Preventing and Responding to Election Disruption and Violence: Ten Considerations for Cities

Introduction

The stakes are high for democracy in 2024 as nearly half the global population will be eligible to participate in elections to choose their leaders in at least 83 national and local contests globally. Elections are opportunities to promote the rule of law and encourage participation in local and national conversations through which citizens negotiate their interests and shape their society. They seek to give voice to and moderate diverging opinions through inclusive institutions, all of which can foster and support social cohesion. However, they do not always bring the smooth and peaceful transition or maintenance of power that a democratic nation strives for. Researchers have found that violence of some kind occurs in one in five elections globally. Furthermore, disinformation can disenfranchise and manipulate voters and undermine faith in democracy, while elections themselves can exacerbate or drive intense polarisation that damages social cohesion.

Local governments typically do not have a specific mandate for organising or overseeing elections. However, drawing on experiences from national governments and international and community partners, there are steps city leaders can take to help safeguard the election period, including in both the lead up to and following elections. Cities face varied election-related challenges, depending on the context, with differing directives and levels of support; however, there are some relevant trends and approaches that local governments should keep in mind going into their election period as they look to maintain social cohesion in and among their communities during what can be a tense period for their residents.

Drawing on the experiences of cities across its global membership, and desk research, Strong Cities has identified ten considerations to support city leaders and local governments safeguard democratic practices and mitigate potential harms during and after election periods.

Ten Considerations for Local Leaders and Governments

1. Enhance a city's understanding of how information is manipulated to disrupt elections.
2. Monitor for misleading information throughout the election.
3. Strengthen a city's resilience to information manipulation.
4. Help maintain information integrity by debunking misleading content and providing reliable, up-to-date information throughout the election period.
5. Create a plan of action for preventing and responding to election violence.
6. Provide targeted support to groups who may be targeted by or are otherwise at risk of election violence.
7. Commit to administer a credible, transparent and inclusive election in your city in order to help build trust in the election process.
8. Proactively promote peace and civility throughout the election period.
9. Cultivate an inclusive dialogue to help minimise polarisation.
10. Promote civic engagement to build social capital and enhance social cohesion.

These considerations, elaborated in this brief, are organised around and aim to enhance cities' understanding **across three topics**:

I. Mitigating the threat of misleading information.
II. Preventing and responding to election-related violence.
III. Managing polarisation and promoting social cohesion.

I. Mitigating the Threat of Misleading Information

Misleading information – whether spread via social media, messaging applications, print, radio, television or word of mouth – is among the most salient threats facing elections in 2024. To make an informed decision, voters need access to credible information about candidates and issues, as well as how to vote. Accordingly, those who hope to disrupt elections target voters with misleading content and conspiracy narratives that obscure their understanding, impede their ability to vote and undermine their faith in the electoral process. This typically disproportionally effects historically marginalised groups.

Forms of Misleading Information

- **Disinformation:** false, misleading or manipulated content intended to deceive or harm.
- **Misinformation:** false, misleading or manipulated content shared irrespective of an intent to deceive or harm.
- **Conspiracy narratives:** explanations for events that propose the existence of powerful and sinister groups colluding in secret to reach malevolent goals, which are often political in nature.
- **Political astroturfing:** manufacturing the impression of widespread grassroot or community support around a candidate or issue where there is none.

Misleading information impacts elections in many ways:

- It hinders an electorate's ability to make an informed decision about candidates, political parties and policy issues.
- Faulty information about polling stations, elections dates, voter registration and voting laws can impede a person's ability to cast their vote.
- Manufactured content and conspiracies about candidates can discredit them and cause reputational damage with lasting professional and personal consequences.
- Disinformation about election results can spread confusion, undermine the election's legitimacy and fuel damaging conspiracies. It has spurred a global rise in election denialism.
- It erodes faith in the electoral process and democracy and can heighten the threat of violence.

Despite the scale of the challenge, local governments can help mitigate its impact. To help manage the consequences of misleading information on elections and democracy more broadly, local leaders and stakeholders should familiarise themselves with common tactics and tools for creating and disseminating disinformation, monitor their use throughout the election period and prepare strategies for minimising harm that include efforts to enhance their city's resilience.

1. Enhance awareness and understanding of how election-related information manipulation is created and spread

Misleading information poses a threat to all elections globally, but the extent and nature of that threat to local communities will vary. Therefore, it is important for city leaders and local governments to familiarise themselves with the tools and mediums typically used to deliver information about elections and candidates and how they may be used to generate mis- or disinformation surrounding the elections in their cities.

Traditional media – including television, radio, newspapers and their affiliated websites – is a common source of information about elections. Firstly, traditional media remains a popular site for political advertising through which candidates advance their accounts of salient issues and target their political opposition in hopes of influencing voters. While digital media now accounts for most of a candidate's spend on political advertising in the US, online ads are largely dedicated to raising campaign funds. Television ads are still where candidates focus on voter persuasion. Secondly, traditional media is an important source of news related to the election. This reporting influences how viewers build their understanding of key issues and come to know candidates and their positions, while polling data impacts how people cast their vote. When this information – either directly from candidates and parties or from third parties – is biased or ill-informed, it can have a detrimental influence.

Digital technology has changed the way we access and share information, and as such has become an essential tool for political campaigns. Social media has been particularly influential; platforms like Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) have had a significant effect on elections over the last two decades. On one hand, the different platforms afford significant advantages to candidates and election organisers, enabling them to connect with and inform voters. It can also help level the playing field for lesser-known candidates without large financial backing by providing a lower-cost option for microtargeting ads, while its algorithms make it easier to propagate campaign messaging organically.

