

Public health considerations for elections and related activities in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic

Interim guidance
10 December 2020



Background

Mass gatherings entailing the presence of large numbers of individuals in a given venue at the same time have the potential to amplify the spread of SARS-CoV-2, the virus responsible for COVID-19 (1); many events, including those implemented in conjunction with elections, may involve such gatherings, and therefore be associated with a risk.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, a large number of countries, territories and areas have been confronted with how elections and related activities could be carried out while adopting safety measures aimed at decreasing risk of transmission of SARS-CoV-2, thus ensuring protection of voters, electoral staff and other relevant stakeholders and workers.

Although in some contexts alternative options may exist that can make elections and related activities largely remote events, it is expected that many countries and territories will still rely on in-person operations for electoral processes taking place during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Audience and purpose

This guidance note is directed to national and local health authorities advising relevant bodies involved in electoral processes. Its purpose is to provide details on the approach that should be followed to decrease risk of transmission of SARS-CoV-2 in conjunction with in-person events related to elections and associated activities.

The recommendations included in this document are derived from those formulated by WHO for mass gatherings organized in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (1).

Decision-making process

Decisions related to safety aspects of in-person events associated with elections held in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic should be taken deliberately and transparently. As in the case of any mass gatherings, WHO recommends that the decision-making process should rely on a risk-based approach, entailing three steps: *risk evaluation*, *risk mitigation* and *risk communication* (1). The outcome should be an informed decision on the arrangements that are best placed to promote the safety of the planned activities, based on the specific context in which the electoral process takes place.

Risk evaluation

The context in which elections and related activities will take place should be assessed with the aim of identifying and quantifying possible risks associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and weighing the capacity of the relevant authorities and organizers to decrease such risks through the implementation of precautionary measures. Such an evaluation should assess risks at the time of the decision-making process and, to the extent possible, take into account the projected risks at the time of the elections. Factors to consider may include:

- COVID-19 transmission scenario¹ prevalent in the country or area where the elections are planned (2)
- Public health and social measures (PHSMs) adopted by the relevant authorities (3,4)
- Characteristics of the planned events (venue, duration, etc.)
- Number and characteristics of prospective participants and the expected interactions and contacts among them
- Capacity of the health system to manage a potential surge of COVID-19 cases in conjunction with or as a consequence of election-related activities (1)

¹ WHO has identified four transmission scenarios of increasing intensity and risk: no reported cases (including both zero transmission and the absence of detected and reported cases); sporadic cases (one or more cases, imported or locally-acquired); clusters of cases (most cases of local transmission linked to chains of transmission); community transmission (outbreaks with the inability to relate confirmed cases through chains of transmission). The community transmission (CT) classification is divided into four levels, from low incidence (CT1) to very high incidence (CT4). Consequently, there are seven categories in total.

Precautionary measures

The following precautionary measures aim at decreasing the risk of transmission of SARS-CoV-2; although primarily applicable to polling places, they can be considered for any in-person activities that are held in the context of an election (see below: “Other in-person activities linked with the electoral process”). Based on national or local specificities, the proposed precautionary measures may be further adapted, while additional ones may be envisaged.

General advice

The following basic preventive measures, if thoroughly applied, can significantly reduce the chances of being infected with or spreading COVID-19. They should be observed by anyone, at any time and in all circumstances (1).

Area	Considerations
Basic preventive measures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physical distancing: maintain a distance of at least one metre (3.3. feet) between any two individuals • Respiratory/cough etiquette: cover your mouth and nose with your bent elbow or a tissue when coughing or sneezing; avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth • Hand hygiene practice: regularly and thoroughly wash hands with soap and water (or a liquid soap solution), or clean them with a hand sanitizer (60-80% alcohol)

Precautionary measures related to venues

Adaptation of venues should be implemented while ensuring that precautionary measures can be implemented without interfering with the planned electoral operations and processes (1).

