Helpdesk Research Report: Electoral support interventions

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Query: What literature exists on lessons learned and impacts of electoral support interventions?

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1. Introduction

Electoral support interventions by international actors have increased greatly since the 1990s. They comprise primarily of electoral observation and electoral assistance. Electoral observation should be of an impartial nature based on the principle of non-interference. It involves the gathering of information on electoral processes and making informed judgments about the character and quality of the processes. Electoral assistance, in contrast, is of an advisory nature and refers to technical or material support to electoral processes. While such assistance directly supports national electoral authorities, it does not publically comment on the quality of the electoral process (Bargiacchi et al., 2011; Binder, 2009).

Electoral assistance may be provided during all phases of the electoral circle and can be directed at a wide range of electoral stakeholders (electoral authorities, political parties, civil society, domestic observers, and media) (Binder, 2009). It includes a broad range of activities, such as (see UNDP et al., 2011; Reilly, 2004):

- Assistance to electoral management bodies (EMBs): EMBs are institutions/authorities responsible for the organisation and conduct of electoral processes. Their activities include:

registering of voters, registering of political parties and candidates, conducting polling, and counting and tabulating votes.

- Support in drafting or reforming electoral legal frameworks: activities here cover various issues, such as design and reform of electoral systems, voter eligibility rules, boundary delimitation, and the role of the EMB.
- Civic and voter education: such programmes aim to expand democratic participation, particularly among marginalised groups. Activities include raising awareness of the rights and responsibilities of citizens, including voting rights, and practical information about where, when and how to vote.
- Support to the media sector: the four key areas of media activities that are important to elections are: media as a mechanism for information dissemination to voters; the use of media by political groups to disseminate messages; the right of media to monitor elections and to report freely; and coverage of the EMB by the media and the EMB's regulation of the media.

This helpdesk report provides a brief overview of discussion in the literature on impacts of electoral support and lessons learned. It should be read in conjunction with the report on 'Electoral Assistance Lessons: trends, lessons and best practices on elections and international electoral assistance' (2008). This current report also provides more detailed information on four electoral interventions: assistance to electoral management bodies, electoral observation, civic and voter education, and support to the media. The first two interventions are addressed most frequently in the literature.

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2. Electoral support – general impacts and lessons learned

Limited evidence
While there is a solid set of literature that discusses electoral support and addresses lessons learned, there is little robust evidence that explores the impact of electoral support and of democracy assistance more generally. Chiroro (2010) argues that **there is a need to measure how much electoral assistance has contributed to democracy building**. Hyde (2010: 512) outlines some of the challenges in determining impacts of such assistance: 'Missing from much of the debate over democracy assistance is a more objective method by which scholars and practitioners can evaluate the conditions under which various forms of democracy assistance are effective. […] **Correlations between total dollars spent on democracy assistance and changes in aggregate measures of democracy or political rights are suggestive but somewhat controversial in that they are open to numerous interpretations.** Because democracy promoters and aid donors may target their assistance toward regimes where improvements are most likely (or least likely), it is difficult to separate the consequences of democracy promotion from what would have happened in the country in the absence of the democracy assistance programmes. Therefore, although it is possible to show that average levels of democracy improve when more money is spent on democracy assistance, it is extremely difficult to demonstrate that the change in democracy scores was caused by democracy assistance rather than some other omitted variable. It is even more difficult to use such methods to pinpoint which democracy assistance programmes work as they were intended, which programmes do not have their intended effects, and whether any programmes have unanticipated effects'.

Experts surveyed for this research report also noted the **lack of large scale evaluations of the results of electoral assistance**. There is some research underway, however, including an evaluation of the Electoral Processes Programme at International IDEA and a couple of studies by UNDP on the effects of their electoral programme.

Determining the impact of electoral support in conflict-affected environments is particularly challenging as there are often additional purposes at play in determining whether specific elections have been successful or unsuccessful in achieving immediate and longer term goals. These additional purposes include: validation of peace settlements; establishment of new sovereign authorities; legitimisation of new constitutional arrangements; a symbolic break from the past; popular participation; completion of demobilisation processes. Electoral results need to be evaluated against each of the many relevant dimensions. This can be particularly complex as some aims may be mutually incompatible (Korth, 2010).