Unfortunately, the features that make social media and online platforms valuable messaging tools also make them an ideal vector for spreading election disinformation, including election denialism, on a massive scale, which regulators have struggled to keep pace with. This challenge is likely to grow as the largest and most popular platforms have significantly downsized their content moderation teams. The European Union (EU) has been particularly vocal about the threat of online disinformation to democracy and has responded with several initiatives[1] to protect elections and counter information manipulation online.

New regulations on political advertising may help close some gaps in how misleading information spreads, but problems remain. Part of the challenge is the way users utilise online platforms. Despite concerns about its legitimacy, social media is the primary source of information for the majority of users globally and its interconnectedness allows mis- and disinformation to travel faster and further than ever before. Messaging apps like WhatsApp and Telegram have made it easier for users to share information beyond a single platform, meaning that misinformation can spread on a grand scale with the added legitimacy (for some) of having come from a source and one knows trusts. One study of WhatsApp communications in the lead up to the 2019 elections in India, for example, found that around 10% of images shared contained misinformation. While in Brazil, WhatsApp was key in a 'governmental operation' to spread disinformation during the 2018 presidential contest.

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[1] For example, the Defence of Democracy Package includes several provisions to protect elections and counter information manipulation; the Digital Services Act places pressure on social media companies to address disinformation; and new regulations on political advertising require greater transparency, limit targeting and data collection and prohibit foreign advertising before an election.

Concerns about disinformation on social media have been amplified by advancements in **Artificial Intelligence** (AI). As a tool, AI offers many advantages for candidates. It helps them create campaign material more quickly and cheaply and in many languages. This enables them to reach a wider audience more efficiently and supports more inclusive outreach, crucial in multilingual communities. There is some debate about the ethics of AI-generated phone calls and dystopian attack ads.

However, with greater study and development, AI could prove invaluable for identifying dis- and misinformation on a large scale and may be a critical tool for ensuring information integrity in future elections. AI chatbots also hold great promise for providing information online in real time. However, users should be wary of generative AI's accuracy.

Despite these benefits, at present, many experts believe that AI poses a serious challenge to elections. Primary concerns include:

- It is supercharging the creation and dissemination of disinformation, especially with advancements in deepfakes that can present convincing photos, videos and audio recordings.
- It is weakening trust in information. As people become more aware of AI's capability, the very possibility of AI-generated media has led people to automatically dismiss or question the integrity of content in expectation that it could be faked.
- It gets things wrong. While automated chatbots and search features can make it easy to answer common question and provide voters with relevant information, AI is notoriously prone to 'hallucinations' and the tools it powers are not consistently reliable sources of information. For example, an investigation into Microsoft's chatbot, Copilot, revealed consistent election disinformation, while other chatbots carry explicit warnings that any information provided should be factchecked.
- It is not neutral. AI companies build rules into their content generators that fill in gaps in users' prompts to retrieve more detailed results and exclude offensive, illegal or overly biased outcomes. While these rules serve an important function, they are dictated by the companies, which effectively concentrates power over a critical source of content and information into very few and increasingly powerful hands.

In recognition of the threat AI poses to elections, Open AI – the company behind the AI chatbot ChatGPT and image generator DALL-E – released a blog post outlining their approach during 2024's worldwide elections 'to prevent abuse, provide transparency on AI-generated content, and improve access to accurate voting information'. Midjourney, another major AI company, is considering a ban on the creation of political images and 20 technology companies have pledged to cooperate in detecting and responding to harmful AI content. However, there are few formal regulations and a large number of smaller AI and technology companies that have been left out of these discussions may be willing to provide AI services with fewer safeguards.

The risk that AI-generated mis- and disinformation poses to elections played out in Slovakia's general election in October 2023. Two days before the election, an audio recording was posted on Facebook in which one of the candidates could be heard discussing election manipulation with a local journalist. The recording was later debunked as having been manipulated using AI, but there was little the affected candidate could do as it was posted during the two-day moratorium before the vote in which media and political parties are meant to remain silent. It is impossible to say whether the doctored clip was responsible for the candidate's narrow defeat, but it reveals the gaps in current policies for managing AI-generated content on social media. Deepfake audio recordings have also been inserted into elections in India, Turkey and the United States, showing how widespread AI-generated disinformation has become.

Traditional media and word of mouth will continue to play a major role in spreading misleading information around elections. However, technology has supercharged this threat and as it changes, so too will the threat landscape. Understanding the threat from misleading information will require cities to be aware of changes to the digital platforms and their policies, as well as the tools used to create deceitful content.

Where possible, cities should hire or provide training to ensure there is expertise within the local government that can stay abreast of changes and advise on and oversee policies and activities that relate to these and new emerging technologies.

2. Monitor for misleading information

To manage the spread and impact of misleading information, it is important for each local official to understand the nature and extent of the threat facing their city. This will require active monitoring of different media channels online and offline – including social media – to identify misleading content and conspiracy narratives as they spread throughout every phase of the election, including the post-election period.

> There is a range of **tools** local government can use to monitor for problematic content and narratives. Some are free online and can help detect bots, support fact-checking and provide overviews of how a story has been reported and talked about online.
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> - **Hoaxy** visualises the spread of information and supports fact checking.
> - **Claim Buster** is a live, automated web-based fact checking tool.
> - **Botometer** helps identify bots, which are often employed to scale disinformation, while **BotAmp** allows you to compare the bot influence of two sets of tweets.
> - **Trends** and **Network Tool** help you identify and map trends in how information is spreading around particular topics.

