

Democratization

ISSN: 1351-0347 (Print) 1743-890X (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/fdem20

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To cite this article: Toby S. James & Holly Ann Garnett (05 Sep 2025): Electoral integrity resilience: protecting elections during global risks, crises, and emergencies, *Democratization*, DOI: [10.1080/13510347.2025.2551075](https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2025.2551075)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2025.2551075>



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Electoral integrity resilience: protecting elections during global risks, crises, and emergencies

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ABSTRACT

Emergency situations caused by natural and technological hazards have often been thought to pose a major threat to democratic practices. This article introduces the concept of electoral integrity resilience as the configuration of actors, resources and properties which enable societies to adapt to an external shock which could damage electoral integrity. The COVID-19 pandemic was a critical case which was thought to pose as a major threat to election quality and democracy worldwide. Although there have been many country-specific studies of the effects of the pandemic, cross-national analysis has been limited due to the unavailability of data. The article uses a new original dataset to identify the properties of polities which had the greatest electoral integrity resilience to the pandemic. The findings point to the importance of overall democratic quality, but also EMB capacity and the availability of multiple methods of voting as key aspects of electoral integrity resilience. These are proposed as key components for investment if countries want to build their electoral integrity resilience ahead of forthcoming crises and emergencies. The article has important lessons for the study and praxis of how future national and global risks can be prepared for – and the construction of resilient institutions.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 1 March 2025; Accepted 19 August 2025

KEYWORDS Electoral integrity; crisis management; democratic backsliding; COVID-19; global risks

Introduction

Emergency situations caused by natural and technological hazards have often been thought to pose a major threat to democratic practices and institutions, including elections. They could potentially provide cover for would-be autocrats to suspend human rights and divert public resources for private gain. They could also make elections much more logistically difficult to administer given limited resources and immediate

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 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2025.2551075>.

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humanitarian threats. Despite this, relatively little research exists on the impact of these situations on democracy and the factors that might enable polities to withstand any new pressures. Studies have begun to explore the effects of climate change and emergencies but tend to focus only on specific national contexts rather than study the phenomenon cross-nationally.¹ There is an absence of wider conceptualization of the factors which contribute toward societal resilience to protect electoral integrity during emergencies. However, this is a pressing concern given forecasts of global challenges such as climate change and perma-pandemics, alongside digital, political and socio-economic risks.²

The COVID-19 pandemic that commenced in 2020 was thought to pose a devastating threat to democracy and democratic institutions. At a time when there were already widespread concerns about democratic backsliding, the pandemic risked causing “pandemic backsliding” because of the suspended human rights, election postponements and compromised election quality according to many commentaries at the time.³ However, the pandemic also saw major national and international efforts to accommodate elections to the pandemic. Many countries invested heavily in personal protective equipment for staff and citizens, encouraged the expansion of postal voting and postponed elections until it was deemed safer to hold them.⁴ The COVID-19 pandemic is therefore a critical case for testing and researching the resilience factors that enabled strong elections to still be delivered successfully.

Which factors contributed towards societal resilience to protect electoral integrity during the pandemic? This article addresses this question by developing the concept of electoral integrity resilience and identifying the key components of electoral integrity resilience through an original dataset of expert perceptions of electoral integrity, covering the period of 2020–2022. It finds that pandemic electoral integrity was most influenced by the quality of liberal democracy and GDP in a country, but also that it could be strengthened through alternative voting mechanisms, safe polling stations, and better resourced EMBs. Each of these findings have important academic and policy lessons for protecting elections into the future, during an era of increased global challenges.

This article begins in section two with a review of the literature on election quality and the extent to which it has considered elections during emergency situations caused by natural and technological hazards. Section three introduces the concepts of electoral integrity and electoral integrity resilience which are used in this study. This leads to some hypotheses about the factors which could enable electoral integrity resilience in section four. Section five outlines the empirical strategy involved. Section six provides the results and analysis. Section seven provides the conclusion.

Existing research on election quality and emergency situations

Research on the quality of democracy has long been a cornerstone topic of social science research.⁵ The literature on election quality was slower to develop, but there have been major advances in the post-Cold War period, which has expanded understandings of the concept, its determinants and consequences. Jorgen Elklit and Palle Svensson noted that there was often blurriness in the definitions of “free and fair elections” used by international organizations and proposed a checklist for election assessment.⁶ This was advanced in later work with Andrew Reynolds.⁷ According to Sarah Birch,⁸ subsequent literature then tended to either define election quality either by a legal approach (whether the laws of the country has been broken), a sociological approach (whether the citizens of the country felt that there had been violations of

electoral practices) an international norms approach (whether international norms and best practices had been ignored) or through democratic theory (evaluating whether elections had violated key democratic principles). Sarah Birch used the latter approach and argued that elections were a vehicle for collective policy choice. Good elections should ensure the three principles of inclusiveness, policy-directed voting, and effective aggregation. Meanwhile, Pippa Norris in her volume on *Why Electoral Integrity Matters*⁹ and subsequent volumes on *Why Elections Fail*¹⁰ and *Strengthening Electoral Integrity*,¹¹ defined electoral integrity in terms of whether international standards and norms were complied with. The literature has subsequently expanded considerably in areas such as the causes of electoral malpractices,¹² how election quality can be improved¹³ and debates about election quality measurement.¹⁴

Emergency situations caused by natural and technological hazards have often been thought to pose a major threat to human life and development goals. The COVID-19 pandemic had far reaching effects including the death, and long-term illness, of millions of citizens, problems with food insecurity,¹⁵ resource conflicts,¹⁶ mental health challenges,¹⁷ problems delivering international aid¹⁸ and had significant effects on the poor.¹⁹ The provision of public services and democratic practices were also likely to be profoundly shaped, but there was little existing knowledge at the start of the pandemic about how this would occur.

Prior to the pandemic very little was known about the effects of emergency situations on elections. Hafner-Burton, Helfer et al.²⁰ noted that despite human rights treaties seeking to minimize violations during emergencies, civil and political liberties were often suspended during emergencies – and argued that this was a rational response to domestic political uncertainty.²¹ Analyses existed on the scope and jurisdiction of international law during emergencies.²² Very little was known about the postponement of elections as countries were grappling with whether to still hold their contests. Prior to the pandemic, there had been only the occasional publication on the topic – such as a review of US state practices on emergency provisions²³ and research on the effects of Nigerian presidential postponement on the financial markets in Nigeria.²⁴ But the topic had not been given serious consideration.

There is a rich literature on voter turnout, but much less was known about voter turnout and natural disasters. Research is beginning to explore the effects of floods and other climate change related disasters. The floods in Calgary in 2016 were not thought to have affected turnout when compared to flood-affected areas by Bodet, Thomas et al.²⁵ However, examining the 2006 mayoral election in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina, Sinclair, Hall et al. found that flood levels did affect participation.²⁶ Sarah Birch found that flooding has affected electoral outcomes in the UK.²⁷ Extreme weather situations are also thought to enable the growth of clientelist relations as incumbents use the situation for partisan advantage.²⁸

Research on the effects of the pandemic on elections expanded very quickly. Early research raised concerns that electoral integrity would be affected by the pandemic, based on the experience of previous emergency situations. It was anticipated that voter turnout might be lower as citizens would be concerned about catching the virus; electoral officials might struggle with the recruitment of poll workers; and campaigning would be likely to be affected.²⁹ Researchers considered whether special voting arrangements should be adopted based on prior research on those voting arrangements. Postal voting was widely advised as a way to reduce the chances of spreading the virus and allowing elections to take place, but concerns about

implementing it with hastily drafted legislation in countries without prior experience of postal voting were raised.³⁰ A rapid move to Internet voting was considered “ugly, and infeasible, option in the short term but it does represent a good system for consideration for a long-lasting solution.”³¹ The impending US Presidential 2020 election received considerable attention given the importance of the contest, so detailed provisions were recommended by scholars.³² Globally, scholars also collaborated with international organizations to make recommendations based on past crises.³³

What impact did the pandemic eventually have on elections? There have been many historical-descriptive country-based case studies published on this topic. The International IDEA and the Electoral Integrity Project published 24 qualitative country case studies looking at what measures were put in place and how effective they were.³⁴ This included case study resources on the first pandemic elections – such as in South Korea.³⁵ There have also been other country-level studies which have noted the effects of the pandemic on elections and national³⁶ or regional responses.³⁷ Research looking at individual country studies have explored topics such as whether voter turnout was affected,³⁸ whether voting behaviour change,³⁹ women’s candidacy⁴⁰ whether elections increased COVID cases⁴¹ and possible safety planning measures.⁴² The effects of the pandemic on election observation has also been considered – noting that scrutiny of elections became much harder.⁴³

There have, however, been few cross-national studies about the effects of the pandemic on electoral integrity – partly owing to the unavailability of comparative data. James, Clark et al.⁴⁴ used news sources collected by International IDEA in real time to track the interactions between election postponement, turnout, election observation and other topics. The Varieties of Democracy project tracked whether there was any overall democratic backsliding during the pandemic, but did not focus on electoral integrity.⁴⁵ However, studies have tended to focus predominately on the issue of turnout. Elsewhere Lee has examined the factors likely to shape the decision to postpone the election.⁴⁶ However, given the centrality of the topic for elections, democracy and development, there remains a major gap in the research to be explored.

