

# Digital technology, citizens' engagement and electoral corruption in Colombia

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## 8. Digital technology, citizens' engagement and electoral corruption in Colombia<sup>1</sup>

**Manoel Gehrke**

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### INTRODUCTION

Electoral corruption is a type of corruption that has received scant attention from the literature on the role of digital media for anti-corruption. Electoral corruption influences how people vote, which votes get counted and, depending on its magnitude, which political parties and candidates are elected to public office. The fact that a lot of the action concerning electoral fraud is concentrated in the weeks preceding the election and reach a peak on election day (and sometimes in the few days following the elections) poses challenges and opportunities for anti-corruption organisations. Even though many of the actions of fraud last a short span of time, it requires high levels of mobilisation and capacity from governmental and non-governmental organisations on the ground.

The recent literature on corruption emphasises that the active involvement of civil society groups and the creation of coalitions is one of the only effective ways in the struggle of combating corruption (Grimes, 2013; Johnston & Fritzen, 2020; Mungiu-Pippidi, 2015). Advancement in digital technology allows the development of new tools aimed at preventing, monitoring, and exposing corruption. The emerging literature on the role of technology for anti-corruption has mostly focused on e-government initiatives, the creation of new social movements and on the capacity of widely used social media platforms to allow for online mobilisation and for protests (Adam & Fazekas, 2021; Bennett & Segerberd, 2012; Kossow, 2020)<sup>2</sup>. Digital technology also creates opportunities for pre-existing social movement organisations to engage societies and to influence the public debate on anti-corruption. However, it is still unclear how social movements organisations that operate mostly through 'offline' encounters adapt digital technologies to expand their reach. To what extent does digital technology change their operations on the ground? What are

the main challenges of supporting and maintaining citizens' participation both offline and online?

To shed light on these questions and to raise hypotheses about the use of digital technology to combat electoral corruption, I examine initiatives promoted by the *Mission of Electoral Observation (Misión de Observación Electoral, MOE* as a Spanish acronym) in Colombia since its creation in 2006. The MOE started with the mission of engaging thousands of volunteers across Colombia to work on a less digital task: observing elections. The crucial part of its operation was the training and physical presence of observers in polling stations to monitor different aspects of electoral integrity and report occurrences of fraud.

I argue that the uses of digital technology have allowed the MOE to improve its capacity to generate, analyse, and disseminate data on electoral corruption. This includes the use of multiple sources of data to map the risks of electoral fraud and violence across Colombia. This provides possibilities to collaborate with social movements and citizens as well as to put pressure on public authorities to *prevent* electoral fraud. It also includes the use of crowdsourcing technologies to *detect* and *report* vote buying, electoral intimidation, and other illegal behaviour committed by criminal organisations, electoral authorities, and party machines on the ground. Through the digital platform *Pilas con el Voto* ('watch out the vote' or 'keep an eye on the vote'), citizens throughout Colombia can report instances of electoral corruption. The information uploaded by citizens and gathered from electoral observers allows the MOE not only to process the data to present them to the official actors and institutions (for example, prosecutors and ombudsmen's office) that address the irregularities and nullify electoral results, but also to suggest concrete measures to improve electoral administration. The mapping initiatives, electoral observation, and citizens' reports of electoral malfeasance constitute new forms of political participation encouraged by civil society groups against electoral corruption (della Porta & Mattoni, 2021).

Examples of similar organisations to the MOE include the *Coalition of Domestic Election Observers (CODEO)* in Ghana, created in 2000 by the *Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD)*, the *Kenya Domestic Observation Programme (K-DOP)*, *Movement for Defence of Voters' Rights 'Golos'* in Russia, and *Electoral Transparency (Transparencia Electoral)* in Peru (O'Grady & López-Pintor, 2004). As of 2022, the *Global Network of Domestic Electoral Monitors (GNDEM)* included 251 organisations across 81 countries. Recent literature finds that the presence of domestic electoral observers on election day leads to cleaner elections, and that cleaner elections have positive implications for democratic representation and accountability (Ofosu, 2019). Crowdsourcing in electoral monitoring has also been adopted by grassroots organisations in other countries as well. This includes the use by

citizens of the Ushahidi platform in Nigeria (Bailard & Livingston, 2014) and the Karta Narushenyi platform in Russian elections (Bader, 2013).

