



THE KNESSET

# Procedures for Voting in Parliamentary Elections during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Examples from Selected Countries

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Comparative review

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## Abstract

This document presents examples of steps undertaken by a number of countries worldwide to adjust their electoral procedures in light of the challenge presented by the COVID-19 pandemic—conducting the elections in a manner that would allow everyone to vote and realize their democratic right while safeguarding public health and preventing the spread of the virus among poll workers, voters, and the general populace to the greatest extent possible. The steps undertaken by the countries reviewed were varied: cancelling or postponing elections, changing the manner of voting, or modifying the physical environment of the polling station or the manner in which the polling stations functioned. It should be noted that, as of the writing of this document, not one of the reviewed countries **has adopted new voting methods** to cope with the pandemic's challenges. Rather, the study found that the use of methods and tools that were already in place was expanded to accommodate the sick or those in quarantine.

This study focuses on elections to the national parliament, although, when relevant, it also provides examples from elections for the presidency or local office. It should be noted that the information presented in the examples does not encompass all the changes undertaken by each country and does not present the challenges associated with the implementation of said changes, but is, rather, meant to illustrate the specific step discussed in the chapter in which it is included. We emphasize that this document is a survey of measures undertaken in other countries and does not examine voting arrangements in Israel. Therefore, it is possible that some of the measures mentioned in this document are implemented in Israel and that some are not. It is also important to remember that this document is a comparative survey, and **should not, therefore, be viewed as a recommendation for implementing any change in Israel's electoral system or voting arrangements.**

Additionally, it is important to mention that this document does not review the general restrictions that various countries imposed to combat COVID-19 or reflect on the differences between said restrictions. The document also does not account for differences in morbidity between countries or the fluctuations in morbidity since the beginning of the pandemic. Additionally, the document does not address the changes in countries' awareness of the pandemic and its risks over time. All these may have affected the preparations for elections.

From the survey, one can reach the following conclusions, among others:

- The need to conduct elections during COVID leads to a clash of two democratic principles: the right to life and personal safety, on the one hand, and the principle of ensuring that elections are equal, representative, and credible, on the other. This need requires a balance between these two values.

These balances are given practical expression through the measures and accommodations that countries implemented to allow elections to take place, which allowed democratic values to be maintained, on the one hand, and safeguard civil rights, on the other.

- The measures described in this document concerning the management of elections during the COVID pandemic can significantly affect how elections are conducted or how the democratic values that underlie the elections are realized. However, differences between countries in the type of measures enacted and the electoral process may result in different outcomes between them. The survey is divided according to the type of change implemented:
  - **Modifications to the polling stations:**
    - Most of the countries examined adopted rules to govern voters' behavior at polling stations in order to maintain social distancing and ensure that the polling stations were disinfected and hygienic.
    - Other measures included changing the location of the polling stations, including drive-through voting, and using mobile polling stations in lieu of a stationary polling station to make voting easier for people in quarantine.
  - **Changes in voting times:**
    - In many of the elections that took place during the COVID pandemic, changes were made to voting times (specifically, extending polling station hours), in order to prevent crowding and decrease the load on polling stations.
    - In some cases, groups of voters were assigned specific voting hours in order to separate between population groups and keep people diagnosed with COVID or potential carriers of the disease separate while safeguarding their voting rights.
    - In some countries where early voting (which takes place before election day itself) is available even under normal circumstances, that option was expanded to additional population groups. In general, an increase was observed in the number of eligible voters who took advantage of this option.
  - **Remote voting:**
    - Many places worldwide allow for alternative forms of voting besides regular voting at a polling station, such as voting by mail or email, voting by proxy, mobile polling stations, or voting in special locations.
    - In some countries, the provisions for remote voting were expanded to allow these methods to be used by people diagnosed with COVID or in quarantine. In some cases, these methods were offered as alternatives to a physical polling station.

## 1. Introduction

In late January 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) to be a "public health emergency of international concern."<sup>1</sup>

The pandemic brought about policy changes in multiple arenas, from restrictions on movement in public spaces, through the closure of businesses and educational

<sup>1</sup> World Health Organization, [WHO Director-General's statement on IHR emergency committee on novel coronavirus \(2019-nCoV\)](#), January 30<sup>th</sup> 2020.

institutions, to changes in various aspects of government—including elections provisions. Since the outbreak of the pandemic, many elections—on both the national and local levels—have been held in more than 100 countries around the world.

This document surveys examples of measures for conducting elections implemented in various countries, specifically regarding changes to voting procedures and times as well as adjustments to in-person voting that reflect the limitations imposed by COVID. The document focuses on elections to national parliaments, but it also provides examples from presidential elections and local elections. Interesting steps were often taken during these elections that could be implemented in parliamentary elections.

This document does not address aspects of elections such as regulation of electoral campaigns, vote-counting, or preparatory work by election commissions. Nonetheless, it should be noted that these aspects may be affected by emergencies such as COVID.

By and large, the information presented in this document relies on reports, surveys, and publications by international organizations, chief among them the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA), the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), the ACE Electoral Knowledge Network, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and the European Commission. When information was presented about a specific country, efforts to confirm the information were made through sources from that country's government and election commission, specifically using online sources. However, we should note that information on voting procedures is not always accessible online, especially if they underwent rapid changes due to the need to prepare quickly for an election campaign during the COVID pandemic—changes that were not necessarily publicized widely or in an organized manner.

We have divided the changes and adjustments implemented in the various countries into three categories: changes to the polling station itself or to the voting environment (relocating polling stations, installing safety measures, etc.), changes in the duration of voting or time of voting (changing polling station hours, early voting, etc.), and changes that permit remote voting (i.e., outside polling stations) in various ways. The document will present details regarding each of these categories along with considerations associated with implementing these changes and examples from around the world. It is important to note that the information presented on specific changes in the various countries we examined does not reflect

the sum total of the changes implemented in each country but rather presents them as examples of the step discussed in that particular chapter.

Different countries implement different election methods and voting arrangements based on their particular historical background, system of government, and other national characteristics. This document surveys countries with a variety of voting methods in order to provide a broad picture of the adjustments made to their election management. Due to the differences between countries, caution is necessary when comparing between them—and between them and Israel. In any event, **none of the information in this document should be viewed as a recommendation for changes to the electoral system or voting arrangements in Israel.**

We note that this document focuses on voting arrangements during the coronavirus pandemic and does not discuss the general steps or restrictions that countries implemented to contend with the spread of the virus—or the differences between countries regarding said steps and restrictions—although they can affect election management, albeit indirectly. For example, a country that strictly enforces wearing masks and maintaining social distance may have less of a need to explicitly address mask-wearing and social distancing in elections guidelines. In addition, the document does not address differences in morbidity between countries, which may affect the restrictions they adopt, both in general and, more specifically, in preparation for elections. Finally, it does not examine the effects of the aforementioned restrictions on voter turnout or the question of the effect of holding elections on the spread of the virus.