Indonesia has made monitoring for dis- and misinformation – what they collectively call 'hoaxes' – a priority in the lead up to their 2024 election. The initiative is led by the national Communications and Information Ministry and employs a 24-hour monitoring unit called the Monitoring Kominfo, which utilises human operators and technology to monitor social media for disinformation. To enhance its monitoring capabilities, the Ministry works in partnership with the Indonesian Anti-Slander Society (Mafindo) and fact-checking website cekfakta.com, which was created in collaboration with media industry stakeholders.

The Ministry is also partnering with civil society organisations dedicated to addressing disinformation, like the Safer Internet Lab (SAIL). Likewise, the Ministry is working with academics and experts, as well as the private sector, to provide comprehensive digital literacy education for citizens throughout the country and enhance national resilience through a movement called SiBerkreasi.

Indonesia's example of collaborative working is important for local governments, especially those that lack the recourses and access to conduct large-scale monitoring efforts themselves. Instead, local governments should pursue a whole-of-society approach grounded in national-local cooperation (NLC), in which they coordinate with national and regional governments, as well as civil society, experts, the private sector and community leaders throughout the city to gather and share pertinent information in real time. In many countries, this level of cooperation, particularly on potentially sensitive topics related to security, is hindered by trust deficits across levels and sectors, and limited structures for sharing information securely. In some cases, international organisations and civil society can act as valuable partners to enhance trust and information sharing. For more on NLC and strategies or enhancing cooperative information sharing, see the NLC Toolkit, developed by Strong Cities for the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF).

3. Strengthen the city's resilience to information manipulation

Information manipulation is a national and even transnational challenge that extends far beyond the reach of local governments. However, local governments can take meaningful action to enhance the city's resilience to misleading information during elections and minimise the impact it has on social cohesion. Information resilience has three key features that will affect how a city is impacted by information manipulation during an election:

- Secure and trusted systems and structures;
- A healthy information ecosystem; and
- Resilient and active residents who can identify misleading information and are willing to help protect the information ecosystem.

The political climate at a given time is also relevant, as high levels of populism and polarisation can negatively impact trust in governmental structures and the media and lower resilience to election related information manipulation.

To determine a city's information resilience and identify gaps, local governments should first assess all three features:

1. **Do residents trust the systems and structures and believe they will deliver a free and fair election?** The perception of corruption or mismanagement – whether it is valid or not – creates opportunities for anti-government conspiracy narratives and disinformation. While it may be difficult to address (real or perceived) shortcomings in national structures, it is important to understand them and note where distrust could make the city's residents more vulnerable to information manipulation that seeks to undermine the validity of the election or democracy. Local leaders and officials should also identify opportunities to strengthen local structures and rebuild trust.

2. **Does the information ecosystem provide residents with trustworthy sources of information about the election?** An information ecosystem consists of the physical and institutional infrastructure that determines the production and distribution of information, and people's relationship with it. During elections, this includes the media, government, political actors and civil society, among others. A healthy information environment will include a diverse range of independent actors with the right balance of freedom and regulation to promote fair and honest reporting without curtailing free speech or silencing dissent. The strength of this system and people's trust in it will largely determine how much space there is for misleading reporting within official channels and for alternative reporting that seeks to fill gaps with disinformation and conspiracy narratives.

3. **Do residents have the capacity to identify misleading content and are they invested in counteracting attempts to manipulate election-related information?** Nothing can fully insulate a city's residents from all disinformation during elections. To be truly resilient, residents – and members of the local government – need the skills and confidence to identify all forms of misleading content, which can be built through media and digital literacy training. Furthermore, to protect a healthy information environment, residents need to be invested in its protection. Research has found that the ability to identify misleading content did not necessarily determine a person's willingness to share it. Therefore, to enhance resilience, media and digital literacy skills are crucial, but cities should also go beyond these and educate residents about the importance of information integrity to instil a sense of ownership in protecting healthy information environments.

Investing in media and digital literacy is a foundational step to enhance the individual resilience of residents in your city.

Media literacy is the ability to 'access, analyse, evaluate, create and act' using different forms of media and communication in different contexts. It determines one's ability to make sense of the media and susceptibility to disinformation and conspiracy narratives.

Digital literacy is the ability to access, interpret and communicate information safely and appropriately using digital technologies.

It is important to tailor curricula and approaches to a local context; however, there are a wide range of free resources available that can provide information and inspiration for cities looking to develop their own content. Examples include:

- Bad News and Fakey: games designed to help users identify misleading content and understand the strategies that actors may use to create and spread disinformation.
- Checkology: a free media literacy curriculum from the News Literacy Project that teaches users to read and interpret online and offline news media.
- First Draft Verification Curriculum: a free library of training content for journalists and the public to learn how to verify different types of media.
- The Center of News Literacy offers free educational resources that range from quick tips to full online courses.
- Project Look Sharp provides resources for educators to introduce media literacy in the classroom and/or for professional development.

To manage the impact of misleading information, **Finland** is working to build a society that is resilient, informed and capable of critical thinking. At the core of this is a strong emphasis on media and digital literacy, which have been integrated into the education system at all levels to help support a healthy society and stable democracy. Much of this education is managed by the Finnish National Audiovisual Institute (KAVI), under the Ministry of Education and Culture, and it plays a key role in promoting media literacy during elections.

