Evidence Gap Map
Summary Report

USAID FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

Political competition through elections

Understanding political competition

Political competition acts as one of the main pillars of democracy. A politically competitive society allows citizens the opportunity to form political parties, compete for power through elections, and shape the direction of public policy (Strom 1992). Although political competition can lead to numerous positive outcomes for society, the current state of democracy globally has shown a concerning trend. The 2021 Freedom in the World Report showed 16 consecutive years of decline in global freedom. This year also marks the largest gap between countries showing deterioration and improvement since the decline began (Repucci and Slipowitz 2021).

Given the global decline in democracy, interventions to increase political competition are frequent and common in L&MICs. Interventions in this area date back to the post-Second World War landscape when electoral observation missions began (Price 2004). Given the history, and spending directed towards these activities (FCDO 2020; USAID 2020), it is vitally important that resources are used effectively. Proven interventions should be implemented, unproven ones should be evaluated, and disproven ones should be discontinued. Though several reviews on this topic have been conducted, they do not address the effects of political competition interventions, and there has been no attempt to systematically map the range of interventions and outcomes related to political competition.

In response to this, USAID commissioned the International Initiative for Impact Evaluation to develop this evidence gap map (EGM) with the aim of: (1) identifying and describing evidence of the effects of interventions to promote political competition in L&MICs; and (2) identifying potential primary evidence and synthesis gaps. The EGM was created through a systematic search and screening process in which we identified relevant quantitative IEs, specific qualitative evaluations that address effectiveness, and SRs. The EGM intends to facilitate the use of evidence to inform decisions among policymakers, researchers, and the development community.

Highlights

- We found 194 eligible studies conducted in low- and middle-income countries (L&MICs). Of these, 188 were quantitative impact evaluations (IEs), four were qualitative evaluations, and two were systematic reviews (SRs).
- Studies were identified for 57 countries; they evaluated interventions mostly implemented in electoral democracy contexts, by public institutions, at the national level, and targeting all citizens/voters.
- Two intervention categories were most frequently identified: *voter information, voter education,* and *get-out-the-vote (GOTV) campaigns*; and *quotas for elected positions*. No eligible evaluations were identified for interventions on electoral justice.
- The most studied outcome was *turnout* and *voting behavior*: over half of all included studies reported the turnout of an election or vote shares for candidates and parties.
- The two SRs focused on voter *information, voter education, and GOTV,* and *quotas for elected positions*. However, both categories were rated as having low confidence, meaning their results are subject to a high risk of bias.
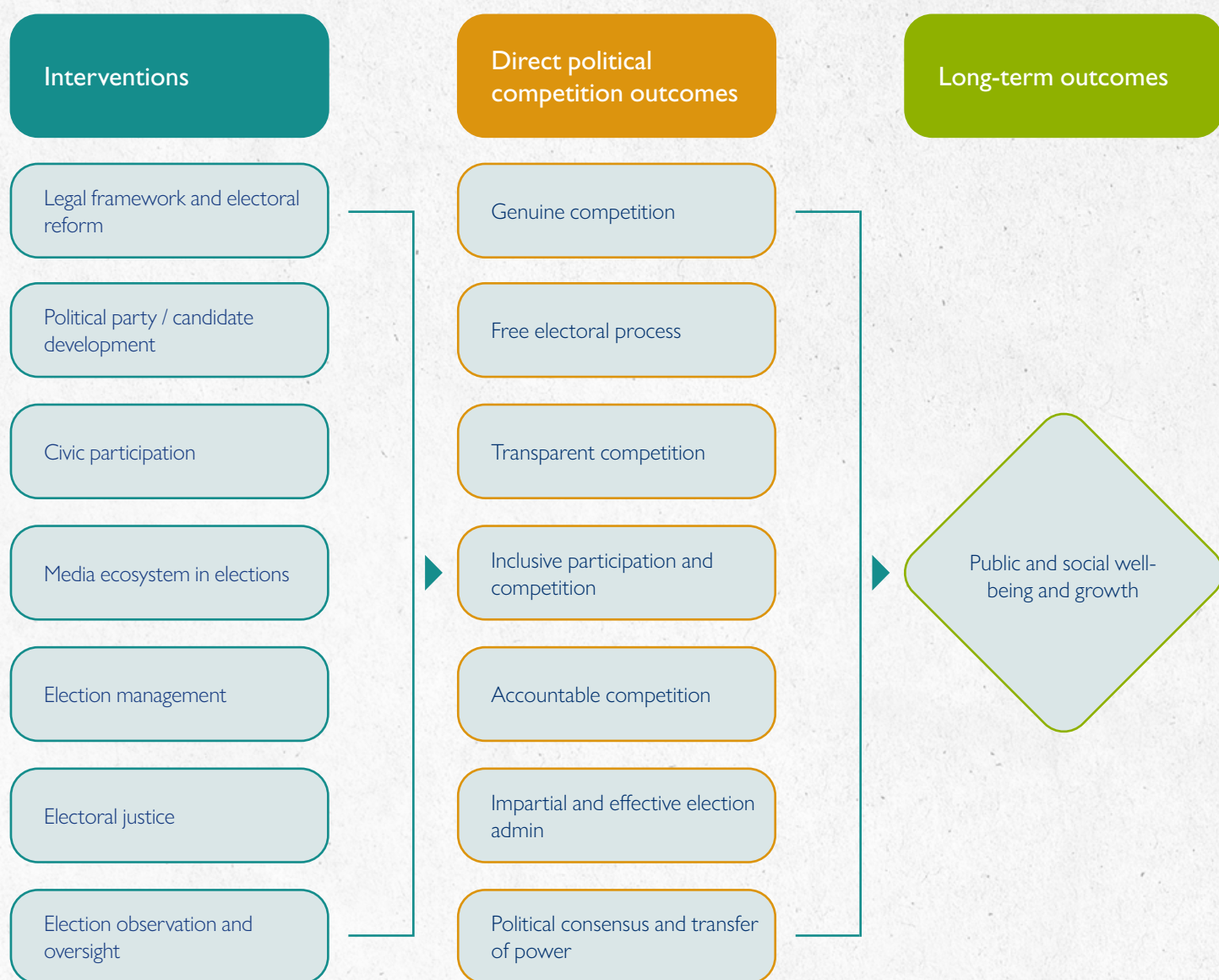
© Carla Chianese / IFES