Concepts & measures

Electoral integrity

This article seeks to identify the properties of polities which had the greatest electoral integrity resilience in the pandemic. It is therefore necessary to define electoral integrity. There are a variety of approaches to defining electoral integrity such as compliance with international standards,⁴⁷ mass perceptions, compliance with national laws⁴⁸ or normative democratic theory.⁴⁹ We use the approach, set out by James and Garnett,⁵⁰ that elections are held to help deliver democracy. Democracy is defined, under this approach, in terms as “a societal system where preconditions exist to fully empower all citizens to realize their individual capabilities and there no group inequalities in power.”⁵¹ This approach to defining democracy is also broader than minimalist definitions which define democracy purely in terms of elections.⁵² There are several preconditions (such as constitutional protections, public administration which is free from corruption and basic health/education) necessary to ensure democracy for the everyday citizen. Elections are key, as mechanisms for enabling citizens to express their voice, empowering citizens over other actors such as autocrats and party

barons and enabling group inequalities to be addressed. However, elections can also disempower citizens if they are riddled with electoral malpractices since they can be used by autocrats to legitimise their rule. James and Garnett therefore define electoral integrity as “a set of principles to be achieved in elections which empower the everyday citizen and help to realize the ideals of democracy.”⁵³ The approach holds that there are four principles of electoral integrity outlined below act as mechanisms to empower people and contribute towards group equality:⁵⁴

- *Contestation* – all groups, individuals and parties to compete in the election in a fair environment.
- *Participation* – there is wide and even participation across the whole population.
- *Deliberation* – debate is led by evidence, seeks consensus and is free from hate and discrimination.
- *Adjudication* – elections are conducted in line with the law, laws are designed fairly, and there are clear processes for raising and dealing with complaints.

The key advantage of an approach based on normative political theory, rather than international standards and international norms, is that the latter may be shaped by power politics. There is no philosophical guarantee that the international norms or national laws are themselves virtuous. A further advantage of this approach is that it incorporates the deliberative aspects of democracy and adjudicatory aspects of democracy which is not found in minimalist approaches such as Dahl’s work which only focuses on participation and contestation.

Electoral integrity resilience

Based on the literature on electoral integrity and natural hazards, we anticipate that elections around the world would be affected by the pandemic. We hypothesize, however, that the pandemic did not influence all elections equally – or all parts of the electoral process evenly. We therefore ask: which factors led to differences in the impact of the pandemic on electoral integrity? Epidemiological viruses themselves do not cause changes in social phenomenon alone. Rather, a virus has emergent properties which then interacts with humans and human activities.⁵⁵ It caused the loss of life and long-term health issues for millions – but also caused humans to strategically change their behaviour. This may in turn cause institutions to change and resources to be reallocated. We might expect the interaction of the virus with humans to have a significant causal effect on electoral integrity, but any change will also be contingent on the interaction with social systems and their properties. In this article we suggest the concept of *electoral integrity resilience* to refer to the *configuration of societal actors, resources and properties which enable a state to adapt successfully to an external shock which could damage electoral integrity*. The presence of these materials does not guarantee resilience because it is also dependent on human agency – the decisions made by key actors such as the EMB, political leaders, parties and other stakeholders. Political leaders may have the sufficient resources to respond to an emergency to protect election, but fail to do so through mismanagement. However, the materials strengthen the ability of country to protect electoral integrity in an emergency situation.

The concept of resilience is widely used in literatures such as individual human well-being resilience, as well as organizational studies and planning. There is no

unified definition. In the context of individual well-being, it been defined by the American Psychological Association as “successfully adapting to difficult or challenging life experiences, especially through mental, emotional, and behavioural flexibility and adjustment to external and internal demands.”⁵⁶ However, there are often competing ideas about whether it is a trait, a process, or an outcome.⁵⁷ It is common to use the metaphor that individuals draw from a pool of resources to make them resilient – a pool which can become depleted over time, which means that varying levels of resilience can be found.⁵⁸ Elsewhere, “engineering” resilience has been defined as “the elastic and reversionary capacities of a system to return to pre-stimulus level of operational performance and material quality, which may ultimately lead to adaptive and maladaptive outcomes.”⁵⁹ Resilience has been argued to be essential to understanding how societies have responded to the pandemic. Haldane, De Foo et al. use a health systems resilience framework to examine how countries responded to the pandemic.⁶⁰ They report that the determinants of resilience included the method of health service delivery, governance, workforce, and medical products/technologies. There has also been a growth in the literature on public sector organizational resilience.⁶¹

In the field of democratization, Boese, Edgell et al. use the concept of democratic resilience in their framework designed to understand autocratization.⁶² For them, this is a two-stage process. In the first stage – onset resilience – some countries are resilient by preventing any aspect of autocratization. Onset resilience may sometimes fail, however, and democracies may see some democratic backsliding. A country may then experience full democratic breakdown, but some show resilience and are able to resist autocratization. Elsewhere, Merkel and Lührmann conceptualize democratic resilience as the “the ability of a political regime to prevent or react to challenges without losing its democratic character.”⁶³ They encourage a focus on (i) rules and institutions (relationships between judicial, legislative, and executive branches) (ii) political party structures and (iii) civic culture and civil society; and (iv) the political community of citizens.⁶⁴ There has not been a literature on the specific socio-administrative features of national polities that makes their election quality resilient in the face of global shocks – and this has not been developed with the use of cross-national data.

In this article we therefore differentiate between polities that are *institutionally rich in resilience materials*. This would provide these societies with the range of resources that enables them to adapt electoral processes to the pandemic – but also a set of checks and balances which prevents the pandemic being politically exploited. At the other end of the continuum, there are those societies which are *institutionally poor in resilience materials*. These societies may have relatively low level of resources and there are also fewer mechanisms to prevent partisan actors manipulating the situation to compromise electoral integrity.

What then are likely to be the characteristics of social systems which are able institutionally rich in resilience materials to respond to external shocks such as a pandemic? By contrast, which systems are inherently more fragile and likely to see electoral integrity suffer? What is the mix of resources and institutions which protect electoral quality? Our major research question therefore asks: *what factors contributed towards societal resilience to protect electoral integrity during the pandemic?*

We hypothesize four potential factors, either exogenous and/or endogenous to the societal system. Exogenous shocks are causes of potential change which are external to the theoretical model or conceptual language being used. COVID-19 can be considered an exogenous shock in that epidemiological viruses are not hereto

conventionally been treated a factor determining the quality of electoral integrity.⁶⁵ There are also the endogenous factors to societal systems which comprise the resilience resources.

Figure 1 presents the theoretical model which may have wider application to other threats to elections (such as climatic shocks). The initial epidemiological shock is presented on the left. The characteristics of the shock will include the scale, timing and geographical location. The scale may be high with a large number of people affected by a pandemic. The timing of the shock might be more significant if it is close to election day – or another important electoral event such as a voter registration day. The location may be more significant if it is in areas where central electoral offices are located which could hinder election co-ordination.

The model proposes that there might be four key electoral integrity resilience resources – each of which are discussed in next section. These factors enable social systems to adapt better and reduce the effect of the pandemic on electoral integrity. These resources do not automatically protect elections. They can be enable actors to adapt elections to a new environment – for better or worse. A would-be autocrats may use them to exploit a strategic opportunity offered by the exogenous shock. A civic minded electoral administrator might find that the voting procedures and plentiful resources enable them to adapt elections – or that they require little adaptation. These actors are embedded in formal institutions such as parliaments, cabinets and constitutions. The structure of these institutions may also be important for how societies are able to respond to emergencies in order to protect elections.