The rest of the chapter is organised as follows. First, I provide a brief overview of the emerging literature on the challenges and advantages of using digital technology against corruption and contextualise their use for combating electoral fraud. Next, I discuss the research design and methodology. Following that, I provide an overview of electoral corruption in Colombia, including the different types of strategies politicians and political parties use to illegally win votes and citizens' perceptions about electoral legitimacy, as well as a brief overview about anti-corruption initiatives in the country, including the 2018 referendum. Subsequently, I examine the interface between digital technologies' offline activities in its main programs: (i) MOE's mapping initiatives of threats of electoral fraud and violence, (ii) *Pilas con el Voto*, MOE's digital platform to encourage citizens to report instances of electoral fraud and irregularities throughout Colombia, and (iii) electoral observation and civic training programs. In the final section I discuss the challenges faced by MOE in adapting the use of digital technology to combat electoral fraud, including that of mobilising citizens, and provide concluding comments.

## SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY, DIGITAL MEDIA, AND ELECTORAL CORRUPTION

Corruption is often a seemingly-victimless crime and carries a burden for the collective. Fighting corruption requires that agents (for example, prosecutors, investigative journalists, politicians, citizens in general) have the power and incentive-compatible reasons to do so (Fisman & Golden, 2017). This is seldom the case because the returns of monitoring and punishing corrupt behaviour individually are inferior to the costs of not acting on it (for example, because of threats of violence) and of engaging in corruption (for example, accepting a bribe in order not to investigate), particularly in contexts where corruption is prevalent. In addition, politicians who are accused of corruption have great incentives to react to revelations of corruption by using their powers to change the laws regarding malfeasance or to coopt other politicians or agents in other institutions who can protect them (for example, prosecutors or judges) (Gehrke, 2019).

To break up this equilibrium in which corruption remains hidden and unpunished, an engaged civil society is considered a precondition to put pressure on investigative authorities to discover and punish corrupt networks formed by businesses, elected officials, and civil servants. The lack of civil society pressure also makes elected officials less likely to invest in institutions (for example, laws, instruments, judicial capacity) that allow for the effective control of control (Johnston 2014). For this reason, there is a growing schol-

arly interest in the consequences of digital technology for the fight against corruption (Mattoni, 2021). Digital technology makes it cheaper to collect and disseminate information that may allow for surpassing collective-action problems which are an important reason why corruption persists (Persson et al., 2013; Mungiu-Pippidi, 2013). Such technology lowers the cost of information exchanges among citizens and makes the information flows more interactive and less dependent on gatekeeping dynamics (Castells, 2015).

However, the effect of the internet and of social media on corruption is also expected to depend on the political regime (i.e., whether a country is a democracy or not) and on likelihood and capacity of the government to censor them (Zhuravskaya et al., 2020)<sup>3</sup>. Avoiding corruption scandals is one of the reasons why dictators across the world spend resources and might lose political capital by selectively censoring the internet (Lorentzen, 2014). Depending on the context, denouncing corruption can also result in more violence against whistleblowers or those denouncing corruption since technology also gives powerful tools for state surveillance and the repression of political dissidents (Pierskalla & Hollenbach, 2013).

In addition to the political regime, the extent to which societies can effectively use information about corruption is subject to many underlying conditions since corruption reproduces existing inequalities and disparities in power. Corruption might simply be displaced to other domains or less visible actions. The effects of more information about wrongdoing might not be enough to change the status quo. In some democratic settings, revealing corruption has also been shown to have effects that might undermine citizens' political efficacy, that is, their beliefs that change is possible and that actions under their control can influence politics (Bauhr & Grimes, 2014; Chong et al., 2015). A recent study finds that the expansion of 3G technology leads to lower levels of confidence in government (Guriev et al., 2021). One of the possible mechanisms that might explain this relationship is that this type of technology reduces the citizens' asymmetry of information regarding malfeasance. An additional threat is that digital technology might also facilitate the transmission of false information about corruption, which can have further detrimental consequences for political efficacy.