Conceptualizing and categorizing interventions and outcomes

This EGM considered studies that evaluate the effects of interventions promoting political competition through the electoral cycle. It covered interventions that focus on "the struggle for state or political power" (Lehoucq 2011, p. 2) and that are directly linked to the concept of political participation, defined as "the ability to take part in the conduct of public affairs; and the opportunity to register as a candidate, to campaign, to be elected and to hold office at all levels of government" (UN 2005).

Using the conceptual framework presented in Figure 1, we developed an interventions and outcomes framework, which formed the basis of the inclusion criteria for this EGM (Table 1). The focus on electoral participation mandated the exclusion of studies focusing on referenda. Additionally, the EGM did not cover elections outside of the political sphere, such as elections in private sector companies or international or nongovernmental organizations, including community-driven development programs. Eligible studies must have evaluated at least one outcome related to political competition or social cohesion and development measures.

Figure 1: Conceptual framework for political competition

Interventions	Direct political competition outcomes	Long-term outcomes
Legal framework and electoral reform	Genuine competition	
Political party / candidate development	Free electoral process	
Civic participation	Transparent competition	
Media ecosystem in elections	Inclusive participation and competition	Public and social well-being and growth
Election management	Accountable competition	
Electoral justice	Impartial and effective election admin	
Election observation and oversight	Political consensus and transfer of power	

Conceptualizing and categorizing interventions and outcomes

Table 1: Examples of political competition interventions and outcomes

Intervention groups

Legal framework and electoral reform
- Activities to support reforms to the electoral environment, as well as the reforms themselves

Political party and candidate development
- Support to parties and candidates in their capability to stand for election

Civic participation
- Activities that focus on supporting the electorate in participating during an election

Election management
- Any support provided to help administer elections, most often directed towards the electoral management body

Election observation and oversight
- Support for and implementation of election observation by domestic stakeholders as well as international actors

Outcome groups

Genuine competition
- Outcomes related to the electoral environment which provide reasonable, fair, and equitable opportunities for candidates and parties

Transparent competition
- Outcomes ensuring each step of an election is open to scrutiny and that elections are conducted in an open and inclusive manner

Inclusive participation and competition
- Outcomes measuring the electorate's participation during an election

Accountable competition
- Outcomes related to the accountability of those elected, as well as those implementing elections

Political consensus and transfer of power
- Outcomes related to the acceptance of election results

Note: These are illustrative examples of the interventions and outcomes framework. The full list is included in the EGM technical report.

