

# Resilient Elections: How to Strengthen Our Democracies

Investigating how threats affect three foundational dimensions of elections: participation, contestation, and organisation.

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**Make it matter**



Elections are at the heart of democracy. Yet the question of their resilience – the ability to overcome environmental, societal, and technological threats while effectively preserving and improving the integrity of the electoral process – is little understood. This project will evaluate electoral resilience by investigating how threats affect three foundational dimensions of elections: participation, contestation, and organisation. It takes Australia, India, Indonesia, and the United States/Canada as in-depth case studies, and bolsters this with a large-N global analysis. It will thus provide new theoretical insights into electoral resilience and develop practical measures and strategies that can be implemented to strengthen elections and therefore democracy.

## Aims and Background

This project aims to:

1. Map the nature of environmental, societal, and technological threats to the conduct of democratic elections;
2. Explain their impact on electoral resilience and;
3. Identify measures that will enhance the resilience of elections to withstand these threats. The significance of such threats cannot be underestimated.

At the national level, the Australian Department of Home Affairs (DHA) has labelled them ‘generational challenges’ (O’Neil 2022) and has established the National Resilience Taskforce and the Strengthening Democracy Taskforces. At the international level, the World Economic Forum (WEF 2023) warns of similar **environmental, societal, and technological** ‘risks’. Regardless of the preferred term, it is evident that, in the face of such headwinds, democracies require what I conceptualise as **‘electoral resilience’: the ability to meet environmental, societal, and technological threats while effectively preserving and improving the integrity of the electoral process.**

A systematic body of work exists on how countries’ structural characteristics impact the integrity of their elections (Frank & Martínez i Coma 2017), but significantly fewer studies analyse the impact of environmental, societal, and technological threats on elections. And hardly any consider their **compounding** effects. The importance of this fellowship is amplified by the fact the frequency and intensity of such events are expected to increase in the years ahead (Naughtin et al. 2022). Yet, we lack a general and comprehensive framework to assess how these threats interrelate and affect electoral resilience.

Understanding how to make elections more resilient is imperative to sustaining our democracies. This fellowship will therefore:

1. Advance the field by understanding how environmental, societal, and technological threats individually and interactively affect the resilience of democratic elections;
2. Test what enhances the resilience of elections to withstand these threats; and
3. Translate this knowledge for policymakers through the provision of a set of countermeasures to mitigate the damaging effects of election threats.

The core question this Fellowship will investigate is: **How do environmental, societal, and technological threats affect the resilience of elections in democracies?** To answer that, I will:

1. Investigate the threats' *features* to understand their commonalities, differences, and interactions.
2. Analyse the *effects* by disentangling the diverse impacts of threats on election resilience.
3. Study and propose *mitigation strategies* to enhance election resilience.

Electoral resilience is an innovative concept that builds on those of electoral integrity and democratic resilience. *Electoral integrity* is positively defined by the presence of criteria for democratic elections (e.g. impartial boundary delimitation) and negatively described by the absence of criteria (e.g. vote buying) (Norris, Frank & Martínez i Coma 2014). When assessing elections, the phrase 'free and fair' denotes that all election stages – from voter registration to vote count – have been conducted according to the law, usually aligned with international normative standards (Norris 2014). Such electoral integrity definitions imply an active role of those involved in the election *but miss the fundamental point that actors often cannot condition the circumstances in which the election is held (e.g. a pandemic)*. When this is the case, the utility of the concept of 'electoral integrity' is limited as it seems more of a fortuitous outcome rather than what actors can and should actively pursue. In turn, *democratic resilience*, defined as 'the ability of a democratic system, its institutions, political actors, and citizens to prevent or react to external and internal challenges, stresses, and assaults' (Merkel & Lührmann 2021: 874), denotes the ability to prevent or react to threats. However, as Holloway and Manwaring (2023) note, we are unsure about when, how, and why democratic resilience happens, which limits the concept.

Even less is known on how to measure democratic resilience, restricting opportunities to provide concrete actions to strengthen it. My innovation of electoral resilience enhances existing concepts by being conceptually more:

1. Comprehensive, as actors are permitted to have either an active or passive role in the origin of the threat;
2. Adaptable, as it can include other threats that may emerge;
3. Precise and measurable, as it operationalises the dependent variable into three discrete outcomes of interest: participation, contestation, and organisation.