Digital technology also poses other threats and can be beneficial to those engaged in malfeasance. The dissemination of cryptocurrencies and offshore companies, for instance, has the potential of allowing those involved in corruption to refine their money laundering schemes and to protect the fruits of corruption from discovery (Radu, 2021). Blockchain technology, for instance, can also reduce the transaction costs of corrupt transactions.

Similar to other types of corruption, electoral corruption might be facilitated by digital technology. Digitalisation makes electoral corruption easier to organise by lowering costs of transmitting information (i) between brokers and

higher levels of party machines, (ii) across brokers, and (iii) between voters and brokers. If allowed by poll workers, citizens, for instance, might take pictures of the voting ballots to prove they are voting for the 'right' candidate to legitimise vote-buying transactions. Parties on the ground might target voters more easily by coordinating their efforts and by having access to more information about citizens' political preferences or their likelihood of turning out to vote (Stokes et al., 2013).

Electoral fraud is often hidden and very decentralised, making it challenging for governmental and non-governmental organisations as well as for citizens in general to know the details of their operation on the ground (Lehoucq, 2003). Some types of electoral fraud (for example, vote and turnout buying) are more likely to depend on the operation of political machines, and activities that control the fulfilment of the transactions usually take place at the ballot-box level, polling station level, or in specific neighbourhoods. Contingent on how widespread the practices are, investigative authorities including the police might lack the incentives or the motoring capacity to curb them.

Certain practices are more easily observable than others. For instance, it might be easier to check failures to comply with rules regarding vote counting than to acquire information on vote buying because the first happens in a specific setting to which electoral observers have access, making it easier to monitor public officials' and poll workers' activities. Turnout buying, when political parties illegally pay their potential supporters to ensure they vote, for instance, might happen across many specific locations (for example, party headquarters, voters' homes, street markets). Domestic observers like the MOE in Colombia build on local knowledge, civic training, and citizens' mobilisation to report electoral fraud.

## RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

I rely on case-study methodology to assess how digital technology affects existing social movement organisations in the realm of anti-corruption. The MOE started as an 'offline' organisation that engaged hundreds of volunteers across the country. By examining how the adoption of digital technologies over time has changed its nature, the main objective is to generate hypotheses and inductively identify variables, causal mechanisms, and paths that illuminate answers to the research question. In Geddes' (2003) terms, this chapter's objective is to engage in *theory creation* and *theory modification*. It is, therefore, very limited in its ability to test theories or to provide overarching arguments about how social movement organisations react to digital technology. Most importantly, this chapter highlights the potential and diversity of solutions, and helps to populate the spectrum of the digital tools that are

being used by grassroots organisations for anti-corruption, particularly in what regards electoral corruption.

My analysis is built on primary sources and on existing research, including a field experiment by Garbiras-Díaz and Montenegro (2022). It is also informed by interviews with individuals working in the MOE and in Colombia's main electoral organisations (Colombia's National Civil Registry and National Electoral Council) and by my own experience working as an electoral observer in Colombia. I complement it with measures of MOE's digital presence and with data from repeated surveys of nationally representative samples for the whole period since the MOE was created.

Similar to other studies that rely on a limited number of cases, one of the main limitations of this study is that it focuses on initiatives promoted by one organisation only. An important advantage of this study, nevertheless, is that, differently from the adoption of specific technological innovations as part of their repertoire, technological changes such as the widespread use of the internet are largely exogenous to actions of the MOE, attenuating concerns of reverse causality. The period under analysis is from 2006, when the MOE was created, to 2021. In the year of its creation, 11 per cent of the Colombian population used the internet, according to the World Telecommunication/ICT Indicators Database (International Telecommunication Union, 2022). By 2022, the proportion of Colombians with access to the internet had reached 67 per cent. The digital tools available to social movement organisations, even though they often need to be adapted, are usually not very costly. Many of the digital initiatives can be copied from similar social movement organisations working in other contexts and adapted to the local context.

This study also suffers from limitations in terms of external validity. The MOE is larger and better funded than most local/national social movement organisations operating in developing countries. Nonetheless, its operation and its mission are highly comparable to many organisations working on domestic electoral observation, and its crowdsourcing platform (*Pilas con el Voto*) is very similar to other tools of electoral monitoring across the world, including those in Russia, Nigeria, and Ghana. The representativeness of Colombia at the national level is high: Colombia's level of electoral integrity is close to the median for electoral democracies according to the Electoral Integrity Project and very similar to many other developing democracies.