© Albert Gonzalez Farran / UNAMID

Main findings

We conducted an extensive search of peer-reviewed and grey literature (that is, research and information that is inaccessible in academic or commercial databases [Keenan 2018]), as well as citation tracking for included IEs and SRs in October 2021 and January 2022. These searches returned a total of 34,139 records. After removing duplicates, we screened 25,648 studies by title and abstract. We identified 766 potentially relevant studies, which were screened based on their full text. We included 194 studies in the EGM, of which 188 used quantitative IE methods, four used qualitative methods that seek to establish causal inference, and two were SRs. See the technical report for more information on the inclusion criteria.
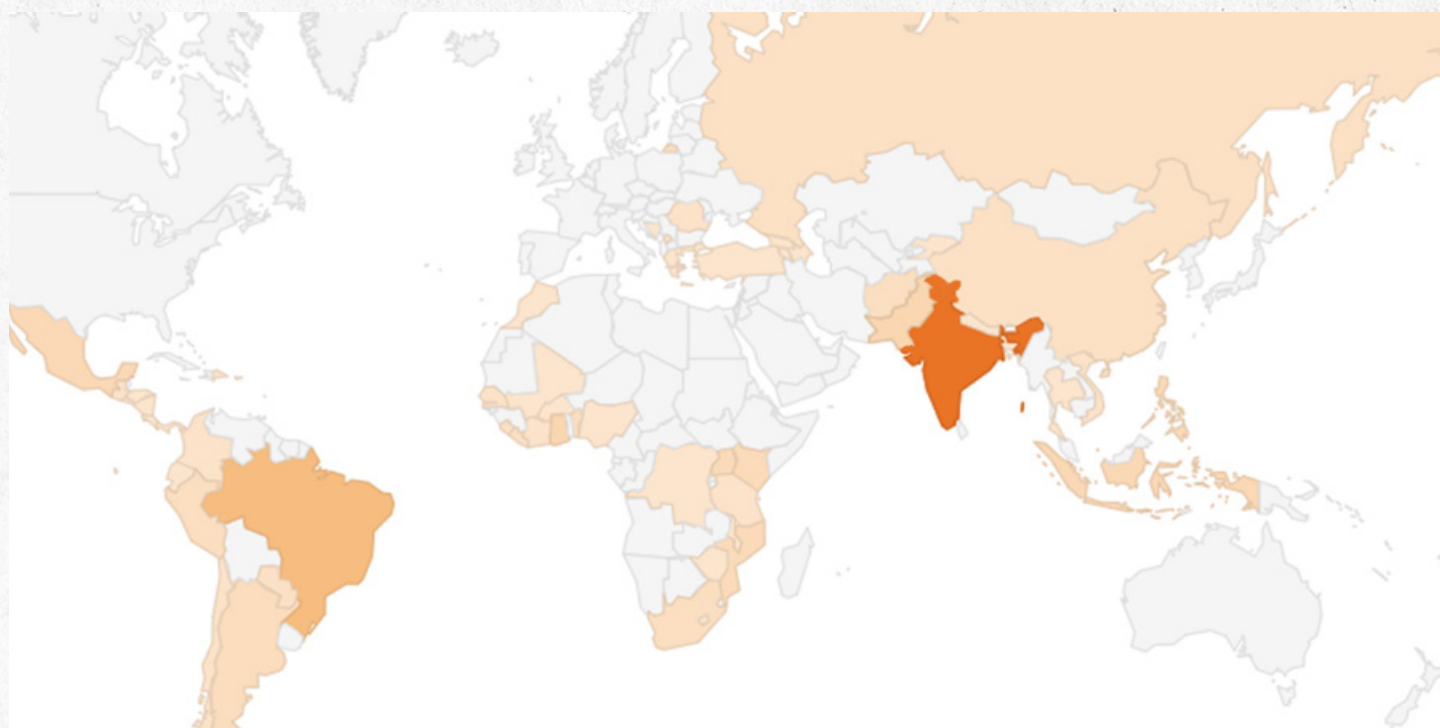
Rigorous evaluations of political competition interventions are relatively new. The first publication of rigorous evidence on the effects of political competition interventions was in 2003 and has expanded rapidly since 2010, with 32 studies published in 2020 alone.

The evidence is geographically concentrated. South Asia was the region with the highest number of evaluations – 66 in total (Figure 2). This concentration is driven by India, which encompassed 27 per cent of the evidence. Research was also focused on Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean, which were represented in 54 and 45 studies, respectively. Few evaluations reported on interventions in East Asia and the Pacific (n = 20), Europe and Central Asia (n = 11), and the Middle East and North Africa region (n = 1).

Almost two thirds of the studies identified in the EGM were conducted in electoral democracies, as defined by V-Dem (2022), and only nine per cent took place in fragile, conflicted, and violent contexts, based on World Bank data (n.d.). The majority of interventions were implemented by a public institution (55%), at the national level (65%), and most often targeted citizens (46%). The high proportion of studies evaluating interventions targeting the whole population may be driven by the number of includable interventions that act as legislative changes affecting the entire electorate; for instance, *electoral system* or *electoral rules reforms*.

