



Upcoming Elections in the Western Hemisphere: Implications for U.S. Policy

Testimony of Michael D. Svetlik

Vice President, Programs, International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES)

House Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere

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Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Sires, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee: on behalf of the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), I deeply appreciate this opportunity to testify on the upcoming elections in the Western Hemisphere and challenges to democracy in the region.

As a global leader in democracy promotion, IFES advances good governance and democratic rights by providing technical assistance to election officials; empowering the underrepresented to participate in the political process; and applying field-based research to improve every phase of the electoral cycle. For 30 years, IFES has worked in over 145 countries to ensure there is a vote for every voice.

With funding from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the U.S. Department of State, and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), IFES has supported decades of credible electoral processes across the region. In many countries, IFES works as part of the Consortium for Elections and Political Process Strengthening (CEPPS), with the International Republican Institute and the National Democratic Institute, under USAID's Global Elections and Political Transitions mechanism to deliver comprehensive democracy, human rights and governance (DRG) programming.

My testimony addresses challenges and opportunities in Latin America's 2018 electoral landscape, with a focus on regional trends, Mexico's July general elections, and recommendations for the United States Government (USG) and U.S. Congress. In recent years, and with few, notable exceptions, Latin America has made considerable progress in consolidating democracy and holding credible elections. Still, there is work to be done, particularly regarding such rapidly evolving issues as cybersecurity and external influence, and to encourage horizontal cooperation through south-south and peer-to-peer international exchanges. The U.S. should take a particularly close look at Mexico and Brazil's elections, which embody a shift from the left-right dichotomy to a popular reaction against corruption.

Thanks to years of investments and relationship building, USG is positioned to partner with Latin America to address such pervasive challenges such as corruption, ineffective leadership and inequality. In line with global trends, citizens are increasingly demanding higher quality elections that uphold transparency, social inclusion, and accountability. The fact that Latin America is facing increasingly complex and nuanced challenges is a direct reflection of the sophistication of its electoral systems.

The Western Hemisphere's 2018 Election Super-cycle

In 2018, almost 350 million Latin Americans – over half of the hemisphere's population – will vote in presidential elections,¹ and many more will participate in legislative elections. A seven-country electoral frenzy will kick off on February 4 (with general elections in Costa Rica) and end in December (with possible presidential elections in Venezuela):

- **February:** Costa Rican general elections²
- **March:** Legislative elections in El Salvador and Colombia
- **April:** Costa Rican presidential run-off and Paraguay's general elections; Cuban legislative elections and presidential transition of power
- **May:** Colombian presidential election and presidential run-off
- **July:** Mexican presidential and legislative elections
- **October:** Brazilian presidential and legislative elections, as well as a presidential run-off
- **December:** Possible Venezuelan presidential election

Stable Democracies and Credible Elections Promote U.S. Interests

Stable democracies make for better trading partners, provide new market opportunities, improve global health outcomes, and promote economic freedom and regional security. As stated in the President's December 2017 National Security Strategy:³

Stable, friendly, and prosperous states in the Western Hemisphere enhance our security and benefit our economy. Democratic states connected by shared values and economic interests will reduce the violence, drug trafficking, and illegal immigration that threaten our common security, and will limit opportunities for adversaries to operate from areas of close proximity to us.

For example, USAID support has enabled IFES to provide technical assistance to Guatemala over its two most recent election cycles, and the Guatemalan election management body (EMB), the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE), continues to welcome IFES support as it prepares for the 2019 general elections. With USG and IFES assistance, Guatemala has continued to strengthen and reform its electoral framework, particularly the democratic and judicial institutions that have become reliable partners in the international fight against corruption, narcotics and human migration.

¹ <https://amp-theguardian-com.cdn.ampproject.org/c/s/amp.theguardian.com/world/2017/dec/28/latin-america-elections-2018-corruption>

² <https://www.as-coa.org/articles/timeline-2017-and-2018-elections-latin-america>

³ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>

Electoral Assistance to Latin America Has Paid Dividends

Electoral assistance is a sound investment that pays long-term, tangible dividends – in its FY18 State and Foreign Operations bill, the House mandated that the administration spend no less than \$2.3 billion on democracy programs. This is less than .05 percent of the House-passed International Affairs Budget, which represents less than one percent of the overall budget. Electoral assistance programs themselves are a drop in the foreign assistance budget. For example, IFES' component of the Guatemala “Electoral Governance and Reforms Program Activity” – which seeks to advance electoral reforms and build the capacity of civil society organizations (CSOs) (particularly disabled persons’ organizations [DPOs]) – operates at a budget of \$2.1 million over three years.

