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters, paras 26 and 19 to 21. Similarly, art. 5.2 of the Council of Europe's Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence states that "[e]ach Party shall adopt or maintain measures that seek to protect its democratic processes in the context of activities within the lifecycle of artificial intelligence systems, including individuals' fair access to and participation in public debate, as well as *their ability to freely form opinions*" [emphasis added]. The Explanatory Report identifies examples of risks posed by artificial intelligence to democratic institutions and process, including to "political pluralism [...] and fair access to and participation in public debate" as well as to "participation in democratic processes through free and fair elections, and a plurality of forms of meaningful civil and political participation", paras 46.d) and e), respectively. Based on these risks, examples of such obligations are suggested, such as "general cybersecurity measures against malicious foreign interference in the electoral process or measures to address the spreading of misinformation and disinformation", para. 47.

95. On international cybersecurity standards, see the Council of Europe's Convention on Cybercrime (ETS No. 185) and particularly the T-CY Guidance Note #9 on aspects of election interference by means of computer systems covered by the Budapest Convention, adopted by the Cybercrime Convention Committee (T-CY). See also Venice Commission, CDL-AD(2020)037, Study - Principles for a fundamental rights-compliant use of digital technologies in electoral processes, principle 5.



avoiding content regulation that may endanger freedom of expression. Providing for criminal sanctions may be justified to deal with the most serious cases.

47. New means to deal with these challenges may need to be employed as well, such as fact-checking, media literacy programmes, or investments in quality journalism.<sup>96</sup> Voter education programmes are also one of the main programmes to be put in place.<sup>97</sup>

48. An independent body should be mandated with the enforcement of these regulations and the implementations of these programmes. This body should have adequate resources and powers to implement their mandate and act speedily.<sup>98</sup>

49. Despite the above, enforcement of national regulations may be hampered by the universality of the Internet, understood as its capacity to affect wherever people are located.<sup>99</sup> Therefore, cooperation between different public authorities, including across borders, ought to be strengthened.<sup>100</sup> Particular attention should be paid to cooperation between national authorities and international organisations, as well as with International Election Observation Missions.

50. State authorities will also need the cooperation of both citizenry and internet corporations.<sup>101</sup> Provisions should be established to ensure the cooperation of internet intermediaries with governments in implementing these rules and programmes. For example, a competent impartial electoral management body or other impartial authority should be empowered to require private

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96. See Venice Commission and Directorate of Information Society and Action against Crime of the Directorate General of Human Rights and Rule of Law (DGI), CDL-AD(2019)016, Joint Report on Digital Technologies and Elections, para. 138.

97. See, for example, Venice Commission, CDL-AD(2020)037, Study - Principles for a fundamental rights-compliant use of digital technologies in electoral processes, paras 92 and 93. See also the Regulation (EU) 2024/900 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 March 2024 on the transparency and targeting of political advertising, para. 4.

98. Venice Commission, CDL-AD(2020)037, Study - Principles for a fundamental rights-compliant use of digital technologies in electoral processes, principle 2 (paras 55-58).

99. The universality of the Internet has also been referred to as the transnational, extraterritorial, and timeless nature of digital technologies. See Venice Commission, CDL-AD(2020)037, Study - Principles for a fundamental rights-compliant use of digital technologies in electoral processes, paras 32-37 and 83.

100. See, for example, Venice Commission, CDL-AD(2020)037, Study - Principles for a fundamental rights-compliant use of digital technologies in electoral processes, paras 87 and 88.

101. See Venice Commission and Directorate of Information Society and Action against Crime of the Directorate General of Human Rights and Rule of Law (DGI), CDL-AD(2019)016, Joint Report on Digital Technologies and Elections, para. 138.

companies to remove clearly defined content from the internet, based on electoral laws and in line with international standards.<sup>102</sup> Cooperation should also be ensured among internet intermediaries, as well as with academia and civil society.

51. Distinguishing the responsibilities of platforms according to their dimension, increasing their responsibilities to the extent that their dimension is bigger, may appear necessary even if we refer to electoral matters.

52. Since digital technologies and artificial intelligence carry risks throughout the entire electoral process, and may even erode public trust, these positive obligations should not be constrained to the campaign period so as to safeguard the integrity of the election as a whole.