## 2. Background: Considerations for holding elections during a pandemic

Elections are an essential component of a democratic regime; at its very essence, democracy is based upon majority rule. In representative democracy—the most prevalent form of government today—elections are conducted periodically for eligible voters to elect delegates to represent them in parliament.<sup>2</sup>

Elections are not only the means of electing the public's representatives but also a vital tool for oversight. Through the electoral process, the incumbent elected officials must win the public trust anew in order to continue serving in their positions. The knowledge that elections will be held in the future encourages public

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<sup>2</sup> As stated, this document deals mainly with parliamentary elections. Votes can be held for other purposes: election of a president or judges, referendum, etc.

representatives to act for the common good in a manner that earns public support and the trust of their constituency. In order to ensure effective oversight, elections must be conducted with a certain frequency, which every country determines through a balance of the time required for elected officials to perform their jobs with the desire to allow the public to again have its say and to ensure oversight.

For democratic elections to be considered credible, they must be conducted in an equitable fashion that can express the public's vote in an accurate, representative, and credible manner. Consequently, elections are conducted with the aspiration that everyone with the right to vote will be able to participate equally, subject to blanket limits defined by law (e.g., limiting the right to vote to polling places near the voter's residence, restricting voting to the country's territory, requiring voters to present identification, etc.). The hope is that voter turnout will be as high as possible (which contributes to the perception that the election results represent the desires of the majority of citizens) and that no one feels that particular groups are prevented from voting and are thereby excluded from the democratic process.

If voter turnout is low or if certain groups are unable to exercise the option to participate, the equality and credibility of the elections are damaged. Equality of participation in elections is a key principle in democracy, and credibility is important so that seats in parliament and public posts can be filled in a representative manner. Additionally, the credibility of the voting process is important to prevent public mistrust in the results, ensuring that even those political parties and social sectors that are unhappy with the final results will accept them as valid, thus preventing objections to the results and harm to the public trust in the government.

Another democratic value—one that might be considered self-evident—is that the lives of the country's citizens have value and that the government is required to ensure their safety and health. This value gives rise to one of the basic human rights, which philosophers and legislators have viewed throughout history as a natural or a fundamental human right—the right to life and personal safety.

Due to the highly infectious nature of COVID-19<sup>3</sup> and the substantial risk it poses to life and public health, countries around the world instituted a series of restrictions to reduce infection rates and prevent the spread of the virus. These steps included restrictions on gatherings, movement, and other activities; on opening businesses

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<sup>3</sup> COVID-19 is transmitted between people through respiratory emissions (when droplets from a sick person's respiratory tracts, emitted mostly through coughing or sneezing, are inhaled by another person, or when another person touches a surface on which such droplets landed and then touches his mouth, nose, or eyes). See: Ministry of Health, [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) frequently asked questions](#), accessed February 11<sup>th</sup> 2021.

and workplaces; and on educational and cultural institutions, etc. We note that the questions and concerns arising from the COVID crisis are not unique to this specific situation and can be relevant in the future when elections are conducted during other medical crises. Therefore, while such steps can aid in the battle against COVID, they can provide a contingency for potential scenarios in the future, such as similar emergencies.

The need to hold elections during the COVID pandemic leads to a clash of the two aforementioned values—the fundamental right to public health and safety, on the one hand, and the democratic values ensuring the existence of equitable, representative, and credible elections, on the other—and requires the striking of an appropriate balance between them. In effect, such a balance examines how to hold elections with a turnout rate that is high enough to ensure public legitimacy while preserving public health and voters' sense of security.<sup>4</sup>

**This balance is given practical expression in the measures each country undertakes to allow elections to be held during the COVID pandemic in a manner that upholds the principles at the basis of democratic elections and protects fundamental rights.** This document examines these measures and accommodations at length.

#### **Food for thought: The pandemic and voter turnout**

One concern associated with the pandemic is that it would lower voter turnout, which would harm the credibility of the election and its results. However, in an examination of voter turnout rates during COVID published by International IDEA it is difficult to point to a clear trend of this kind. While the data indicate that turnout rates did decrease during this period in some countries, there were also countries that saw an increase in voter turnout rates.<sup>5</sup>

Additionally, **we should make it clear that changes in voter turnout are not necessarily related to COVID.** There are various factors that affect the voter turnout in each election and unique characteristics that individually affect each country and election cycle. Another aspect that makes it difficult to compare pre-pandemic elections with those conducted during the pandemic is that in the period

<sup>4</sup> European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission), [Interim report on the measures taken in the EU member states as a result of the COVID-19 crisis and their impact on democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights](#), October 2020, p. 31.

<sup>5</sup> International IDEA (Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance) is a leading international organization that assists in promoting democracy and democratic elections: [Global overview of COVID-19: Impact on elections](#), accessed: February 21<sup>st</sup> 2021.



following the outbreak of the virus, there were varying degrees of public awareness and different policies in each country, which might have affected turnout rates. The difficulties in isolating these variables and in examining the situation at the precise time of each election make comparisons and drawing definitive conclusions difficult.

## 2.1 The validity of accommodations responding to temporary challenges with fundamental changes

The steps that can be taken to adjust elections to a pandemic include, among others, fundamental changes to electoral methods or voting practices which may involve significant deviations from the country's norms, such as allowing remote voting or early voting in a country that previously did not allow such practices. Such changes can seemingly provide a response to temporary needs (such as reducing the chances of contagion), and there may therefore be support for their rapid adoption. However, one might argue that the adoption of such fundamental changes under ordinary circumstances would have required in-depth public and parliamentary discussion for which there is not sufficient time during a pandemic. Under such circumstances, it might appear possible to support the introduction of changes with a limited validity, i.e., temporary changes limited to a single election cycle. However, such a step is accompanied by several concerns:

- Even if it is a one-time measure, if the results of the elections that employ the measure garner reduced public trust, it might cast a pall over the entire term of the parliament (and government) so elected, and it may lead to public mistrust, perhaps even hastening the next elections.
- “Nothing is so permanent as a temporary program”—Introducing a change, even if temporary, may increase the probability that it will be approved as permanent policy without an in-depth discussion—inter alia because it will have already been implemented successfully—even if there are legitimate concerns about the policy or its implementation.
- Organizational and logistical cost: Changes in voting procedures can require a financial investment in acquiring equipment or putting infrastructure to use, with costs that are considered high for a single-use item (for example, procuring voting machines or creating the infrastructure for online voting). Further to the previous point, in future discussions, the cost itself may

constitute a consideration supporting the change and the dismissal of objections to it.

In addition to questions of values and democracy, changes in voting and election procedures generally require logistical adjustments, which often involve additional costs and demand more time for election preparations, such as in the need to train employees. These requirements are not a trifling matter, especially while also contending with a state of emergency, and they should be taken into consideration when changes to the voting system are contemplated. However, in general, this document will not provide detailed information on the logistical and financial aspects of adopting the changes that are discussed.

By and large, in the course of writing this document, **no examples were found of countries that fundamentally changed their electoral system as a response to the COVID pandemic**; we only found cases of technical adjustments to polling places and expansions of existing arrangements (such as extending distance voting to populations such as the sick and people in quarantine, where such arrangements already existed on a smaller scale).