While the Finnish example is carried out at the national level, it offers many lessons for local governments.

- It is dynamic. Media literacy education in schools not only teaches students techniques for identifying manipulated content and misleading information; it also instills critical thinking to prepare students to navigate fast-paced world where approaches are constantly changing.
- It connects media literacy with digital literacy to help students understand the impact of technology.
- Students are taught to understand the impact that misleading information has and appreciate the importance of building positive critical consumption habits and becoming good digital citizens.
- It targets students of all ages, including adult education.
- It provides a range of free educational resources in three languages.
- It pursues innovative and inclusive approaches, including simulations and games.

4. Help maintain information integrity

While it may not be possible to prevent the presence of misleading information, local governments can help maintain the integrity of election information by actively debunking rumours, conspiracies and mis- and disinformation related to the election and by ensuring reliable information is accessible to all. They can do this through various online and offline approaches to help ensure they reach a wide swath of the population and by considering direct outreach like mail and email to share regular newsletters, broadcast channels through TV and radio, and social media.

Whatever approach a city takes, the end goal should be making information widely accessible. This can involve providing updates and guidance in all relevant languages and considering different disabilities (e.g., visual, auditory impairment and learning disabilities).

Pakistan supports its illiterate voters – 38% of the population – by assigning each party a symbol that voters can use to identify their party of choice on a ballot.

Debunk misleading information throughout the election cycle to help stem its spread and minimise its impact. Building on the monitoring described above, cities should consider which channels and mechanisms will be most effective for disputing misleading information and maintaining information integrity throughout the election period.

The City of **Hertford** (North Carolina, United States) took to social media to engage local residents and examine important issues. City council members hosted a series of discussions with experts and community leaders to inform residents about the midterm elections and help reassure them about the election's safety and validity.

Provide accurate and accessible information at all stages of the election. Rather than merely responding to poor information, cities should consider its role in proactively providing residents with accurate and timely information. In addition to the methods described above, cities should consider the following approaches:

- Create a dedicated page on local government websites that houses all relevant information in one place. Be sure to feature information in a timely and prominent manner in all relevant languages on website home pages and through pinned social media posts so people can find it easily and link back to the dedicated page.

- Provide contact information where people can reach out to the local government with questions. Consider hosting meetings and events throughout the city in the run-up to election where people can speak with election officials and get support with registration or voting.

- In the run-up to the election, note where election results and important updates will be shared so people know where to look for official information once voting has begun.

- Update official sources quickly and consistently so there are fewer opportunities for rumours to emerge. This is especially important if there are delays or irregularities. In such a case, releasing a message that there is not yet an official update is better than saying nothing, which allows disinformation to fill the silence.

- Make sure voting sites are well marked and signage is checked regularly for interference. Ensure locations are staffed with officials who speak relevant local languages so they can assist all voters.

- Establish a physical location that caters to all election-related needs. Orange County (California, United States) set up the Vote Center Lab in 2020 where it tests voting processes, trains election officials, provides voter information and offers tours to familiarise people with voting processes.

- Work with community leaders to help get information to all sectors of the population and make messages more credible among those who may not trust government messaging.

- Provide targeted outreach to communities that face barriers to voting or have low voter turnout historically. The City of Mesa (Arizona, United States) made a concerted effort to connect with Spanish-speaking voters in the lead-up to the 2020 presidential election. In addition to posting bi-lingual information on the city's website and social media channels, the city council reached out directly to Latino citizens to explain their options for registering and voting and help them formulate a plan to vote.

II. Preventing and Responding to Election-Related Violence

Electoral violence is an extreme form of electoral manipulation in which coercion against people, property and infrastructure is employed to influence the outcome of an election, including in its aftermath. This violence can take many forms, from intimidation and harassment to lethal force. It can be perpetrated by a multitude of actors at any stage of an election, including by both state and non-state actors.

Forms of election violence can include:

1. **Inter-party violence** between members and supporters of different political parties.

2. **Intra-party violence** between members and supporters of the same party as they jockey for control of a party.

3. **Violent protests** that may erupt spontaneously from an otherwise peaceful and legitimate protest, or through strategic interference by spoilers who wish to disrupt peaceful election processes.

4. **Excessive police force** directed at protesters through poor crowd control or deployed strategically by a ruling administration to hinder political rivals or the election itself.

5. **Targeted assassinations, death threats and harassment** directed at candidates and their families, key party members or those associated with the administration or oversight of the election, including poll workers, election observers, journalists and even the manufacturers of voting equipment.

6. **Destruction of property** associated with elections, including campaign materials, polling stations and ballots.

7. **Extremist attacks** targeting election-related activities to hinder the democratic process.

8. **Cyber-attacks** that obstruct voting, steal data or tamper with results.

Researchers have found that violence of some kind occurs in one in five elections globally. It is most likely to occur in post-conflict environments or where the root causes of violence are already present. However, election violence can occur anywhere when underlying tensions are tested through a high-stakes contest for power, especially when processes are not in place to prevent it or where voters lack faith in their political system.

Free and fair elections can be a form of violence prevention by providing citizens with a peaceful way to express their political desires and grievances; when they fail to meet their democratic promise, elections can provide the spark that catalyses existing tensions into open conflict.