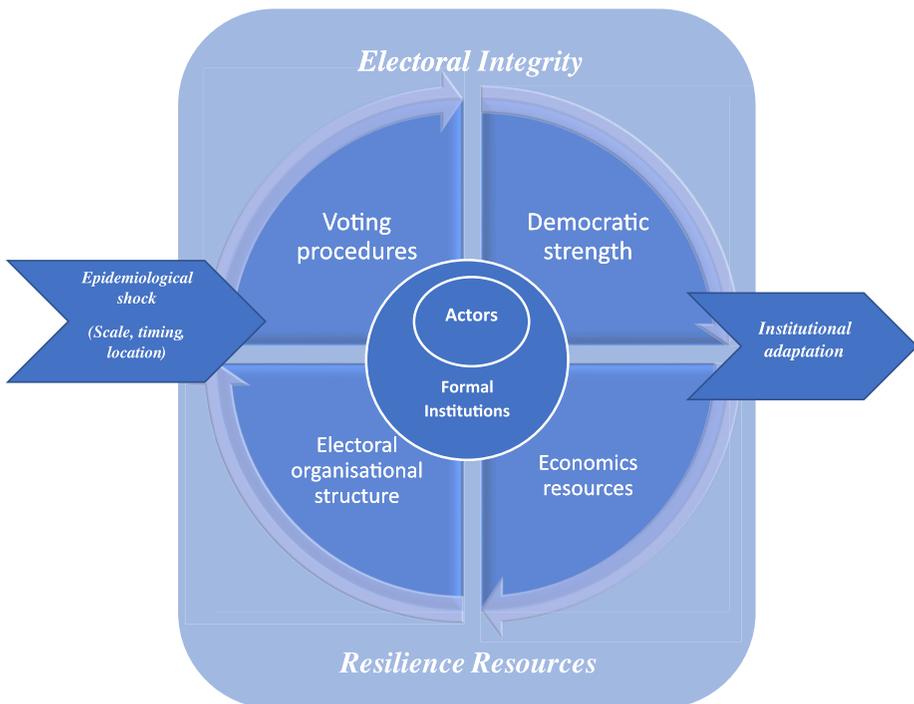


Figure 1. Conceptualizing electoral integrity resilience.

Hypotheses

We now seek to empirically examine the importance of the components of the model with hypotheses about the factors that influenced the resiliency of elections to the external shock of the COVID-19 pandemic. The dependent variable here is not the overall quality of elections since we know electoral integrity is influenced by a host of factors. Instead, we are examining the resiliency of election quality to this epidemiological shock.

Factor 1: liberal democratic strength

One likely factor to influence electoral integrity resilience is the underlying level of democracy. We expect that democracies would be better positioned to respond to the pandemic and preserve electoral integrity for two reasons. Firstly, the greater scrutiny and accountability inherent to democracy may act as protective mechanisms to ensure that the polls are made pandemic proof. A free media is more likely to raise alarm bells if electoral integrity is compromised – and this threat can incentive decision-makers to protect electoral integrity. Politicians are also more likely to abide by the informal rules of the game and observe democratic norms.

However, there is a case that it will be autocracies where electoral integrity is more at risk. In autocracies, autocrats may choose from a menu of manipulation⁶⁶ and the pandemic would provide cover for such tactics to be deployed. Hence:

- H1: Electoral integrity resilience will be lower in autocracies during the pandemic.

Factor 2: economic resources

Resilience is likely to be greater where a country's GDP per capita is higher. Economic wealth should help whether the storm and provide a pool of resources, with which problems can be addressed. It would enable the state to purchase additional equipment to replace materials that have become inaccessible because of supply chain problems – or provide equipment such as Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to make polling stations safe for election staff and voters. Across many other policy areas, the pandemic was reported to have exaggerated inequalities between countries.⁶⁷ Hence, we would expect:

- H2: Electoral integrity resilience will be lower when GDP per capita is lower.

Factor 3: organizational structures

The capacity of electoral management bodies (“EMBs”) has been shown to be an important determinant in shaping the quality of the delivery of the polls.⁶⁸ When it comes to a pandemic, this organizational capacity should play a key role in enabling EMBs to still deliver high quality elections.

EMB autonomy has also been found to be a driver of electoral integrity and should therefore be considered as a possible source of institutional adaptation. However, there is also a literature on how autonomy can enable other public organizations to adapt to emergency situations. Health authorities with greater autonomy were argued to be able to adapt quicker and more freely.⁶⁹ The same may therefore apply to electoral bodies.

- H3a: Electoral integrity resilience will be lower when EMB capacity is lower.
- H3b: Electoral integrity resilience will be lower when EMB autonomy is lower.

Factor 4: voting procedures

A greater diversity of voting methods should contribute towards resilience. Those countries that provide only one method for voting will be likely to be more compromised by emergency events. Requiring citizens to vote in person, for example, is likely to be problematic if they have COVID-19 on the day of the election. The provision of special voting arrangements such as postal voting, proxy voting and early voting may protect the polls from the negative effects of the pandemic. Many countries spent considerable time and resource looking to expand the number of voting methods available. By contrast, others would have not need to have exerted such efforts reforming laws and revising practices.

Other procedures would also be likely to have played a role. We would also expect that countries which had procedures which supported vulnerable citizens, ensured safety at polling stations, had sufficient poll worker numbers, safety for poll workers, and sufficiently resourced EMBs would be better positioned to weather the storm posed by the pandemic. These procedures may have existed prior to the pandemic – but may have been put in place during it. For example, personal protection equipment would not have been used prior to the pandemic. These would act to protect electoral integrity by protecting participation – one of the key components of electoral integrity. Hence:

- H4a: Electoral integrity resilience will be lower when there are fewer possible methods to vote.
- H4b: Electoral integrity resilience will be lower when there are fewer procedural supports to voters.

Method

Data

The main source of data used was an expert survey of electoral integrity.⁷⁰ The Perceptions of Electoral Integrity (“PEI”) dataset contains data collected from mid-2012 to 2022, capturing the quality of elections on an 11-stage electoral cycle, including a variety of specific questions relating to the conduct of elections, from electoral laws and management to the campaign environment. These data are captured for each national-level election.⁷¹

During the pandemic, an additional battery of questions were asked which asked respondents to consider how well the election withstood the pressures to electoral integrity associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. The questions were designed to provide one measure of a commonly reported threat to electoral integrity posed by the covid-19 pandemic for each principle of electoral integrity, as set out in the conceptual framework above. We understand that this indicator is not exhaustive of the potential issues associated with the dimension of electoral integrity but given that these questions had to be designed and were fielded before the full extent of the pandemic was known, it provides some indication of what we thought may be the most

pressing challenge posed by the pandemic to that issue. A further set of questions asked about how electoral management was affected by the pandemic. These additional variables are used for later analysis. Table 1 summarizes the measures and questions for elections occurring after the pandemic was declared on March 11, 2020, to the end of 2022. To measure pandemic electoral integrity, we focus in on the questions that tap into the four components of electoral integrity mentioned earlier.

To measure potential factors that led to increased or decreased electoral integrity during a pandemic, we have a variety of other sources of data available. From the Varieties of Democracy dataset,⁷² which also employs expert perceptions, we use the liberal democracy index, EMB autonomy and EMB capacity. GDP is collected from the World Bank (PC PPP).

Data on special voting arrangements was taken from International IDEA (<https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/special-voting-arrangements>). This provides data on whether postal voting, early voting, mobile voting, or proxy voting methods are available to voters, in addition to the traditional polling station polling method. A score of 1 was used where all citizens had the opportunity to use each method – or .5 where only some citizens were able to use this method. The scores were added to create an additive index on a scale of 0–4. The PEI 9.0 battery also asked respondents whether “Support to enable vulnerable citizens to vote” was provided and “voting facilities protected voter safety” on a five-point Likert scale.

Table 1. COVID battery, PEI 2020–2022.