<u>General impacts</u>
International electoral support has played an important role in improving the quality of electoral processes (Binder, 2009). **Much of the literature finds that electoral and democracy assistance has been successful in creating institutions (e.g. electoral commissions) and in transferring technical skills** (An, 2006; De Tollenaere, 2006; De Zeeue, 2004). In Cambodia and Rwanda, for example, the technical administration of elections is now very proficient (An, 2008). Tuccinardi et al. (2008: 11) state that there are many cases worldwide where international electoral support was 'crucial to prevent undemocratic forces from performing mass manipulation of the results, to strengthen the legitimacy of emerging democratic groups and parties and to persuade ex-combatants to accept the rules of the democratic game'. In Southern Africa, a recent report on the effects of EU electoral assistance on democracy building finds that such assistance has enhanced the capacity of EMBs, civil society organisations and political parties and contributed to voter education and local observer groups during elections (Chiroro, 2010).

This same body of literature highlights, however, that such assistance has been less successful in achieving the longer term objective of strengthening democratisation. Chiroro's report (2010) on EU electoral assistance in Southern Africa states that electoral assistance comes in 'trickles' for a particular electoral year and has failed to result in the building of robust democratic institutions and broader democratisation. De Zeeuw (2004) finds that while electoral institutions have been created in some cases, they do not necessarily function properly. There has also been inadequate attention to strengthening processes and systems outside of election periods, for example the creation of conditions for genuine political competition (strong civil society organisations, a capable media, acceptance of political competition) (An, 2008; Tuccinardi et al., 2008; De Tollenaere, 2006; De Zeeuw, 2004). Chiroro (2010: 10) states that the perception of electoral assistance in Southern Africa is that it 'has no clear effect on the quality of elections unless there are also effective checks and balances in place and an evolving democratic political culture where the political actors and parties abide by the rules of the game'.

A recent report by DFID also emphasises that while the number of countries holding elections and adopting democratic institutions has been on the rise, this has yet to translate into genuine democratic transitions. 'Some authoritarian regimes have become more secure and confident, increasingly adept at imitating forms of democracy while undermining its substance' (DFID, 2011: 8-9).

Flores and Nooruddin (2011) explore the timing and effects of elections in the aftermath of violent conflict. Although elections are often relied upon in order to usher in democracy and end armed conflict, the impact of elections in such contexts is questionable. The authors argue that politicians will find it difficult to credibly commit to peace and democracy in the absence of solid democratic institutions that ensure just electoral competition, constrain election winners and remove military from politics. In the absence of such institutions, elections can worsen conditions in conflict-affected environments. They find that elections are 'far more beneficial in countries with previous democratic

experience'. In such cases, 'only one year of preparation is needed before elections have a largely positive effect on reducing recurrence [of conflict]. In contrast at least two years of preparation is needed in new democracies and even then, the effect of elections is not nearly as positive as it is in established democracies' (p. 21-22).

<u>Lessons learned and recommendations</u>

The literature points to a variety of lessons learned from international electoral support interventions. The following are some of more commonly cited lessons and recommendations:

Treat elections as a process rather than an event: In the past, the focus of international assistance was usually on the election as an event, without consideration of long-term institution building programmes. The failure of traditional electoral assistance plans to contribute to broader democratisation resulted in a shift by key players (the EC, the UNDP and International IDEA) to a more holistic approach, with a longer-term outlook. Under the 'Electoral Cycle Approach', support is to be provided for a variety of activities undertaken well in advance (e.g. planning exercises) and after (e.g. legal review and auditing) the election day itself. Moreover, this approach emphasises the need to support a wider range of stakeholders, in particular EMBs, political parties, civil society organisations and the media. The premise is that a wide range of legal, technical and organisational aspects must be considered simultaneously (Bargiacchi et al., 2011; DFID, 2011; Tuccinardi et al., 2008; Carothers, 2010).