Election violence is a serious threat, both for the immediate hazard it poses to lives, property and prosperity, as well as the fundamental threat it poses to democracy by preventing voters from casting their ballot safely. Cities of all sizes and geographies are at risk, from large urban centres to small rural towns. For example, during Mexico's bloody 2018 election, violence was recorded in 24 of the country's 32 states and only 5% of incidents took place in the capital, Mexico City. Many of the hundreds of political actors killed were candidates in local mayoral races. In Kenya's 2017 general elections, violence affected 38% of constituencies, including both urban and rural areas. Ultimately, cities typically bear the brunt of election violence and have a duty to help prevent it and mitigate its consequences for the lives and livelihoods of their residents.

5. Create a plan of action to prevent and respond to election-related violence

Local governments should set out a plan of action to safeguard their elections from violence and prevent them from undermining social cohesion in their city. A plan should align with national strategies and emphasise both prevention and response, outlining steps to assess risks, gather information, communicate securely between actors, enhance resilience and respond to emergencies, such as violence, to prevent escalations and mitigate the impacts. It should also connect with existing local safety plans and draw on existing mechanisms for violence prevention and response. Wherever possible, cities should work with national- and community-level actors for additional support in monitoring and intervention. A whole-of-society approach built on NLC can bridge gaps in capacity, communication and trust that might otherwise limit city-led efforts.

Cities should be mindful that an overly-securitised approach may be intimidating, especially for groups who do not fully trust security actors. Even where the administration and security of elections is managed at the national level, local governments should identify opportunities to work with law enforcement and election monitors to build trust with communities and help ensure a measured approach is taken to protect campaign events and voting sites, without discouraging potential voters from taking part. Such efforts should prioritise building relationships with vulnerable groups and developing mechanisms to de-escalate tensions between citizens on different sides of the political spectrum.

Conduct a thorough risk assessment. Before the election cycle begins, local governments should conduct a thorough risk and vulnerabilities' assessment to identify moments and circumstances in which violence is most likely, as well as key drivers including grievances and historic or ongoing conflicts between groups that could be inflamed by the election. Wherever possible, this should be done in collaboration with regional and national government agencies. Information collected at the local level enhances the understanding and readiness of national agencies, just as national-level assessments can provide critical information to contextualise local threats. For more on NLC and strategies for enhancing cooperative information sharing, see the NLC Toolkit developed by Strong Cities for the GCTF.

Cities should remember that while the risk of violence exists at any point during an election, there are particular events where the threat is typically higher. For example, campaign rallies, debates, voter registration centres and polling days all present potentially vulnerable moments when a large number of people related to the election will be gathered together. Likewise, the days immediately following a contested election or after a new government is sworn in, are significant moments for protest and disruption that could turn violent.

Identify vulnerabilities to external interference. Malevolent interference from a foreign country has become a prominent threat to elections. While predominantly a national-level issue, local governments should still consider how this risk will impact their city and how they can protect their constituencies.

After a Russian criminal group hacked into the voter database in **Illinois** (United States) in 2024, the Illinois State Board of Elections has instituted more robust cybersecurity infrastructure and now provides additional training for election officials.

Enact measures to protect election workers. Election workers can be particularly vulnerable during a precarious election as disgruntled voters look for a place to direct their anger. Therefore, the local government should outline steps that could be taken in concert with their national counterparts to protect them and provide support where needed. For example, throughout the 2020 election, election workers in the United States came under threat stemming from conspiracies that the election had been mishandled. As a result, local lawmakers across the country took actions to protect their election workers in subsequent elections, including:

- **Colorado** introduced 24-hour video monitoring, increased training for election officials, harsher penalties for security breaches and opportunities for election officials to remove their personal information from public records.
- **Maryland** has proposed the Protecting Elections Official Acts of 2024 that would introduce harsher penalties for threatening election officials.
- Similar bills have been passed in **Michigan** and **Nevada.**

Cities should familiarise themselves with any existing guidelines, processes and training programmes for election workers in their country and help ensure poll workers throughout their constituency understand them and are prepared to carry out their duty. Resources and training for poll workers should consider the unique threat that different demographics might face, like women, and include training in de-escalation. The States United Democracy Center has developed a de-escalation toolkit for election workers that includes useful advice for anyone who wants to help support poll workers to navigate challenging situations.

Work with security actors to de-escalate volatile situations and respond with appropriate force. Excessive police force is a common form of election-related violence, so a plan of action should seek to prevent it. Security actors need the training, capacity and resources to preserve peace throughout the election process. This is especially important during high-risk events, like campaign rallies or demonstrations where violence can erupt, sometimes sparked or escalated by the police. Where cities are involved in training and management of security forces, local governments should build in election-specific training provisions into a plan of action to ensure all officers – including veteran officers – are prepared to protect vulnerable points and deescalate situations should they arise, rather than escalating or intensifying violence.

- **Election-related training should be provided to all officers, regardless of their seniority or status**. In **South Sudan**, Governor Tong Akeen Ngor of [Northern Bahr el Ghazal State](#) initiated police training for all officers within his jurisdiction, including commissioned and non-commissioned officers. The 45-day training programme was introduced in February 2024 as 'a protective measure during the forthcoming elections' and will emphasise physical readiness and rule of law.

- **Police may also benefit from a human rights-focused training programme**, like the one offered to officers in **Zimbabwe** by the [United Nations Development Program](#) (UNDP) on Human Rights, Elections and Policing in 2019. The election-specific course focused on equality and protecting the freedoms of assembly and speech throughout the election period. It also provided guidance for community policing and gender in policing to better enable officers to build trust and support at-risk groups.

- **Wherever possible, police training should be transparent.** The **United Kingdom's** College of Policing published guidance and materials for training police officers during elections on their [website](#).