Variable name	Positive coded (1–5, with 5 as more positive for electoral integrity)	N. Elections	Mean (1–5)	Std. Dev.
	Overall			
emergency2	“20-1b. Emergency conditions weakened electoral integrity (1–5)[P]”	143	3.37	0.93
	Contestation			
incumbentcampaign2	“20-5b. Emergency conditions favoured the incumbent’s campaign (1–5)[P]”	143	3.21	1.01
	Deliberation			
opportunitycampaign2	“20-4b. Emergency conditions limited opportunities to campaign (1–5)[P]”	143	3.05	0.97
	Participation			
hesitant2	“20-7b. Emergency conditions made citizens hesitant to vote (1–5)[P]”	143	3.48	0.94
	Adjudication			
postponed2	“20-6b. The election was postponed to suit the incumbent (1–5)[P]”	143	4.15	0.76
	Additional Questions in the battery (used in later analysis)			
Safetyvoters	“20-2. Voting facilities protected the safety of voters [P]”	143	3.60	0.84
support	“20-8. Support was provided to enable vulnerable citizens to vote (1–5) [P]”	141	3.14	0.94
resourced2	“20-10b. Emergency conditions led to electoral officials being insufficiently resourced (1–5)[P]”	141	3.71	0.80
safetyworkers2	“20-3b. Voting facilities endangered the safety of poll workers (1–5)[P]”	143	3.69	0.74
shortage2	“20-9b. Emergency conditions led to a shortage of poll workers (1–5)[P]”	141	3.76	0.72

Notes: Missing values due to expert non-response. “P” is used to indicate that the direction of the item is positive “N” where it is negative. Positive recoding used so higher numbers denote higher levels of electoral integrity. Variable names are listed to enable the reader to reanalyse the dataset.

It is also important to note that the pandemic spread unevenly around the world – with countries experiencing different waves at different moment in time. The timing of the election may also be important. Some countries had little forewarning that the pandemic was incoming and may therefore have had to hold the election in the midst of uncertainty. By contrast, others would have been able to witness other countries holding their elections – and be able to draw out best practices and lessons from them. Policy transfers and lesson drawing have become a widespread phenomenon in public administration.⁷³ Electoral officials are also known to be well networked, and a variety of online events were held by practitioners. Hence, we anticipate that the extent of the epidemiological shock to the election would vary according to the timing of the election in proximity to the start of the pandemic progressed the number of cases (by population) in the previous week in the country rises. COVID-19 rates are collected through the World Health Organization (<https://covid19.who.int/data>).⁷⁴

Analysis

We first present an overview of the data, that visualizes the aggregate changes in levels of electoral integrity over time. It considers overall changes in electoral integrity using the PEI Index and the additional battery of questions using bi-variate statistics.

Secondly, OLS regression models are run. The first considers each of the dependent variables related to pandemic electoral integrity resilience: expert perceptions of how electoral integrity fared during pandemic conditions. The independent variables are as mentioned above: V-Dem liberal democracy index, GDP per capita, V-Dem EMB capacity and autonomy.⁷⁵ The control variables are: the number of COVID-19 cases per capita 7 days before the election as a measure of COVID spread in the country leading up to voting day, and the number of days since the pandemic had started. A second set of model considers as a dependent variable citizens' hesitancy to vote during the pandemic, including the same independent and control variables as above, but also adding the number of special voting arrangements available as a potential driver of pandemic electoral resilience.

As in any cross-sectional research, we do our best to alleviate concerns that the same factors that influence pandemic electoral integrity factor the country's ability to remain resilient. However, completely eliminating these issues is unavoidable in this type of research, and we describe the analysis of the results carefully to ensure that we are not making unwarranted assumptions of causality.

Results and analysis

How did electoral integrity fare during the pandemic?

PEI 9.0 covers elections between 2012 and 2022, which therefore includes nearly three years of the pandemic. As [Figure 2](#) demonstrates, there is little evidence of a major overall decline in electoral integrity over the pandemic period. There was a slight decline in 2020 from the previous year, but this rebounds in 2021. We see that levels of electoral integrity in 2020 were no lower than most pre-pandemic years.

However, we recognize that a variety of factors, notably which elections were ultimately held that year, influence these overall indicators of change in electoral integrity during the pandemic. Thus, the more specific questions in the survey about how the

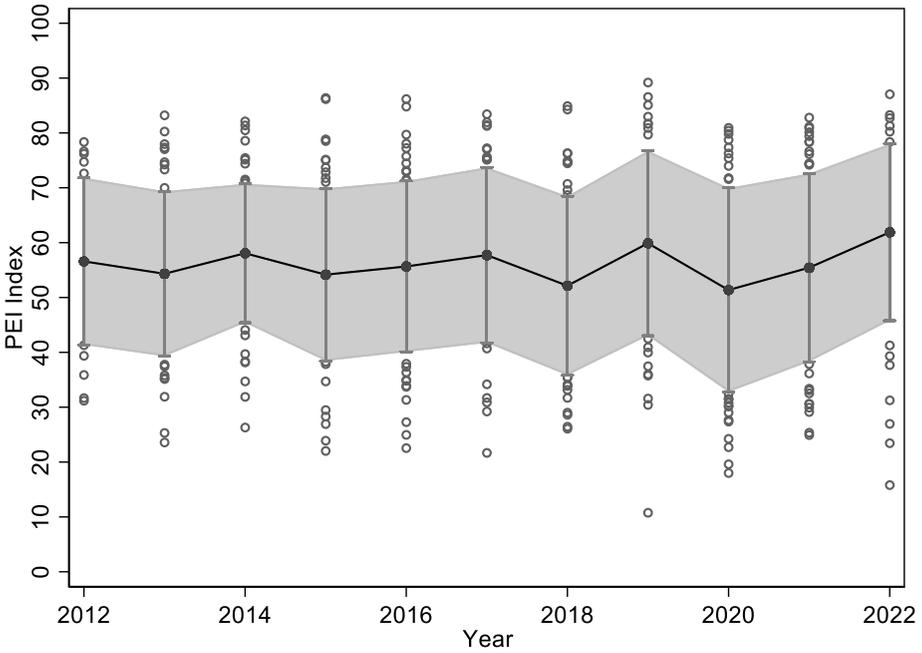


Figure 2. PEI Index change over time.

pandemic influenced electoral integrity provide a more robust response to the question of how the pandemic may have affected electoral integrity.

Figure 3 illustrates the impact on the election’s ability to respond to the pressures posed by the covid-19 pandemic, using the measures cited in Table 1. A high score

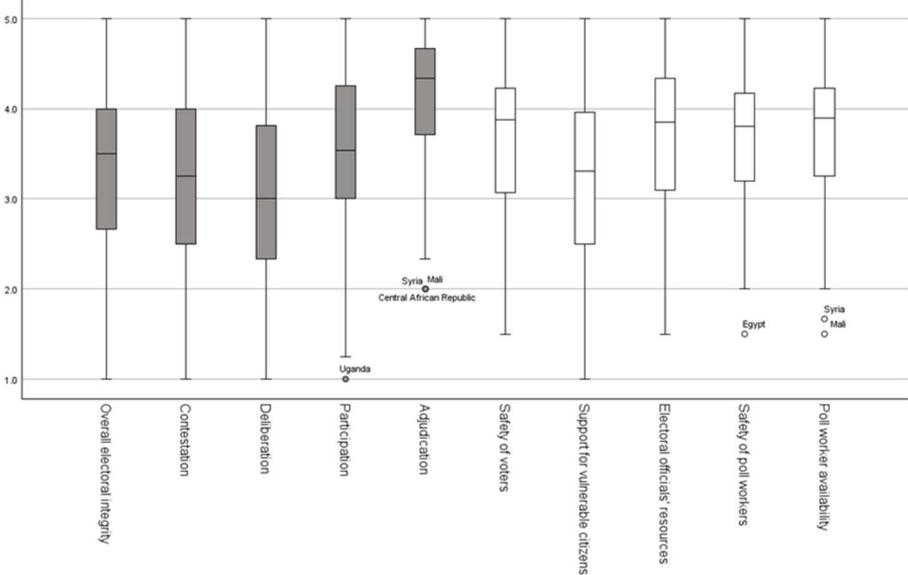


Figure 3. Boxplot of the effects of the pandemic on five dimensions of electoral integrity.

on a 1–5 rating indicates a higher impact of the pandemic on electoral integrity. A score of 3 would indicate a neutral position or no effect. The length of the box represents the variables interquartile range and contains 50% of the case. The median value is illustrated by a black line in the centre of the box. Deliberation was the lowest mean – suggesting that campaigning was the component most affected by the pandemic. There appears to be little impact on adjudication in the vast majority of cases. However, the effects were still very strong in some. The responses to “election postponed to suit the incumbent” suggests that election quality may have been further compromised in Mali, Central African Republic and Syria by the conditions.

Nonetheless, there were many countries where the variable value was below 3 for specific components of electoral integrity. This is illustrated by Figure 4(a–f). In Figure 4(a), for example, Mali, a contest held early on in the pandemic seems to have been highly affected by the circumstances according to the expert responses. Holding elections in Mali was already difficult because of a variety of political factors. Case studies of the Mali election evidence that the pandemic compounded these problems.⁷⁶ But in South Korea, the electoral integrity seems to have been preserved and protected.