Link electoral support with other democratic development policies and activities: Electoral assistance has often been treated as a technical exercise and decoupled from broader development and political agendas. This has limited its effect on democratisation. Electoral support interventions could benefit from greater coordination with other activities that are carried out in areas of democratic development, including: 'support for the security sector (for election-related security issues), gender equality (for the equal political participation of women), rule of law (for an enhanced legal framework and the strengthening of election-related judicial bodies), anti-corruption (to enhance the transparency of electoral processes), environment (for the development of environment-friendly electoral processes), education (for civic education and awareness), local elections (empowering communities through decentralisation) and media monitoring (access to unbiased information or at least to a plurality of views)' (Bargiacchi et al., 2011: 9; see also DFID, 2011). Elections and electoral assistance should also be linked to strengthening of civil society more broadly and the development of effective political parties (Chiroro, 2010).

Promote synergies between election observation and electoral assistance: Electoral observation with observers deployed throughout the country on or around election day can have an immediate impact on the running of elections. The longer term impact of observation, however, depends on whether recommendations of observation efforts are effectively adopted in electoral assistance programmes (Bargiacchi et al., 2011). In Southern Africa, while observer missions were perceived as important for the quality of the election, many believe that most of their recommendations are rarely taken into account in planning for future electoral support programmes (Chiroro, 2010). Election observers may be unaware of existing assistance efforts and how their recommendations could feed into a larger process aimed at democratic development; and/or electoral assistance practitioners may fail to incorporate observers' recommendations. There is thus a need to further expand the exchanges between observers and electoral assistance providers and to build capacities through specific training programmes for both groups designed to promote synergies (Bargiacchi et al., 2011).

Take into account the political context of electoral processes: The treatment of electoral assistance as technical has also resulted in the decoupling of such assistance away from political context and political dialogue. This has resulted in situations where assistance has been provided despite a lack of genuine comment to elections by political leaders in the supported countries. It is important to combine assistance programmes with the promotion of diplomatic/political dialogue before, during and after elections (Bargiacchi et al, 2011; DFID, 2011; Carothers, 2010). It is also important to engage in political economy analysis to develop a clear contextual understanding of electoral issues, the significance of different types of elections, power dynamics and regime type in a country. Such analysis would help to identify in what ways the international community can provide effective support for electoral processes and broader democratisation; and the associated risks (Bargiachhi et al., 2011; DFID, 2011; Chiroro, 2010).

Ávila and Orozco-Henríquez (2009) argue that it is also necessary for donors to acknowledge their own political context, which entails the promotion of a particular model of elections and democracy. This has in some cases resulted in 'a serious deficit in the political legitimacy of the governments that are formed as a result of these democratic exercises' (p.6-7). They advocate for better needs assessments of target countries and the creation of a variety of options for electoral assistance based on a joint agenda with local actors.

Prevent election-related conflicts and violence: Election-related violence is a concern, particularly in post-conflict and transitional contexts. Poorly conducted and ill-timed elections have the potential to exacerbate divisions and violence (e.g. Bosnia and Herzegovina); whereas well conducted and well-timed elections can contribute to conflict resolution (e.g. Nepal and Sierra Leone) (DFID, 2011). It is important to engage in comprehensive risk assessments in order to understand the different stages of the electoral cycle in which violence can occur. Corresponding interventions should be implemented that consider the whole electoral cycle and allow for specifically designed response measures to prevent, mitigate and/or resolve election related conflict and violence (Bargiacchi et al., 2011; DFID, 2011).

Such interventions include: 'reviewing the legal framework (e.g. research has shown, that the electoral system may affect the likelihood of violence in terms of how it produces fair results or how it encourages candidates running for office to cooperate, etc.); planning and budgeting (e.g. through the establishment of well-developed security plans and allocation of funds to policing and contingency plans where the risk of violence is high); civic and voter education (e.g. campaigns to raise awareness of the legitimacy of the process); strengthening electoral dispute resolution mechanisms (e.g. to ensure that if aspects of the electoral process should be contested by candidates or citizens in general, there is an established juridical channel through which complaints will be handled to the highest possible standards); and evaluation (e.g. assessing incidences of violence during the most recent electoral process that can feed into the planning phase of subsequent elections)' (Bargiacchi et al., 2011: 13). Attention should also be paid to the development of leadership and conflict management skills for all electoral stakeholders, including staff of EMBs, representatives of parliaments, the media, civil society and security services (Bargiacchi et al., 2011).

