1 Introduction

Around the world, there are concerns about the fairness of elections. Elections are sometimes characterised by low turnout with citizens staying away from the polls out of distrust of the politicians. Overseas actors are often claimed to be trying to manipulate algorithms on social media to give coverage for some candidates. The electoral period can also be one of violence, fear and repression – as bullets and tear gas are used to suppress post-election protests.

These concerns are also taking place during a period of rapid technological, political and cultural upheaval. Traditional forms of media have increasingly been replaced by new digital mediums. There has also been a more aggressive international environment where governments have sought to sow disruption using these online platforms. There have been major shifts in public opinion – with citizens often turning against elections and democracy. These are added to wider concerns about the decline of democracy and democratic backsliding (Bermeo 2016; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018).

During this period of rapid change, we ask: what is electoral integrity? What value do good elections have? What do good elections look like? How do we know when they take place and when they do not? How can we measure the quality of elections around the world? Do old concepts of what it means to have a good election, often anchored in earlier centuries, stand the test of time? What are the current threats to electoral integrity?

Elections bestow power on political leaders and their governments in nearly all states. They take their place on the world stage and contribute towards shaping the global political order on the basis of election contests. If their path to power was "fraudulent," "rigged" or "unfair," then the legitimacy of their rule is diminished – with broader consequences for the legitimacy of the global order too. At the same time, claims that elections were "fraudulent," "rigged" or "unfair" can be cheaply and falsely made to try to undermine authority. The concepts and political ideas that are used to define electoral integrity are of supreme importance in any debates about democracy, power and the state.

Given the scepticism with which the public often treats elections and democracy, there is also great value in freshly anchoring the reasons why elections are important. Elections may matter because they are enshrined in international agreements such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). However, for the everyday citizen, reasoning from inside high-level corridors of power may feel too far removed from their experience to make sense.

We have three overall arguments. Firstly, we argue that the role of elections is to strengthen human empowerment as part of a wider system

of democracy. We use a maximalist conception of democracy, which is connected to human development. This conceives of a democracy emancipatory system that enables citizens to be empowered to fulfil their human capabilities. Elections are a social practice, which have the ability to empower the everyday citizen to realise some of their human capabilities. They enable imagination, thought and reason; expressions of voice; serve as a mechanism to give them power against the otherwise powerful and act as mechanisms for group equality. Flawed elections do the opposite: they disempower citizens and embolden autocrats and others. To empower citizens, we argue, elections must fulfil four principles: contestation, participation, deliberation and adjudication. We therefore define electoral integrity *as a set of principles to be achieved in elections that empower the everyday citizen and help to realize the ideals of democracy.* This original conception of electoral integrity contrasts with earlier approaches which are anchored in laws and standards, stakeholder perceptions and minimal and procedural democratic political theory. While there may be overlap with these approaches, our focus on citizen empowerment puts people first.

The second argument is that the context in which elections can empower or disempower citizens has fundamentally shifted and that we now live in an *age of complexity*. It is commonly stated that we live in an age of democratic backsliding, according to traditional liberal conceptions of democracy. While considerable evidence gives weight to this argument, we argue that the shifts have been broader. There have been qualitatively new societal developments that have arisen since the turn of the twenty-first century, which means we should revisit the concepts of liberal democracy from the 1950s and 1960s. These shifts mean that our conception of good elections needs to be revised.

Thirdly, the transition into a new age of complexity requires more fine-grained and conceptually grounded measurement tools to assess the quality of elections. We set out a method for evaluating elections thoughtfully aggregating expert perceptions across the key principles of electoral integrity. This method provides a more nuanced and detailed picture of when and where elections empower people – and when they do not. We can furthermore contrast these measures with existing cross-national evaluations of elections using commonly used data sources.

These three arguments have important consequences for prescribing best practices to defend and enrich democracy, as well as major scholarly implications for the study of democracy, democratisation, comparative politics and beyond.

Electoral Integrity: Existing Approaches

There are currently four broad approaches to defining electoral integrity (Table 1). The first is to equate electoral integrity based on *laws, standards and procedures*. The first variant of this approach is to evaluate whether the election follows international laws and practices prescribed by international organisations. Pippa Norris defined electoral integrity as: "Global norms grounded in multilateral agreements, international conventions, treaties, and international laws" (Norris 2013, 564). As Norris points out, "normative authority is understood to derive from the body of human rights treaties and conventions in the international community; not directly from principles of democracy" (Norris 2015, 4). A voluminous grey literature from international bodies followed, consolidating and adding detail to international "best practices" (Carter Center 2014). Yet international standards might also be shaped by power politics. If the balance of power within international organisations shifts, then standards may shift. Standards can be an important tool to hold countries to account in the international sphere – but they need to be derived from normative theory.