Moreover, the effects of the pandemic varied considerably over time. We see that there is some evidence that as the pandemic dragged on, all electoral integrity measures related to specific COVID-19 improved. Figure 4(a–f) demonstrates a positive trajectory over the three years in the extent to which the pandemic affected the polls. A correlation is also found to be statistically significant in Table 2. We believe that as the pandemic entered its second year, many workplaces (including EMBs) had successfully pivoted to alternative work arrangements and citizens became used to safety requirements, making elections easier to manage. It is also possible that those managing elections had learned from other jurisdictions’ experiences to implement safe and secure elections during this emergency situation.

We also find some relationship between COVID-19 cases per capita in the 7 days prior to the election and pandemic electoral integrity, notably for the safety of voting facilities. However, we also note that some of the same factors, like access to resources, can affect both electoral integrity and the prevalence of COVID-19 cases.

Table 2. Correlations.

	Days since pandemic declared	COVID-19 cases per capita (7 days before the election)
Emergency conditions weakened electoral integrity (Reverse Coded)	0.51***	0.06
Incumbent campaign favoured (reverse coded)	0.42***	0.08
Limited opportunities to campaign (Reverse coded)	0.57***	0.02
Citizens hesitant to vote (reverse coded)	0.44***	0.06
Election postponed to suit incumbent (reverse coded)	0.22***	0.08
Support to enable vulnerable citizens to vote	0.25***	0.13
Voting facilities protected voter safety	0.25***	0.15*
Shortage of poll workers (reverse coded)	0.36***	–0.02
Electoral officials insufficiently resourced (reverse coded)	0.43***	0.05
Voting facilities endangered poll worker safety (Reverse Coded)	0.35***	0.14

* $p < 0.10$.

** $p < 0.05$.

*** $p < 0.01$.

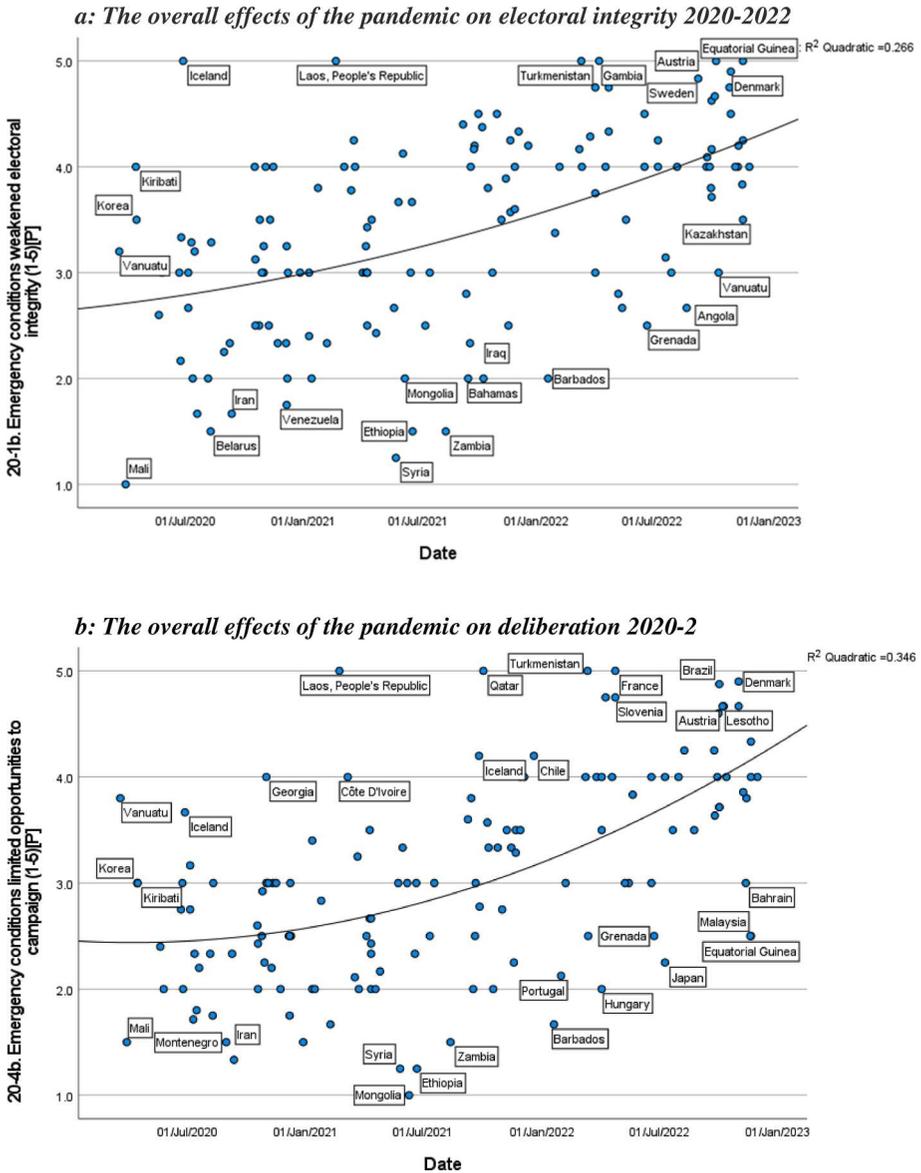
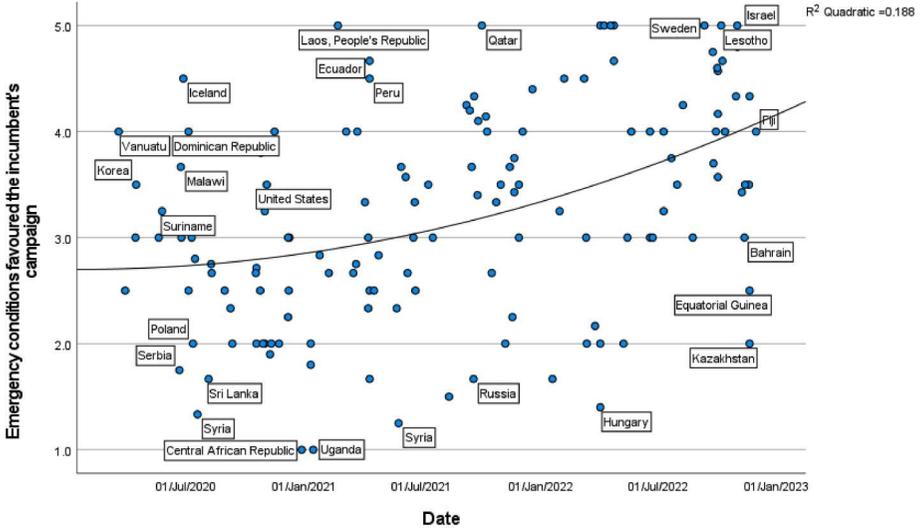


Figure 4. (a) The overall effects of the pandemic on electoral integrity 2020–2022. (b) The overall effects of the pandemic on deliberation 2020–2022. (c) The overall effects of the pandemic on contestation 2020–2022. (d) The overall effects of the pandemic on one measure of equality of participation 2020–2022. (e) The overall effects of the pandemic on one measure of adjudication 2020–2022.

What factors contributed towards societal resilience to protect electoral integrity during the pandemic?

