

UNDP

Norcal 2025



Maintaining Electoral Integrity

Chair Introductions

Head Chair: Advaith Krishnakumar

Welcome, delegates, to the UNDP committee for NorCalMUN 2025! I'm Advaith Krishnakumar, and I'm super excited for my very first time as head chair to be at NorCal. I'm a junior at Foothill in my fourth year in MUN. Other than MUN, I love debating politics, listening to music (especially Weezer), and reading. I also play guitar. NorCal will be an incredible experience for all of you in committee, so please have fun debating and researching! Feel free to reach out with any questions, comments, or concerns at advaith.kku@gmail.com.

Vice Chair: Arnav Bajjuri

Hi, my name is Arnav Bajjuri, and I will be your vice chair for this committee. I'm a junior at Foothill and this is my second year in MUN. Outside of MUN I like to hang out with my friends, explore the outdoors, and make Tik Toks. I'm really looking forward to committee, and If you have any questions, please feel free to reach out to me at abajjuri@gmail.com.

Vice Chair: Lily Jenkins

Hi, I'm Lily Jenkins, and I'll be your vice chair. I'm a sophomore at Foothill, and this is my third year in Model UN. When I'm not studying or working, I love driving around as well as playing and listening to music. Right now I'm teaching myself to play guitar and piano. I'm so excited to chair this committee, and I hope you find the topic as interesting as I do! If you have any questions, you can reach out to me at lj2booklover@gmail.com.

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I. Topic Background:

A. Key Terms

Absentee Voting – Remote voting or voting by mail, where the voter is not able to vote in person at a polling station.

Ballot Stuffing – Removing the votes of the party or candidate by intoxicating the total number of the votes with illegal additions to the count.

Campaign Finance – The money parties and candidates raise and spend to do campaigning, as well as the regulations around it.

Disenfranchisement – Refusal to allow a group or an individual to vote or denying them the right to vote.

Electoral Assistance - Aid provided to states from outside groups to oversee and improve elections, mostly in terms of institutional support.

Electoral Cycle – Every single phase of an election process such as pre-election, election day, and post-election phases.

Electoral Fraud – Any illegal manipulation of the election, including vote counting or falsification of results.

Electoral Integrity - The degree or quality of fairness to which an election is held, the degree or quality of transparency, and the degree or quality of adhering to the principles of democracy.

Electoral Observation – Elections to be independently monitored by national or international observers in order to ascertain fairness.

Electoral Roll (Voter Registry) – A voter's roll kept to be used in elections; a list of all registered voters.

First-Past-the-Post (FPTP) – A system of electing where the candidate who gets the plurality of votes wins.

Free and Fair Elections - Elections where all voters cast their votes without fear or suppression, and where electoral results are not disputed.

Gerrymandering – The redistricting of electoral districts in order to give an advantage to a specific party or to a faction.

Incumbency Advantage – The advantage of incumbency, where the office holders are favored during re-election campaigns.

Independent Electoral Commission – An independent governmental body that controls and regulates elections so that they are free and fair.

Proportional Representation – A system of elections in which seats are allocated according to the percentage of votes that each party receives.

Secret Ballot – A voting system that the preferences of the voters will be kept secret to minimize coercion.

Turnout Rate – The proportion of the number of people who are qualified to vote in an election but who voted.

Universal Suffrage – The freedom of every adult citizen to vote without any gender, racial, or social status-based restrictions.

Vote Buying – Giving cash or any other commodity as a reward in exchange for the vote of a person.

Voter Intimidation – Threats, coercion, or harassment to influence or deter an individual to vote freely.

Voter ID – Laws that mandate identification of voters before they cast a ballot, which are frequently argued as to their effects on turnout.

Vote Rigging – Rigging elections to predetermine elections.

Voter Registration - The act of being added to an electoral role as a prerequisite to voting.

Voter Suppression – Any measure or practice that aims to limit or hinder certain groups of people from voting.