## 2.2 Postponing elections

As an alternative to changing voting policies, the option exists to postpone elections and hold them at a later date. In general, the date for parliamentary elections is set in the constitution or by law, and it is a fixed date determined by the duration of the previous parliamentary term, by the result of a no-confidence vote, or by the dispersal of the parliament. Postponing elections is not necessarily possible legally or constitutionally in all countries. Moreover, even in countries where postponement is possible, it may only be possible in specific circumstances. In countries where a deferral is possible—elections commissions were sometimes given extra time, specifically due to COVID, whether to implement the steps and changes essential during COVID or to aim for a time when the hope is that the pandemic will have passed and no accommodations will be required.

On the one hand, deferring elections is a cheap and simple step. One could suggest that most voters would choose not to go out and vote during a

pandemic and that holding elections at such a time would result in meager voter turnout rates and results that do not properly represent the public's will. However, deferring elections interferes with democratic principles, i.e., that elections allow voters to express their will and conduct oversight of public officials, as stated above.<sup>6</sup>

According to the data provided by International IDEA, 197 elections (local and national) were supposed to take place worldwide between February 21<sup>st</sup> 2020 and February 1<sup>st</sup> 2021, of which 96 were postponed. An analysis of the postponed elections revealed most of them to be local elections (sometimes only for a single position, such as the mayor of a given city) or national referendums. Most of the postponements of national parliamentary elections were short term and were meant to allow for preparations for elections to be held under COVID restrictions. For instance, the general election in New Zealand was deferred by one month, and the national elections in Serbia were postponed by two months.<sup>7</sup>

As stated above, the following chapters present information concerning the changes and accommodations to voting procedures implemented in the countries surveyed, divided into three categories: changes to the polling station environment or the method of voting, changes in voting times or the duration of voting, and changes allowing remote voting (i.e., outside a polling station). We also discuss the considerations associated with implementing these changes and provide examples from around the world.

### 3. Changes to the polling station environment

The most widely accepted method of voting in democratic countries worldwide is at a polling station, as is the custom in Israel. This public is familiar with this method and understands it, and it is relatively easy to supervise. The "polling station environment" includes the physical location where all stages of voting take place: voter arrival, direction of voters to the proper ballot box,

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<sup>6</sup> International IDEA, [Elections during COVID-19: Considerations on how to proceed with caution](#), accessed: January 13<sup>th</sup> 2020; Council of Europe, Directorate General of Democracy, [Elections and COVID 19](#), March 29<sup>th</sup> 2020, pp. 2–3; International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), [Legal considerations when delaying or adapting elections](#), June 2020, pp. 3–4.

<sup>7</sup> International IDEA, [Global overview of COVID-19: Impact on elections](#), accessed: February 15<sup>th</sup> 2021.

waiting in line, entry and identification before the poll committee, voting (usually behind a screen), placement of the vote in the ballot box, and departure from the polling station.<sup>8</sup> In this manner, hundreds of people pass through the polling station throughout the day, and if one of them is ill or a carrier of coronavirus, there is a risk of spreading the disease and infecting many people.

When adopting changes in the polling station environment, it is important to consider the broad effect of each change—both the effects on the stages of the voting process and the environment, as well as the effects on the fundamental values previously mentioned. In addition, it is important to consider the effects on safeguarding public health and safety, preserving the confidentiality and credibility of the vote, and maintaining accessibility to the voter population. For example, restrictions on poll overseers that would keep them at a distance from the poll committee would lower the risk of infection, but would make the overseer's work harder and could negatively affect the credibility of the voting process (see discussion in Section 3.4 below).<sup>9</sup>

Below are examples of steps to reduce the risk of infection at polling stations, with examples from countries around the world.

### 3.1 Changes in the location of polling stations

Health organizations recommend that meetings and activities involving strangers not be held in small enclosed spaces as much as possible, but rather in large, open, and well-ventilated spaces that permit social distancing and good air circulation. Several countries attempted to implement this recommendation during the elections



*An outdoor polling station. Elections in Russia, July 2020 (The Guardian)*

<sup>8</sup> Note that voting can be accomplished in many ways, such as inserting a ballot into an envelope and dropping it into the ballot box (as in Israel) using a computerized system, filling out a ballot or perforating a ballot, etc. A ballot box is not always used—in computerized voting, for example, there is no separate box—but the need to ensure reliable and confidential voting exists in all these cases.

<sup>9</sup> OSCE, [Alternative voting methods and arrangements](#), October 2020, pp. 36–37.

while preserving the order of the voting process and the ability to monitor voting.<sup>10</sup>

For example, in Russia, legislation adopted due to the COVID pandemic allowed polling stations and ballot boxes to be located outside buildings (for example, in playgrounds or parking lots, see photo). As of the writing of this document, no data were found concerning the extent to which such polling stations were used.<sup>11</sup>

Some countries allow the option of drive-through or curbside voting. This means coming to the polling station in a vehicle and voting without leaving the vehicle, by using a specially designed ballot box or with help from poll workers. **In routine times**, these arrangements allow people with disabilities to vote in the localities detailed below, and **during the COVID pandemic**, they were **expanded** to include voters in quarantine or voters with COVID symptoms. For instance:

- In Lithuania, people who were in quarantine due to COVID during the October 2020 elections could vote at special polling stations (without the need for preregistration and regardless of residential address) and vote from their cars.<sup>12</sup>
- In several states in the United States, this option was provided to certain population groups, generally those physically unable to enter the polling station or those suffering from COVID symptoms (the examples we checked did not make separate reference to verified carriers without symptoms). A poll worker approached the voter (wearing identifying dress such as a colored vest) and brought a ballot form for the voters to fill out. Then, in some states, the voters were given an envelope into which they placed their ballot, and they were required to sign an



*Drive-through voting, Elections in Lithuania, October 2020 ([Central Electoral Commission of the Republic of Lithuania](#))*

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., pp. 37–38.

<sup>11</sup> International IDEA, [Electoral events in Russia during the COVID-19 pandemic: Remote electronic voting, outdoor voting and other innovations](#), November 2020.

<sup>12</sup> Central Electoral Commission of Lithuania, [There are special polling stations for self-isolated voters](#), accessed: February 2<sup>nd</sup> 2021.

authorization form allowing the poll station worker to place the ballot in the ballot box on their behalf.<sup>13</sup>

- The Czech Republic established 78 polling stations for drive-through voting to serve voters in quarantine. These polling stations were open for a single day, two days before Election Day.<sup>14</sup>
- The idea of drive-through voting was considered in South Korea but not implemented until Election Day itself.<sup>15</sup>

Another option is voting at a special polling station, not the polling station at which the voter is registered based on his or her place of residence. The special polling station may be a mobile ballot box that is moved throughout the day and is brought to a voter (rather than requiring the voter to come to a central polling station) or a polling station at a special location, such as a hospital or similar institutions. **Under normal circumstances**, such polling stations give the opportunity to vote to people with disabilities who find it difficult to leave their homes and to people who have difficulty going to a regular polling station on Election Day because they are hospitalized, are employed at a workplace that is open on Election Day, are on a military base, or are incarcerated.

There are several major questions concerning voting in these kinds of polling stations: Who is entitled to make use of this option? Should exercising voting rights using this method require preregistration? When does the voting take place, on Election Day or earlier?

The higher the number of voters permitted to vote this way and the shorter the time allotted to vote this way, the greater the number of mobile polling stations and staffers required.