Multi-variate analysis identifies the drivers of resilience which will protect against declines in electoral integrity during the pandemic. The models in Table 3 are all coded so larger numbers mean higher levels of electoral integrity.

c: The overall effects of the pandemic on contestation 2020-2022



d: The overall effects of the pandemic on one measure of equality of participation 2020-2022

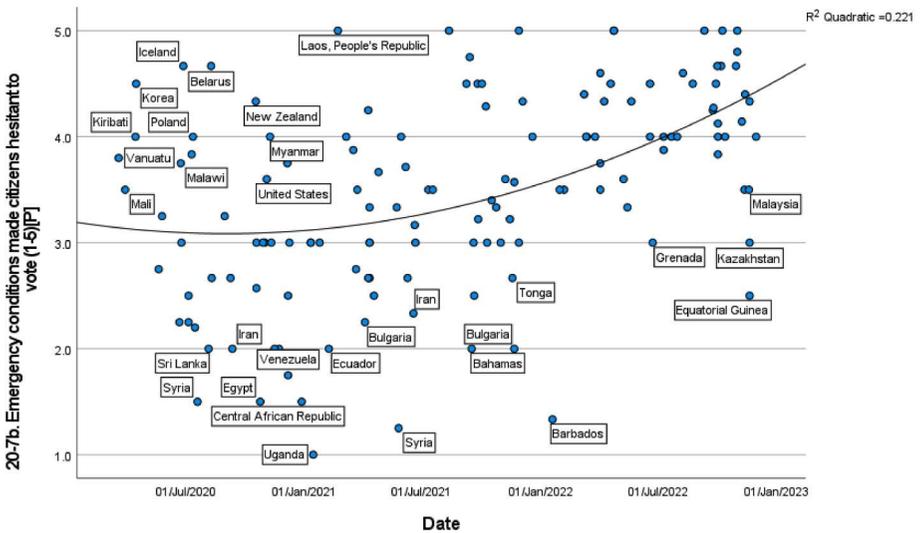


Figure 4 Continued

Factor 1: liberal democratic strength

H1 considers the impact of the quality of liberal democracy in a country. We find that those countries with higher liberal democracy scores were better able to weather the pandemic storm. The effect of liberal democratic strength was statistically significant for contestation (the incumbent being favoured by the campaign conditions for adjudication), and adjudication (the presence of strong institutional

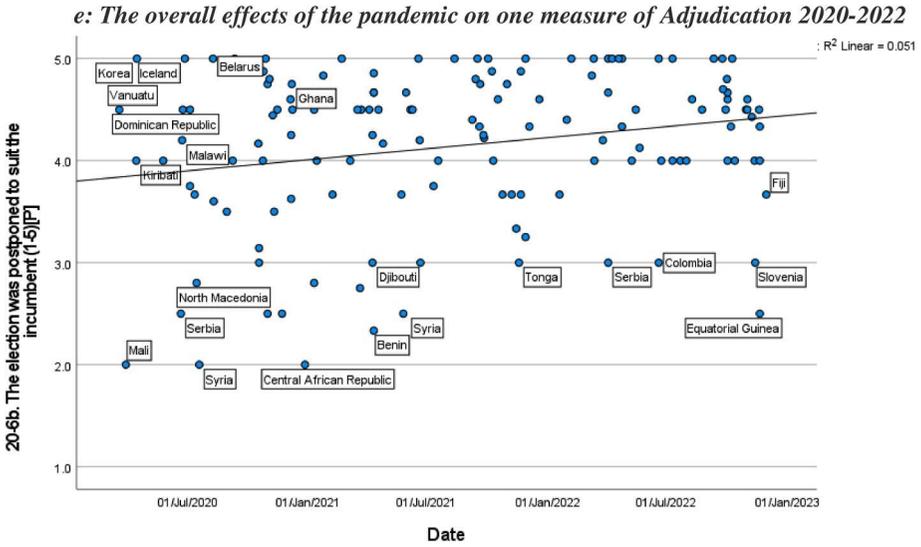


Figure 4 Continued

rules preventing the incumbent gaining advantage from election postponement). This suggests that incumbents in less democratic regimes used the pandemic as an opportunity for elections to be organized in a way that benefited their interests (Figure 5).

Factor 2: economic resources

We see some positive impact of GDP (H2) on the resiliency of the participation dimension of electoral integrity to the COVID-19 pandemic. This suggests that economic resources are playing an important role, as predicted, in facilitating resilience. Notably, it is likely that in places that lacked the resources to effectively manage the pandemic (and a pandemic election), citizens may not have felt as comfortable going to the polls (Figure 6).

Factor 3: organizational structures

Considering the impact of electoral management institutions, we generally see little effect of EMB autonomy (H3a) or capacity (H3b) on pandemic electoral integrity resilience. However, EMB autonomy was important in the integrity of the contest and preventing incumbents from delaying it to suit their needs (Figure 7).

Factor 4: voting procedures

Were citizens hesitant to vote during the pandemic? This was one of the most prominent concerns: that citizens would stay away from the polls due to concerns about catching or spreading COVID-19. In Table 4, we test a variety of predictors of

Table 3. What predicts how well a country upheld electoral integrity during the pandemic?

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	Overall – Emergency conditions weakened electoral integrity (reverse Coded)	Deliberation – Limited opportunities to campaign (reverse coded)	Contestation – Incumbent campaign favoured (reverse coded)	Participation – Citizens hesitant to vote (reverse coded)	Adjudication – Election postponed to suit incumbent (reverse coded)
COVID cases per capita (7 days prior to election)	–21.75 17.83	–22.64 19.39	–21.76 20.92	–13.63 19.84	–12.41 16.94
Days since the pandemic was declared (100s of days)	0.14*** 0.02	0.18*** 0.02	0.12*** 0.03	0.12*** 0.02	0.03* 0.02
V-Dem	0.86	0.74	1.84**	0.18	2.08***
Liberal Democracy Index	0.64	0.70	0.75	0.71	0.61
GSP PC PPP (\$10000s)	0.06 0.05	–0.03 0.05	–0.05 0.05	0.09* 0.05	–0.01 0.04
V-Dem EMB Capacity	0.07 0.09	0.11 0.10	0.14 0.11	–0.01 0.10	0.11 0.09
V-Dem EMB Autonomy	0.00 0.10	–0.03 0.11	–0.02 0.12	0.07 0.11	–0.22** 0.09
_cons	2.08***	1.75***	1.78***	2.57***	3.13***
	0.21	0.23	0.25	0.23	0.20
<i>N</i>	128	128	128	128	128
R-sq	0.43	0.40	0.37	0.29	0.25

Notes: Some variables are reverse coded to ensure that a greater number always means higher electoral integrity. OLS Regression, Standard errors in second row.

* $p < 0.10$.

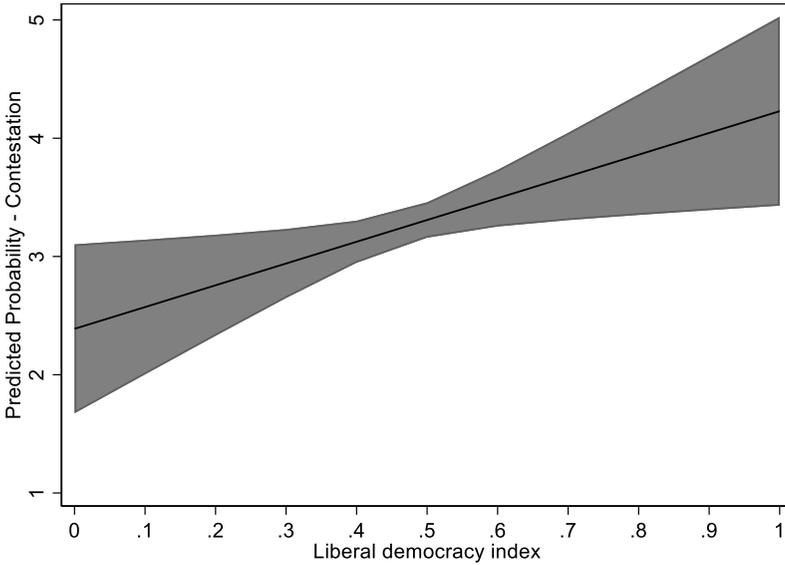
** $p < 0.05$.

*** $p < 0.01$.

citizen hesitancy to go to the poll (note: smaller numbers denote more hesitancy), including special voting arrangements (H4a) and additional supports (H4b) as independent variables.