Area	Considerations
Space (1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure that the designated locations are sufficiently large to accommodate the expected number of people while allowing for physical distancing between any two individuals • Consider increasing the number of venues (e.g. by establishing additional polling places)
Time (1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase time of operations, e.g. by extending the opening hours of the polling places, to accommodate delays caused by implementation of precautionary measures • Minimize the duration of the stay of people at the venue, as well as that of the interaction between voters, electoral staff and other stakeholders (e.g. observers, party agents, media persons), to the minimum necessary, commensurate with safety and polling legal requirements • Encourage expeditious voting and operations by voters and electoral staff, commensurate with safety and polling legal requirements
Ventilation (5,6)	<p>Designated venues should be well ventilated (ventilation is the intentional introduction of fresh air into a space while the stale air is removed)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If practical, host the event outdoors, e.g. by using robust tents; consider the feasibility of partial outdoors arrangements, e.g. voting indoors, waiting/queuing areas outdoors • If the planned event has to be held indoors, choose a well-ventilated room: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Natural ventilation by opening windows is the preferable way, if possible and safe to do so ○ If ceiling, table or pedestal fans are used, this should happen in conjunction with outdoor air changes (e.g. by opening windows) and by minimizing the air blowing from one person to another person ○ If air-conditioning systems are used, the percentage of outdoor air should be maximized, and recirculation of the air minimized
Physical barriers between electoral staff and voters (7)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider arranging for physical barriers, such as protective plexiglass screens or boards, at places where interactions are more likely to occur, for example in front of tables where voters are identified and ballots are handed out
Flow regulation (1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minimize crowding and regulate people flow at designated venues, by considering: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ increased frequency of public transport ○ staggered arrival ○ numbered entries ○ designated seats or standing places ○ adequate spacing of tables and booths ○ floor marking ○ crowd barriers ○ separate accesses and way outs; one-way pathways and corridors to ensure unidirectional flow

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ limiting the number of electoral staff and stakeholders (e.g. observers, party agents, media persons) to those who are strictly necessary, commensurate with safety and polling legal requirements ○ reducing the number of accompanying individuals ○ ensuring that people leave the venue and its surroundings as soon as they have completed their task (e.g. after voting) ○ limiting occasions for gathering in proximity to the designated venue of the election-related activity <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Consider designating staff as crowd controllers and supervisors to oversee entrance to polling places and monitor adherence to precautionary measures in place
Infection prevention and control (IPC) (1,8)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Ensure availability of hand-washing facilities with soap and water, or hand sanitizers (60-80% alcohol), throughout the venue, especially in key areas (e.g. accesses, toilets and way outs) ● Ensure that hands are washed or cleaned before and after using or touching shared objects (e.g. writing devices or screens for voting)
Visual reminders (1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Disseminate key messages throughout the venue with the help of visual reminders (e.g. on basic preventive measures and other recommended practices, and on actions and steps to be followed by people developing COVID-19 symptoms during the event, according to national/local rules and regulations)
Cleaning (8,9)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Establish schedules for regular and thorough cleaning and disinfection of the venue, at least twice daily; a higher frequency can be applied to most-attended areas and frequently-touched equipment, objects and surfaces ● Surfaces (e.g. tables, chairs, sinks, toilets) should be cleaned with water and soap or a detergent, followed by a disinfectant ● For disinfection, the following products may be used: 70-90% ethanol (ethyl alcohol) for equipment and objects, and sodium hypochlorite at 0.1% (equivalent to 1000 ppm for surfaces) ● If voting takes places in premises that are normally used for other activities (such as in schools), ensure thorough cleaning and disinfection upon completion of voting and related operations ● Ensure safe collection (e.g. in lid bins or close containers) and adequate packing (e.g. in strong, leak-proof, closed bags) of any waste generated by the planned activity, and its safe disposal according to national/local rules and regulations
Consumables and supplies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Consider keeping a stock of masks at the polling place for people who come to vote without their own, if wearing a mask is required by national/local rules and regulations (while informing that each attendee should bring their own) ● If feasible and compatible with polling legal requirements, consider advising voters to bring and use their own writing devices, while maintaining a supply of those available to voters upon request
Management of individuals with symptoms suggestive of COVID-19 (1,10,11)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Consider designating an isolation room or dedicated space at the polling place for people who develop symptoms suggestive of COVID-19 ● Offer a medical/surgical mask and physically isolate persons who develop symptoms suggestive of COVID-19 while at the polling place, and cannot leave the site immediately; advise them to follow relevant national/local guidance on COVID-19 ● Arrangements should be made by health authorities for the management of those individuals, their possible referral to designated locations (health facility or otherwise), and for contact tracing operations (i.e. the identification and follow up of persons who may have been exposed to SARS-CoV-2) ● The above-mentioned operations should be conducted in accordance with national/local policies, regulations and protocols

Personal protective equipment (PPE)

The following advice applies to voters, electoral staff, other stakeholders (e.g. observers, party agents, media persons), and workers.