The use of a mobile polling station or placement of a polling station at an institution makes voting accessible to people who find it difficult to exercise their right to vote at a polling station, and without adopting methods for remote

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<sup>13</sup> See, e.g., Iowa Secretary of State, [Voting on Election Day: Accessibility](#); North Carolina State Board of Elections, [Curbside Voting](#); County of Santa Barbara, [Traffic clerk—Curbside voting quick guide](#); City of Madison, [Quick guide to curbside voting on Election Day](#); Texas Secretary of State, [Curbside voting: all accessed February 15<sup>th</sup> 2021. Note that in the United States, many election procedures vary between cities, counties, and states, and some procedures are only utilized in some of the places. The examples from the US represent a variety of jurisdictions, but these should not be taken as a full and representative picture of the country as a whole.](#)

<sup>14</sup> IFES, [Elections in the Czech Republic: 2020 Senate and municipal elections—frequently asked questions](#), September 2020, pp. 5–6.

<sup>15</sup> International IDEA, [Managing elections under the COVID-19 pandemic: The Republic of Korea's crucial test](#), July 2020, p. 4.

voting. However, such voting incurs relatively high costs for the number of voters reached (moving from place to place takes time and involves additional expenditures), and there are concerns regarding harm to the confidentiality and credibility of the vote:

- Confidentiality: Among other things, the principle of confidentiality is intended to prevent undue pressure on a voter to vote in a particular way. As a result, regular polling stations and the voting procedures in place therein are designed to protect the voter from such outside pressure; voting in a dynamic environment such as in a mobile polling station cannot ensure such protection. For example:<sup>16</sup>
  - The voting environment may not conform to prohibitions against electioneering;
  - The voting environment may not afford voters the necessary confidentiality;
  - If voting takes place at a military base, institution, or prison, the authority figures at the site may be able to exert greater pressure on voters.
- Credibility: With a mobile ballot box, it is harder to ensure transparency and the supervision by observers of all the stages of handling the ballots. As a result, there is a greater risk that the workers accompanying the ballot box will attempt to alter the votes within it.

**Due to the COVID outbreak**, several countries around the world expanded existing arrangements for voting by means of mobile polling stations and ballot boxes, thereby allowing people quarantined due to COVID to vote in this manner.

- In the Czech Republic, voters in quarantine could request (up to one day before the elections) to have a mobile polling station brought to them. Two soldiers and a civilian operated the poll, and the voter had to present ID and a document attesting to the need to be in quarantine. Similar arrangements existed in Moldova, Mongolia, and Romania.<sup>17</sup>
- In Croatia, voters could request to vote at a mobile ballot box without presenting a quarantine document. However, according to

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<sup>16</sup> OSCE, [Alternative voting methods and arrangements](#), October 2020, pp. 29–35.

<sup>17</sup> National Assembly of Bulgaria, **ECPRD request 4586: Holding elections in the context of the COVID-19 epidemic**, February 2021; IFES, [Elections in the Czech Republic: 2020 Senate and municipal elections—frequently asked questions](#), September 2020, pp. 5–6; International IDEA, [Global overview of COVID-19: Impact on elections](#), accessed: February 7<sup>th</sup>, 2020.

International IDEA, not everybody who registered ended up receiving the service.<sup>18</sup>

- In Georgia, voters in quarantine could request to vote this way, but the last day to register for the service was four days before the election. Thus, people who were required to enter quarantine after that date could not request to vote using this method.<sup>19</sup>

Examples of arrangements for voting in institutions, which were affected by COVID: Several countries—including Italy, Iceland, New Zealand, and the Czech Republic—allowed voters who were in hospitals or quarantine facilities to vote in a ballot box at their institution instead of one based on their registered address. This option was not available under the voting procedures previously in force in these countries.<sup>20</sup>

### 3.2 Changes to the operation of polling places and to rules for voter behavior

As previously stated, the fight against COVID requires changes to multiple aspects of the work of polling stations and to the voting process, including frequent cleaning frequently; using face masks; and maintaining social distancing between people (including within the poll committee), between the committee and the voters, and between voters and other voters. This creates challenges for the polling operation; for instance, certain steps in the voting process require proximity between people, such as when voters identify themselves before the poll committee using an ID or other means—which is usually presented to the committee and passed around between committee members—so their identity can be verified and their names marked off on the electoral register.

There are many examples of the adjustments made in various countries to the work of polling stations in order to ensure their efficient operation under COVID restrictions, e.g.:<sup>21</sup>

- Supplying hand sanitizer to voters and staff;
- Supplying PPE such as face masks, gloves, transparent dividers, or protective clothing to the poll committee;

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<sup>18</sup> International IDEA, [Global overview of COVID-19: Impact on elections](#), accessed: February 7<sup>th</sup>, 2020.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> OSCE, [Alternative voting methods and arrangements](#), October 2020, pp. 37–38.



- Maintaining social distancing in and around the polling station by adding voting booths and spreading the voters across a greater number of polling stations;
- Taking temperature or conducting serological tests in the polling stations.

The OSCE<sup>22</sup> recommends that if special instructions exist for managing the queue, such as giving priority to people with disabilities or to others, these should be disseminated to the public and displayed at the polling station on clear signage.<sup>23</sup> A survey published by the organization indicates that some of the countries reviewed placed an emphasis on the advance dissemination of guidelines on radio, television, and the Internet. The public was asked to arrive wearing masks and gloves and to bring personal writing implements (to avoid sharing pens), and more.<sup>24</sup>

We identified changes to varying degrees in the operation of polling places in every country where elections took place since the beginning of the COVID outbreak. Most mandated social distancing in line for the polling station, wearing facemasks, sanitizing hands with antiseptic materials, sterilizing surfaces periodically, providing masks and gloves to the poll committee, and more. Below are detailed examples of accommodations carried out in four countries:

- South Korea adopted rules of conduct for voters regarding such matters as queueing behavior and conduct inside the polling station to safeguard voters' health. For example:
  - Mask requirement for voters;
  - Requirement to measure temperature before approaching the polling station; anyone with a temperature of over 37.5 degrees Celsius or with breathing difficulties were referred to a special polling station;
  - Maintenance of a distance of least one meter between voters (with clear signs on the floor of the polling station);
  - In the polling stations, masks must be removed for identification; masks and gloves must be worn while casting the ballot;

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<sup>22</sup> The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe is an international organization promoting democratic institutions and human rights, among other things. Despite its name, the organization also includes non-European countries from North America and Asia. For a full list, see: OSCE, [Participating states accessed: February 18<sup>th</sup> 2021](#).

<sup>23</sup> OSCE, [Alternative voting methods and arrangements](#), October 2020, pp. 38–39.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 37–38.

- Finally, when leaving the polling station, voters were directed to dispose of their used gloves.