We see a positive impact of all potential predictor variables on citizens being comfortable going to vote: support for vulnerable citizens, safety at polling stations, poll worker numbers, safety for poll workers, sufficiently resourced EMBs, and the provision of special voting arrangements. This indicates that the participatory principle of electoral integrity during emergency conditions like pandemics can be strengthened through the provision of supports and procedures made available to citizens and election workers. There is potential risk of endogeneity in this finding, as more supportive voting procedures may be put in place due to citizens' hesitancy to vote. Nonetheless, this is important evidence as to the interplay between positive supports and comfort voting during crises.

a: Predicted Probability - Incumbent campaign favoured (reverse coded) and Liberal Democracy Index



b: Predicted Probability - Election postponed to suit incumbent (reverse coded) and Liberal Democracy Index

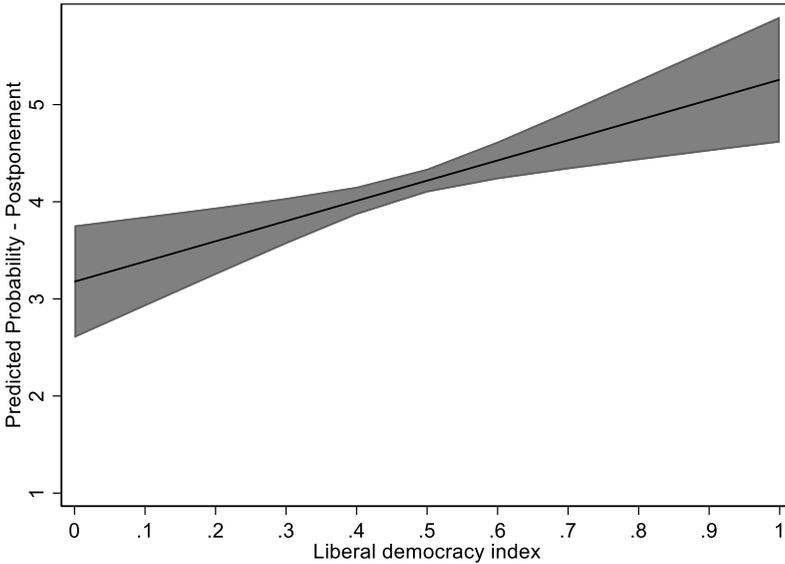


Figure 5. (a) Predicted Probability – Incumbent campaign favoured (reverse coded) and Liberal Democracy Index. From Table 3, Model 4, Other values at means, 95% confidence intervals depicted. (b) Predicted Probability – Election postponed to suit incumbent (reverse coded) and Liberal Democracy Index. From Table 3, Model 5, Other values at means, 95% confidence intervals depicted.

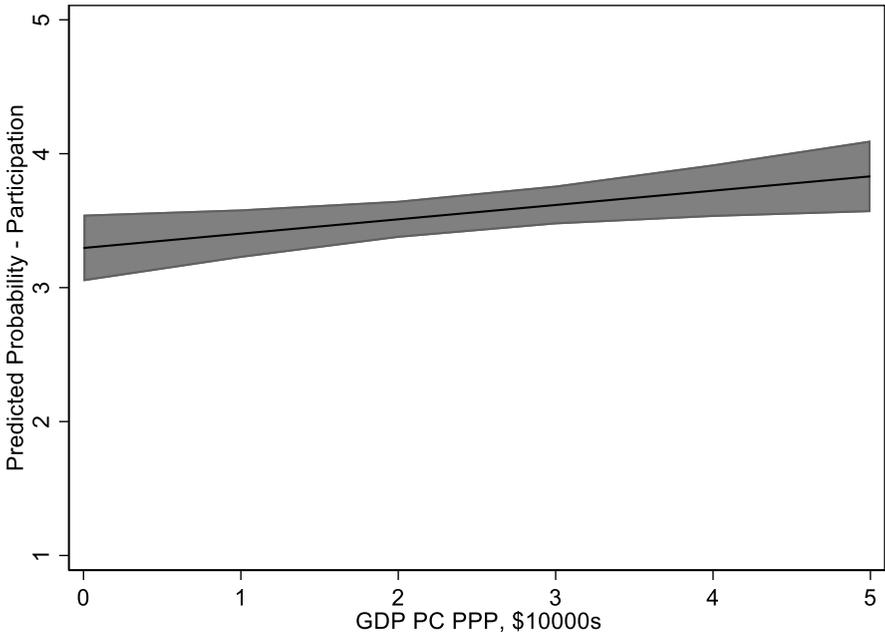


Figure 6. Predicted Probability – citizens hesitant to vote (reverse coded) and GDP. From Table 4, Model 4, Other values at means, 95% confidence intervals depicted.

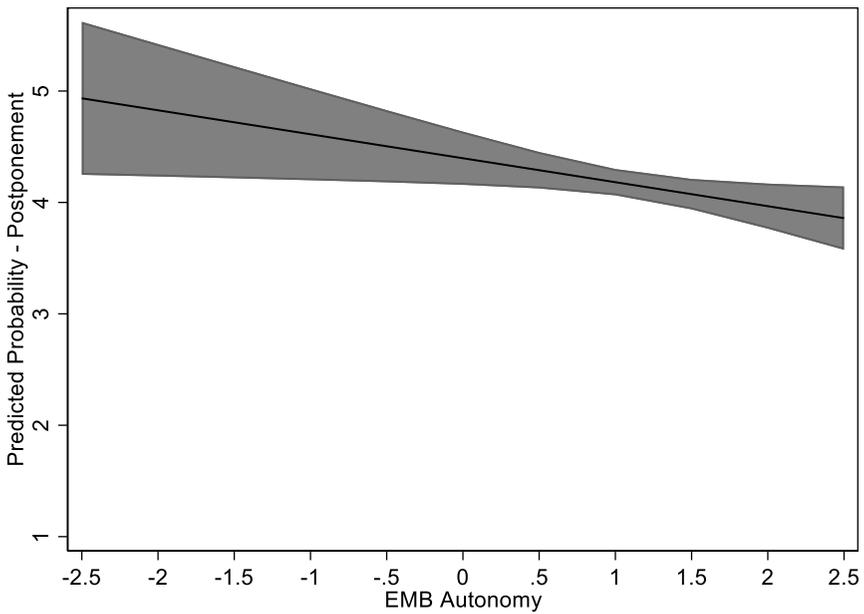


Figure 7. Predicted Probability – postponement (reverse coded) and EMB autonomy. From Table 3, Model 5, Other values at means, 95% confidence intervals depicted.



Table 4. What predicts citizen hesitancy to vote due to pandemic?

	(1) Participation – Citizens hesitant to vote (reverse coded)	(2) Participation – Citizens hesitant to vote (reverse coded)	(3) Participation – Citizens hesitant to vote (reverse coded)	(4) Participation – Citizens hesitant to vote (reverse coded)	(5) Participation – Citizens hesitant to vote (reverse coded)	(6) Participation – Citizens hesitant to vote (reverse coded)
COVID cases (last 7 days) by population	-11.56	-10.73	-11.04	1.03	-4.58	-19.81
Days since the pandemic was declared (100s)	19.57	18.97	17.82	16.72	16.93	19.63
GSP PC PPP (\$10000s)	0.11***	0.11***	0.08***	0.06***	0.06**	0.12***
V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.02
V-Dem EMB Capacity	0.07	0.09*	0.10**	0.08*	0.06	0.05
V-Dem EMB Autonomy	0.05	0.05	0.05	0.04	0.04	0.05
Support to enable vulnerable citizens to vote	0.40	-0.22	-0.45	-0.33	-0.28	-0.26
Voting facilities protected voter safety	0.71	0.69	0.65	0.60	0.61	0.72
Voting facilities endangered poll worker safety (Reverse Coded)	-0.02	-0.10	-0.09	-0.06	-0.02	-0.02
Shortage of poll workers (reverse coded)	0.11	0.10	0.10	0.09	0.09	0.10
Electoral officials insufficiently resourced (reverse coded)	0.01	0.02	0.08	0.15	0.08	0.13
Total Special Voting Arrangements	0.16	0.11	0.10	0.10	0.09	0.11
_cons	0.10	0.39***	0.58***	0.68***	0.63***	0.34**
N	2.14***	1.56***	0.99***	0.54	0.82**	0.14
R-sq	0.33	0.36	0.36	0.34	0.32	2.58***
	126	128	128	127	127	128
	0.32	0.36	0.43	0.50	0.49	0.32

Notes: Some variables are reverse coded to ensure that a greater number always means higher electoral integrity. OLS Regression, Standard errors in second row.

* $p < 0.10$.

** $p < 0.05$.

*** $p < 0.01$.

Conclusions

Emergency situations caused by natural and technological hazards have often been thought to pose a major threat to democratic practices and institutions, but there has been relatively little literature on this topic until recently. One vitally important democratic practice is the regular holding of elections. The COVID-19 pandemic posed a potential threat to election quality worldwide as it was predicted that democratic backsliding might occur. This article introduced the concept of electoral integrity resilience as the configuration of actors, resources and properties which enable societies to adapt to an external shock which could damage electoral integrity. It then uses original data to identify the effects that the pandemic had on electoral integrity in national elections during 2020–2022.

The article found that campaigning appears to have been the most negatively hit aspect of the election as lockdowns presumably prevented campaigners from reaching out to voters. However, there was considerable variation by countries. We find that as time passed, the effects of the pandemic on electoral integrity did diminish. However, we remain sceptical that there are any pure effects of rates of COVID-19 cases on pandemic electoral integrity, pointing instead to other factors that may influence both variables.

