

Instructor Handout : Free and Fair Elections

<http://usinfo.state.gov/products/pubs/principles/election.htm>

Free and fair elections allow people living in a representative democracy to determine the political makeup and future policy direction of their nation's government.

Free and fair elections increase the likelihood of a peaceful transfer of power. They help to ensure that losing candidates will accept the validity of the election's results and cede power to the new government.

Elections alone do not assure democracy since dictators can use the resources of the state to tamper with the election process.

Free and fair elections require:

- Universal suffrage for all eligible men and women to vote — democracies do not restrict this right from minorities, the disabled, or give it only to those who are literate or who own property.
- Freedom to register as a voter or run for public office.
- Freedom of speech for candidates and political parties — democracies do not restrict candidates or political parties from criticizing the performance of the incumbent.
- Numerous opportunities for the electorate to receive objective information from a free press.
- Freedom to assemble for political rallies and campaigns.
- Rules that require party representatives to maintain a distance from polling places on election day — election officials, volunteer poll workers, and international monitors may assist voters with the voting process but not the voting choice.
- An impartial or balanced system of conducting elections and verifying election results — trained election officials must either be politically independent or those overseeing elections should be representative of the parties in the election.
- Accessible polling places, private voting space, secure ballot boxes, and transparent ballot counting.
- Secret ballots — voting by secret ballot ensures that an individual's choice of party or candidate cannot be used against him or her.
- Legal prohibitions against election fraud — enforceable laws must exist to prevent vote tampering (e.g. double counting, ghost voting).
- Recount and contestation procedures — legal mechanisms and processes to review election processes must be established to ensure that elections were conducted properly.

Voting methods — varying by country and even within countries — include:

- Paper ballots — votes are marked on or punched through paper.
- Ballots with pictures of candidates or party symbols so that illiterate citizens may cast the correct vote.
- Electronic systems — voters use touch-screen or push-button machines.
- Absentee ballots — allowing those who will not be able to vote on election day to cast their ballots prior to the election.