Build local capacity: Short-time frames in the operational design of electoral support programmes and the recruitment of experts for only a limited period have sometimes led experts to do the job themselves rather than mentoring and training local partners. This limits the scope of genuine capacity development. Stakeholders themselves also may lack the staff to retain such capacities. The institutional set-up may not be conducive to long term capacity or institutional memory (Bargiacchi et al., 2011). In Mozambique, for example, the knowledge and skills developed for election

administration rested with individuals rather than structures (De Tollenaere, 2006). In recent years, with the adoption of the Electoral Cycle Approach, more resources have been invested in longer term programmes and the development of local capacities at all stages of the electoral cycle. Innovative approaches and projects include participatory on the ground and e-learning programmes for donors, electoral administrators and other stakeholders in electoral processes. They include learning not only technical but also political aspects. Bargiacchi et al., (2011) advocate for greater support for such training; and the development of South-South collaboration programmes that promote dialogue and exchange of experiences.

Improve monitoring and evaluation: There has generally been limited emphasis on the inclusion of adequate monitoring and evaluation mechanisms in electoral assistance processes (UNDP et al., 2011; Tuccinardi et al., 2008). Carothers (2011: 4-5) remarks that: 'Donors have a surprisingly weak understanding of the effectiveness of electoral aid despite the long record of experience in this area'. The neglect of M&E is due in part to the objective difficulty of evaluating progress in target country's democratisation processes. Nonetheless, electoral support programmes would benefit from the implementation of operational auditing, external and internal peer reviews, results-based monitoring and evaluation tools and independent or multi-stakeholder post-election reviews (Tuccinardi et al., 2008). Having benchmarks and indicators in place throughout the electoral cycle could also help to make long-term electoral assistance more effective (Bargiacchi et al., 2011).

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3. Electoral observation

Electoral observation involves the gathering of information on electoral processes and making informed judgments about the character and quality of the processes. It is supposed to be of an impartial nature based on the principle of non-interference (Bargiacchi et al., 2011; Binder, 2009). Every well-established international organisation now has an election observation function attached to its mandate (Dalnorf, 2011). Since the late 1990s, 'the refusal by a government to invite reputable foreign observers has become a conspicuous signal that democratic elections are unlikely to take place' (Hyde, 2010: 511). International election observers are now present at more than four out of every five elections in the developing world. **Despite their widespread presence, the effects of observers on elections are not fully understood** (Hyde, 2010).

The very presence of election observers could improve the quality of the election process during all relevant electoral phases. Their presence on election day at a significant number of polling stations could deter overt acts of electoral fraud or other improper behaviour. In addition, the immediate publication of preliminary findings by observer missions usually attracts much national and international media attention, which can also deter lack of adherence to international standards (Binder, 2009). These kinds of deterrent outcomes are difficult to measure, however (Carothers, cited in Hyde, 2010).

Hyde (2010) seeks to examine whether the presence of election observers has any effect by looking at measurable aspects of election day behaviour, such as number of votes cast and adherence of poll stations to set opening hours. Through random assignment of international election observers, she finds that the presence of observers caused increases in total votes cast for the incumbent (who ultimately lost the election), probably due in part to adherence of polling stations with observers to election day hours. Since voter turnout for the incumbent needed greater mobilisation and thus time, polling stations that did not close early received more votes for the incumbent than non-monitored stations that were more likely to have closed early. Election observers can also impact on voter

perceptions. A poll of voters in Cambodia revealed that the presence of election monitors helped reassure them that elections would be free and fair (Peou, 2004).

Hyde and Kelley (2011) stress that **due to inadequate and delayed funding, many missions arrive too late or are too understaffed to engage in pre- (or post-) election monitoring; and attention is directed solely to election day**. In addition, there is limited guidance in key election observation handbooks concerning non-election day activities, which has the effect of downplaying the importance of non-election day activities in the overall assessment of the election under investigation (Darnolf, 2011). With most of the attention focused on election day, **some governments have moved their fraudulent activities and improper behaviour to the periods prior to (and after) election day**. Beaulieu and Hyde (2009) find that some leaders are increasingly engaging in covert strategic manipulation of elections, for example: tampering with voter registration lists; anonymous intimidation of or violence against opposition candidates; and passing candidate qualification laws that intentionally disqualify popular candidates.