What explains the variation in a state's capacity to protect electoral integrity in an emergency situation such as the pandemic? We find some positive relationship between countries with lower levels of liberal democracy and the incumbent taking advantage by postponing the election and receiving a benefit from the campaign. There is additionally some relationship between a country's wealth and pandemic electoral integrity. Better resourced countries, we suspect, were better able to manage the health and safety considerations attached to running an election during a pandemic, as well as continue resourcing their electoral management institutions adequately. We find a statistically significant relationship between EMB capacity and autonomy against some specific indicators relating to making the polls safer for citizens and poll workers.

When we consider voters' willingness to vote during a pandemic, we do see some positive impact of safe polling facilities and better resourced EMBs. This suggests that each of these variables can play an important role in the calculus a voter makes when deciding whether to vote, especially when there is a global health emergency in progress. These procedures can therefore be important for protecting the principle of participation during elections in crisis.

Overall, these findings point to the importance of overall democracy quality, EMB capacity and the availability of multiple methods of voting as key aspects of electoral integrity resilience. They suggest that these are key components for investment if countries want to build their electoral integrity resilience ahead of forthcoming crises and emergencies.

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1. E.g. Birch and Martínez i Coma, "Natural Disasters and the Limits of Electoral Clientelism."
2. World Economic Forum, *The Global Risks Report 2023*.
3. Landman and Splendore, "Pandemic Democracy"; Krimmer, Duenas-Cid, and Krivosova, "Debate: Safeguarding Democracy During Pandemics."
4. James, Clark, and Asplund, *Elections During Emergencies and Crises*.

5. Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*, Przeworski, “Democracy as a Contingent Outcome”; Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory*.
6. Elklit and Svensson, “What Makes Elections Free and Fair?”
7. Elklit and Reynolds, “A Framework for the Systematic Study of Election Quality.”
8. Birch, *Electoral Malpractice*, 11–13.
9. Norris, *Why Electoral Integrity Matters*.
10. Norris, *Why Elections Fail*.
11. Norris, *Strengthening Electoral Integrity: What Works?*
12. Hafner-Burton, Hyde, and Jablonski, “When Do Governments Resort to Election Violence?”; Hyde and Marinov, “Which Elections Can Be Lost?”; Daxecker, “Unequal Votes, Unequal Violence.”
13. Uberti and Jackson, “Does Aid Promote Electoral Integrity?”; Kuk, Hajnal, and Lajevardi, “A Disproportionate Burden”, Donno, *Defending Democratic Norms*.
14. Garnett and James, “Measuring Electoral Integrity”, Fisher and Sällberg, “Electoral Integrity – The Winner Takes It All?”; Clark and James, “Poll Workers.”
15. Hangoma et al., “Short- and Long-Term Food Insecurity.”
16. Menton et al., “The COVID-19 Pandemic Intensified Resource.”
17. Ahmed et al., “Mental Health in Europe.”
18. Jones et al., “Sustaining Disaster Aid in the Onset.”
19. Rönkkö, Rutherford, and Sen, “The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Poor.”
20. Hafner-Burton, Helfer, and Fariss, “Emergency and Escape.”
21. also see: Richards and Clay, “An Umbrella with Holes.”
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23. Whitaker, “State Election Laws: Overview of Statutes Regarding Emergency Election Postponement Within the State”, Congressional Research Service, the Library of Congress, 2004.
24. Eboigbe and Okafor, “Testing Uncertainty Information Hypothesis.”
25. Bodet, Thomas, and Tessier, “Come Hell or High Water.”
26. Sinclair, Hall, and Alvarez, “Flooding the Vote.”
27. Birch, “The Electoral Benefits of Environmental Position-Taking.”
28. Birch and Martínez i Coma, “Natural Disasters and the Limits.”
29. James and Alihodzic, “When Is It Democratic to Postpone an Election?”; Landman and Splendore, “Pandemic Democracy”; James, “New Development: Running Elections During a Pandemic.”
30. British Academy, *How to Hold Elections Safely*; James and Alihodzic, “When Is It Democratic to Postpone an Election?”
31. Krimmer, Duenas-Cid, and Krivososova, “Debate: Safeguarding Democracy During Pandemics,” 9.
32. Persily and Stewart III, *THE VIRUS AND THE VOTE: ADMINISTERING THE 2020 ELECTION IN A PANDEMIC*.
33. British Academy, *How to Hold Elections Safely*.
34. James, Clark, and Asplund, *Elections During Emergencies and Crises*.
35. Spinelli, *Managing Elections under the COVID-19 Pandemic*.
36. Ayandele et al., “Democracy and Elections Amid the COVID 19 Pandemic”, Kajcsa, “Elections in Romania During COVID-19”, Liljeblad and Doe, “Virulent Pandemic and Fragile Democracy in Myanmar”; Dulani et al., “Elections in the Time of Covid-19”, Sala, “Dos políticas públicas opuestas durante la covid-19”; Roy and Singh, “Elections in a Pandemic”; Téglási and Nagy, “Elections in Hungary and in Other Countries”; Sempijja and Brito, “The Fallacy of ‘Scientific Elections’ in the COVID-Era”, Yu et al., “The Effect of Trust in Government”; MacDonald and Molony, “Future Pandemics and Elections.”
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38. Picchio and Santolini, “The COVID-19 Pandemic’s Effects”; Merkley et al., “Communicating Safety Precautions”; Garnett et al., “Contagious Elections.”
39. Baccini, Brodeur, and Weymouth, “The COVID-19 Pandemic.”
40. Gatto and Thome, “Resilient Aspirants.”
41. Cassan and Sangnier, “The Impact of 2020 French Municipal Elections.”
42. Weibrecht et al., “How an Election Can be Safely Planned.”
43. Matlosa, “Pouring Salt into the Wound”, Vasciannie, “Observing Caribbean Elections.”
44. James, Clark, and Asplund, *Elections During Emergencies and Crises*.

45. Edgell et al., “Pandemic Backsliding.”
46. Lee, “When Elections Wait.”
47. Norris, *Why Electoral Integrity Matters*.
48. Vickery and Shein, *Assessing Electoral Fraud in New Democracies: Refining the Vocabulary*.
49. Birch, *Electoral Malpractice*; James and Garnett, “Introduction: Defining Electoral Integrity.”
50. James and Garnett, “Introduction: Defining Electoral Integrity”; James and Garnett, *What is Electoral Integrity?*.
51. James, “Real Democracy,” 228.
52. Przeworski, *Democracy and the Market*; Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*.
53. James and Garnett, *What is Electoral Integrity?*
54. *Ibid.*
55. Sayer, *Method in Social Sciences*.
56. American Psychological Association, *Resilience*.
57. Bonanno, cited in: Southwick et al., “Resilience Definitions, Theory, and Challenges.”
58. *Ibid.*
59. Keenan, “COVID, Resilience, and the Built Environment.”
60. Haldane et al., “Health Systems Resilience in Managing.”
61. Boin and Van Eeten, “The Resilient Organization”; Duchek, “Organizational Resilience.”
62. Boese et al., “How Democracies Prevail.”
63. Merkel and Lührmann, “Resilience of Democracies,” 872.
64. *Ibid.*, 872–3.
65. For examples of the pandemic being treated as an exogenous shock in economic theory, see: Azarova and Mier, “Market Stability Reserve.”
66. Schedler, “The Menu of Manipulation.”
67. Bambra, Lynch, and Smith, *The Unequal Pandemic*.
68. van Ham and Garnett, “Building Impartial Electoral Management?”; James, *Comparative Electoral Management*.
69. Lloyd-Smith, “The COVID-19 Pandemic.”
70. For more on the use of expert perceptions of electoral integrity, see: Martínez i Coma and van Ham, “Can Experts Judge Elections?”
71. Garnett et al., “Perceptions of Electoral Integrity, (PEI-9.0).”
72. Coppedge et al., *V-Dem Dataset Version 12*.
73. Legrand, “Elite, Exclusive and Elusive.”
74. There were three cases where the tracker reports no covid cases (Kyrgyzstan’s 2020 legislative election; Kyrgyzstan’s 2021 Presidential election; and Turkmenistan’s 2022 Presidential Election). This may be due to poor quality of covid data reporting; however we do not know for certain and defer to the data provided.
75. A set of models considers the changes in overall electoral integrity from the pandemic-era election to the most recent election preceding in the Appendix. However, we caution that these models are exploratory since a variety of factors over time could change the overall levels of electoral integrity in a country.
76. Matlosa, “Elections in Africa During Covid-19”; Gerenge, “Managing Elections Under Covid-19.”

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada [890-2020-0006].

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