

THE ROLE OF ELECTORAL MANAGEMENT BODIES IN
SUPPORTING VOTER EDUCATION:
LESSONS LEARNED AND CHALLENGES

"EDUCATION FOR PARTICIPATION?"

by

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May 29, 1999
Mexico City, Mexico

Mr. Chairman Barakat, members of the panel, dear friends and colleagues, it is an honor to be here with you today to discuss such an important topic. I hope that my remarks on behalf of the National Democratic Institute (NDI) will be both informative and a little provocative. The conversation, thus far, seems to have over-emphasized the technical aspects and under-emphasized the political aspects of electoral process, which, as we all know, is critically important as it pertains to the role of electoral management bodies in supporting voter education. Obviously, as the director of citizen participation programs for NDI, I believe that a determining component in establishing the legitimacy and maintaining the integrity of the electoral process is the active and informed participation of citizens.

Before I go further please allow me to say a few words about NDI and the institute's global experience with electoral systems.

National Democratic Institute

NDI is a Washington, D.C. based nonprofit organization working to strengthen and expand democracy worldwide. NDI believes that democracy depends on legislatures that represent citizens and oversee the executive; independent judiciaries that safeguard the rule of law; political parties that are open and accountable; and elections in which voters freely choose their representatives in government. All of those require active citizen participation in governmental and political processes.

NDI helps build stable, broad based and well organized institutions that form the foundation of pluralistic society and a strong civic culture. The Institute supports the efforts of democrats in every region of the world to: build political and civic organizations; safeguard elections, and promote openness and accountability. We currently have 40 resident offices and are working in 52 countries around the world on a variety of political development programs.

NDI's global work with citizens and civil society organizations is necessarily broad given the diversity of initiatives and different types of associational life that exists in various countries. NDI supports a variety of civic education programs in countries in the process of consolidating their democratic transitions. In 1998-9 NDI conducted citizen participation programs in 36 countries, working with close to 1000 non-governmental organizations and community based groups. Those organizations included NGO networks, umbrella federations, religious institutions, cultural groups, neighborhood groups, professional associations, rural community based organizations, human rights and environmental groups and domestic monitoring and voter education coalitions.

NDI, ELECTORAL SYSTEMS AND DEMOCRATIC DEVELOPMENT

Since its founding in 1983, NDI has worked to promote genuine, democratic elections as a cornerstone of democratic development. NDI's activities to help those working inside their countries to ensure the integrity of election processes include: the adoption of democratic electoral laws and

regulations; international election assessments of pre-election, election-day and post-election periods; nonpartisan election monitoring by domestic nongovernmental organizations; and political party poll watching and effective use of electoral complaint mechanisms. In all of this work NDI encourages open communications and strong participation around election management bodies, political parties, domestic election monitors and others who want genuine elections.

Since 1986, NDI has conducted over 100 pre-election assessments, organized 45 international election observation delegations, supported the development and functioning of domestic nonpartisan election monitoring organizations in more than 45 countries. We have also worked closely with numerous political parties, of all political persuasions, on party poll watching, and the development of codes of conduct. We have also conducted several technical assistance programs designed to help election commissions develop strategic capacities in the area of voter education.

The institute has also produced over 100 election related papers, a significant amount of civic and voter education materials (some of which is on display) and domestic election monitoring manuals. Additionally, I have brought copies of a paper by Patrick Merloe, NDI Senior Associate and Director of Programs on Election and Political Processes, on "Lessons Learned and Challenges for International Election Monitoring," which you may find interesting.

In all of the work cited above, NDI has worked hand in hand with election commissions to improve transparency, participation, and the overall integrity of the electoral process.

REMEMBERING THE POLITICAL CONTEXT

We must constantly remind ourselves that elections are political processes not merely technical exercises. Often elections, and therefore voter education, occur in the transitional or developing societies within a political context conditioned by painful economic experiences associated with moving from centrally planned to market-oriented economies and/or from military or one-party regimes to pluralism. The political context at the time of an election normally may reflect concerns such as economic recession, environmental degradation, skyrocketing unemployment and social disintegration. Moreover in many transitional countries large sectors of citizens may have lost faith in public institutions, either because of the traumas of the prior undemocratic regime or because of disappointment in politicians during the early phase of transitions. Of course in some countries politicians who claimed to be democratic may have turned out to be just as autocratic as the previous rulers. In such situations citizens may have completely withdrawn from the political process.