After a decade of generally increasing aid levels, USG assistance to Latin America decreased each year between FY2010 and FY2014 (aid increased slightly in FYs 2015 and 2016). This decline was “partially the result of reductions to the overall U.S. foreign assistance budget.” However, it is also because investments in aid – particularly electoral assistance – have paid dividends: Electoral democracy has been consolidated in many countries; regular elections are the norm, with few exceptions (most glaringly, Venezuela); and countries such as Panama have even graduated from election assistance. This has allowed USG assistance to the region, as a proportion of total foreign assistance, to drop from nine percent in FY2005 to six percent in FY2015. Such Latin American countries as Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico and Uruguay now provide foreign assistance to other countries.⁴ This means our Latin American partners are stronger allies, and USG assistance can now be more targeted and impactful.

Regional Trends: Advanced Challenges Could Cause Backsliding

In general, Latin America has made considerable progress over the past three decades to consolidate democracy and build resilient democratic institutions. Competitive elections that are viewed as credible by voters and contestants alike are the norm. Even within this context, there remain several trends that highlight the need to remain vigilant as democracy continues to develop and evolve across the region.

Money and Politics

Money is an essential ingredient of politics and political campaigns, allowing parties and candidates to deliver their message to voters. Yet unequal distribution of campaign funds creates a skewed playing field, giving individuals and social groups with the economic resources an unfair advantage in elections and exaggerating their influence over candidates and parties. Latin America is a region characterized by inequality, which gives rise to electoral campaigns in which funding disparities are stark. In addition, the misuse of state resources can be a major corruptive force in the electoral process, as it introduces or exacerbates power inequalities and gives unfair electoral advantage to incumbents.

Recent cases of corruption – including the wrongful use of public funds and personal enrichment through government contracts like the notorious Odebrecht bribery case, among others – have left Latin Americans thirsty for change, and many incumbent politicians wary of election results. Latin America is

⁴ <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R44647.pdf>

also a region where organized crime has a major presence, transacts billions of dollars each year in illicit business and has the potential to corrupt democratic institutions.

Campaign finance regulation is crucial to the preservation of democracy in the region. In Brazil, the Electoral Tribunal is trying to produce new resolutions to address challenges around money in elections that is not fully controlled (Brazilian interlocutors have estimated that three percent of election campaign funding comes from public funds, two percent donations from individuals, and the rest from businesses). There is a high presence of organized criminal groups in municipal elections in particular – many elected mayors have received funds from drug trafficking and organized crime. Furthermore, Brazilian evangelical organizations can collect money that is not tracked through official systems.

Low Institutional Credibility and Disillusionment with Democracy

Strong institutions are the backbone of durable and credible democracies and elections. In spite of progress made in recent decades, some regional electoral bodies have been crippled by a loss of institutional credibility contributing to a disillusionment with democracy. In Mexico, support for democracy declined by 10 percent in one year, down to 58 percent. In 2015, Mexican voters had the lowest satisfaction with democracy in all of Latin America, and less than half of citizens in the region expressed a belief that democracy is the best form of government.⁵ Many democratic institutions in the region are trying to address this. For example, the Federal Electoral Court of the Judicial Authority of Mexico (TEPJF) is working to strengthen the role of the courts in ensuring the constitutionality of government actions in a transparent way.

However, disillusionment continues to be exploited by those that benefit from a lack of public trust – losing candidates and parties, media companies, foreign actors, patronage networks, political consultants and technology providers. Venezuela’s National Elections Council (CNE), for instance, has morphed into a tentacle of the ruling party and government. It does not uphold the values of independence and integrity for which it was created. The July 30, 2017 election for a new Constituent Assembly was rife with fraud and undemocratic practices and IFES – along with many others – condemned the vote. Indeed, Smartmatic, the company that provided the voting system software, released a statement saying there was no doubt that the results were manipulated.⁶ Voters were not even given the option of rejecting the plan to create the Constituent Assembly, which will have the power to dismiss any branch of government – including the opposition-controlled legislature – and no major election monitoring missions were allowed to observe the process.