B. Historical Context

Since democracy began in the 6th century B.C., Athens, elections have evolved globally. However, election integrity quickly faced challenges, and today, many remain. For example, before 139 BCE in Ancient Rome, the system favored elites. Citizens voted orally, allowing the wealthy to observe and intimidate. In 139 BCE, the "voting unit" system based on wealth gave way to a ballot system intended to empower poorer citizens. Twenty years later, the "voting bridge," a modern-day poll booth, was established, letting citizens vote privately. The Romans

fought voter intimidation to help the less powerful, solidifying a secret and free voting procedure. What's important to note is that these exact same struggles for rights exist today. Now, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) promotes political rights, defining fair elections as periodic, genuine, having a secret/free voting procedure, and equal; something all countries should strive to achieve. The goal of this committee is to uphold these values in elections around the world while combating electoral malpractice.

Election subversion is any action to change election outcomes, often characterized as "Deceive, Disrupt, Deny." For instance, while gerrymandering is not always illegal, it can undermine democratic principles and distort representation. This practice began in the U.S. in the late 1700s, and a recent foreign example is Bulgaria, 1990. The Bulgarian Socialist Party lost the popular vote but won a majority in parliament, likely due to gerrymandering. This undermines election integrity and leads to unrepresentative outcomes.

C. Key Issues

Foreign election interference is a significant topic when it comes to election integrity. This is a global pattern, with flawed elections as the victim on every continent. While we may believe the intentional interference in another country's election would be exclusively to change the results, more likely it is to weaken citizens' faith and trust in the legitimacy of the system. The three main identifiable techniques used by aggressors are the manipulation of information, cyber incidents, and the funding and support of proxy parties and political groups. Russian interference is a prime example of this strategy, involving itself in elections such as Georgia, Ukraine, Estonia, the EU, and the United States. Cyberattacks and disinformation campaigns sow distrust in the system. Allegations of interference in the 2016 Brexit vote have been addressed by the UK Parliament's Intelligence and Security Committee (ISC), which concluded in its 2020

report that there were most likely attempts by Russia, but no direct impact. The same report warned that Russian influence in the UK was the “new normal”.

The three targets of foreign election subversion are voters, politicians or political parties, and the election process or system. Bad actors can manipulate voters’ behavior from afar via the spread of disinformation and the creation of “echo chambers” on social media. AI can now be wielded as a powerful tool, and a cause of deepening mistrust in information. Stolen information and data leaks can impact politicians, like Hillary Clinton’s leaked emails in the 2016 US election. Finally, the election process itself can be attacked. Voter data can be stolen by malicious hackers, turnout suppressed, and electronic-based systems are particularly susceptible to cyber attacks.

Election denial can also be a powerful tool to thwart otherwise legitimate elections. In Brazil, for example, the former president, Jair Bolsonaro, made claims of a rigged election following his loss in the re-election in 2022. A few months later, his supporters stormed the Brazilian Congress, protesting the stolen election. However, unlike his political ally, Donald Trump, Bolsonaro was barred from elections until 2030 for publicly denying the legitimacy of the election. However, Bolsonaro’s attempted election overturning still represents a case of electoral integrity gone wrong. Trust in electoral institutions was low, giving credence to his propaganda, which thus allowed for the near-cancellation of a legitimate election. Jair Bolsonaro presents a case of how mistrust in electoral processes, combined with propaganda, can lead to the undermining of democracy.

The Chinese Communist Party established key restrictions on Internet access in the early 2000s and continues to block unflattering media from its citizens. As of 2025, the World Press Freedom Index ranked it 178th out of 180 concerning press freedom. This has significant

implications for Chinese elections. After all, if journalists and the press can't publish or distribute their real, uncensored opinions, and voters cannot determine for themselves the truth, they can only believe the misinformation disseminated in their media. Additionally, China has taken an interest in elections close to home, such as Taiwan and Hong Kong.