**Only when electoral resilience is established, can we pursue electoral integrity and advance towards (and measure) democratic resilience.**



Drawing on Dahl (1989), there are three underlying dimensions of elections that I will focus on to examine electoral resilience: *participation*, *contestation*, and *the organisation* of the election. Each of these will be analysed through the lens of the main actors involved. *Participation* is understood as a variation 'in the population entitled to participate on a more or less equal plane' (Dahl 1971: 4). Since democracies are 'substantially constituted by voting' (Brennan & Hill 2014: 162), voter turnout is a cornerstone in the analysis. *Contestation* occurs when individuals run for public office, usually through political parties, which are formed to represent the views of citizens into parliaments (Aldrich 1995). The *organisation* of the election is based on the premise that representatives are chosen via elections. Institutions such as Election Management Bodies (EMBs) are responsible for organising and administering the election and take on several forms across the world (James et al. 2019).

**Beyond the inconclusiveness and lack of systematization, existing studies have three additional limitations.** First, they each focus on just one threat, neglecting any possible *interaction*, *cascade* and *compounding effects* posed by multiple threats that may be present (but see Birch & Martínez i Coma, 2023). Second, since they are almost exclusively composed of country case studies in a specific time, the selection of the dependent variable occurs in response to *something relevant* happening, raising bias, external validity concerns and limiting the possibility of estimating causal effects (Geddes 1990). Third, they do not address plausible mitigation strategies, constraining the analyses' public use. I will build on the important insights provided by prior research while enhancing our understanding of how the different threats impact the dimensions of elections.

In this fellowship I will, therefore, first produce a comprehensive comparative analysis including all democratic elections since 1945 that will examine whether, and how, environmental, societal, and technological threats affect participation, contestation, and the organisation of the elections. This will also include an analysis of EMBs' policy documents. Second, I will assess the causal relationships between threats and the three dimensions of the elections, relying on primary and secondary sources. Finally, I will translate the results into the proposition of specific policies to strengthen election resilience.

## Innovation

The project is innovative and original in four **theoretical** aspects:

1. It introduces and develops the concept of electoral resilience, as detailed above.
2. It develops an integrated approach, building from the monocausal explanations available in current scholarship and assessing their interrelations. It thus provides the first comprehensive account considering multiple simultaneous threats to electoral resilience (Birch & Martínez i Coma 2023);
3. It links the three election dimensions with the threats to assess how the latter interact, and compound one another, thereby providing a precise account of how they affect electoral resilience.
4. It establishes electoral resilience as central to broader notions of democratic resilience (Merkel & Luhrmann 2021).

The fellowship combines cross-national comparative analyses, quasi-experimental methods and in-depth case studies of four countries on three continents allowing comparison of different institutional systems. The results will:

1. Assess the causal relations between threats and actors;
2. Provide fundamental knowledge for forecasting and thus prevention efforts;
3. Overcome the selection bias problem of previous single-country studies that usually select on the dependent variable (Geddes 1990); and
4. Help advance the comparative scope of the field.

In terms of **impact**, the fellowship will develop mitigation strategies to address the current threats enhancing the resilience of elections of use to democratic governments, citizens, political parties and EMBs, in the form of policy blueprint documents, reports and case studies for practitioners and interested audiences.



# ELECTION DAY

## Project design and methods

The project adopts a comparative perspective and takes advantage of the insights that case studies provide to assess the mechanisms – i.e. preparation, learning – by which electoral resilience can be enhanced or damaged. The fellowship will study Australia, Indonesia, India and the United States/Canada. Three of these large countries are federations, allowing for internal variation in the presence of threats within the same institutional arrangement. Leveraging the similarities and differences of electoral process in the four is especially productive when assessing the features and effects of threats as well as when producing the specific policy measures

## Methods

Each part of the research question combines complementary methodological approaches and will be a working package (WP).

### WP1

To establish the **features** of the threats, WP1 will observe whether the levels of participation, contestation and organisation are significantly different when threats are present. The approach to do so is to build on large-scale aggregate observational data, useful for generalisability purposes.

In addition, I will conduct a content analysis of national policy documents, issued by each of the EMBs to map how they have evolved in their perception of the threats over time. This information will also be used to prepare interviews for WP3.