Furthermore, last November’s elections in Honduras also showed a dramatic step back in the credibility of the electoral authority. The election process was tarnished by many legal and technical irregularities, which has cast a damaging cloud of doubt over the institution.

⁵ <http://www.ifes.org/news/tackling-emerging-global-challenges-mexicos-2018-elections-cybersecurity-disillusionment-and>

⁶ <http://www.ifes.org/news/ifes-statement-crisis-venezuela>

The Rise of Independent Candidates: Why Voters are Turning Away from Weakened Parties

Strong party systems have long been a feature of democracy in Latin America, given their important role in providing citizens a means to participate and as a means to organize government. In recent years, unaffiliated or independent candidates have continued to multiply with each election cycle. This is due not only to the corruption that weakens and disqualifies traditional political players, but also an evident lack of leadership. This opens the doors to fresh, new and potentially bad actors, and has cultured a phenomenon in which traditional politicians work to be seen as outsiders. In Brazil, former military officer and presidential candidate Jair Bolsonaro is gaining support with an extreme right – but clear and direct – message against the traditional political class. In Colombia, perennial presidential candidate Sergio Fajardo has created a new political movement to serve as a platform for his candidacy, while in Mexico, Margarita Zavala recently resigned from the conservative National Action Party (PAN) party to run as an independent in the July federal elections.

The rise of independent candidates has a significant impact on the members of marginalized groups who want to run for office. Often, it can be challenging for women and members of other marginalized groups to garner support or receive a nomination from their parties, as they are often perceived as less electable than men (even though evidence does not support this). Therefore, they may turn to independent candidacy. While this allows them to be free from any certain policy agenda, independent candidates have no natural support base from parties, must procure all of their own funding, and often find it more difficult to win than party candidates. These findings would have implications for our technical assistance on how electoral bodies and parties can promote and increase the political participation of marginalized groups.

Elections on Trial: The Continuing Need for Strong, Independent Electoral Courts

As elections worldwide become more litigious, there is rising pressure on electoral tribunals and courts to resolve politically charged disputes and avoid the destabilization of political transitions. Latin America's electoral justice system (except for instances such as Venezuela) is largely rising to this challenge. The electoral courts have effectively advocated for the adoption of good practices and rules, from the use of new technologies at the service of greater transparency in elections, to the endeavor to assure equity in electoral contests. Latin America is also currently the only region with an established network of election arbiters, meeting annually to discuss specific election dispute resolution (EDR) issues, drawing directly from election cases in their own jurisdiction.

However, electoral justice is an area that will continue to face challenges and will only become more prominent as litigants turn to the courts to try and achieve what they could not accomplish at the polls. Mexico's TEPJF may hear up to 50,000 cases in 2018 (in comparison, the tribunal heard 16,000 cases in 2017). The TEPJF will only have 15 days to rule on these cases, requiring rigorous effort to ensure a process that is both efficient and fair. However, there are different funding levels for local courts across the country, with some receiving adequate funding and others receiving funding so insufficient that they do not even have an office. A lack of adequate funding can affect a local court's ability to effectively manage cases.

Although political aspirants and supporters may be involved in violence, bribery, hate speech and intimidation, few offenders are held to account, despite multiple punitive mechanisms that might exist across different institutions. This can make such offenses viable tactics both in campaigning and in post-

election agitation. For the sake of public confidence in rule of law and as an alternative to violence, it is imperative that election offenses do not go unpunished. However, prosecution is often complicated by threats and intimidation against individual judges, prosecutors and commissioners.

To mitigate these challenges, IFES is partnering with the TEPJF to pilot regional electoral jurisprudence networks to facilitate peer-to-peer knowledge exchange and professional support among election arbiters; develop a compendium of electoral case law to enhance access to information on precedents and fact patterns for arbiters; and develop a comparative research paper on case management systems to identify key principles for strengthening transparency and credibility in the management and disposition of election cases. This joint effort will draw extensively from the experience of electoral tribunals in the region.