Another benefit of international election observers is their ability to legitimize or delegitimize elections. 'If an election is considered to have been conducted in accordance with international standards, legitimacy will be added to the results, public confidence raised and the political actors are encouraged to accept the outcome of an election'. In contrast, 'if an election is criticised for having violated international standards, the mission's findings will give voice and weight to allegations of national actors who claim that electoral fraud has occurred. For instance, in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004) and also Kyrgyzstan (2005) ODIHR (OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights) found that the elections had fallen short of international standards. Thereby, they strengthened the position of the national opposition and finally contributed to new elections which resulted in a peaceful change of power' (Binder, 2009: 234-235). Further, **the legitimacy accorded by observers can contribute to the allocation of development funds that are conditional upon respect for human rights and democracy** (as occurred after a positive assessment of the 2008 Rwandan elections by the EU mission) (Binder, 2009).

The benefits tied to human rights and democracy can result, however, in incentives for leaders to 'fake' democratisation and to invite international observers in order to gain international credibility, while engaging in covert strategic manipulation of elections. It is important that international observers have the resources and skills to be able to catch these kinds of manipulations (Beaulieu and Hyde, 2009).

Another critique of observer missions is that they may not necessarily be neutral. Kelley (2010) argues that the notion of 'neutral' election observers is a myth. Her study is based on case studies and on the Data on International Election Monitoring project. She finds that there are multiple observer missions in most cases where external monitors observe elections, and that 'in roughly a third of the cases, **monitoring missions disagreed with one another about their overall assessments**' (p. 162). Such conflicting judgments risk 'undermining the influence of the international monitoring effort and can be exploited by local political actors to their advantage' (DFID, 2011: 28). Further, Kelley stresses that election assessments may depend on the degree of autonomy that a monitoring organisation enjoys. **NGOs may have greater independence**, for example, than intergovernmental organisations (IGO), since governments lack formal power over NGOs and can distance themselves from NGO statements. Instead, **nondemocratic IGO members may seek to soften the assessments of elections in other countries in order to avert future criticism of their own elections**. It is important to understand the predispositions of observation missions; and to remember that 'observers are agents of donors, governments, and organizations, whose need for

diplomacy or stability can push monitors away from frankly assessing elections' (Hyde and Kelley, 2011: n.p.).

Darnolf (2011) citicises, for example, the political decision of the EU to send an observation mission to monitor the 2009 election in Afghanistan that donors were fully funding. This was despite security concerns that would limit the ability of the mission to make an informed decision on the quality of elections. He argues that although the election was 'one of the most problematic the international community has ever been involved in', EU observer missions praised the work of the security forces and the election commission (p. 18).

As noted earlier, while the presence of observers around election day can have an immediate impact on the running of elections, the longer term impact of observation depends on whether recommendations of observation efforts are effectively adopted in electoral assistance programmes (Bargiacchi et al., 2011). There have been **limited synergies, however between electoral observation and assistance programmes**.

It is important that support also be provided to the formation of domestic groups with the capacities to observe their own elections. This is essential for democratic development (UNDP et al., 2011). In addition, domestic observation groups will have greater knowledge of the local scene and are more likely to be able to reach areas where international monitors are not (DFID, 2011). Support to domestic observation groups can be linked to support for other civil society initiatives, such as civic and voter education (UNDP et al., 2011).

4. Electoral management bodies

Electoral management bodies (EMBs) are often the main recipients of electoral assistance. They are in most countries the authorities mandated to organise and conduct electoral processes. They usually manage at least one (but usually more of the following activities): registering of voters, registering of political parties and candidates, conducting polling, counting and tabulating votes (UNDP et al., 2011). EMBs are designed to be independent of the executive and thus independent from political interference. This lends credibility to the electoral process (Kambale, 2011; Reilly, 2004).

Given their important role, **electoral assistance to EMBs can contribute to significant improvements to various key components of the electoral process.** In particular, assistance aimed at strengthening the physical infrastructure of EMBs and at capacity building of core EMB staff have the **potential to contribute positively to democratic development** (Darnolf, 2011). In Bangladesh, electoral support was provided to develop the capacity of the Election Commission, by improving management capacity, the voter registration system, and the electoral database. This was seen as important not only for immediate electoral processes but also as an important component of the government's efforts to strengthen the democratic process, such that all future elections could be conducted in a free and fair manner that maximises full citizen participation (Ponzio, n.d.: 217). Darnolf (2011) cautions, however, that improvements may be delayed, as electoral management bodies are often large national institutions that are 'deeply steeped in the country's civil service culture' (Darnolf, 2011: 5).