Figure 2: Geographical evidence base

Main findings

The evidence is concentrated on two intervention categories: voter information and quotas. The *voter information, voter education,* and *GOTV* category had the highest number of studies (n = 71; Figure 3). These interventions typically provided voters with information and reminders on where and when to vote, information on the incumbent's performance, information on corruption, or conducted anti-vote-buying campaigns. *Quotas for elected positions* was the second most common intervention category (n = 44). Of these studies, 41 evaluated the implementation of gender- or caste-based quotas in India. The large number of evaluations in India does not necessarily imply that this specific legislative change has been over-evaluated; it rather seems to indicate a lack of research on quotas outside of the Indian context.
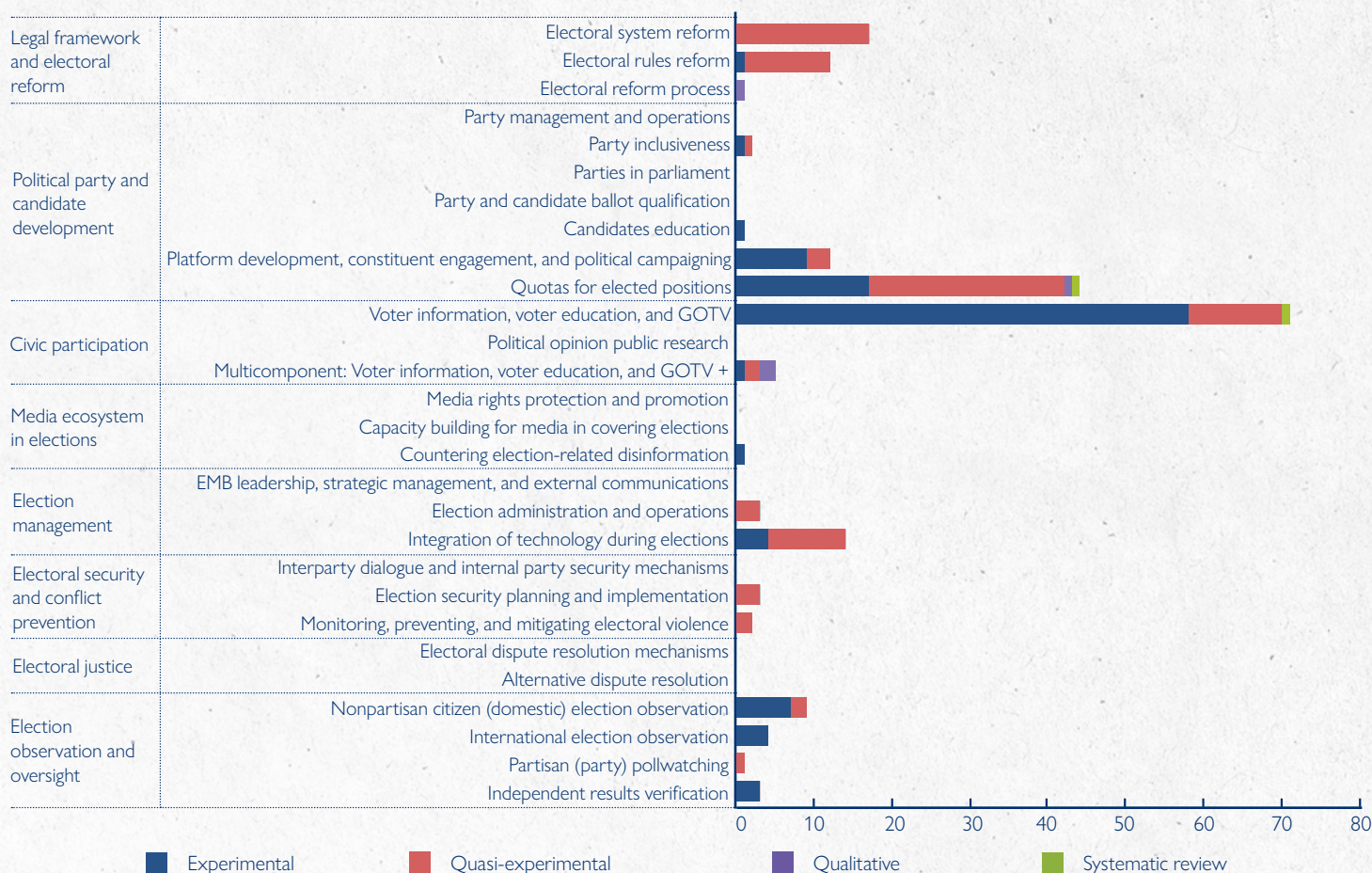
Other key areas of political competition have little or no rigorous evidence. There is an absolute gap in evaluations of *electoral justice* interventions focused on capacity building and the effective use of dispute resolution mechanisms. Studies may exist on this topic, but

without the use of rigorous methods to identify causality. This may reflect a challenge to applying rigorous methods to assess the effects of these types of interventions.

Other areas of political competition for which we identified few evaluations were: *countering disinformation,* and *electoral security, observation, and administration.* Only one *disinformation* study was identified in this EGM: a training program in India. This lack may be due to the recent emergence of this area of research. Despite being a common issue in many elections in L&MICs, electoral security is an understudied area, with only five identified studies.

Electoral observation is one of the most common interventions in political competition but only 11 studies were identified. Two of these evaluated the effect of domestic or international observation on measures beyond *corruption* and *voting behavior*. Finally, we identified three studies related to *election administration and operation*, all of which only measured outcomes related to *turnout and voting behavior.*

Figure 3: Distribution of included studies across interventions

Legend	
Experimental	Quasi-experimental
Qualitative	Systematic review

Main findings

Two thirds of the outcomes in the framework are understudied. The EGM included 27 outcome categories (Figure 4); of these, only eight categories were measured by 10 or more studies. *Voting behavior* was the most common outcome reported in included studies (n = 107), mainly as an indicator of turnout and party or candidate vote share. These measures are perhaps the most fundamental outcomes related to political competition during elections, but they are also widely available to researchers and require little or no firsthand data collection. Other relevant outcomes that require researchers to conduct primary data collection or conceptualize and define the indicator (for example, those related to transparency of electoral processes and bodies) were less studied.