Cybersecurity and Social Media: Adapting to a Fluid Landscape

Security and trust are key elements to any election. Throughout Latin America's 2018 super-cycle, voters must have confidence that final election results are also the correct ones.

EMBs must have in place systems, networks and equipment with appropriate security mechanisms. Security practices must prevent external interference and ensure confidentiality and data integrity. Every point of the electoral cycle – pre-election, post-election and Election Day – carries the potential for bad actors to sow enough distrust for the public to reject legitimate results: "Denial of Service" attacks, exploitation of software vulnerabilities, hacking, and spear phishing present just a few possible risks.

A decisive factor in trust-building is the development of tamper-proof technological platforms to transmit vote tallies. Results transmission is both the climax and most vulnerable point of the electoral process. Three power blackouts occurred during Honduras' November 2017 vote counting process; this accentuates the importance of strengthening cybersecurity at all levels, but particularly in the area of results transmission.

Social media has transformed elections worldwide. For citizens, social media is a means of grassroots advocacy, a place to join a cause and help it grow. For politicians, it is a new channel of communication to share their vision and platform. However, social media has become weaponized, particularly with the increased use of disinformation. Its great strength is also its weakness: There is no information "middle man," and barriers between information givers and receivers have melted away. Internet anonymity leads to impunity, which in politics and elections can be particularly harmful and damaging.

Internet use has grown dramatically in Latin America. Peru, for example, is the global leader in internet proliferation, surpassing even the United States and Mexico. Argentina and Brazil lead the world in engagement on social networks. In sum, around 80 percent of internet users in Latin America access social media, which shows the potential impact of disinformation. EMBs in the region have had to adapt to these realities and are developing not only specialized units to regulate social media impact in election administration (in Argentina, the government took serious steps to avoid external disinformation during last year's legislative elections), but are also promoting legislation to address formally these situations.

Fostering Inclusive Democracies: Ensuring all Groups are Active Participants

Inclusive and representative democracies provide for the full and active participation of all citizens irrespective of race, gender, religion, ethnicity or sexual identity. In Latin America, the proportion of women and Afro-descendant, indigenous, LGBT, and persons with disabilities in politics is far less than these groups' share of the general population. The region has made significant advances, but more work is needed to achieve fully representative governance, meaningful and equal participation of women and men in all spheres of political, economic and social life.

To date, 16 of the 33 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean have adopted gender quota laws. Many credit this system for the fact that 25 percent to 50 percent of national legislatures in Latin American countries are female. And seven Latin American countries – Bolivia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, and Panama – have traded quotas for parity, mandating that parties run gender-balanced candidate lists. Parity laws in several countries extend these gender-balance requirements to the executive and the judicial branches. The evolution of such gender quota and parity laws offers reasons for optimism.

In Bolivia, indigenous people have special protections under the constitution, and the country has representative democracy, direct democracy (e.g., referendum), and community-based democracy, enforced by indigenous populations. Oftentimes, indigenous people are not “elected,” per se, but chosen by their own community and rules. This system represents a democracy with different levels and types, not just election by a vote. Mexico has adopted special protocols to resolve electoral disputes with a particular gender or indigenous perspective.

Mexico's July 2018 Elections: A Bellwether of Latin America's Progress and Challenges

Mexico's July 2018 elections are unprecedented in their magnitude and significance. Mexico will hold presidential, legislative, senatorial, gubernatorial (in nine states) elections, and elect the Head of Government of the Capital. Given this complexity, electoral democracy in Mexico is both an example of progress made to date and of work that remains to be done to improve the capacity and performance of electoral bodies, to strengthen citizen voices, and to mobilize voters. Within the context of widespread violence, corruption, and a strong influence of social media, the largest electoral date in the history of Mexico may also be an opportunity to revive Mexican anti-American sentiment and harm U.S.-Mexico relations.