Even in countries where the transition toward a fully democratic process has developed relatively smoothly, building and maintaining public confidence in the electoral process is a principle challenge. This is a central challenge for voter education efforts. It is not enough for voters to learn where, when and how to vote. Voters must be convinced that voting will make a difference, *and voters must have confidence in the integrity of the electoral process. Building public confidence in the electoral process requires that voters hear the voices they trust and respect from civil*

society--i.e., from respected civic and religious institutions, community leaders. It simply is not enough that governmental authorities and electoral management bodies conduct voter education, as important as such efforts are to genuine elections.

Public confidence also requires a perception among the electorate that the political parties and candidates have confidence in the integrity of the electoral process. It is therefore important that the political competitors be encouraged to speak to this issue or made part of the effort to inform various sectors of the electorate about the overall electoral process. For civic leaders, whether labor, business, religious or cultural leaders, to speak with force and conviction, to encourage public confidence, these actors must be able to see all aspects of the election process and to participate in the formulation of electoral policy.

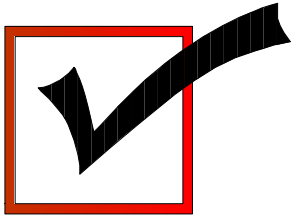
Transparency and citizens participation in elections processes is without a doubt central to building confidence and inextricably linked to effective voter education activities. Voter turnout can be effected more by the confidence level of the electorate than the number of messages voters hear about where, when and how to vote.

To forget that elections are contentious, complicated processes and generally the high point of the political cycle in any given period, would not only suggest a profound lack of elementary political understanding it would also be rather naively dangerous behavior especially for the international community. People develop institutional and social trust in a variety of ways but more often than not they will pay attention to the signals sent by their leaders whether they be located in religious, ethnic, parties or civic institutions.

CONSIDERING THE RELATIVE VALUE

What is the value of a narrowly defined voter education in developing or transitional countries -- where word of mouth, when where to vote, how to carry out procedures fairly well known by citizens? Voter education focus has to expand beyond the procedures to fundamental questions such as why the population should trust the political system or why the electorate should participate.

NDI AND VOTER EDUCATION



Voter Education: What are we talking about?

NDI's operating definition of voter education is the process by which citizens are educated on how to register and vote, develop a sense of civic duty to participate in the electoral process, and learn to respect the outcome of legitimate elections.

NDI's programmatic perspective on voter education:

Regular elections provide citizens with an opportunity to express their will and determine the composition of government. To make sensible choices, however, citizens must be aware of an election's purpose, their voting rights and obligations, the dates and procedures, the range of electoral options, and they must know how to vote.

NDI conducts impartial voter education programs that provide citizens with the information and know-how required to participate in election processes. Citizens learn about registration, balloting, and counting procedures, about the roles and responsibilities of elected officials, and about how to gather and analyze information to make informed electoral choices. Additionally, programs help citizens understand that they are the ultimate authority in a democracy and, as such, they have a responsibility to participate. At the same time, however, ***NDI programs help citizens understand that an election by itself does not guarantee the conditions for democracy.***

When citizens are not familiar with the electoral process, the results are manifested by low levels of participation or a large number of improperly cast ballots or a dearth of confidence in the election's integrity or in the legitimacy of the results. Cynicism toward elections may also develop when election officials or political competitors have not fulfill past promises. Overcoming voter apathy has proven to be a difficult challenge in transitional societies, especially during second elections. Therefore, programs designed to raise the level of awareness and confidence of citizens in the democratic process are often useful or necessary.

Depending on the political situation, social and cultural traditions, and the particular educational needs of citizens, NDI draws on a range of voter education techniques. These include facilitated discussions, non-partisan posters, pamphlets and buttons, voter awareness kits, radio and television announcements and dramatizations, voting simulations and candidate forums.

Often, NDI provides training, technical assistance, and materials support to nonpartisan civil society organizations conducting country-wide voter education campaigns. By working with existing organizations, NDI helps build a local voter education capacity. NDI has also worked with national election commissions to design and implement impartial voter education activities and to encourage the systematic review of registration rolls. We have conducted voter education programs in more than

25 countries including South Africa, Nicaragua, Bulgaria, Chile, Egypt, Guyana, Thailand, Liberia and the Ukraine.