A variant of this approach is to evaluate elections in terms of whether the national laws were followed (Vickery and Shein 2012). Should the national laws regulating the electoral process be broken, then the election can be argued to be defective. This approach is widely used in news coverage around elections. An advantage of the approach is that it does not impose an "outsider" perspective on elections, which international standards might. The rule of law is also clearly important to provide a consistent framework for all actors. However, it assumes that national laws are themselves fair. National laws are often used by incumbents to ban candidates and parties from contesting elections, create gerrymandered electoral districts or disenfranchise people from voting.

A second approach is to assess whether elections have *popular support and confidence* amongst key stakeholders such as elites (Schnaudt 2023), the public (McAllister and White 2011; Norris 2025) or electoral officials (Garnett and James 2021) about whether the election was fair. The advantage is that actors within a country may have local knowledge of their own specific elections, which can be drawn from. The problem, however, is that no actor has an unbiased picture of the quality of an election, given the wide range of activities and processes that make up the full electoral cycle. It also does not give actors any definition or yardstick of what each actor should look out for and value when assessing their elections – apart from that they value them.

Table 1 Contrasting definitions of electoral integrity

	Legal elections		**Popular elections**	**Minimal and procedural democracy**			**Human empowerment**
	International standards	Legal approach	Stakeholder perception	Competitive elections	Free and fair	Electoral manipulation	Human empowerment
Key authors	Norris	Vickery and Shein	Schnaudt	Hyde and Marinov	VDem	Birch	This volume
Rationale	International agreements	Rule of law	Local support	Competition	Clean elections	Electoral manipulation	Enabling real democracy
Measurement	Compliance with international documents	Compliance with national law	Opinion surveys	Can elections be lost?	To what extent are elections free and fair?	Electoral manipulation which puts private above public interest	Electoral conditions that enable human capabilities
Normative	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Timeless	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

A third approach is to use *minimal and procedural democratic political theory*. This involves seeing elections as an activity that is undertaken to help achieve a specific form of governance. Adam Przeworski (1991, 10) claimed that a democracy is a country where the "[incumbent] parties lose elections." Robert Dahl (1971) claimed that a democracy required several institutional guarantees that enable the opportunities to participate in the election as a voter (participation) and to stand as a candidate (contestation). Connecting these ideas to elections, Hyde and Marinov (2012) assess elections in terms of whether they exhibit de facto competition and whether the incumbent can lose. Sarah Birch uses a "working minimal definition of a democracy" to inform an approach to studying electoral malpractice, defined as "the manipulation of electoral processes and outcomes so as to substitute personal or partisan benefit for the public interest" (Birch 2011, 14). This can involve the illicit manipulation of institutions, vote choice or the voting act. The Varieties of Democracy Project meanwhile measure "clean elections" where there is "an absence of registration fraud, systematic irregularities, government intimidation of the opposition, vote buying, and election violence" (Coppedge et al. 2025). These provided important advances in the literature, but we argue, to do not cover all the ways in which elections can be important for contributing towards realizing human capabilities. Further literature provides a detailed assessment of whether particular procedures are followed. For example, did polling stations ensure ballot secrecy? Were there audits in place (Alvarez et al. 2020)? These are important questions to ask, and each procedure may have value. But to what ends? What are the goals of elections?

Argument and Structure: Electoral Integrity in an Age of Complexity

We use a broader definition of democracy. Realist democracy begins by asking about the nature of the human condition and what societal structures can be put in place to improve it (James 2024, 2025 forthcoming). Material necessity in the world gives rise to human needs such as access to food, water and security. But also the need for the use of the senses, imagination and thought; emotions; practical reason; affiliation with others, concern for other species; play and recreation activities; and having control over one's environment. The real democracy approach argues that the nature of social life is formed by structured social relations. Humans find themselves in economic, cultural and political circumstances which are not of their choosing. They can also find themselves to be members of groups which are discriminated against or face unequal opportunities in society. This contextual situation can significantly shape, but not

ultimately determine, their life opportunities and life outcomes. The approach argues that democracy is an emancipatory system that enables citizens to be empowered to fulfil their human capabilities. It therefore requires that there are certain preconditions for democracy that need to be in place in order for citizens to be able to realise their human capabilities. These include health, education, living standards, public administration quality, electoral integrity, liberal protections, participatory conditions, deliberative conditions and cultural structures. Elections are therefore one social practice that serve as a structure to empower people. Elections with integrity enable citizens to use imagination, thought and reason; express voice; strengthen individual power against the otherwise powerful and act as mechanisms for political equality. Elections are argued to empower people when four principles are found in them: participation, contestation, deliberation and adjudication.

The advantage of our approach is that it has normative underpinnings, which enable us to distinguish between "good" and "bad" elections. It is also a more universalist approach which goes beyond a particular part of the electoral cycle – or a set of national or international laws at a given moment in time. It is connected to and draws from theories of human development. It also provides a more detailed picture of the ways in which people are empowered or disempowered in a specific election. It allows us to paint a more detailed picture about the full range of ways in which elections can be tools of empowerment – or mechanisms for disempowerment.