Evaluation designs differ by intervention types. It is more feasible, for example, to randomly allocate voter information interventions than electoral systems reforms, which are usually rolled out nationally at once. The feasibility of randomizing voter information interventions is reflected in the evidence, where 82 per cent of *voter information* studies used an experimental design, and all *electoral system reforms* studies used a quasi-experimental technique. The suitability of evaluation methods for different interventions also extends to qualitative designs. *Electoral reform process,* a category that captures inclusivity in the planning and implementation of electoral processes, includes one study, which used a qualitative design.
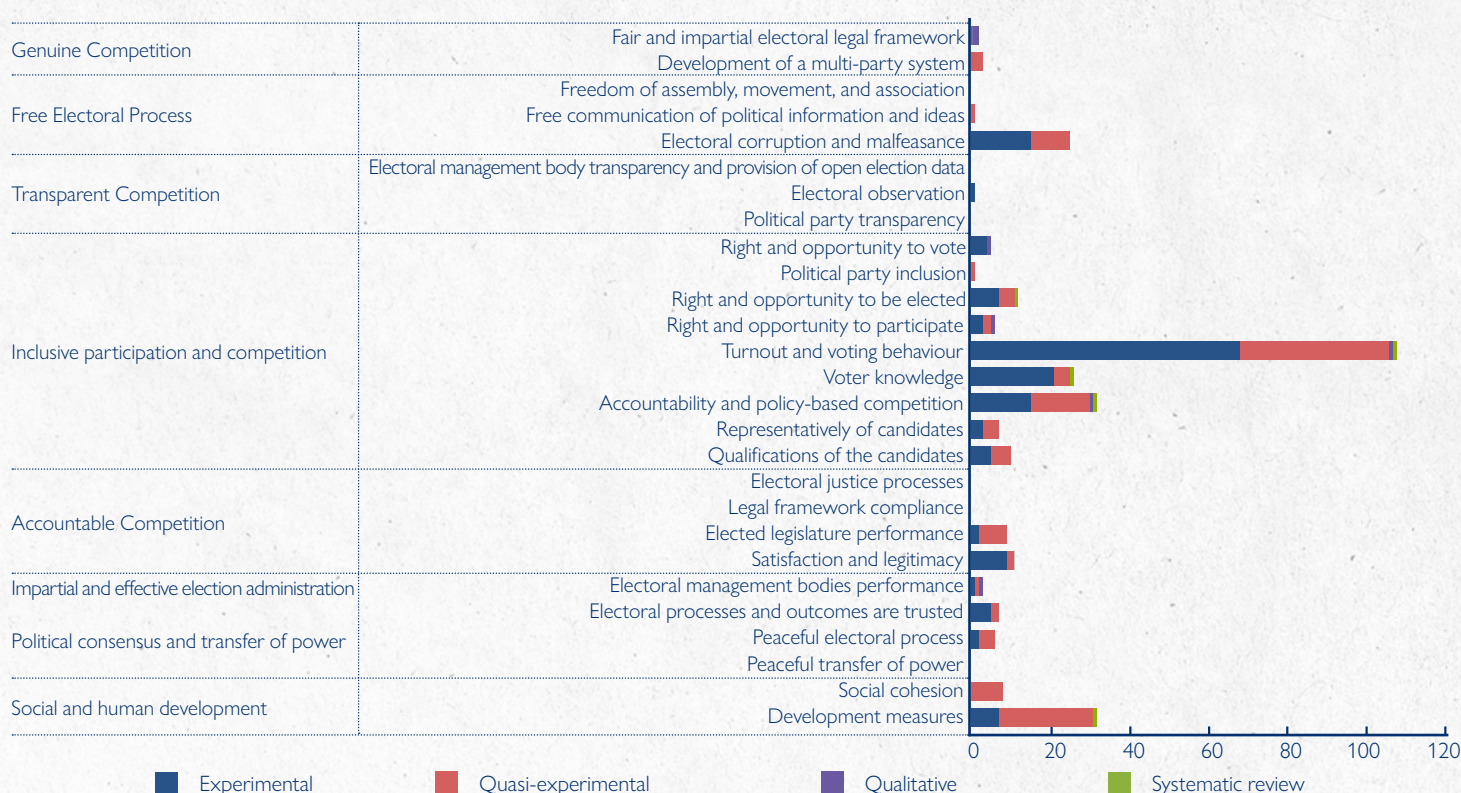
There is a scarcity of qualitative evaluations. Only four qualitative evaluations (2%) were identified for inclusion within this EGM. Of the eight qualitative methodologies identified as includable for this map, only three were used: process tracing, contribution analysis, and qualitative comparative analysis. This gap may also be indicative of qualitative researchers not stating the research method used; this map only included qualitative design methodology if the authors explicitly stated using one of the eligible designs.

Ethical approval and cost data are underreported in included studies. Only 17 per cent of studies reported having obtained ethics approval to conduct the evaluations. The majority of studies with this clearance were randomized evaluations. Quasi-experimental methods are better suited to taking advantage of secondary data, such as official electoral results or longitudinal surveys, which were the data sources in many of the included evaluations. Likewise, data on the interventions' cost were rarely reported in studies (10%), which constrains the possibility of conducting cost-effectiveness analysis across interventions. The underreporting of ethics clearance and cost data does not necessarily mean that evaluations did not receive this approval or collect this information; instead, it may be the case that authors simply did not report it in the studies included in the map.

There is a lack of updated and high-confidence synthesis on political competition interventions. Two SRs were identified in this map, focusing on the two most common interventions: *voter information* and *quotas*. Based on the information reported in their publications, both reviews were appraised as having low confidence, meaning there is a high risk of bias in their results.

Figure 4: Distribution of included studies across outcomes

Promising areas for future research

In addition to helping stakeholders identify relevant literature, this EGM serves as a starting point for building up the evidence base. Based on the gaps identified, there are opportunities for conducting future IEs and SRs. We suggest several key areas where future work could be useful (Table 2), and encourage stakeholders to consider their own priorities and interests when reviewing the EGM.