Particular emphasis was placed on publicizing these rules among eligible voters, among other things, through television advertisements, posters put up around the country, and display of the rules in the polling stations on Election Day. In addition, similar instructions were disseminated among poll workers and observers. In addition, poll workers at the special polling stations for the ill and medical crews were equipped with PPE, masks, gloves, etc.<sup>25</sup>

- In the United States, some electoral districts and states used various kinds of protection such as plastic dividers between poll workers and voters, masks, gloves, disinfectants, and more (see picture).<sup>26</sup>
- In the presidential elections in Poland, the poll workers received masks and gloves, which they were told to change every hour; they were also to air out the polling station for ten minutes and disinfect frequently touched surfaces every hour.<sup>27</sup>
- In the local election in Queensland, Australia, in addition to the means mentioned above, the number of voters in every polling station was limited to one hundred, and additional staff was employed supervising the queues. Furthermore, the distribution of printed materials in the polling station—including instructions to voters—was forbidden, and the public was encouraged to bring pens from home.<sup>28</sup>



*A polling station with a plastic divider, masks, and gloves, in Wisconsin, USA ([Green Bay Press Gazette](#))*

### Food for thought: Differing approaches to measuring temperature

<sup>25</sup> International IDEA, [Managing elections under the COVID-19 pandemic: The Republic of Korea's crucial test](#), July 2020, p. 3.

<sup>26</sup> International Foundation for Electoral Systems, [Featured elections held and mitigating measures taken during COVID-19](#), October 2020.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 4–5.

One of the steps that can be required to identify potential cases of COVID is taking people's temperature, similar to what has been done in Israel at the entrances to stores and other public spaces. Such a requirement is intended to protect public health, as fever may be a sign of illness. However, one could argue that unlike access to a particular store, voting is a basic right that cannot be denied a person solely on the grounds of illness.

We saw that not every country demanded temperature measurement upon entry to polling stations,<sup>29</sup> but that such a requirement was a common step in multiple countries. In several countries, including Indonesia, South Korea, and Malaysia, voters with a temperature above a specific limit were referred to special polling stations.

However, some countries did not measure body temperature. For example, Brazil decided to forgo temperature measurements after discovering that it would be expensive to implement at all polling stations and that the act of measuring increased the chances that large groups would congregate. Italy, too, did not measure temperatures at polling stations; voters were supposed to measure their temperature at home and avoid coming to polling stations if exceeded a particular limit. The United States did not require temperature measurements; indeed, some states issued explicit instructions forbidding taking voters' temperature upon entry to polling places.<sup>30</sup>

### 3.3 Rules concerning identifying voters with masks at polling stations

Concern for the spread of coronavirus via droplets resulted in the adoption by most countries of a general requirement to wear masks in all public spaces or a choice by citizens to protect themselves by wearing a mask even without such a requirement. On the one hand, masks make it difficult to identify voters at polling places, in locations where poll workers verify the voter's identity using their photograph on an official identity document or in a government database. On the other hand, as previously mentioned, there is a desire to limit poll workers' exposure, especially as they encounter large numbers of voters throughout the day.

<sup>29</sup> International IDEA, [Global overview of COVID-19: Impact on elections](#), accessed: February 7<sup>th</sup> 2021.

<sup>30</sup> Texas Secretary of State, [Election advisory No. 2020-19: Voting in person during COVID-19](#), June 18<sup>th</sup> 2020, accessed: February 7<sup>th</sup> 2021.

As described above, the accepted procedure for dealing with this issue is granting permission for voters to remove their mask for only a brief time, during the process of voter identification by the poll committee; this was done, for instance, in Belize, South Korea, Niger, the Czech Republic, and Kyrgyzstan.<sup>31</sup> In the United States, some states gave the poll committee the authority to demand that a voter remove his or her mask temporarily for the purposes of identification. In Texas, for example, if voters refused to remove their mask, they could fill out a provisional ballot that could later be turned into a fully valid vote by subsequently identifying themselves at the voter registrar's office pursuant to state requirements. At the same time, however, other states did not officially grant such discretion in their guidelines.<sup>32</sup> In addition, there was also a recommendation that poll workers be protected using transparent plastic dividers or similar means (see above).

### 3.4 Electronic supervision (using cameras) of polling stations and vote counting

One way to ensure the integrity of the elections and enhance their credibility is via the external supervision of the poll committee throughout the day on Election Day and during the vote-counting process. This supervision ensures that the poll workers perform their duty properly and that the election procedures are observed. At the same time, supervision must be carried out in a way that minimizes infringement of voting confidentiality, i.e., a specific person's vote cannot be observed. For instance, in Israel, supervision is **normally** carried out by means of observers physically present near the ballot box, similarly to the poll committee. Another possible supervision tool is direct video transmission from polling stations or vote-counting rooms. However, this is a method that exacerbates questions of privacy, as such transmissions can be online and public, limited to specific viewers, or recorded to be watched after the fact by authorized individuals.

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<sup>31</sup> International IDEA, [Global overview of COVID-19: Impact on elections](#), accessed: February 7<sup>th</sup> 2021.

<sup>32</sup> Michigan Bureau of Elections, [November 3, 2020 election: Polling place safety and accessibility](#), October 28<sup>th</sup> 2020, p. 12; Texas Secretary of State, [Election advisory No. 2019–2020: Voting in person during COVID-19](#), June 18<sup>th</sup> 2020; Virginia Department of Elections, [Masks requirements of officers of election and voters](#), September 9<sup>th</sup> 2020, all accessed: February 8<sup>th</sup> 2021.

As far as elections during a pandemic are concerned, the use of electronic supervision can reduce the need for the physical presence of observers, which may aid in reducing crowding and maintaining social distancing. Generally speaking, such video recordings can allow more people to conduct supervision and can also be watched after the fact. At the same time, several key questions arise, including:

- How can the secrecy of voting be ensured while the polling station is under video surveillance? How can that be accomplished while ensuring the level of supervision remains high?
- Assuming that the recording is of similar quality to webcams or surveillance cameras, with varying video and audio quality and a fixed camera location, how can one ensure that the recording is reliable and captures all the details—without raising concerns of manipulation?

Additionally, such systems raise practical questions concerning the costs, maintenance, and installation.

As of the writing of this document, there were only a few examples of electronic election monitoring around the world, and the recording was primarily done during vote counting and not during the voting itself. Thus, for instance, some states and districts in the United States have the practice of broadcasting their vote count—which is not unique to the COVID outbreak—though there is no uniform or binding procedure on the subject. In recent years and unrelated to the COVID outbreak, some states and districts have started broadcasting live streams from the vote-counting centers; for instance, Arizona passed a law in 2019 mandating "live video recording" of the vote-counting process.<sup>33</sup>

According to several reports, South Korea employed livestreams from polling stations, which allowed interested parties to follow the elections.<sup>34</sup> However, during the process of writing this document, we were unable to find further information about this procedure, such as whether the livestream covered every all polling station, when the livestream took place, where it could be viewed, and what its content comprised.

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<sup>33</sup> MIT Technology Review, [Vote count livestreams are here to stay](#), November 2020, accessed: February 7<sup>th</sup> 2021.

<sup>34</sup> IFES, [Featured elections held and mitigating measures taken during COVID-19](#), October 2020, p. 6; International IDEA, [Managing elections under the COVID-19 pandemic: The Republic of Korea's crucial test](#), July 2020, p. 3.

## 4. Changes in voting times

Like other aspects of the electoral process, voting times are determined through a balance of the desire to allow the greatest number of people to vote, logistical considerations (e.g., the cost of operating the election systems and the polling stations increases the longer the hours), and the need to maintain the credibility of the elections (if voting extends over multiple days, it becomes more difficult to protect the earlier votes from fraud and similar issues).