Chinese actions on restricting privacy also reveal another danger to electoral integrity: the chilling effect. The chilling effect is when a law is so broad or so restrictive that it impedes on free expression outside of its supposed role. For example, China's restrictions on the Internet and press freedoms create a chilling effect where people become hesitant to talk about politics, and thus prevents free speech. Free speech, as a requirement for full electoral integrity, makes it so that electoral integrity is limited by a chilling effect. This highlights the role that privacy has on ensuring electoral integrity: not just through secret ballots, but through allowing for full expression.

Social media has generally been hailed as a positive thing, in terms of removing the barrier to entry of traditional journalists and newspapers and allowing users to learn and share the news themselves. It can allow people to speak up and make their voices heard, like in the Arab Spring in 2011. However, the fundamental structure of social media can remove the middle ground or gray area on topics, showing only the most controversial takes and increasing polarization online. The rise of so-called political influencers online also raises important questions: in America alone, over $\frac{1}{3}$ of people gain information from influencers regularly. However, the decentralized nature of social media and the novelty of political influencers allow them to exist in a legal gray area, letting them spread misinformation and distrust as they please. This was a worry in the 2024 EU elections.

In 2024, the influencer-turned-politician Fidias Panayiotou from Cyprus won election to the European Parliament. His tenure in office has seen allegations of misinformation, accusations of collusion with Elon Musk, and his own political party disavowing him. Fidias, as he is known online, is one example of a recent and concerning trend of influencers entering politics.

The same algorithms that present us with funny videos can be manipulated to present us only with people and things we agree with, essentially making other opinions invisible to us. What is the solution to disinformation? Some suggest programs to debunk disinformation, enhance media literacy, and upgrade cyber defence capabilities. Ultimately, it will be the responsibility of the committee to determine the importance of media affecting the integrity of an election and what to do.

Education can also majorly contribute to electoral integrity. Since electoral integrity describes not just processed, but trusted processes, then people must learn to trust electoral institutions. This can be accomplished through education. Good education not only informs people of their rights and thus brings awareness to areas where rights are impeded, but also describes the signs and effects of bad electoral practices, like corruption or vote buying. However, education to ensure electoral integrity falls apart when education itself is biased, such as when the Iraqi government created misleading voter information videos on the 2005 election without the approval of the independent Iraqi Electoral Commission.

The process of voting itself is not the only thing that can have integrity. Voter registration, the process by which voters are added to the voter roll, can have integrity or fail to achieve it. For example, the loss of voting rights as a result of imprisonment or living abroad can, according to the European Court of Human Rights, constitute a loss of human rights unless explicit reason is given. Additionally, systems which require voters to register themselves rather than being

automatically registered from other government data can prove cumbersome for voters in remote areas or without good education on voting. To alleviate this, some states have implemented online voter registration; some have raised concerns, however, that these systems can be prone to fraud or misuse.

Campaign finance, the ways that political parties and candidates raise and use money, is a major field of concern with electoral integrity. Broadly, campaign finance reform is meant to deter corruption, ensure a level playing field for all candidates, and promote transparency. Debates around campaign finance generally involve a trade-off between the free expression of people donating and using money (individual donors, civil society, corporations, candidates etc.) and the regulatory oversight of electoral commissions. The United States, for example, allows essentially unlimited donations from political parties, labor unions, and corporations under the Supreme Court decision *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* (2010). *Citizens United* has allowed for the formation of large political action committees (super PACs), which, while prohibited from directly coordinating with individual campaigns, essentially allow campaigns to raise large sums of money with little regulatory oversight.

Methods to rein in the worst parts of money in politics include bans and limits of fundraising and expenditure by candidates, public funding of elections, and publicly disclosing political donors. However, the US again showcases the limitations of these avenues of regulation. Spending limits on campaign funds applies only to those achieved through public funding of elections, something almost obsolete in the age of super PACs. This has allowed the US to have incredibly expensive elections, with the 2020 election alone costing over \$10 billion. This is quite expensive to both campaigners and organizations who heavily donate. More strict spending limits, like what is used in the United Kingdom, can allow for more reasonable

spending in elections and reduce the oversized role of large corporations and wealthy donors in elections.