Where cities do not have a direct mandate to oversee police training, **they should identify where training or capacity gaps exist and work with relevant regional or national agencies to address them.** Furthermore, local government can help facilitate trust- and relationship-building activities between police and different communities where historically antagonistic relationships present a risk during elections. This can include working with community leaders to understand residents' grievances and concerns working with police and affected communities to address them.

In **Nigeria**, the CLEEN Foundation introduced the [Police Accountability Program](#) to build trust in the police through dialogue, accountability and partnership. Local governments could consider a similar approach to enable communities and police to prepare for a safe election period together.

Create a coordinating body. The preparation and execution of a plan of action will require a city or state to coordinate effectively between different levels and sectors and have the ability to respond quickly to threats. Depending on the scale of this undertaking and your city's resources, it may be useful to create a body that will oversee the process throughout the election cycle. One such example can be found in **Pennsylvania** (United States), where Governor Josh Shapiro launched the [Pennsylvania Election Threats Task Force](#) tasked with ensuring a safe, secure and fair election in 2024.

6. Provide targeted support to at-risk groups

While no group is immune from election violence, some may be more vulnerable than others and require additional support. For example, [young people](#) have been mobilised to perpetrate political violence and are also widely victimised. Globally, [women](#) have suffered disproportionately during elections compared to men. [Minorities and members of opposition](#)

political parties may be at higher risk in high-stakes elections, just as members of minority groups who feel underrepresented may turn to violence in the face of 'permanent exclusion' from elections.

Identify which groups may face greatest risk from election violence – either through recruitment by violent actors or as victims – and include provisions in the city's plan of action to provide them with additional support and protection. For example, city-led, youth programmes can engage at-risk young people and address their underlying vulnerabilities, such as economic inequalities and wider feelings of injustice, as well as enhance their understanding of the electoral process and local politics and incorporate them as drivers of peace throughout the election. In **Nakuru** (Kenya), Strong Cities with the county government to support a youth theatre company – Skynet Theatre Productions – in their campaign to raise awareness about election violence and promote peace among their peers in the lead up to the 2022 election. They used cultural outputs like film and music to highlight the connection between tribalism and election violence and encourage young people to become ambassadors for peace in their own communities.

Provide or facilitate additional training to help protect at-risk groups. In the lead up to its 2022 election, **Kenya**, with support from UN Women and OHCHR, provided police with additional training to help prevent and mitigate violence against women throughout the election period. The National Democratic Institute (NDI) has also provided training local election observers to recognise and report election violence against women as part of its efforts to prevent such violence globally.

Typically, national governments will oversee the implementation of these kinds of training programmes and will bear responsibility for identifying and protecting vulnerable groups. However, vulnerabilities will likely vary among different localities in a given country and local governments should work with national actors to identify and bridge gaps to protect their most vulnerable residents. Local governments should also work with civil society, community leaders, the private sector and international organisations to help ensure the necessary resources and support are available to support protection efforts in their communities.

Help increase voter turnout among historically marginalised groups. This can include drives to register voters, transportation to get people to the polls, or efforts to bring voting to the people.

For example, in 2020, the local government in Muskegon (Michigan, United States) visited schools, senior citizen homes and other locations in a mobile voting trailer to register voters, distribute and collect ballots and answer questions about the election. It is also important to ensure poll workers understand how to support voters with a range of disabilities or other needs.

North Macedonia developed an Election Day Pocket Guide for poll workers that included guidance for helping voters with a range of disabilities. Many countries have developed similar resources. Cities should help ensure poll workers understand and have access to such resources and support their development if they don't yet exist.

7. Commit to a free and fair election in your city and build faith in the voting process

Feelings of unfairness or impropriety are often strong motivators for violence during and following elections. However, for many cities, the onus of a ensuring a free and fair election falls beyond their remit. Typically, the elections are organised and administered in accordance with national (and/or state or regional) regulations. Despite this, **local governments should consider what tools, programmes and processes are available to them to support elections in their city and enable their citizens to take part in a way that builds their faith in the electoral system.**

Make the election process more transparent. To enhance trust in the voting process and reduce the space for disinformation and dissent that can stoke violence, local governments can identify ways to make support transparency throughout the election. For example, governments can create opportunities to make the voting process and results more visible and pre-empt accusations of mismanagement.

Cities and counties across the United States are making their voting processes more transparent.

- **Baltimore** (Maryland) livestreams their ballot processing so anyone can watch.

- **El Paso** (Texas) livestreams videos of their ballot boxes and uploads videos directly to the cloud where residents can access them.

- **Pasco County** (Florida) introduced the Ballot Scout to allow voters to track their mail-in ballots in real time, which helped enhance trust in mail-in voting.

However, local governments should be mindful that livestreaming parts of the election could introduce additional risk to election workers. For example, **Denver** (Colorado) stopped livestreaming the processing of ballots over fears about increased threats to election workers nationwide.

Many local and regional governments do not have the mandate to affect the voting process or make it more transparent. Instead, responsibilities for these efforts typically rest with national actors, like in **Kenya** where the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) shared scanned copies of results in real time during the 2022 elections as part of a strategy to enhance confidence in the outcomes and reduce violence. Local governments can help support these kinds of national-level transparency efforts by promoting awareness of them throughout the election, so residents know where and how to access them in real time.

Local governments might also find it useful to engage proactively with the media by issuing press releases throughout the election period – including honest information about mishaps – and invite the media to be present for important points in the election cycle.