Taking steps such as those described in the previous section (maintaining social distancing, disinfecting between voters, etc.) may mean that additional time is required for each person to vote. This, in turn, may lead to crowding in the polling station and an increase in the amount of time people wait in line (and are exposed to other people), which contradicts the goal of reducing crowding. Possible ways of addressing this situation are changes in the duration of voting or in the polling stations' hours of operation, as presented below.

### 4.1 Extending polling station hours and assigning voting hours

Polling stations' hours of operation are important for proper election procedures. The polling stations must be open for long enough to allow all eligible voters to exercise their right to vote, including those who are working part of the day or are unavailable for other reasons. In an election where the COVID outbreak necessitates adjustments to voting procedures, it may take longer to vote, as noted above. As a result, certain countries decided to extend the hours of operation at polling stations to reduce the volume of voters. Another option is assigning separate voting hours to voters in at-risk population groups, voters in quarantine, and confirmed COVID cases and patients, in order to minimize the potential contact between individuals from these groups and members of the general population—which would occur if they were to stand together in a single queue.<sup>35</sup>

Below are details regarding several of the steps undertaken concerning this issue:

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<sup>35</sup> OSCE, [Alternative voting methods and arrangements](#), October 2020, p. 39.

- Some countries—including Brazil, India, Jordan, and Sri Lanka—extended polling stations' hours of operation;<sup>36</sup>
- In South Korea, changes to the guidelines just before the elections allowed voters in home quarantine to vote at polling stations after regular voting hours, when these were already closed to the general public.<sup>37</sup>
- In Singapore, the operating hours of polling stations were extended by two hours, and each voter was assigned to a specific two-hour voting window. The elderly were assigned the earliest time slots in order to reduce their exposure to other population groups.<sup>38</sup>
- In Jamaica, those required to quarantine were allowed to vote at polling stations in the hour before the polls closed (both on Election Day itself and on the early voting days, see below). These voters were required to give advance notice of their intent to arrive at the poll through a call center and to arrive at the polling station area on their own in a private vehicle while wearing a plastic face shield and disposable face mask, gloves, and gown.<sup>39</sup>

#### 4.2 Early voting (at polling stations or by other means)

In some countries, elections take place over the course of several days instead of on a single day; voting on these additional days is identical in fashion to that on Election Day itself or it may differ in certain ways (different number of polling stations, different operating hours, etc.). Even under **routine circumstances**, countries such as Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, New Zealand, Norway, Slovenia, and Sweden allow early voting.

Those opposed to early voting are concerned about voter fraud, such as in cases where voting takes place by mail or identification rules are not enforced as strictly as on Election Day itself. For this reason, some countries limit early voting and permit it only in certain places or for specific population segments and maintain strict identification rules.

The procedures for early voting are similar to those for Election Day. Election Day in effect becomes the last day on which voting is possible. The period during which voting is possible changes from country to country. Countries that allow early voting will generally have a more limited distribution of polling

<sup>36</sup> Election Commission of Sri Lanka, [Parliamentary election 05.08.20: Extension of the hours of poll](#), July 2020; International IDEA, [Global overview of COVID-19: Impact on elections](#), accessed: February 7<sup>th</sup> 2021.

<sup>37</sup> International IDEA, [Managing elections under the COVID-19 pandemic: The Republic of Korea's crucial test](#), July 2020, p. 3.

<sup>38</sup> IFES, [Legal considerations when delaying or adapting elections](#), June 2020, p. 11.

<sup>39</sup> Office of the Prime Minister of Jamaica, [Disaster risk management \(enforcement measures\) \(no. 11\) \(amendment\) \(#4\) order 2020—Protocols for voting in the 2020 general election](#), August 30<sup>th</sup> 2020; International IDEA, [Global overview of COVID-19: Impact on elections](#), accessed: February 7<sup>th</sup> 2021.

stations than on Election Day itself (a smaller number of polling places or only remote voting).<sup>40</sup>

Like other voting methods mentioned in this document, the option of voting before Election Day may be available to all citizens or limited to particular groups, specifically those who cannot vote on Election Day itself (for example poll station staff or those who will be out of the country on Election Day).

Each country that allows early voting does so under slightly different conditions: the number of days before Election Day when voting can take place, the identity of those who are allowed to vote early, the locations of polling stations, the method of voting, etc. As a rule, the counting of the votes by early voters takes place only after Election Day itself. The ballots are collected and sent—by mail or other means—before the legally mandated Election Day and are not counted until the day itself.

During the process of writing this document, we found no examples of countries that instituted early voting due to the pandemic and did not have early voting as an option **in routine times prior to the pandemic**. However, data indicate that in those countries where the option was available, the rate of early voting increased.

It is impossible to determine the existence of a definitive connection between the COVID outbreak and the aforementioned increase in early voting, and other explanations for this change exist. It is possible that countries that, **under ordinary circumstances**, limit early voting to specific population groups, expanded eligibility **during the COVID outbreak**—for example, to medical personnel or even the entire population, or by making the process of registering for early voting easier—or extended the time for early voting, and the increased rate of early voting may have resulted from these changes. At the same time, however, it is possible that the increase stemmed from reasons that are not pandemic-related (advertising campaigns, current events, etc.).

Below are several examples from around the world of early voting rates **before and during the COVID outbreak**:

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<sup>40</sup> OSCE, [Alternative voting methods and arrangements](#), October 2020, p. 24.



- In the 2017 parliamentary elections in New Zealand, 47.5% of all voters chose to vote early. In the October 2020 elections, during the pandemic, approximately 68.3% of ballots were early votes.<sup>41</sup>
- In the November 2020 US presidential elections, which took place during the pandemic, 64.1% of all votes were cast early.<sup>42</sup> Of those early ballots, 65% were mail-in votes, and 35% were early votes at polling stations. This is an increase compared to the previous elections in 2016 when 41% of all ballots were early votes, of which 59% were mailed in and 41% were early votes at polling stations.<sup>43</sup>
- According to media reports, the April 2020 parliamentary elections in South Korea, held during the pandemic, allowed early voting on April 10<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> (Election Day was April 15<sup>th</sup>). Approximately 26.7% of ballots were cast early, as opposed to 12.2% of those in the previous parliamentary elections in 2016.<sup>44</sup>
- In the October 2020 Lithuanian parliamentary elections, the two-day period generally allotted for early voting was extended to four days during COVID. The early voting polling stations (located in municipal buildings) remained open for an hour more than usual. The elections were held in two rounds, and in each round, approximately 11.5% of the ballots were cast early—almost double the rate in the 2016 elections.<sup>45</sup>

## 5. Remote voting

Remote voting, i.e., voting that does not require voters' physical presence at the polling station assigned to them, can be implemented by various methods.<sup>46</sup> Voting using such methods may be more convenient than voting at a polling station and may increase voter turnout—especially under COVID-related restrictions. However, it also poses a twofold challenge and raises questions about issues that are fundamental to the democratic process:<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> New Zealand Electoral Commission, [2020 general election advance voting statistics](#), [2020 general election voter turnout statistics](#), [Historical events](#), accessed: February 7<sup>th</sup> 2021.