The purpose of preserving electoral integrity goes beyond simply ensuring electoral processes are secure. When elections are secure, then people trust democratic institutions more. As a result, they can better participate in the political process through increased civic engagement and turnout. Of course, increased turnout leads to better representation, which then leads to good governance. As a whole, supporting electoral integrity not only keeps elections secure but also improves democratization: the process of parts of society adopting democratic traditions like civil rights and equality. Promoting electoral integrity also means promoting better states.

II. Past UN Action:

A. General Action

The United Nations's approach to electoral integrity rests largely on its reliance on international treaties, electoral assistance, and specific resolutions. The foundational Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirms the need for "periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote." More specifically, the later International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights stresses the importance of these same rights to apply to all people in a state equally. As such, the UN indirectly condemns any kind of voter suppression.

However, the trouble lies in enforcement. Like in many other issues, just because a country has signed a treaty to promote electoral integrity, it doesn't mean they follow through.

Countries that suppress democracy are often full signatories of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Since the UN cannot directly end unfair elections, its main work to secure electoral integrity has been through electoral assistance. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is the major body responsible for giving such aid, often assisted by the European Union. Member states can apply for electoral assistance from the UNDP, often in the form of “developing or improving electoral laws, processes, and institutions, focusing primarily on election administration bodies.” While the UN can create systemic change, most support comes in the form of securing individual elections in member states. As such, the system could be more proactive.

Lastly, the UN conducts frequent research into the state of electoral integrity. Recently, the Action Coalition for Information Integrity was formed to safeguard electoral integrity through combating misinformation. The coalition holds regular meetings and publishes annual reports on the state of electoral integrity. However, much can still be learned from individual resolutions of the UN.

B. Individual UN Resolutions

Resolution A/res/48/124 came in February of 1994, a potential response to Cold War democratization and the Cambodian elections in 1993. Following years of authoritarian rule, UN peacekeeping forces were able to stabilize Cambodia and hold a democratic election, widely regarded as fair. The success in Cambodia demonstrated the potential for UN intervention to foster transitions towards democracy in challenging environments. The resolution reflected a growing recognition of the need to balance national sovereignty with the UN’s interest in promoting democratic governance.

In the resolution, the UN condemns interference in national electoral processes and calls for states to refrain from financing activities that interfere in the same processes. However, it does mention the UN may help with technical assistance when requested by the foreign state, as long as the UN respects national sovereignty. This resolution likely influenced UN action on the first multiracial election in South Africa, marking the end of apartheid. Nelson Mandela was inaugurated as president of South Africa on May 10 of 1994, in the country's first democratic election. Additionally, the UN aided El Salvador in holding its first election to be held in a time of peace since recent turmoil. While challenged by voter registration issues, the election was deemed generally free and fair by international observers.

The Right to Privacy in the Digital Age is a United Nations General Assembly resolution of December 2013: Resolution A/RES/68/164. This was proposed due to concerns that have grown over issues of mass surveillance, intercepting of communications and gathering of personal information without the consent of the individual, which have been in the spotlight after the release of information concerning mass surveillance programs across the world.

A/RES/68/164 further reconfirmed the right to privacy of the UDHR and ICCPR in Article 12 and 17, respectively. It stressed that this right should not remain unpunished in the digital world so that it does not depend on a nationality or the location of a particular individual. The resolution encouraged all states to update and review surveillance laws frequently, with an aim of checking the laws to see that they are in line with international human rights law. It demanded the creation of independent oversight mechanisms to oversee surveillance schemes and that the human rights obligations need to be observed outside the national boundaries in the case of digital communication as well.

Although the resolution was not binding, it was the first one that the UN officially addressed digital privacy in a global context. It also asked the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) to compile a report concerning the protection and promotion of the right to privacy on both domestic and extraterritorial surveillance. This report, released in 2014, reaffirmed the doctrine that unlawful and arbitrary surveillance and data gathering are not only in violation of human rights, but that states should embrace the labeling of transparent protections.