VOTER EDUCATION AND ELECTORAL MANAGEMENT BODIES

Dr. Lopez-Pintor presents, as part of his trailblazing study, a view that an essential aspect of any "guiding principles" for EMBs should be the advocacy of participation by all political parties, the promotion of transparency at all stages of the electoral process, and the need for the EMBs to be accountable to the legislature and to the public, to ***underscore voter information and civic education***, and implement cost effective measures. We at NDI agree wholeheartedly.

Election systems require criteria and a mechanism for identifying eligible voters and preventing ineligible persons from voting. The mechanism is also used to guarantee the one person, one vote principle by preventing people from voting more than once or from voting in the wrong location.

The universal right to take part in government is directly affected by the eligibility/voter registration process. Specifically, since establishing a potential voter=s eligibility is often a prerequisite to voting, an evaluation of the process by which eligibility is determined, paying special attention to whether significant segments of the population are being disenfranchised.

Unreasonable criteria restricting eligibility, such as the use of distinctions based on race, color, gender, religion, nationality, ethnic origin, social group, past political affiliations, literacy, property ownership and ability to pay. Reasonable restrictions have included distinctions based on age, citizenship, residency and mental competence.

Often the cumulative impact of existing voter education programs is inadequate. This deficiency often occurs because governments and election commissions lack the resources or commitment to implement impartial voter education programs or because their existing communications about voter education are ineffective or misleading. Another common explanation is that governments fail to allow enough time in the election schedule for the development and execution of voter education programs.

In some of the electoral processes that we have been part of, we have on occasion observed overt hostility or even disdain by election commissions for civil society organizations engaged in voter education or domestic monitoring activities. Bad relations can be produced by a range of factors beginning with a lack of resources, both financial and human, to common mistrust of each other do to unfamiliarity with the authority, methods of operation, responsibilities and tasks each may be performing.

The institutional capacity issues are sometimes compounded by a few problems in peculiar to electoral systems. These problems are associated with voter education that is linked to citizens

registering to participate. The problems include:

procedures that cause unreasonable difficulty for certain sectors of the population to register or obtain the identification card necessary for voting, including: limiting hours or days for registration; placing registration sites at inconvenient or intimidating locations; levying fees; conducting literacy exams; or subjecting registrants to unfairly burdensome procedures such as presenting multiple identification cards or photographs, making multiple visits to the registration site, etc.;

inaccurate lists, such as lists that include the names of individuals who have died or left the constituency, fictitious individuals, or registrants who are listed more than once or are otherwise ineligible; that fail to include the names of eligible individuals who have properly applied to register; or that recorded registrant=s names in ways making it impractical to locate them on the lists; and

Failure to assure transparency in the registration process, as evidenced by restrictive regulations of recalcitrant officials who prevent monitors from analyzing the process in a timely manner.

FREE, FAIR AND ACCEPTABLE

The question of what criteria determines whether an election was free and fair has occupied observers most of this decade. Dialogue among citizens groups sometimes is revealing in this respect and often the main question is, was it a legitimate and acceptable electoral process.

Dr. Lopez-Pintor's study also suggest that "in helping to develop a democratic culture, the electoral bodies should carry out, or if not in their mandate, encourage the conduct of non-partisan voter education programs. They should also strive continuously to improve the electorate and to promote public understanding of the democratic process." We at NDI strongly agree with that conclusion. In fact, it is directly connected to how the public may interpret the election results. In other words, one measure of an election=s legitimacy is the degree to which the electorate is adequately informed about:

Voter rights and obligations

Dates and procedures of the election

The range of options (e.g., policies, parties or candidates, etc.) from which voters can choose

The significance of these choices.

THE PUBLIC IMAGE OF EMB AND VOTER EDUCATION ACTIVITIES

With respect to the public image of election management bodies, it has to be noted that often election commissions are seen by the electorate in the same light as politicians and political institutions, as bodies that are judicious with the truth. In a political contest for the reigns of national power such an image can be disastrous. Therefore, the promotion by electoral authorities of civic education and the values of democracy through non-traditional means, "including influencing the draft of school texts and of democratic elections of student representatives at schools,@ as well as through promoting internal democracy of political parties, conducting elections for union where appropriate, etc., as suggested by the study, could all be part of the regular work of election commissions. However, depending on the composition of the population, the historical and contemporary circumstances, it may be necessary for elections commissions to go even further. For instance, a participatory voter education approach and outreach plan, which seeks the full involvement of all major stakeholders, could be adopted in ethnically divided or multinational states as an essential part of the election commissions work.