When people do feel aggrieved with the election process or outcomes, ensure there are clear mechanisms for reporting perceived irregularities and contesting elements of the election or voting process. Where these processes are managed at the national level, local governments can help raise awareness about them and ensure their residents can access them. Cities can do this by sharing guidelines and links online and offline in all relevant languages – offering translations as needed – and providing direct assistance and a place for citizens a place to ask questions and seek advice.

Be mindful of precedent to minimise backlash to changes in voting procedure. Updating election procedures and equipment can help streamline the voting process and make it more secure and accessible. However, change can also trigger suspicion and cast doubt on an election's validity, especially if that change comes too quickly and without adequate preparation. For example, when Pakistan's former Prime Minister Imran Khan introduced electronic voting machines in 2022, he explained that the machines would help counter voter fraud and corruption. However, distrust and uncertainty about the new method of voting offered political opponents the chance to portray them as a tool for election manipulation and stir up resistance. In 2024, Pakistan returned to voting exclusively on paper. Local governments can help prevent this kind of blowback and ease the transition to new means of voting or changes in procedures by helping introduce them to citizens and addressing insecurities about the voting process.

8. Promote Peace

To support prevention efforts, cities can signal their commitment to a peaceful election and, through communication campaigns, encourage their residents to do the same.

Generalised campaigns that target the wider population can emphasise the importance of a peaceful election and encourage peaceful behaviours. A public commitment to non-violence is an important part of a peaceful election, both preventively and in response to tension.

Local governments typically have a better understanding of the threats their citizen face than their national counterparts and can help enhance engagement with such national-level campaigns by connecting it with local concerns or implement their own.

Before its national election in 2015, **Nigeria's** National Orientation Agency launched a social media campaign called Do the Right Thing, Wage Peace 2015. The campaign was intended to provide a platform for a range of actors to encourage peaceful behaviour and provided an opportunity and an impetus for everyone involved to pledge their commitment to peace.

In addition to broadly-targeted communications, local governments should consider more **bespoke messaging campaigns** that speak directly to vulnerable segments of the population, or provide tailored advice, support or resources to help them navigate the unique barriers or risks they may face.

In **Burundi**, Search for Common Ground created a radio drama series for young people that explored themes of violence, inequality and political manipulation to help strengthen the youth resilience to political and election-related violence.

Local governments could also consider ways to **encourage independent peace activists** who can serve as credible messengers for engaging different communities in their cities.

For example, UNICEF has supported the mobilisation of young peace ambassadors in **Sierra Leone** who can move throughout rural and hard-to-reach areas spreading a message of peace. Cities could replicate this approach by providing open support to peace ambassadors that have no connection with political parties and strong ties with different communities.

Similarly, in **Bangladesh**, the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) engaged over 1,000 political and civil society leaders in People Against Violence in Elections (PAVE) to provide community-level peacebuilding around elections. It taught them about election violence and trained them in cross-party collaboration on conflict-related issues and peacebuilding to create an empowered network of peace ambassadors that could move within different communities.

III. Managing Polarisation and Promoting Social Cohesion

Elections can exacerbate underlying social tensions and drive fragmentation and polarisation. Politics is about more than just a series of issues or even ideologies; rather, politics have come to form a core part of many people's social identities. These partisan identities connect political alignment with a strong in-group mentality. While ideological differences can be approached logically, partisan identities trigger emotional responses that

are far more susceptible to polarisation. In highly polarised countries, these partisan identities have begun to merge with other social identities making them more volatile.

When partisan fighting comes to the fore during elections, an attack on a party or candidate can feel like a personal attack rather than a discussion about political issues. Elections typically do not cause polarisation; rather they exacerbate existing divisions. In places where polarisation is already high, this can have serious social and political consequences. This can be especially problematic in cities with heterogenous populations where candidates' focus on power structures and group dynamics can amplify existing differences and unrest.

Since polarisation is typically intensified by and during elections – and studies have shown that intense polarisation correlates with serious democratic decline – cities should take steps to enhance their residents' resilience to polarisation throughout the election cycle. These can include initiatives that strengthen a shared local identity and promote social cohesion through inclusive dialogue and civic engagement.

9. Cultivate an inclusive dialogue throughout the election cycle

Cities should work with all relevant political parties, along with community leaders and community-based organisations to foster an environment that encourages inclusive dialogue with all residents of a city, as well as constructive conversations between political parties and with and among city residents throughout the election cycle.

Advance productive, inclusive dialogue between politicians and political parties.
Politicians' political rhetoric affects polarisation among the electorate. This is true at any point in time, but it is intensified during elections when people are exposed to more, and more divisive, rhetoric as politicians and parties challenge each other. Much of this rhetoric will come from candidates in national races, but by enhancing productive dialogue between local politicians and reducing polarising rhetoric at the city level, it may help reduce the polarising consequences of elections locally.

Uganda's Inter Party Organization for Dialogue (IPOD) is one such example, facilitating consistent exchange between five political parties.

IPOD was established in 2009 through support from the Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy (NIMD) but was incorporated as a legal entity in 2021 providing a range of services to support good governance and political inclusivity throughout Uganda to help ensure democracy supports peace and social cohesion.

One strategy is to facilitate ongoing dialogue among rival political parties (and their supporters) throughout the election. This can include regular meetings among party heads and members, as well as communication mechanisms that enable cross-party collaboration

to respond to and diffuse potentially volatile situations. The example above provides some useful guidance for cities, especially during local elections.