***Respect for fundamental rights (see the Code, guideline II.1)***

53. The positive responsibility of the State to prevent undue interference with the principles of the European electoral heritage must not lead to undue state intervention.<sup>103</sup>

54. Democratic elections are not possible without respect for *inter alia* freedom of expression, including media freedom.<sup>104</sup>

55. Any restrictions on the operation of internet intermediaries are only permissible to the extent that they have a basis in law, are necessary, in the public interest, and comply with the principle of proportionality.<sup>105</sup> Any such restrictions on the operation of websites, blogs or any other Internet-based, electronic or other such information-dissemination system, including systems to support

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102. See Venice Commission, CDL-AD(2020)037, Study - Principles for a fundamental rights-compliant use of digital technologies in electoral processes, principle 2 (paras 55-58).

103. See Venice Commission and Directorate of Information Society and Action against Crime of the Directorate General of Human Rights and Rule of Law (DGI), CDL-AD(2019)016, Joint Report on Digital Technologies and Elections, para. 136.

104. Venice Commission, CDL-AD(2002)023rev2-cor, Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters, guideline II.1.a, which refers to freedom of expression and of the press.

105. Venice Commission, CDL-AD(2002)023rev2-cor, Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters, guideline II.1.b. In the case of data protection regulations, for example, article 11 of the modernised Convention 108 also stresses that lawful restrictions must respect the essence of fundamental rights and freedoms and constitute a necessary and proportionate measure in a democratic society.

such communication, such as Internet service providers or search engines, are only permissible to the extent that they are compatible with guideline II.1.b.<sup>106</sup>

56. Permissible restrictions generally should be content-specific. Generic bans on the operation of certain sites and systems are not compatible with the provisions of the European electoral heritage.<sup>107</sup> It is also inconsistent with these provisions to prohibit a site or an information-dissemination system from publishing material solely on the basis that it may be critical of the government, or the political social system espoused by the government. However, in case the webpage or system is managed by a foreign entity and has on many occasions disseminated false information aimed at influencing the election results, a general ban could be acceptable.

57. Sanctions should be imposed by an impartial body and subject to an effective system of appeal.<sup>108</sup>

### ***Specific provisions on the use of digital technologies by Election Management Bodies***

58. Nothing in the Code nor in this interpretative declaration prevents the introduction of digital technologies in elections, including artificial intelligence. Digital technologies may actually be used to ensure the respect for the freedom of voters to form an opinion and the principle of equality of opportunity by the media and by internet intermediaries. The following possibilities are just a few examples: the use of artificial intelligence could be considered to tackle the dissemination of false information in political campaigns through the possibility of performing real-time information reviews in an accessible manner; to answer citizens' questions about the electoral process, the electoral rules,

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106. Namely, that "Restrictions of these freedoms [namely, freedom of expression and of the press, freedom of circulation inside the country, freedom of assembly and freedom of association for political purposes, including the creation of political parties] must have a basis in law, be in the public interest and comply with the principle of proportionality."

107. See Venice Commission and Directorate of Information Society and Action against Crime of the Directorate General of Human Rights and Rule of Law (DGI), CDL-AD(2019)016, Joint Report on Digital Technologies and Elections, para. 137.

108. Venice Commission, CDL-AD(2002)023rev2-cor, Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters, guidelines II.3.1 and II.3.3 as well as para. 19. See also Venice Commission and Directorate of Information Society and Action against Crime of the Directorate General of Human Rights and Rule of Law (DGI), CDL-AD(2019)016, Joint Report on Digital Technologies and Elections, para. 137, and Venice Commission, CDL-AD(2020)037, Study - Principles for a fundamental rights-compliant use of digital technologies in electoral processes, principle 2 (paras 55-58).

on ways to exercise the right to vote, etc; and support election administrations in ancillary processes, such as voter registration.

59. In this context, a distinction should be made between rules addressed to designers and providers of digital technologies in elections, including artificial intelligence, and those addressed to electoral management bodies using these technologies. The latter are subject to much stricter standards, including all those applicable under the rule of law. Election management bodies should therefore adhere to the previous provisions in the interpretative declaration and, additionally, to those detailed in this section.

60. Election management bodies should comply with additional standards and requirements as new insights emerge about the impact of digital technologies and artificial intelligence in electoral processes.<sup>109</sup> The adoption of digital technologies and artificial intelligence tools by electoral management bodies should respect the rule of law principles related to, *inter alia*, transparency, accountability, and responsibility in the decision-making process regarding the purchase, implementation, monitoring, and use of digital technologies and artificial intelligence.