## ELECTORAL CORRUPTION IN COLOMBIA

Electoral corruption in Colombia, as in many countries, has a long history (Posada-Carbó, 1997; Posada-Carbó, 2000; Chaves et al., 2015). Electoral fraud has been a fertile strategy in contexts where voting and violence have co-existed for many decades (Taylor, 2009; Ocampo, 2014). The level of

electoral fraud is one of the reasons why, despite its multiple decades of democracy (Colombia has been a democracy since 1958), elections in the country have a substantially lower degree of legitimacy than in most Latin American countries – most of which had more recent dictatorial experiences than Colombia. In 2021, only 18 per cent of Colombians believed that votes were always counted correctly, the lowest figure across Latin America (Lupu et al., 2021). Colombia also has the highest proportion of citizens who say that votes are never counted correctly: 31 per cent. This figure compares to only 6 per cent and 4 per cent in Chile and Uruguay, respectively (Lupu et al., 2021).

Wealth and electoral fraud are closely related in the minds of Colombian citizens. Approximately half of all Colombian citizens believe that the rich always buy the elections and an additional 43 per cent say that the rich sometimes buy the elections. The remaining 7 per cent believe that the rich never buy the elections, a figure that, among countries in Latin America, is only higher than that of citizens of Paraguay (5 per cent) (Lupu et al., 2021). The lack of credibility of elections is also affected by citizens' perceptions about ballot secrecy: 79 per cent believe that politicians can always (40 per cent) or sometimes (39 per cent) find how one votes. Such negative evaluations of the electoral process in Colombia are motivated by real problems of electoral integrity.

Politicians in 21st-century Colombia use a variety of illegal tools to win elections (La Silla Vacía, 2018). Electoral fraud can take many forms: vote buying, aggregation fraud, turnout buying, intimidation, and voter impersonation (Lehoucq, 2003). Each type of fraud requires a different set of actions and organisation. Vote and turnout buying rely more directly on the interaction between party activists and voters, while aggregation fraud, ballot stuffing, and voter impersonation fraud depend to a greater extent on the collaboration of electoral authorities or poll workers. Politicians committing electoral fraud take advantage of the lack of state presence and of areas in which public officials collude with or when organisations are infiltrated by criminal groups (Ocampo, 2014). Eaton and Prieto (2017) document how subnational authoritarian elites 'grasp levers of power in national institutions' and combine it with territorial control using electoral corruption and other forms of corruption. Deals with armed groups provide the coercive tools for electoral intimidation.

Some of the activities that allow for electoral corruption take place long before election day. Electoral corruption is fuelled by illegal campaign donations and public funds deviated from elected officials who secured 'sweet deals' with contractors while in office (Gulzar et al., 2022). Other types of electoral corruption require an operation on the ground on election day (or close to the election day) to intimidate voters willing to vote for other candidates, to provide cash, and goods or exchange other favours to ensure that likely supporters turn out to vote. On election day, political parties employ



many brokers on polling stations that are there in theory to verify electoral integrity, including the work of poll workers. The presence of party brokers in polling stations allows them to check the turnout of their presumed supporters and to compare counts with very disaggregated electoral results. Rueda (2017) finds a negative correlation between the size of polling stations and vote buying. In polling places where the total number of voters per ballot box is smaller, brokers have a better ability to estimate whether voters are fulfilling their promises and recompensate them for doing so.

Another common type of electoral fraud is the impersonation of voters and poll workers. Political machines often register citizens to vote in multiple places across the country, a process that is commonly referred to in Colombia as *trashumancia electoral*, i.e., voters register to vote outside of their place of residence in a seasonal pattern of migration that takes place for political reasons. This takes advantage of the flows of displacement across Colombia that were generated by its civil war (Steele, 2017) and the flexible rules concerning residency for electoral purposes. In the weeks prior to the 2019 municipal and department elections alone, the National Electoral Council nullified approximately 1 million voter registrations for voter registration fraud. In the week before the 2015 local and regional elections, that had happened to approximately 1.6 million voting IDs. These problems are aggravated by the interference of armed and criminal groups in elections (Acemoglu et al., 2013; Romero & Valencia, 2007; Valencia & Ávila, 2014), as well as the assassinations of community leaders and organisers (Prem et al., 2022).