The *electoral justice* intervention group is the only area in which this EGM cannot provide insight. The evaluation of interventions focused on capacity building to support the implementation of dispute resolution mechanisms, as well as the use of the mechanisms themselves, should be prioritized. If experimental or quasi-experimental evaluation methods are less viable in this area – a potential reason for the absence of evidence on this topic – qualitative methods that aim to establish a causal pathway could be explored for the evaluation of these interventions.

In terms of the outcomes that political competition interventions can affect, future research could also complement commonly used indicators (e.g., turnout) with measures that are currently less available to decision makers (e.g., those related to transparency of electoral processes and bodies). The restricted availability of these outcomes may be related to the fact that they require primary data collection or that they can vary based on researchers' own conceptualizations. For instance, *political party transparency* was not measured in any of the studies on the map. This outcome may require researchers to clearly define the aspects of transparency they are examining and how they are measuring them. This could range from an objective measure of whether a party provides data on leadership election results to more subjective measures of whether internal party mechanisms that select leaders and election candidates are transparent and accessible.

Similarly, upcoming research should encourage evaluations of interventions implemented in the Middle East and North Africa, and East Asia and the Pacific. Although relevant interventions take place in these regions, it seems thus far that rigorous evaluations are not part of policy and program evaluations. Integrating evaluations into programming in these regions could help to alleviate this evidence gap.

We identified two SRs synthesizing the two most represented intervention categories: *voter information* and *quotas*. While these may offer interesting insights into their topics, they were both appraised as low confidence and therefore may not be a suitable means of informing decision-making. These areas offer great potential for updated and high-confidence synthesis to understand their effects, including opportunities to cover a range of different information and education electoral campaigns, interventions implemented in different regions, and the most recent studies on these topics. In addition, Table 2 provides a list of other intervention categories with nine or more evaluations in the map, which may also benefit from updated, high-quality synthesis.

Table 2: Suggested areas for future research in political competition

Type of gap	Areas for future research
Intervention (with no eligible studies in the EGM)	■ **Electoral justice:** electoral and alternative dispute resolution mechanisms ■ **Political party and candidate development:** party management and operations; parties in parliament; party and candidate ballot qualification ■ **Civic participation:** political opinion and public research ■ **Media ecosystems in elections:** media rights protection and promotion; capacity building for media in covering elections ■ **Election management:** electoral management body leadership, strategic management, and external communications ■ **Electoral security and conflict prevention:** interparty dialogue and internal party security mechanisms
Outcome (with no eligible studies in the EGM)	■ **Free electoral process:** freedom of assembly, movement, and association ■ **Transparent competition:** electoral management body transparency and provision of open election data; political party transparency ■ **Accountable competition:** electoral justice processes; legal framework compliance ■ **Political consensus and transfer of power:** peaceful transfer of power
Geography	■ Countries in the Middle East and North Africa region ■ Countries in East Asia and the Pacific region
Synthesis	■ Voter information, voter education, and GOTV ■ Quotas for elected positions ■ **Legal framework and electoral reform:** electoral system reforms; electoral rules reforms ■ **Political party and candidate development:** platform development, constituent engagement, and political campaigning ■ **Election management:** integration of technology during elections ■ **Election observation and oversight:** nonpartisan citizen (domestic) election observation

Using the evidence patterns in the EGM

EGMs are tools for decision-making and can be used to:

1. Inform research agenda-setting: the EGM findings can help to identify priority areas for future research investment, particularly when combined with expertise from diverse stakeholders to effectively interpret the gaps..

1. Investments in new IEs may be particularly beneficial when they target interventions for which limited evidence exists or where there is limited evidence on the effects of the intervention on a population or context of interest. For example, we found absolute gaps for 10 interventions, including *electoral justice.* In addition, limited evidence was identified on interventions to *counter disinformation* and reduce *election violence.* Although many of these interventions receive substantial funding for implementation, there is a lack of evidence evaluating their effects. Improving the availability of rigorous evidence could help to facilitate evidence-informed action around these interventions.

2. Where large concentrations of primary evidence already exist, investments in additional IEs may not provide as much value as investments in evaluations of interventions and outcomes for which little or no evidence exists. For example, we found a significant number of IEs around voter information and quotas for elected positions. Synthesizing this evidence may be a better approach for strategic allocation of future research resources.

3. Where there are concentrations of primary evidence, and existing SRs are out of date, have methodological limitations, or do not cover populations of interest, commissioning or conducting new high-quality SRs could better inform the effects in these areas. For example, two SRs were identified on the areas for which we found the largest number of studies; however, both reviews are low confidence and/or out of date.

2. Support policy and program design: hyperlinks in the online EGM enable easy access to rigorous evidence that can be consulted when designing new policies and programs. Stakeholders considering the adoption of specific interventions may reference evaluations in the relevant row to understand their likely effects. Conversely, stakeholders interested in influencing a specific outcome may reference evaluations in the corresponding column to understand which interventions may affect that outcome. Stakeholders can also use the EGM filters to identify interventions relevant to areas and populations of interest. For example, we found a wealth of studies conducted in South Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Sub-Saharan Africa; therefore, users interested in these regions may wish to use this filter to identify relevant studies.