<sup>42</sup> This is an unofficial number published by the policy and research body the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), see: [The 2020 election by the numbers](#), accessed: January 25<sup>th</sup>, 2021

<sup>43</sup> US Election Assistance Commission: [The Election Administration and Voting Survey 2016 comprehensive report](#), June 2017, p. 8.

<sup>44</sup> Yonhap News Agency, [Voter turnout in early voting hits record high despite coronavirus pandemic](#), April 11 2020, accessed: February 7<sup>th</sup> 2021.

<sup>45</sup> Central Electoral Commission of Lithuania, [2020 Seimas elections results](#), accessed: February 2<sup>nd</sup> 2021.

<sup>46</sup> ACE Electoral Knowledge Network, [Absentee voting](#), accessed: January 24<sup>th</sup> 2021; European Commission, [Study on the benefits and drawbacks of remote voting](#), 2018.

<sup>47</sup> European Commission, [Study on the benefits and drawbacks of remote voting](#), 2018, p. 142; European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission), [Interim report on the measures taken in the EU Member States as a result of the COVID-19 crisis and their impact on democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights](#), October 2020, p. 31.

- Ensuring secrecy (being able to identify voters and accept their ballot without revealing what candidate or party they voted for);
- Ensuring vote integrity (ensuring that voters' electoral rights are upheld and that whoever receives the vote documents it correctly);

The manner in which remote voting is implemented affects the relative weight of the aforementioned challenges, as described below.

## 5.1 Mail-in voting, email voting, and voting by fax

Some countries allow voters to complete a ballot and send it to the election commission by mail, email, or fax, either requiring specific preregistration or not requiring it.

Mail-in voting is customary in countries that allow expatriates to vote, among them Australia, the United States, the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and Canada. Some countries only allow remote voting for a few years during which the citizen does not actually reside in the country. For instance, British citizens can vote up to 15 years after leaving the country, Australian citizens up to six years, and Canadian citizens up to five years.<sup>48</sup> In addition to remote voting from abroad, some countries permit mail-in voting for citizens within the country itself; these countries include Australia, many states in the US, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Poland.<sup>49</sup>

There are further differences between countries in terms of how the voting is carried out, for example, whether such voting options require preregistration or submitting a request. In most countries that are members of the OSCE, mail-in voting is accomplished using voting materials mailed to the voter's house, and the ballot is returned by the postal service, as well.<sup>50</sup>

Ostensibly, the option of voting by mail (alongside the ability to vote at a polling station) makes voting easier and allows more people to vote and to do so more conveniently. However, it is important to consider whether allowing additional segments of the population to vote by mail would make it more difficult for a different population segment, for whom postal services are less available or reliable. The latter segment would not be able to utilize that voting method because of the

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<sup>48</sup> ACE Electoral Knowledge Network, [Persons eligible to out of country voting](#), accessed: January 24<sup>th</sup> 2021.

<sup>49</sup> International IDEA, [Special voting arrangements \(SVAs\) in Europe: In-country postal, early, mobile and proxy arrangements in individual countries](#), accessed: January 24<sup>th</sup> 2021.

<sup>50</sup> OSCE, [Alternative voting methods and arrangements](#), October 2020, p. 11.

higher probability that its votes would not be counted due to delays or irregularities in the envelopes' arrival.<sup>51</sup>

In line with what we stated generally regarding methods for remote voting, mail-in voting brings with it concerns for the confidentiality and the credibility of the vote. In addition to the election-specific concerns, mail-in voting is also affected by the challenges that affect the postal system. For example, if the address on the envelope is unclear or if there is another logistical problem that affects the reliability of the service, the envelope may not reach its destination in time to be counted—if it arrives at all—or it may be returned to the sender, whose vote will then not be counted. There are also other logistical issues to consider: one must prepare in advance for questions concerning the mailing date and determining the voting date, and prepare the election commission to address the unique demands of this type of voting, which differs from regular voting at a polling station. Additionally, there are costs associated with sending the letters and envelopes with the ballots, which could be borne entirely by the state or by whoever wishes to vote in this manner.

Methods to ensure the credibility of the vote include the use of inner envelopes, witness signatures, and the verification of signatures on forms accompanying the ballot. However, these methods will not ensure public confidence in cases where the public already has even the slightest doubt in the election process.<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, we note that it is almost—if not entirely—impossible to supervise the voting process using this method.

#### **Food for thought: Designated drop boxes for mail-in voting**

In the United States, some jurisdictions make use of designated drop boxes for mail-in voting, i.e., voting envelopes need not go through the regular postal system. Creating such an infrastructure could reduce and instill greater confidence than the use of the regular postal service, but the placement of such boxes carries additional costs. In addition, it raises concerns that a separate system will provide a target for those who wish to illegally affect voting results. Thus, for instance, according to reports in the American media, during the 2020 elections, the California Republican Party set out its own drop boxes, which could have been confused with official ones.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. this issue is emphasized even more in e-voting and voting by fax for population segments where these means are not as available

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, pp. 11–12.

<sup>53</sup> *The New York Times*, [California Republican Party admits it placed misleading ballot boxes around state](#), October 12<sup>th</sup> 2020.

The following are some examples from around the world concerning changes in mail-in voting procedures intended to allow people quarantined due to COVID to vote:

- In the South Korean parliamentary elections held in the years prior to COVID, people with limited mobility—people with disabilities, older adults with mobility difficulties, prisoners and arrestees, etc.--were allowed to vote by mail. In the elections held in 2020, during the COVID pandemic, the option of voting by mail was expanded to those in quarantine or isolation at home or in a medical institution. To vote from home, voters had to preregister from March 24<sup>th</sup>–28<sup>th</sup> (election day was 15 April); those diagnosed with COVID after that date could vote early in polling places stationed in various medical facilities (though not by mail).<sup>54</sup>
- The local elections in Bavaria, Germany were held in two rounds in March 2020. The second round took place after Germany had instituted emergency measures to prevent the spread of COVID, and so all the ballots cast in that round were sent in by mail.<sup>55</sup>

Voting by fax or email is less common than voting by mail and is associated with additional challenges. Despite concerns that technical failures will prevent ballots from reaching their destination, concerns regarding harm to the secrecy of votes, and concerns that ballots may be sent using another person's name without his or her knowledge, there are no concerns that physical ballots will be lost or stolen. However, greater attention must be given to technological risks such as cyber-attacks. Some states in the US allow voters to submit their ballot by email or fax.

## 5.2 i-Voting

i-Voting can be carried out online using a personal computer or a smartphone app.<sup>56</sup> Unlike email voting, which is the electronic equivalent of mail-in voting, i-voting is accomplished using a dedicated platform specifically developed for this purpose.

### **Food for thought: The difference between e-Voting and i-Voting**

e-Voting encompasses any voting process done by computer. It can be accomplished either using a voting machine located in a polling station that replaces the manual

<sup>54</sup> International IDEA, [Managing elections under the COVID-19 pandemic: The Republic of Korea's crucial test](#), July 2020, p. 2.

<sup>55</sup> IFES, [Featured elections held and mitigating measures taken during COVID-19](#), October 2020, p. 4.