## PREVENTING, DETECTING, AND REPORTING ELECTORAL FRAUD IN COLOMBIA

A major scandal surfaced in 2005 and 2006 when documents revealed the collusion between dozens of congressmen, governors, mayors, and other politicians, and the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC), a paramilitary group responsible for many human rights abuses, including the killings of thousands of civilians (Romero & Valencia, 2007; López, 2010). The paramilitary group coerced voters and other elected officials while it established protection agreements with specific politicians. Political activists created the MOE in 2006 as a reaction to that scandal.

Interestingly, MOE's director, Alejandra Barrios Cabrera, was one of the student leaders of the movement 'La Séptima Papeleta' (The Seventh Ballot). The movement was created in reaction to terrorist attacks and the assassination of four aspiring presidential candidates (Jaime Pardo Leal, Bernardo Jaramillo Ossa, Luis Carlos Galán and Carlos Pizarro) before the 1990 elections. Citizens demanded a Constitutional Assembly, and the movement eventually led to Colombia's Constitution of 1991.

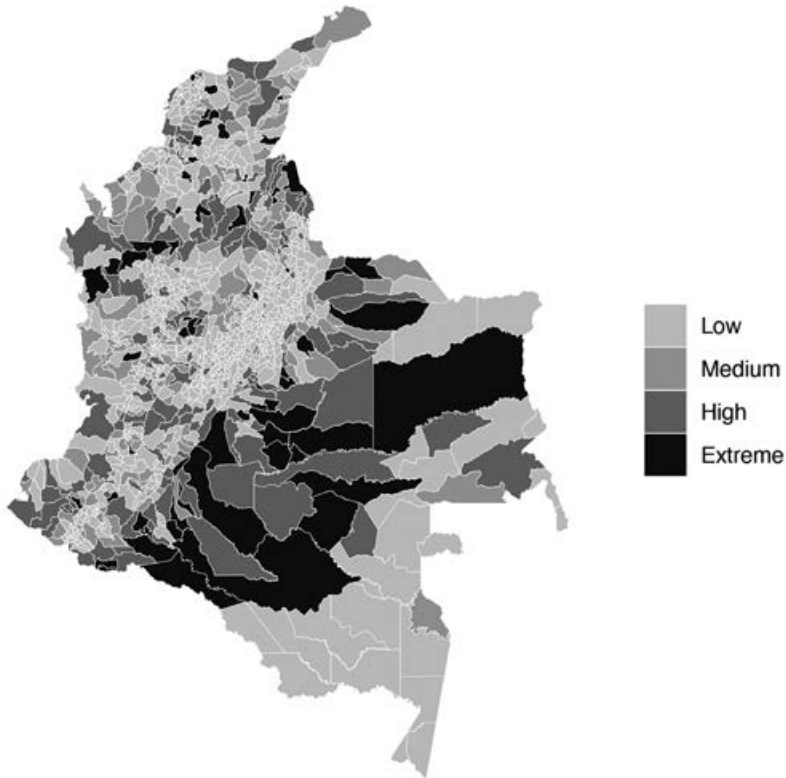
The MOE is governed by an assembly of civil society groups (for example, labour unions, indigenous organisations, and universities) and is mostly financed by intergovernmental development agencies (for example, UNDP and the European Union), foreign governments (for example, Swedish government, U.S. government) and foreign organisations that work in democracy promotion (for example, National Endowment for Democracy). In terms of Bennett and Segerberg's (2012) typology, the Mission of Electoral Observation has largely continued to operate as an *organisationally brokered network*, that is, it has retained strong coordination of the action and has used technology to coordinate goals. However, it has incorporated some aspects of what the authors call *connective action* and that include co-production and the use of interactive media for citizens to engage and collaborate in the organisations' goals. In the next subsections I analyse how digital technology has shaped the main activities performed by the MOE, starting from its mapping initiatives.