3. Identify examples of IEs undertaken in particular contexts or that use particular methods: this can be useful in identifying potential challenges as well as strategies applied to address obstacles, which may strengthen the quality of future research. Stakeholders considering rigorously evaluating their work may reference evaluations of similar interventions for ideas on how they can be conducted. For example, stakeholders interested in conducting or commissioning IEs in fragile contexts may use this filter to identify relevant evidence and understand the methods and approaches used when conducting evaluations in such complex environments. Similarly, the methods filter can be used to identify intervention areas where qualitative research has been more used, such as *electoral reform processes.*
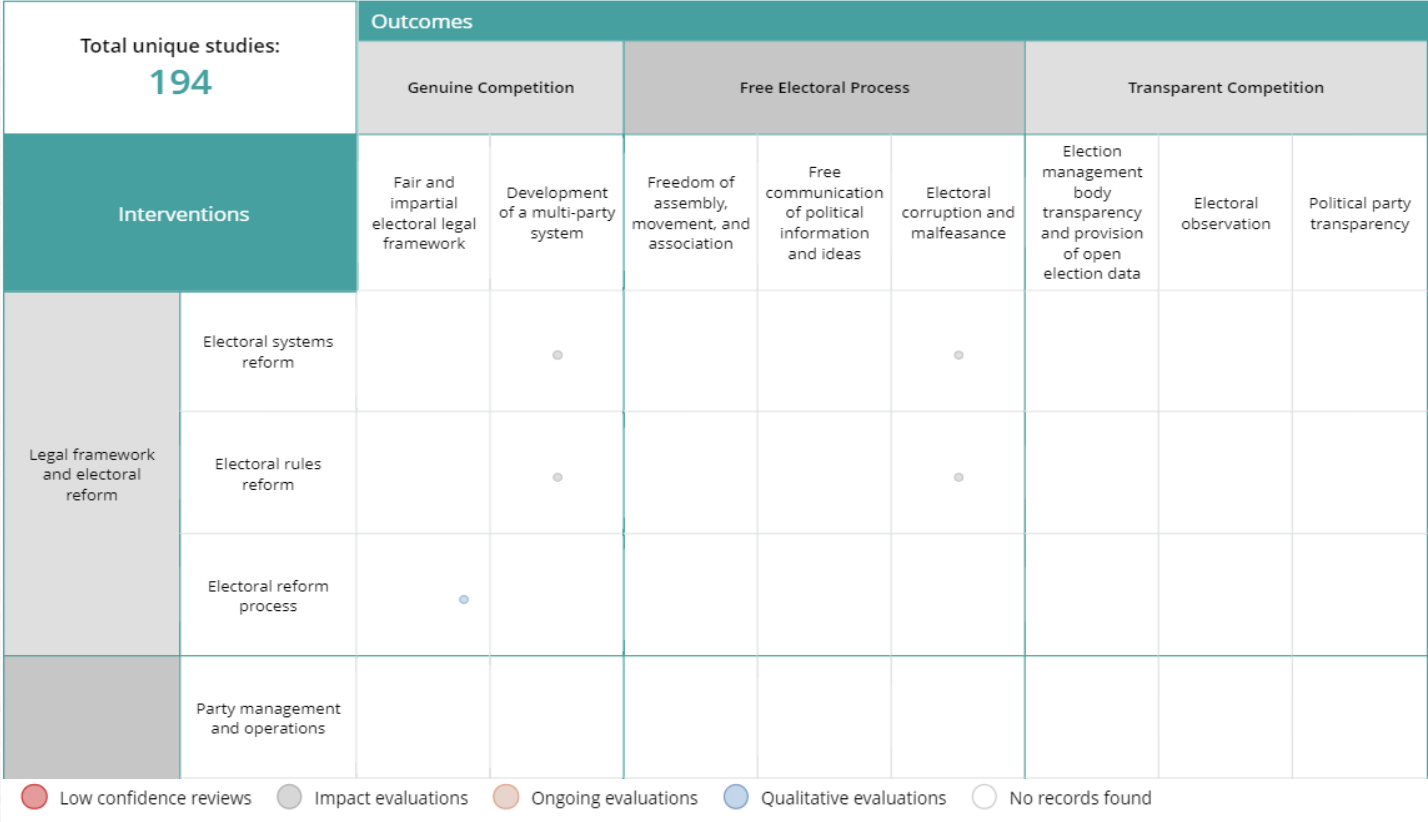

© Marco Dormino / UN Photo

Accessing and engaging with the evidence gap map

We present the results of the EGM graphically in an interactive online platform. The main framework is a matrix of interventions and outcomes, with colored bubbles representing evaluations and SRs. The size of the bubble indicates the relative size of the evidence base for that intersection of intervention and outcome. Grey bubbles indicate quantitative IEs, and light blue bubbles indicate qualitative evaluations. Purple bubbles represent ongoing reviews, and light red bubbles represent ongoing primary studies. The SRs follow a traffic-light system to indicate the level of confidence in how the authors arrived at their findings: green for high, orange for medium, and red for low confidence. The interactive aspect of the EGM allows users to filter the results based on key variables (e.g., region, country, country income level, country democracy level, study design), thereby facilitating an efficient, user-friendly identification of relevant evidence.