<sup>56</sup> To clarify: the discussion here concerns online voting, not online registration for in-person or mail-in voting.

polls (where voting is done with a paper ballot) or as online voting, i.e., remote voting using a computer connected to the Internet.<sup>57</sup>

As of the writing of this document, we did not find any countries that had adopted e-voting inside polling stations to deal with the effects of the COVID outbreak. Presumably, such a step would involve additional challenges such as cleaning the voting machines between voters.

The recommendations by the Council of Europe regarding efforts to safeguard democracy during COVID noted that e-voting could be used to conduct credible elections during this period. However, the use of the term "electronic voting" in the recommendations was not fully clarified, and the document did not state whether the reference was to e-voting in general—i.e., including computerized voting at poll stations—or solely to i-voting.<sup>58</sup>

i-Voting makes voting accessible to certain segments of the population, but in cases where it replaces "regular" voting, it may alienate voters with limited Internet access or low levels of technological literacy. Additionally, i-voting exacerbates concerns regarding infringement of the secrecy and credibility of votes that are associated with voting by mail and email (as described above). With i-voting, it is difficult—and perhaps impossible—to provide voters with an environment free of outside interference. In addition, i-voting adds a special technological challenge: On the one hand, it is essential to ensure that a record exists of each voter who has exercised his or her right to vote and that the vote was recorded correctly. On the other hand, the voter's identity must be kept separate from the content of his or her vote. There is, therefore, no practical way of visually supervising the voting and vote-counting processes, and external supervision of the voting and vote counting requires a professional knowledge of the programs and of how the voting system is constructed as well as access to these systems.<sup>59</sup>

In order to build public trust in i-voting, the OSCE recommended gradual implementation while using pilot programs, tests, mock elections, and so on.<sup>60</sup> This recommendation concerns the adoption of such a system at any point in time and is

<sup>57</sup> For further information on e-Voting see: Ehud Becker, [e-Voting: A comparative look](#), Knesset Research and Information Center, September 3<sup>rd</sup> 2019 [Hebrew].

<sup>58</sup> Council of Europe, Directorate General of Democracy, [Elections and COVID 19](#), March 29<sup>th</sup> 2020, p. 3.

<sup>59</sup> OSCE, [Alternative voting methods and arrangements](#), October 2020, pp. 41–43.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, p. 43.

not explicitly tied to the constraints related to the unique circumstances that demand changes in voting procedures during emergencies. In addition to the need to develop suitable systems free from outside interference from the outset, the aforementioned challenges make it difficult to rely on such new technologies as a response to a state of emergency so long as they were not used in previous elections. Only a single country—Estonia—allows all voters to vote online in parliamentary elections. This option already existed **before the COVID pandemic**, and that policy has not changed due to the pandemic. Nine countries and states (including Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and some states in the US) allow i-voting for certain groups (such as citizens residing abroad or soldiers stationed far from their homes) **under normal circumstances**, each in accordance with its own policies.

### 5.3 Voting by proxy

Voting by proxy is a process whereby the voter does not come to the poll on his or her own but instead instructs someone else to vote on his or her behalf. Such a process is based on the assumption that the proxy will vote as instructed.

Such voting is generally limited to specific groups of voters, such as those with limited mobility or impaired vision, and it is allowed **under normal circumstances** in Belgium, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Poland, and Sweden, among others.

One could suggest that voting by proxy makes participation in the election easier, but it also almost completely negates the secrecy of the voter's vote vis-à-vis the proxy. It is also difficult—and perhaps impossible—to ensure that the proxy vote accurately represents the voter's will.<sup>61</sup> Therefore, special attention must be paid to the conditions under which permission is granted to use this process, so that voting by proxy is permitted only in predefined cases and when the proxy is granted the proper authorization. For instance, such voting may be conditioned on preregistration or an affidavit signed by an attorney, in addition to presentation of the voter's ID (some countries allow voting by proxy even without those

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<sup>61</sup> For example, in Sweden, the voter fills out a ballot and inserts it into a signed envelope that is inserted into an external envelope. Thus, the task of the proxy amounts merely to handing in the envelope, similarly to the procedure for mail-in voting. This makes it more likely that the proxy will be unaware of the content of the vote. Voting by proxy is available in Sweden to those with limited mobility. Valmyndigheten (Swedish Election Authority), [Voting by Proxy](#), accessed: January 24<sup>th</sup>, 2021

conditions).<sup>62</sup> We note that international election oversight bodies have issued recommendations to certain countries that they do away with this option and instead using other procedures for remote voting.<sup>63</sup>

**During the COVID crisis**, several countries viewed voting by proxy as a possible solution for those sick or in quarantine. For example, Croatia (in the parliamentary elections) and France (in local elections) allowed COVID patients in isolation to vote by proxy.<sup>64</sup> France made voting by proxy easier by allowing each proxy to vote on behalf of two principals and by abolishing the requirement that previously required justification of the request to vote by proxy.

As mentioned, this method of voting has in the past been the target of relatively greater criticism than other methods of remote voting, and not many countries implement it even in elections not during the coronavirus pandemic.

## 5.4 Voting by telephone

Voting by means of a phone call in which the voter identifies him- or herself and votes is not an accepted method of voting. As of the writing of this document, it is used only in New Zealand, and it has not been adopted in other countries as a measure for contending with the COVID crisis. However, it was used in New Zealand to allow people in managed quarantine facilities to vote.

New Zealand allowed its citizens to vote by telephone dictation even before the COVID pandemic under specific conditions, such as people with visual impairments, expatriates, citizens residing in remote areas, and those physically unable to fill out forms. For the October 2020 elections, which took place during the COVID pandemic, people in managed quarantine facilities (amounting to approximately 5,000 voters) were added to the list of eligible groups. They were allowed to vote by phone for 12 days (on Election Day itself and the 11 days preceding it).<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> European Commission, [Study on the benefits and drawbacks of remote voting](#), 2018, pp. 127–128, 135, 149.

<sup>63</sup> OSCE, [Alternative voting methods and arrangements](#), October 2020, pp. 20–23.

<sup>64</sup> National Assembly of Bulgaria, **ECPRD request 4586: Holding elections in the context of the COVID-19 epidemic**, February 2021; IFES, [Featured elections held and mitigating measures taken during COVID-19](#), October 2020, p. 1; Council on Foreign Relations, [How countries are holding elections during the COVID-19 pandemic](#), September 17<sup>th</sup> 2020, all accessed: January 24<sup>th</sup> 2021.

<sup>65</sup> New Zealand Electoral Commission, [Arriving travelers in isolation to be able to vote by telephone](#), September 16<sup>th</sup> 2020, accessed: January 20<sup>th</sup> 2021.

The voting procedure was as follows: whoever wanted to vote by telephone was required to preregister and select a personal security question at that time.<sup>66</sup> Additionally, the voters received a personal identification number. Voting was done through a dedicated call center, and the voters identified themselves using only the PIN to avoid revealing their identity. Following identification, the call center operator asked the voter the security question, and after receiving the response, read out the various choices and documented the voter's selection.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> E.g., the name of your first primary school, your first pet's name, and the name of the street you grew up on)

<sup>67</sup> New Zealand Electoral Commission, [Vote by telephone dictation at the 2020 general election and referendums](#), accessed: January 20<sup>th</sup> 2021.