61. The Venice Commission has consistently expressed the view that any successful changes to electoral legislation and practice should be built on at least the following three essential elements: 1) a clear and comprehensive legislation that meets international obligations and standards and addresses prior recommendations; 2) the adoption and enforcement of legislation, including on digital technologies and artificial intelligence, by broad consensus after extensive public consultations with all relevant stakeholders; and 3) the political commitment to fully implement such legislation in good faith when using digital technologies and artificial intelligence, with adequate procedural and judicial safeguards and means by which to timely evaluate any alleged failure to do so.

62. The Code already states that electronic voting methods should only be used when they are secure, reliable, and transparent.<sup>110</sup> Additionally, the

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109. *Inter alia*, and without prejudging on-going work on its update, those standards and requirements stemming from the Rule of Law Checklist. See Venice Commission, CDL-AD(2016)007, Rule of Law Checklist.

110. The Code states that systems are secure if they can withstand deliberate attacks and that they are reliable if they can function on their own, irrespective of any shortcomings in the hardware or software (Venice Commission, CDL-AD(2002)023rev2-cor, Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters, para. 43). According to the Code, it should also be possible to check that the system is functioning properly (Venice Commission, CDL-AD(2002)023rev2-cor, Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters, para. 44).

use of digital technologies and artificial intelligence should be made in full respect of the principles of individual autonomy,<sup>111</sup> privacy,<sup>112</sup> equality, and non-discrimination.<sup>113</sup> These requirements should apply to any technology used by the election authorities throughout the electoral cycle, including digital electoral registers.<sup>114</sup> Additional requirements may apply to different technologies.<sup>115</sup>

63. A problem observed in the development of artificial intelligence involves the fact that this technology has shown biases related to ethnicity, nationality, sexual orientation, and gender identity, to name just a few examples. The development of artificial intelligence should therefore be done in a way that

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111. Individual autonomy is enshrined in art. 7 of the Council of Europe's Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence (CETS 225). According to the Explanatory Report to the Council of Europe's Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence, "[i]ndividual autonomy is one important aspect of human dignity and refers to the capacity of individuals for self-determination; that is, their ability to make choices and decisions, including without coercion, and live their lives freely. In the context of artificial intelligence, individual autonomy requires that individuals have control over the use and impact of artificial intelligence technologies in their lives, and that their agency and autonomy are not thereby diminished", para. 55).
  112. The right to privacy is enshrined in art. 8 of the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (ETS No. 005), most known as the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). In the electoral context, it is closely connected the principle of secret suffrage (see Venice Commission, CDL-AD(2002)023rev2-cor, Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters, guidelines I.4). International obligations on data protection are also related to the right to privacy (see paras 37-38 above).
  113. The prohibition of discrimination is enshrined in art. 14 of the ECHR.
  114. Other Council of Europe's standards on the use of digital technologies in electoral processes have also similarly broadened their material scope. For example, the scope of the Recommendation Rec(2004)11 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on legal, operational and technical standards for e-voting was broadened in the updated Recommendation CM/Rec(2017)5 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on standards for e-voting from "an e-election or e-referendum that involves the use of electronic means in at least the casting of the vote" to "the use of electronic means to cast and/or count the vote". In turn, the recently adopted Committee of Ministers' Guidelines on the use of information and communication technology (ICT) in electoral processes in Council of Europe member States "cover the use of ICT solutions by, or on behalf of, the relevant electoral authorities, in all the stages of the electoral process except e-voting and e-counting".
  115. See the above-mentioned recommendations and guidelines. See also the Guidelines on the protection of individuals with regard to the processing of personal data for the purpose of voter registration and authentication as well as the paper on Sensitive Personal Data, Biometrics, and the Registration and Authentication of Voters: The Application of Council of Europe Convention 108, which have been adopted by the Consultative Committee of the Convention for the Protection of Individuals with regard to Automatic Processing of Personal Data. In the case of artificial intelligence, due account should be taken of transparency-related aspects, such as explainability and interpretability (Explanatory Report to the Council of Europe's Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence, paras 60-61).

discrimination is avoided, especially if these are based on political affiliation, as they would jeopardise the principles of impartiality and neutrality in the administration of the electoral process.