Darnolf (2011) also finds that **support to EMBs has not been successful in achieving sustainable outcomes**. Capacity-building has often been 'downgraded to not much more than "on-the-job-training" for national EMB staff while internationals become implementers instead of advisors' (p. 8).

In addition, while donors have funded voter registration programmes based on laptops, digital cameras, fingerprint-scanners and the like, this has not been coupled with an operational plan and inventory system for proper storage and service purchased equipment. As such, equipment is often lost or damaged.

A study on EMBs in West Africa finds that **successful performance of EMBs and their contribution to a higher level of citizen participation depends on more than formal guarantees of independence and adequate resources**. Whether they actually operate with independence and face up to executive interference is a key challenge. Additional challenges to electoral management include: 'the creation and maintenance of a credible electoral roll, the high cost of elections, the lack of powers to sanction misconduct, and the low level of involvement of EMBs in the management of electoral disputes' (Kambale, 2011, 8).

5. Civic and voter education

Voter and civic education programmes are another important area of electoral assistance. The main goal of such programmes is to expand democratic participation, particularly among marginalised and under-represented segments of society. Activities include raising awareness of the rights and responsibilities of citizens, including voting rights, and practical information about where, when and how to vote (Reilly, 2004; UNDP et al., 2011).

Civic and voter education is often conducted by different types of civil society organisations (international, national and local level organisations). They require long-term support that spans the entire electoral cycle (DFID, 2011). Successful assistance programmes tend to encourage the formation of NGO umbrella groups for civic and voter education activities to balance support provided to the national EMB (Tuccinardi et al., 2008).

Effective civic and voter education programmes, both pre- and post- election can help to expand democratic participation. An impact assessment of election assistance to Palestinian civil society organisations to engage in voter education sessions found that the sessions contributed to informed voters and a high voter turnout. This included the successful targeting of women and marginalised or otherwise disadvantaged voters (Reeves, 2006). The UNDP's support to post-election civic education strategies and awareness-rising programmes in Cambodia, Bangladesh, Indonesia and Kyrgyzstan, for example, encouraged people to 'influence governing institutions, defend their rights by holding representatives and government officials accountable, and contribute to society through civic actions. On the other hand, several UNDP civic and voter education programmes failed to raise people's consciousness by providing inappropriate and even irrelevant information to citizens' (Ponzio, n.d.: 218).

6. Media

There are four aspects of media activities that require attention in relation to elections: media as a mechanism for information dissemination to voters; the use of media by political groups to disseminate messages; the right of media to monitor elections and to report freely; and coverage of the EMB by the media and the EMB's regulation of the media (UNDP et al., 2011). **Support to the media activities is crucial in building trust in the electoral process** and in promoting understanding of the ongoing publicity needs of EMBs and other electoral actors (Tuccinardi et al., 2008). **It can also be crucial in informing voters and facilitating discussion and debate**; for example, 'the international community's Radio OKAPI platform has been critical for informed

discussion in the DRC's political space. Likewise, the BBC World Service Trust Sanglap programme in Bangladesh is estimated to have reached 18- 21 million citizens in the pre-election debates' (DFID, 2011: 24).

Support to training for the media on the electoral cycle is, however, often lacking from electoral assistance programmes (Tuccinardi et al., 2008). Key findings from a recent workshop conducted by BBC World Service Trust and International IDEA on support to the media in electoral processes found that **current policies regarding media support during elections are characterised by 'a lack of strategy and coordination**, a predominance of ad hoc and short-term support, and inadequate lesson learning across elections, organisations and countries' (p. 5). There were some positive examples, however, and discussion **about new opportunities, particularly through social media**. Such opportunities could provide fresh attempts to ensure elections are more accountable and rooted in public debate – and ultimately more likely to lead to sustainable political settlement. They also require adjustments to training approaches for EMBs, journalists and citizens. More generally, media need to be equipped with the skills and knowledge to understand, contextualize and report on official results as they are announced.

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