The resolution has provided the catalyst for further UN decisions such as subsequent UN resolutions of the Human Rights Council and the declaration of the Special Rapporteur on the right to privacy in 2015. Such acts have assisted in institutionalizing the issues of privacy concerns in the UN framework, although the difficulty of enforcing such a resolution is still an issue since the resolution is merely advisory. Additionally, they demonstrate the intertwined nature of privacy rights and electoral integrity.

III. Current Situation:

A. General Situation

The current state of electoral integrity leaves much to be desired. The 2025 Electoral Integrity Global Report showed clear, global trends. Firstly, more states had democratic backsliding compared to those without. Secondly, the states with large reductions in electoral integrity were large democracies (the United States, the United Kingdom, and India).

Other major findings from the report were that campaign periods, especially in campaign finance and media, had low scores of electoral integrity across the board. While not all scores in every country showed complete sham elections, the results are still concerning. For one, the trends show no noticeable increase in electoral integrity over the past decade. Also, the fact that

major states had the largest decline in electoral integrity means that a large number of voters are forced to deal with non-free and fair elections. Looking at individual cases of challenges to electoral integrity can reveal many insights into just how democracy can be undermined, and the ways it can be protected.

B. Case Studies of Elections

The 2017 Turkish constitutional referendum was an election focused solely on changing the Turkish constitution. The amendments proposed were generally aimed at shifting Turkey's system of government from parliamentary to presidential, basically giving the president more power. If passed, the amendments would eliminate the position of Prime Minister and transfer his responsibilities to the President, who would serve as both head of state and government. The President's powers would increase, including the ability to issue decrees with legal force and have more power over appointments to the Supreme Board of Judges and Prosecutors (HSYK). A "Yes" vote would effectively remove the checks and balances system designed to limit one person's power. The "Yes" campaign ultimately won with 51.4% of the vote, while 48.6% voted "No". Major cities in general voted higher for "No" in cities such as Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir.

The election faced accusations of misconduct and electoral irregularities. There were claims of government pressure on "No" supporters, with Human Rights Watch stating the takeover of major media companies and persecution of journalists. International observers raised concerns about an unlevel playing field, citing a lack of diverse media for voters and restrictions on opposition campaigning. There was also a controversial government decision to verify unstamped ballots – originally a protection against fraud – which triggered the main opposition party to call for the votes to be recounted.

To date, the issue of privacy is closely linked to political events, especially in democratically regressing states. The Serbian parliamentary election of 2023 has attracted particular concern among international observers not only because of the political context but also due to matters pertaining to freedom of the media, electoral intimidation, and digital privacy.

The elections, which took place on December 17, 2023, showed a clear win of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS). The campaign was, however, characterized by accusations of misappropriation of state funds, unfair media reporting, and targeted online disinformation. Watchdog organizations and opposition parties claimed that authorities were spying on political rivals and reporters using surveillance technologies and online surveillance.

The OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) noted that the elections were held in a polarised atmosphere, and the ruling party enjoyed systemic benefits. It was reported that government-affiliated parties had access to large amounts of voter data, which led to questions regarding data security and adherence to international standards of privacy, such as in A/RES/68/164.

The European Union and other international organizations have appealed to Serbia to reinforce its data protection legislation, guarantee that its oversight agencies are independent, and also to ensure that state surveillance practices are undertaken in accordance with the law and reasonably. The election controversy has again rekindled debates in the UN and other multilateral forums on how to better implement digital privacy principles in the politically sensitive environment.

IV. Questions to Consider:

1. How can the UN balance preserving and expanding electoral integrity with national sovereignty?
2. What types of electoral assistance can the UN provide to best help countries prone to democratic backsliding?
3. What is your country's stance on the regulation of media, finance, and outside influence in elections?
4. What aspects of electoral integrity are most important to maintain?
5. What is the line between campaigning and advocating against the electoral system?
6. How can democratic backsliding be alleviated and prevented?
7. Should there be one global standard for electoral integrity, or should individual nations and regions receive their own standards?

Tech Policy: This committee will be UNMOD TECH. This means delegates may use their devices during unmoderated caucuses only.

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