Area	Considerations
Masks and gloves	<p>Follow guidance issued by relevant national/local authorities. In its absence, refer to WHO recommendations, as follows:</p> <p>For masks (12):</p> <p>In areas with known or suspected community or cluster SARS-CoV-2 transmission:</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Masks should be worn in any indoor or outdoor settings where physical distancing of at least one metre (3.3. feet) cannot be maintained, as follows: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ the general population should wear non-medical (fabric) masks ○ individuals at higher risk of developing severe illness from COVID-19 (those aged ≥ 60 years and those with pre-existing medical conditions (13)) should wear medical masks • If indoors, unless ventilation has been assessed to be adequate (12), WHO advises that masks should be worn (as detailed above), regardless of whether physical distancing of at least one metre (3.3. feet) can be maintained <p>For gloves (11):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gloves are not required for the purpose of preventing transmission of SARS-CoV-2, unless in the case of physical contact with a suspected or confirmed case. Gloves may be used for protection against mechanical or chemical hazards. Importantly, the use of gloves does not replace the need for appropriate hand hygiene, which should be performed frequently, as described above
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Precautionary measures related to special population groups

Special precautions should be dedicated to groups at higher risk of transmitting COVID-19 and to those at higher risk of developing severe illness from COVID-19 if infected.

Area	Considerations
Risk of transmitting COVID-19 (13,14)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People who, according to national/local rules and regulations, are required to stay in isolation (e.g. suspected, probable and confirmed COVID-19 cases) or quarantine (e.g. contacts of probable or confirmed COVID-19 cases) should not engage in any in-person event related to the electoral process • Special arrangements can be considered for this group, such as institution-based registration and voting (e.g. in hospitals, for admitted people) or remote voting
Risk of developing severe illness from COVID-19 (13)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People aged ≥ 60 years or with pre-existing medical conditions (such as diabetes, hypertension, cardiac disease, chronic lung disease, cerebrovascular disease, chronic kidney disease, immunosuppression and cancer) are at higher risk of developing severe illness from COVID-19 if infected <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Special arrangements can be considered for this group, e.g. specific time slots for voting, dedicated polling places/stations and voting booths, preferential treatment in the queues, institution-based registration and voting (e.g. retirement homes), registration and voting through mobile units, or remote voting ○ Relevant authorities and employers may wish to consider not deploying electoral staff, other stakeholders (e.g. observers, party agents, media persons) and workers who belong to this group, and/or assigning them to positions that have little or no direct contact with the public

Risk communication

A communication strategy should be devised with the aim of facilitating acceptance of changes and modifications to pre-COVID-19 procedures, and addressing response to rumours, misinformation and concerns about risk of COVID-19 transmission.

Communication activities related to the health aspects of the elections should be implemented before, during and after voting (15).

The key messages to disseminate include the following:

- Rationale behind the process followed to improve safety of planned activities
- Explanation and details on precautionary measures adopted
- Risks associated with the planned activities, before and after application of precautionary measures (residual risk)
- Report on the overall safety of the implemented activities, once they are completed

Enabling factors

The following factors will enable a smooth implementation of precautionary measures (1). At country level, national/local authorities should facilitate the dialogue between all relevant stakeholders involved in the safety of planned activities. WHO can participate in that process, in coordination with all relevant UN sister agencies, notably with UNDP that is usually the lead UN agency for provision of electoral advice and assistance (in conjunction with UN peacekeeping operations or special political missions in relevant countries).

Area	Enabling factors
Coordination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Joint coordination and oversight should be in place between the authorities responsible for the electoral process and those responsible for health, notably for the response to COVID-19
Planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adequate and timely planning should be considered, such as mobilization of human resources (including back-ups) and financial means to meet identified needs, and a procurement plan for PPE and any other consumables required to safeguard voters, electoral staff, other stakeholders and workers

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The alignment should be ensured between precautionary measures implemented during the electoral process and national/local health policies on COVID-19
Capacity strengthening	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Electoral staff and other relevant stakeholders involved in the elections should be made aware of the precautionary measures applied, and should receive adequate training on safe delivery of planned activities in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic
Supervision and feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Designated authorities should ensure supervision and monitoring of precautionary measures applied during all planned activities; they may also consider inspecting venues for suitability A feedback mechanism should be in place to identify, report and correct any COVID-19/health issues occurring during and after the planned electoral activities

Other in-person activities linked with the electoral process

In addition to voting operations, a wide range of in-person mass gathering events can take place in the context of an electoral process. Such activities may precede or follow the casting of the vote, and include meetings and workshops, training sessions, electoral campaigns and rallies, voter registration, vote counting and tabulation, electoral observation, gatherings following announcement of results, etc.

As a general rule, a risk-based approach should inform the decision-making process, and the precautionary measures highlighted above should also be considered, for all circumstances in which in-person gatherings take place (1,16). Similarly, recommendations on risk communication and enabling factors (coordination, planning, capacity strengthening, supervision and feedback) should also be taken into consideration when planning such activities.

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WHO continues to monitor the situation closely for any changes that may affect this interim guidance. Should any factors change, WHO will issue a further update. Otherwise, this interim guidance document will expire 2 years after the date of publication.

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