Political Competition evidence gap map

Figure 5: Snapshot from online EGM

Total unique studies: 194	Outcomes							
	Genuine Competition		**Free Electoral Process**			**Transparent Competition**		
Interventions	Fair and impartial electoral legal framework	Development of a multi-party system	Freedom of assembly, movement, and association	Free communication of political information and ideas	Electoral corruption and malfeasance	Election management body transparency and provision of open election data	Electoral observation	Political party transparency
Legal framework and electoral reform — Electoral systems reform		○			○			
Legal framework and electoral reform — Electoral rules reform		○			○			
Legal framework and electoral reform — Electoral reform process	○							
Party management and operations								

● Low confidence reviews ● Impact evaluations ● Ongoing evaluations ● Qualitative evaluations ○ No records found

What is an EGM?

3ie evidence gap maps are collections of evidence from IEs and SRs for a given sector or policy issue, organized according to the types of program evaluated and the outcomes measured. They include an interactive online visualization of the evidence base, displayed in a framework of relevant interventions and outcomes.

They highlight where there are sufficient IEs to support SRs and where more studies are needed. These maps help decision makers target their resources to fill these important evidence gaps and avoid duplication. They also facilitate evidence-informed decision-making by making existing research more accessible.

About the summary report

The studies on which this report is based were identified through the political competition EGM by Gonzalez Parrao and colleagues (2022). The authors systematically searched for published and unpublished IEs and SRs through January 2022, and then identified, mapped, and described the evidence base of interventions that aim to improve political competition through elections. The map contains two SRs and 192 IEs. The evidence's characteristics are described and mapped according to a framework of 28 interventions and 27 outcomes. The Political Competition EGM can be viewed at: https://developmentevidence.3ieimpact.org/egm/political-competition-through-elections-evidence-gap-map.

This summary report was authored by Cem Yavuz and Constanza Gonzalez Parrao. They are solely responsible for all content, errors, and omissions. The report was designed and produced by Akarsh Gupta, Mallika Rao and Tanvi Lal.

© Ashutosh Negi / UN Women

References

FCDO. "Statistics on international development: final UK aid spent 2019." UKaid Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), 2020. https://assets. publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/ file/927135/Statistics_on_International_Development_Final_UK_Aid_Spend_2019. pdf. (Accessed: 21 December 2022)

Gonzalez Parrao, Costanza, Etienne Lwamba, Cem Yavuz, Saad Gulzar, Miriam Berretta, Jane Hammaker, Charlotte Lane, Katherine Quant, John Eyers, and Douglas Glandon. Promoting political competition through electoral processes in low- and middle-income countries: an evidence gap map. International Initiative for Impact valuation (3ie), 2022.

Repucci, Sarah and Amy Slipowitz. "Freedom in the world 2021: democracy under siege." Freedom House, 2021. https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-02/FIW2021_World_02252021_FINAL-web-upload.pdf. (Accessed: 21 December 2022)

Keenan, Ciara. "Searching part two – grey literature. meta-evidence blog." Campbell Collaboration UK & Ireland, 2018. http://meta-evidence.co.uk/grey-literature. (Accessed: 21 December 2022)

Lehoucq, Fabrice. "Political competition, policy making, and the quality of public policies in Costa Rica. Working Paper N7. World Bank, 2011. https://documents1.

worldbank.org/curated/en/312871468247845252/pdf/577070NWP0Box353766B01PUBLIC10gcwp007web.pdf. (Accessed: 21 December 2022)

Price, John. "The 'Cat's paw': Canada and the United Nations Temporary Commission on Korea." The Canadian Historical Review 85, no. 2 (2004): 297–324. https://doi. org/10.1353/can.2004.0077. (Accessed: 21 December 2022)

Strom, Kaare. "Democracy as political competition." American Behavioral Scientist 35, nos. 4–5 (1992): 375–396. https://doi.org/10.1177/000276429203500404.

UN. "Political participation." In Women and elections: guide to promoting the participation of women in elections. United Nations (UN), 2005. https://www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/wps/publication/WomenAndElections.pdf. (Accessed: 21 December 2022)

USAID. "Agency financial report fiscal year 2020. a foundation built on decades of global health investment." U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), 2020. https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/USAID_FY2020_AFR-508.pdf. (Accessed: 21 December 2022)

V-Dem. "Country-date." V-Dem dataset v12. Varieties of Democracy Project, 2022. https://doi.org/10.23696/vdemds22. (Accessed: 21 December 2022)

World Bank. "Fragility, conflict, and violence." https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/fragilityconflictviolence. (Accessed: 21 December 2022)

© Ainhoa Goma / Oxfam

The International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie) develops evidence on how to effectively transform the lives of the poor in low- and middle-income countries. Established in 2008, we offer comprehensive support and a diversity of approaches to achieve development goals by producing, synthesizing and promoting the uptake of impact evaluation evidence. We work closely with governments, foundations, NGOs, development institutions and research organizations to address their decision-making needs. With offices in Washington DC, New Delhi and London and a global network of leading researchers, we offer deep expertise across our extensive menu of evaluation services.

For more information on 3ie's evidence gap maps, contact info@3ieimpact.org or visit our website.

🌐 3ieimpact.org

February 2023