The image of the election management body is also directly tied to its style and methods of work. The commission can use the electoral process to build institutional trust among citizens for its work and the electoral system generally, if it operates in an open and transparent manner. Or it can be the prime culprit in eroding citizens trust in the entire democratic process if there is constant public bickering among commissioners, if the commission refuses to share information with key stakeholders, or if the commission is so dominated by the executive that its credibility has been compromised before it even begins its work.

Two Key Points to keep in mind:

1. The cumulative effect of all voter education in an election should be evaluated by the degree to which pertinent information is reasonably available to all eligible voters in a form they can comprehend, and in a timely fashion (i.e., allowing a reasonable time for the audience to make use of the information). The information should adequately discuss essential facts, procedures, rights and issues.

2. There are no fast and simple methods by which to make these evaluations. To do so, you need to determine the level of voter understanding about the election. You must also determine whether their lack of understanding is of such a pervasive or profound nature that the election results might not reflect the true will of the people. Lack of voter understanding may be manifested by an unusually low level of voter participation or by a large number of improperly cast ballots or spoiled ballots. A public opinion survey, or focus groups which collects information from a representative cross-section of the voting population, is a technique you may use to make these determinations.

LESSONS LEARNED FROM PRACTICE:

Voter education is an aspect of democratic civic education that is specifically designed to provide citizens with the knowledge, skills and values necessary to increase participation in the political process

Voter education programs, broadly concerned with the development of citizenship competence, have to be an integral part of electoral management bodies work and their strategic planning processes

By ascertaining citizens' perceptions and understanding of the electoral process, focus group can be used to develop effective, targeted voter education programs.

Voter Education programs should not be seen simply as programs to educate citizens on how to register and vote, but also be inclusive of promoting a sense of civic duty, to increase knowledge of democratic principles, political and human rights, respect for electoral outcomes and the value of the vote

Clearly defined links between electoral management bodies, political parties and other civil society organizations must exist if citizens are to have confidence in the electoral process

Electoral management bodies have to appreciate the fact that voter education campaigns by civic groups tend to focus more on themes that are immediately relevant to citizens daily lives and therefore should not be condemned as being partisan

Electoral management bodies are most respected and seen as being accountable, transparent and neutral entities when they assist in opening up the electoral process and creating more accessible avenues of participation for citizens and civil society organizations

The promotion of institutional trust and support for governmental institutions, such as electoral management bodies, through voter education programs, is often directly related to the political context within which the elections are being held

Increased political participation can be a by product of voter education activities if those programs emphasize direct political participation and provide popular motivational mobilization techniques

THE CHALLENGES BEFORE US:

There are a number of important challenges before electoral management bodies as it related to voter education. Several of the more salient ones identified by NDI include the following:

Have to appreciate the fact that more informed voters can have less trust in the political system, therefore, how one measures impact has to be flexible and reflective of an understanding of common knowledge education that exist among the potential electorate

Voter education in crisis, post-conflict situations, and defacto one-party states, require special measures that sometimes combines the normal techniques with some country specific culturally appropriate conflict resolution messages and

Technology is not the wand that will magically solve all the problems associated with an electoral process. The power of computers make some officials delusional and can cause them to forget or distort the nuts and bolts of basic voter education work

Measuring The Impact of Voter Education Programs

Risks Of Election Commissions Funding the Activities of NGOs

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CONSIDERATION:

Electoral management bodies must start voter education activities much earlier than what studies and experience currently reflects, and this is especially true if a national political consensus regarding the process needs to be reached prior to the elections. The investment of time and resources would help to ensure that the election results are more likely to be accepted by all political contestants;

Sufficient resources, financial and human, should be allocated by government to the election management bodies so that they can adequately undertake nation-wide voter education activities which would address the specific needs, concerns and cultures of the country, as well as, being appropriate for the particular stage of the transition a country may be going through;

More systematic attention should be given by electoral commissions to their grassroots communications strategies and the proper utilization of the media, print and electronic, in voter education efforts in rural areas;

All government agencies at the local, regional and national levels, especially the permanent electoral management bodies, should become institutions where regular sources of up-to-date voter education information can be obtained by citizens (not just at election time).

The consolidation of democracy requires the establishment of a new tradition of broad-based participation in the electoral process and of respect for and trust in the electoral system. The cost of conducting systematic voter education is much less than the price of a unpopular, illegitimate and rejected elections. For the foreseeable future voter education will remain the key that unlocks the door to increased political participation.

Thank you.