### WP2

Analysing the **effects** requires establishing whether there were shifts regarding participation, contestation and organisation when a threat was present and also how change happened. To assess the threats' effects on the:

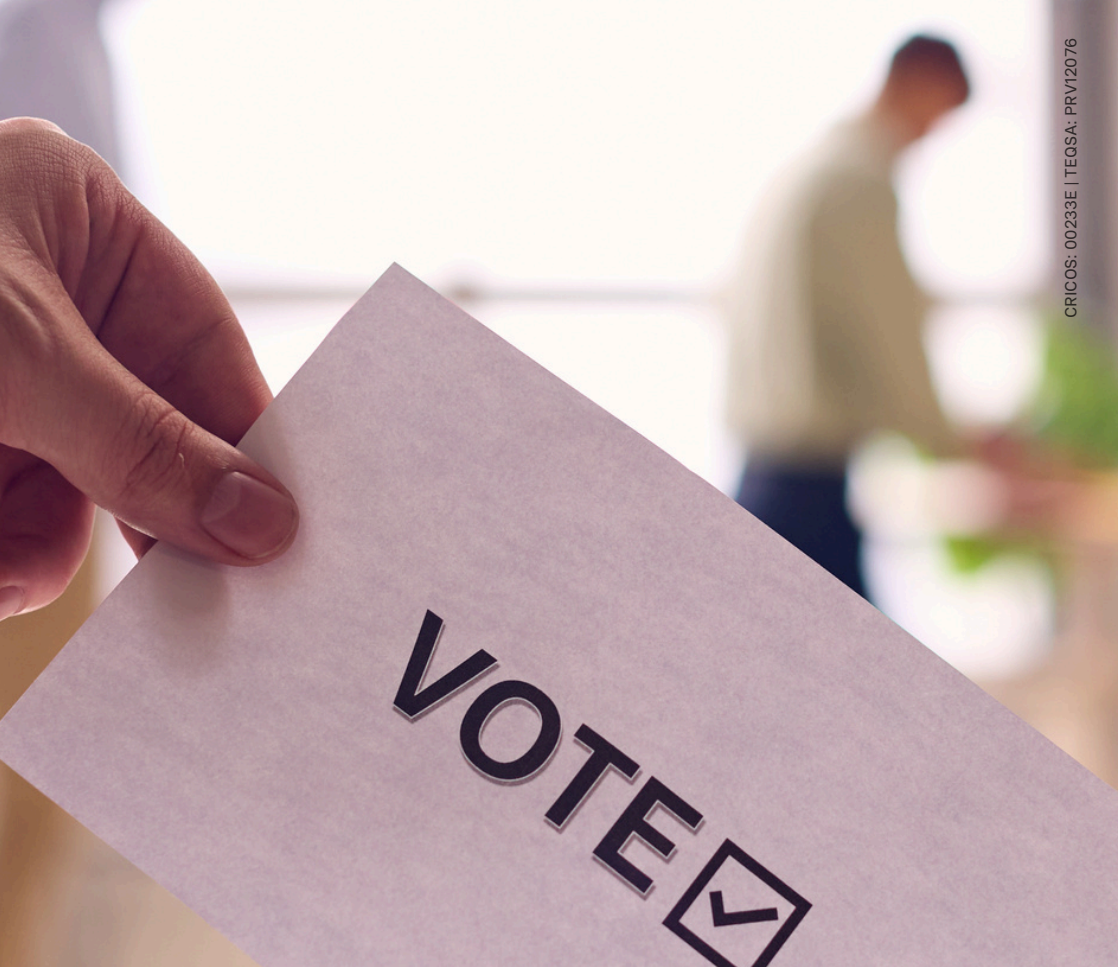
- *participation* dimension, I will deploy 'unexpected events during survey' (UEDS) methodology.
- *contestation* dimension, I will re-purpose the created dataset from WP1 and rely on methods used in public policy.
- *organisation* dimension, I will conduct interviews with EMB commissioners, staff responsible for the electoral process, members of civil society involved in the electoral process and academics.

Finally, to understand how the different environmental, societal, and technological threats influence citizens and when and why they shift their predispositions on participation, contestation and organisation, I will design and embed a series of conjoint experiments.

### WP3

To propose the **specific actions** and policies that enhance election resilience, I will use the information from the interviews and the in-depth case studies, the content analysis from the policy documents (see *Communication*), and the conclusions from the features and effects articles.





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