Cities should consider mechanisms through which all parties can come together to discuss pressing political issues and prepare to meet election-related challenges cooperatively. Such an effort would show that while parties may differ on policies, they can still form a united front in a commitment to peace. Where possible, cities should work with a neutral third party to organise and facilitate this platform to help ensure all parties are on equal footing and avoid any perceptions of bias or favouritism. Another strategy is to focus on enhancing public exchanges between parties to promote a more productive and inclusive political dialogue.

Recognising the importance of intra- and inter-party dialogue for reducing polarisation and promoting democracy, the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) worked with NIMD to produce the Interparty Dialogue Skills Training Module. The module was first implemented in **Zimbabwe** in 2018 to bring local government leaders together to help prevent electoral violence. It trains politicians to engage with one another and the public. The programme was later adapted and delivered to youth politicians in **Malawi** and **Zimbabwe**.

The training also encouraged politicians engage with more of the city, not only the ardent supporters of their own party. Following from this example, cities should consider opportunities to work with all political parties to enhance inter-party dialogue and make engagement with a city's residents more inclusive.

Create a more inclusive dialogue with a city's residents. As noted above, polarising political rhetoric often pits supporters of different parties against each other in a contest that intensifies us-vs-them thinking and fragments social cohesion. These divides have transcended politics in many places to become part of social identity, enhancing the polarising effect. Furthermore, when citizens feel excluded from or unrepresented in mainstream political discourse it can make them more vulnerable to fringe and even extreme movements, further impairing social cohesion. To help prevent this, cities should identify ways to promote inclusive dialogue with all segments of the population throughout the election period to help them connect more positively with local politics and their fellow citizens regardless of their political affiliation. This could include:

- Organising events and activities for residents of all ages, such as town hall meetings, citizen debates, school-based activities, election fairs and more to encourage people with different beliefs to come together and discuss the issues respectfully in a controlled environment.
- Holding conversations with representatives from different political parties and community groups to publicly commit to peaceful and respectful dialogue throughout the campaign period.
- Creating an online platform with information representing different viewpoints and groups where users can exchange perspectives and learn about different platforms.

A city should take a whole-of-society approach in addressing this challenge. By working with diverse actors to plan and deliver different activities and initiatives, local government can help ensure buy-in for responses from different segments of the city's population. It can also make efforts more effective in addressing the needs and concerns of diverse groups and account for different barriers to participation. To be truly inclusive, these efforts should account for language and accessibility barriers so everyone can take part.

While many dialogue strategies focus on the pre-election period when campaigning exposes the electorate to potentially polarising rhetoric, an inclusive dialogue is also important after the election as part of the transition of power. This is particularly important following a hotly contested election. Newly elected local officials can help rebuild social cohesion following a heated contest by building relationships with different groups and making themselves available to all residents, regardless of political party, to get to know them and discuss their concerns.

10. Promote civic engagement

Elections exacerbate strong political identities that drive social polarisation, often above and beyond differences on specific issues. To help combat that, **local governments can focus on building a sense of shared identity that comes with sharing a city and strengthening the social capital that binds different communities together.**

> **Social capital** refers to the benefits derived from the interactions and relations between members of a society that enable that society to function. It is a critical ingredient for a functioning democracy and can become eroded through polarisation.

Organising events that appeal to different communities and civic engagement activities, such as community service, volunteering, and participation in local organisations, can help build social capital, engender a sense of ownership in the community and mitigate polarisation.

Civic engagement can also help combat social polarisation during tense election periods by fostering a sense of ownership that transcends politics and encouraging community-led collaborative problem-solving. **Cities should consider ways to empower communities to address local issues collectively.** This could include community forums to identify shared priorities and a small allotment of funds for community-led solutions. When individuals work together to identify and solve common problems, they develop a sense of agency and ownership. This shared purpose can bridge ideological divides and foster a collaborative spirit. Furthermore, focusing on concrete problems and solutions within communities provides an opportunity to shift the conversation away from ideological or other differences and towards practical, collaborative problem-solving.

Local governments should be mindful to avoid politicisation, which could prevent some groups from participating or undermine the message of community over politics. This is particularly challenging if there are local elections or if the competing parties at the national level have ties to the local government or are represented at the local level (e.g., the mayor and/or members of city council). To avoid this, **cities should work with all relevant political parties to present efforts as nonpartisan, or partner with a neutral third party to help ensure the activities do not have direct (whether perceived or otherwise) political ties or objectives.**

Conclusion

Elections are critical moments for a country's present and its future. National elections give shape to a county's domestic and foreign policies, while local ones can give citizens a chance to exert influence on the policies and practices that govern their day-to-day lives. When they are properly administered, an election can strengthen democratic values and bolster resilience to violence. However, as every region of the world has seen, they also present precarious moments that can threaten violence and disruption. divide cities and erode a country's democratic character.

The ability to run free and fair elections face several threats, including from misleading information, violence and polarisation. While cities rarely have a role to play in overseeing elections, as in so many other areas, mayors and the local governments they lead are on the front-lines when violence manifests during the campaign or when the results are announced. Thus, these local actors should take action to maintain social cohesion and mitigate the risk of violence in and among the communities they represent and, more broadly, support a free and fair election.

Therefore, Strong Cities encourages mayors and local governments to take the time to understand the election-related threats their city is facing, work across sectors and levels to establish a plan and do what they can to ensure that the next time their residents have the opportunity to participate in an election that it is a positive and peaceful experience and one that avoids (further) dividing their city.