The Capacity and Performance of Mexico's Electoral Bodies

The National Electoral Institute (INE) and the TEPJF are the cornerstones of the Mexican electoral ecosystem. The INE was founded on the principles of improving citizen participation, promoting peaceful and regular elections, and corroborating the legitimacy of election outcomes. It is responsible for organizing and overseeing federal elections, and for collaborating with sub-national electoral bodies to conduct local elections. To avoid politicization in INE, electoral claims are channeled through, and reviewed by, the TEPJF. The TEPJF is a permanent judicial body dedicated to the resolution of electoral cases and consists of 32 state-level tribunals, five regional tribunals and the Superior Court, which shares constitutional authority on par with the Mexican Supreme Court.

The heart of the capacity and performance of INE is found in its professional staff. The recruitment, selection, training, and evaluation of staff to provide electoral services, especially in its fundamental areas, is critical to the competent preparation and organization of elections. This is also true for the TEPJF's professional staff.

The three types of challenges these electoral authorities face are: 1) Coordination between national and local electoral authorities; 2) political conflict; and 3) the electorate's apathy. The INE must ensure voting procedures are respected and judiciously oversee the use of public spending in campaign and the access media slots. The INE must also respond swiftly to a candidate's inability or unwillingness to accept and publicly acknowledge his or her defeat in a close and contentious vote. This was an issue most recently in the 2017 local elections Coahuila, Mexico State, and Nayarit, as well as during the presidential election of 2006, when the runner-up candidate refused to accept the official results and contributed to social unrest, affecting the credibility of the electoral authority.

Again, the TEPJF's challenge will be the significant increase in the number of cases that is likely to hear. It should be underlined that as of today, the TEPJF is being flooded with complaints from members of different political parties under the allegation that they have not been treated fairly (in the selection process for candidacy).

Cybersecurity and Outside Influence in Mexico

In recent months, there has been some speculation in the United States that the 2018 elections can be a strategic target to alter geopolitical balance. Mexico, like most countries, does not have legislation regulating cybersecurity and elections. As concerns about election technology and cybersecurity grow, countries are reverting to trusted processes and strengthening manual processes that are more resistant to manipulation and enjoy a large degree of public trust and public understanding. Furthermore, as EDR becomes an increasingly visible and contentious tool for challenging election results, candidates and parties in multiple countries are employing a tactic of eroding public trust in the electoral process by insinuating fraud ahead of elections.

It is anticipated that the TEPJF will see an increasing number of cases regarding disinformation through social media, potentially generating jurisprudence that responds to this gap in the law. This puts the TEPJF in a potentially delicate position, as it is called upon to balance issues of electoral integrity with freedom of expression and freedom of commerce, while also remaining within its constitutional mandate.

Civil Society Engagement

Never in the history of Mexico have citizens had so much power in their hands to share information, organize social movements, and develop policy reform platforms that enhance accountability and deter the abuse of power. A clear pattern in Latin America is that while CSOs have enthusiasm and energy, they often lack the technical competence necessary to meaningfully advance policy reforms. This is especially true in Mexico, where there is increased apathy among youth and women, who are less likely to engage in politics and actively participate in electoral processes.

A challenge faced by the electoral bodies in Mexico will be to mobilize voters, in and outside of the country. There is a consistent decline of the participation rate including for presidential election (less than 60% of the electorate). As for the participation of the Mexicans living abroad (90% in the U.S.), more than 10 million have the right to vote, but it is anticipated that no more than 300,000 will do so.

Recommendations: Electoral Assistance in the Western Hemisphere

Proactive, targeted and sustained donor investment can promote free and fair political processes and help consolidate democratic norms. With further investments from international partners, Latin America can continue to strengthen political institutions, expand access, enhance transparency, and deepen credibility.

IFES recommends that the U.S. Congress, USAID, and other international donors commit to supporting the following areas, each of which strengthen credible political processes:

Robust Funding for Electoral Assistance

On behalf of IFES and the democracy and governance implementers community, we thank the Congress – and particularly this Subcommittee – for its continued support of DRG in even the most challenging budget environments. We ask that the U.S. Congress continue its support for robust levels of democracy assistance, and encourage you to leverage your oversight role in ensuring appropriated funds are obligated and spent.