64. In order to comply with the principle of universal suffrage, the user interface of digital systems shall be easy to understand and use by all voters and the systems shall be designed, as far as is practicable, to enable persons with disabilities and special needs to use them independently.<sup>116</sup> Unless digital channels are universally accessible, they shall be only an additional and optional means.<sup>117</sup>

65. Due to the rapid evolution of technical solutions, especially artificial intelligence, the integrity and security of election technologies should be addressed with special care. As risks change rapidly, special procedures for risk assessment and risk management should be set-up and updated regularly.

66. There is also a threat that digital technologies and artificial intelligence may be used in a biased way to control the actions of opposition parties and leave the government parties' actions out of the scope of similar controls.

67. The procedural guarantees in the Code should therefore especially be observed when election technologies are used. Specific new provisions may need to be foreseen in the regulatory framework to mitigate any potential threats.

a. The impartiality, independence and professionalism of election management bodies are essential when digital technologies imply more tasks and their centralisation in these bodies, who should be accountable for how

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116. Standards 1 and 2 of the CM/Rec(2017)5 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on standards for e-voting, and guideline 2 of the Committee of Ministers' Guidelines on the use of information and communication technology (ICT) in electoral processes in Council of Europe member States.

117. Standard 3 of the CM/Rec(2017)5 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on standards for e-voting, and guideline 3 of the Committee of Ministers' Guidelines on the use of information and communication technology (ICT) in electoral processes in Council of Europe member States.

they are used.<sup>118</sup> In turn, election authorities will also need the cooperation of cybersecurity, data protection, and law-enforcement agencies, as well as citizen organisations and corporations.

b. Election management bodies should disclose the use of digital technologies, including algorithms and artificial intelligence systems. Legislation should contain clear rules on how far observers have access to digital systems or algorithms. Even though digital technologies and artificial intelligence systems are continuously developing and so are continuously changing the security mechanisms and needs, electoral legislation should provide, in a manner as detailed as possible, which data is publicly accessible. Observation missions, in turn, should consider incorporating specialists and resources dedicated to addressing these specific issues within their teams.

c. If public access to some of the processes or content of digital systems is limited due to security reasons, independent auditing should be foreseen. The conclusions of such audits should be public.

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118. The principle of accountability is not originally stated in the Code but is common in international standards on digital technologies. For example, under the modernised Convention 108, accountability is understood as the responsibility for and ability to demonstrate compliance with legal provisions (art. 10(1)). The Explanatory Report to the Council of Europe's Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence refers to this principle as the "need to provide mechanisms in order for individuals, organisations, or entities responsible for the activities within the lifecycle of artificial intelligence systems to be answerable for the adverse impacts on human rights, democracy or the rule of law resulting from the activities within the lifecycle of those systems" (para. 66). Overall, it is understood that "[t]his principle emphasises the need for clear lines of responsibility and the ability to trace actions and decisions back to specific individuals or entities in a way that recognises the diversity of the relevant actors and their roles and responsibilities" (Explanatory Report to the Council of Europe's Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence, para. 68). In the specific case of digital election technologies, no specific definition of accountability is yet provided. However, under Recommendation CM/Rec(2017)5 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on standards for e-voting accountability requirements for Member States are outlined, including: developing and updating technical, evaluation, and certification standards to reflect legal and democratic principles; ensuring independent evaluations of e-voting systems before introduction and after significant changes; issuing clear certificates that identify evaluation subjects and include safeguards against modifications; and maintaining an open, comprehensive audit system for e-voting to actively report potential issues (paras 36-39). In turn, the Committee of Ministers' Guidelines on the use of information and communication technology (ICT) in electoral processes in Council of Europe member States states that "it should be possible to make someone accountable if unauthorised changes or errors occur. It is essential to provide for an accountable and transparent procedure concerning how to interact with a running system, correct any data, or change or replace a malfunctioning system. Interacting with a running system for such purposes should be addressed in the risk analyses" (guideline 4).

## Venice Commission

DG-I, Council of Europe – 67075 Strasbourg Cedex, France

Tel.: +33 3 88 41 20 67 – Fax: +33 3 88 41 37 38

E-mail: [venice@coe.int](mailto:venice@coe.int)

[www.venice.coe.int](http://www.venice.coe.int)

**[www.coe.int](http://www.coe.int)**

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