We also argue that elections should be located within a specific historical period. There are universal threats to human empowerment posed by the realpolitik involved in designing and implementing elections. Would-be autocrats are always watching from the shadows for opportunities to entrench their power. However, there are other actors who may undermine elections (such as media platform moguls, overseas governments and party barons) – and the way in which they are able to do this may emerge from the tools available to them within a specific period. This Element argues that new times have emerged, an age of complexity, in which elections empower, but also disempower because of new emergent threats and challenges. How can universal, timeless principles be applied to these new threats?

We do not argue that international standards or best practices are unimportant. Far from it. They are indispensable for developing procedures and sharing knowledge about how elections can empower people. However, their value needs to be based around theories of empowerment – rather than being valued for their own sake.

We develop the argument in more detail in the next section, which sets out our new concept of electoral integrity. Section 3 then argues that we have entered

a new age of complexity in which there are new threats to electoral integrity, which therefore requires new concepts. In Section 4, we propose a revised tool for measuring the new concept of electoral integrity. Section 5 then paints a picture of election quality around the world. It also compares the results of our measurement to other measures at an aggregate level and through some illustrative vignettes.

The Element therefore, aims to advance the literature with a new approach to conceptualizing and measuring election quality. Ultimately, it considers the implications of this new approach and charts the research agenda ahead.

2 Defining Electoral Integrity

The concepts and political ideas which are used to describe society and social practices are of extreme importance. As Foucault argued, the linguistic terms are deeply political because they embed normative understandings of the "good" and the "bad" and therefore embed power relations (Foucault 2019). Social theorists, such as Jeremy Bentham, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Mary Wollstonecraft, developed concepts such as "chartism," "democracy" and "feminism" not just to contribute towards political philosophy, but as calls for action to change the world. They endorse or contest the political order.

"Electoral Integrity" can also serve as a call to action for change – but needs careful definition. This section sets out the concept of electoral integrity, which the volume uses. We argue in the first part of this section that the concept of electoral integrity must be anchored in democratic theory. We then introduce the normative approach that will be used, based around a maximalist theory of democracy. Drawing from this, it is argued that elections should be valued as they are mechanisms to empower humans to realise their capabilities. Four principles of electoral integrity are set out.

Elections as Mechanisms for Democracy

The concept of electoral integrity must involve the study of the whole electoral cycle. Elections involve more than just election day. There are several phases, including the pre-electoral period (covering planning, training, voter education and voter/party registration), the electoral period (covering nomination, campaigns, voting and results) and the post-electoral period (covering audits, review and boundary redrawing) (ACE 2017). However, all parts of the electoral process are important.

We take a normative approach to defining electoral integrity using democratic theory. This has several advantages over those approaches which define electoral integrity in terms of enactment of national laws; international standards; or the views of key actors such as elites, the public or electoral officials.

Firstly, it provides a *moral compass*. A theory of democracy provides some clear aspirations for what we are trying to achieve when we design electoral laws and run elections. Without this, we have no reason to know whether the international standards or national laws that govern elections are fair, just or otherwise. Elites, publics and officials may agree or disagree with each other about whether elections are fair – but are they right? Why or why not? An approach with a normative anchoring can address these questions.

Secondly, it allows us to make recommendations for *improvements in real-world practice*. A normative approach allows national laws and international

standards to be subject to critical scrutiny through research. Once defects are identified, new laws and standards can be advocated and adopted.

Thirdly, unlike laws and standards, principles are *timeless*. Institutions are known to have their effects change over time, through drift, for example, as societies undergo changes (Hacker, Pierson and Thelen 2015; Mahoney and Thelen 2010). An electoral law designed in the nineteenth century may well have been important in making elections fairer in Victorian Britain, but this is no guarantee that it will have the same effect a century or two later. For example, the effects of electoral systems change as populations move or grow. Technological transformations can bypass existing laws designed to protect elections. Campaign spending limits can be made redundant by parties and candidates advertising on social media, which is much more difficult to regulate. There is therefore a need for a universal benchmark.

Our first goal in re-conceptualizing electoral integrity is therefore to define these normative principles that undergird electoral integrity. We begin with an apparently simple statement: *Elections are held for a reason: to establish and uphold democracy.* The question "What is democracy?" however, has been one of the long-standing debates within political science, and there exists a wide variety of approaches to defining democracy, and we first present (in brief) some alternative definitions and an argument for our preferred approach.

What Is Democracy?

The most barebones approach to defining democracy, a *minimalist approach*, defines it as the presence of elections. Joseph Schumpeter argued that "the democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote" (Schumpeter 2003 [1942], 269). In other words, there was little else to democracy other than elections. It involved a system for the competitive struggle for power between rival elites. This system was defended by Adam Przeworski (2019, 5) who saw democracy "a political arrangement in which people select governments through elections and have a reasonable possibility of removing incumbent governments they do not like." Although minimalist in nature, it provided an alternative to decisions being made by those with the greatest physical and military force. As Przeworski defined it, "The miracle of democracy is that . . . People who have guns obey those without them" (Przeworski 1999, 16). For Przeworski, "[d]emocracy is a system that keeps us from killing each other; and that's good enough." (Przeworski 2000).