Long-term Support Across the Electoral Cycle

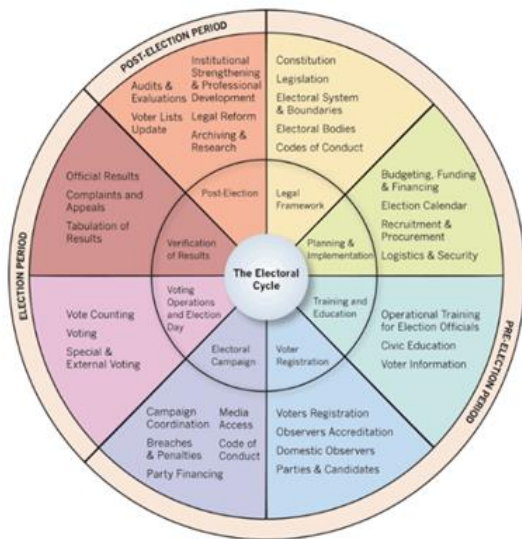


Figure 1. The Electoral Cycle, International IDEA (Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance)

Election day is not an isolated event. The political processes and operational demands that both precede and follow an election are interdependent, and a failure or shortcoming at a single point may have significant repercussions at multiple stages of the cycle (see Figure 1). Moreover, if electoral shortcomings accumulate and cause citizens to lose faith in the credibility of the election results, broader development objectives may also suffer. It is paramount for international donors to recognize the value of full electoral cycle support in order to proactively invest resources in advance of elections and at sufficient levels to engage local partners in a consistent fashion – and with sufficient time to help them with their urgent and longer-term needs. This does not imply huge investments in many stable countries, but rather sustained capacity building, technical assistance, and accompaniment.

Peer-to-peer Exchanges

Recent elections, particularly in Honduras, have illustrated the urgent need for the promotion and exchange of international best electoral practices, particularly in the areas of cybersecurity, results transmission and EDR. The development of local expertise via peer-to-peer learning and exchanges promotes the independence of EMBs from internal and external influence. IFES recommends the implementation of USG programming to bring polling workers, civil society representatives, members of the judiciary, and others who participate in the organization and administration of an election in a foreign

country to the United States to study electoral procedures in the United States for educational purposes, and vice versa.

The regional and global networking among election professionals is one of the major ways in which elections transcend national borders. These associations or communities of practice place a high level of importance on the development of professional electoral officials with high integrity, a strong sense of public service, knowledge, and experience of electoral processes, and a commitment to democratic elections.

Promotion of Horizontal Cooperation

In the Western Hemisphere, IFES encourages south-south dialogue and collaboration between and among countries in the region to accelerate development, generate local solutions through collective action, contribute to sustainability, and help ensure regional stability. IFES has enjoyed a close working relationship with the INE (formerly IFE) since 1993 and currently holds active memorandum of understanding with both institutions allowing IFES to accompany the Mexican EMBs during the upcoming electoral process.

Empowering Civil Society to Foster Citizen Oversight of Electoral Processes

Civil society plays an important role in the electoral cycle – not only for carrying out civic and voter education activities, but also for holding governments and electoral institutions accountable. Through our work with CSOs, IFES empowers citizens to drive democratic change and socioeconomic development. Part of this process includes educating citizens about their rights and responsibilities in a democratic society, as well as the role of the government in service delivery across sectors. Elections in particular are an opportunity for citizens to engage in their political systems. Through civic and voter education, CSOs can reach women, youth, and other vulnerable populations to encourage informed participation in elections. To ensure that elected leaders are responsive to constituent needs, CSOs can work with citizens to make connections between political party platforms and their own priorities and create space for more constructive multi-stakeholder dialogues. With a stronger understanding of government planning and spending, citizens will also be better prepared to consolidate their priorities, mobilize around them, and advocate for greater government accountability to public interests.

Focus on Inclusion: Youth, Women, Persons with Disabilities and Indigenous Populations

Effective electoral assistance empowers traditionally marginalized groups such as youth, women, persons with disabilities, and indigenous persons to gain equal access to public institutions, win economic and political self-determination, and fully realize their individual rights. Inclusion and empowerment activities strengthen the credibility and stability of democracies more broadly, as democratic institutions flourish when all groups of society are represented.

IFES has a proven track record in the Western Hemisphere of empowering underrepresented groups to participate in the electoral process:

- **Haiti:** In 2016 and 2017, IFES promoted the secure and equal participation of women in national and local elections by engaging to prevent violence against women in elections (VAWIE). Actions

included conducting a targeted VAWIE assessment, raising awareness and offering resources to women candidates, including a call-in line and referral service for victims. IFES also provided a training for “Male Allies for Leadership Equality (MALE)” to raise awareness of gender-based violence (GBV) and build a network of allies to stand against GBV and worked with the electoral management body and the Ministry of Women Affairs on the development of a National Gender Strategy for 2015-2020.

- **Honduras:** In 2012 and 2013, IFES supported the Honduran electoral commission’s voter education efforts through the coordination of mobile voter education units and kiosks. IFES also partnered with eight CSOs whose activities empowered voters with information about the electoral process. These organizations worked at the community level, allowing IFES to reach marginalized, indigenous and Garifuna (Afro-descendant) communities, as well as youth. The voter education activities included town hall community meetings and fairs in Lenka and Chorti communities. Visual (pictorial) materials were also distributed to help voters with low literacy skills understand these processes.
- **Guatemala:** In 2011, Guatemalans went to the polls to elect the president and vice president, members of congress at the national and district levels, mayors, and representatives to the Central American Parliament. The TSE focused many of its efforts on increasing voter registration. IFES supported the TSE’s efforts to include marginalized populations such as youth, women, people with disabilities and indigenous populations by conducting targeted civic education campaigns. IFES ensured messaging reflected intersectional identities such as indigenous people with disabilities and young women. IFES also supported the TSE in developing inclusive poll worker training materials and for the first time ever, poll workers were trained on basic sign language so deaf voters felt more welcome at the polls. IFES supported an initiative to translate public service announcements encouraging people to register to vote into four of the main Mayan languages (Quiche, Quekchi, Mam and Laqchiquel) in the country. Similar efforts were replicated for the 2015 elections.
- **Dominican Republic:** Ahead of the 2012 presidential election in the Dominican Republic, IFES collaborated with the La Junta Central Electoral (JCE), political parties, local DPOs and election observation groups to encourage deeper engagement in political life by citizens with disabilities. This included training people with disabilities to serve as election observers and facilitating the development of a disability rights policy platform. These successful efforts have paved the way for a more nuanced approach to building the capacities of persons with disabilities who have been exceptionally marginalized from political processes, youth with disabilities, especially young women. IFES has recently been awarded a grant from USAID’s Disability Fund to implement the “Promoting Political Leadership of Youth with Disabilities” project. This initiative will cultivate the leadership talents of youth with disabilities to engage in the political process in leadership roles, such as election officials and candidates, as well as build the capacities of ADIDE, a network of local DPOs, to implement programs.

IFES recommends the continuation of similar USG programming, as well as electoral assistance that supports inclusive electoral laws and policies; prevention of and protection against violence against women in elections and politics; the equal opportunity recruitment and employment conditions for electoral administrators and poll workers as well as recruitment and resourcing for candidates; increased dialogue with DPOs and women-, youth- and indigenous-led CSOs; targeted voter outreach; safe and accessible polling stations, campaign trails and political workplaces; access for all persons to democratic processes (i.e., the necessary ID documents for voting); and leadership training. IFES recommends programs that proactively focus on inclusion of marginalized groups, with a focus on the ways that intersectional identities impact participation in political life.

Conclusion: Renewing Our Commitment to Latin American Democracy

The time is now to reinvest Latin American democracy. Although the 2018 super-cycle is critical, the United States should not turn away afterwards; we must work with our partners to assess lessons learned and next steps to strengthen institutions such as EMBs, regulatory bodies, the judiciary, parliament and civil society. The key to effective electoral assistance is sustained support to make electoral events more legitimate and responsive, rather than destabilizing and a flashpoint for violence.

Democratic governance is forever a work in progress. A renewed commitment to supporting the people of Latin America in their pursuit of credible, inclusive, transparent and responsive democracies will in turn support American interests at home and abroad.

Mr. Chairman, thank you again for this opportunity to testify. On behalf of IFES, we are honored to partner with the U.S. Government and Congress, international aid organizations, our CEPPS partners, and of course, the citizens of Latin America in support of a more democratic and prosperous region.



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