## MAPPING RISK OF ELECTORAL FRAUD AND VIOLENCE

Prior to every election (i.e., Legislative, Presidential, Local and Regional), the MOE produces and publishes maps that predict the risk levels of electoral violence and fraud in each of the 1,103 municipalities in Colombia. The maps are published online together with a full report containing detailed analyses of the threats in each municipality across the country. The analyses are based on an array of variables measured at the municipal level: (i) territorial presence of criminal organisations, (ii) recent levels of violence, (iii) threats and violent incidents against community organisers, political candidates, and human rights defendants, (iv) threats to a free press and violence against journalists, as well as the (v) dynamics of forced population displacement. Over time, risk maps have become more sophisticated and included more dimensions such as (i) the dominance of specific political parties, (ii) abnormal levels of electoral turnout in previous elections and the (iii) presence of economic activities that are associated with electoral fraud such as illicit crops and illegal mining.

These variables are measured by the MOE itself and in collaboration with think tanks, NGOs, and universities, include the use of official data from governmental organisations. Since 2018, for instance, the MOE has itself gathered, processed, and published detailed data on all threats and actual violence (murders, bombing and shooting attacks, kidnappings) against community organisers, social leaders, and politicians as part of its *Observatory on Political Violence*. In the 12 months preceding the 2022 legislative elections, for instance, there were 92 murders of community organisers and political candidates, 4 disappearances, 64 bombing and shooting attacks, and 4 kidnappings

(Mission of Electoral Observation, 2022). The data processed for this initiative was embedded on the mapping exercises starting with the 2018 elections.



*Source:* Produced by the author based on data by the Mission of Electoral Observation.

*Figure 8.1 Risks of electoral fraud and violence (2018 elections)*

For the 2018 elections, the MOE considered that in 63 municipalities there were extreme levels of risk of electoral fraud and violence, 72 municipalities with high risk, and 43 municipalities were considered of medium risk (Figure 8.1). Even though there is great variation inside the same departments and across neighbouring municipalities, there are relatively higher risks of fraud and violence in municipalities in the Amazon region, in the Caribbean and on the Pacific coasts.

The reports produced together with the maps highlight patterns and stories of electoral fraud in particular areas of the country that are more vulnerable

to electoral fraud. The mapping strategy provides useful data visualisation tools that also get traditional media and online coverage, putting pressure on governmental authorities and raising citizen awareness. Electoral fraud is a difficult topic for journalists to cover, particularly in settings where investigative journalism is sparser such as rural areas and small municipalities. It remains, nevertheless, a challenge to understand the details of the different socio-political contexts associated with electoral fraud in each municipality. Meanwhile, those engaged in electoral fraud build on very detailed local knowledge including citizens' political preferences and needs and are ready to exploit their vulnerabilities. Certain types of electoral fraud require a very sophisticated operation by political parties on the ground, often involving the participation of local criminal organisations or other armed groups. This operation includes, for instance, which citizens in a neighbourhood to target in order to buy their turnout or their votes, and which poll workers or civil servants would be willing to engage in fraud during election day (for example, in vote counting or in the verification of voters' identities). The operation of electoral fraud often requires the hiring of brokers with high levels of information about local voters (Szwarcberg, 2015).

Preventing electoral fraud is challenging for electoral authorities, particularly because a portion of their own members on the territory might themselves be part of initiatives to sabotage fair electoral processes. The context is even more challenging in places where violence is a credible threat. Governmental authorities, including the national police and the army, even if not part of corrupt networks, might prefer to focus on guaranteeing security instead of cracking down on clientelist networks engaging in electoral fraud.

## CIVICS PROGRAMS AND ELECTORAL OBSERVATION

The core activity of the MOE is to train volunteers to work as electoral observers across the country. The MOE relies on its network with universities, NGOs, and labour unions to recruit observers and also attracts them through campaigns using digital media. Most observers are university students and engaged citizens with substantial local knowledge. Between 2006 and 2022, the MOE conducted 1,636 workshops to train citizens in electoral monitoring and on different aspects of electoral administration (MOE, 2022). This civics training provides citizens with specific knowledge and practical tips about the most common types of electoral fraud they should be attentive to. Because electoral administration has many technical aspects, raising citizens' knowledge and know-how to monitor elections helps to establish higher standards for shared beliefs on what characterises 'clean elections'. This has important consequences for raising awareness across a fairly large group of citizens and

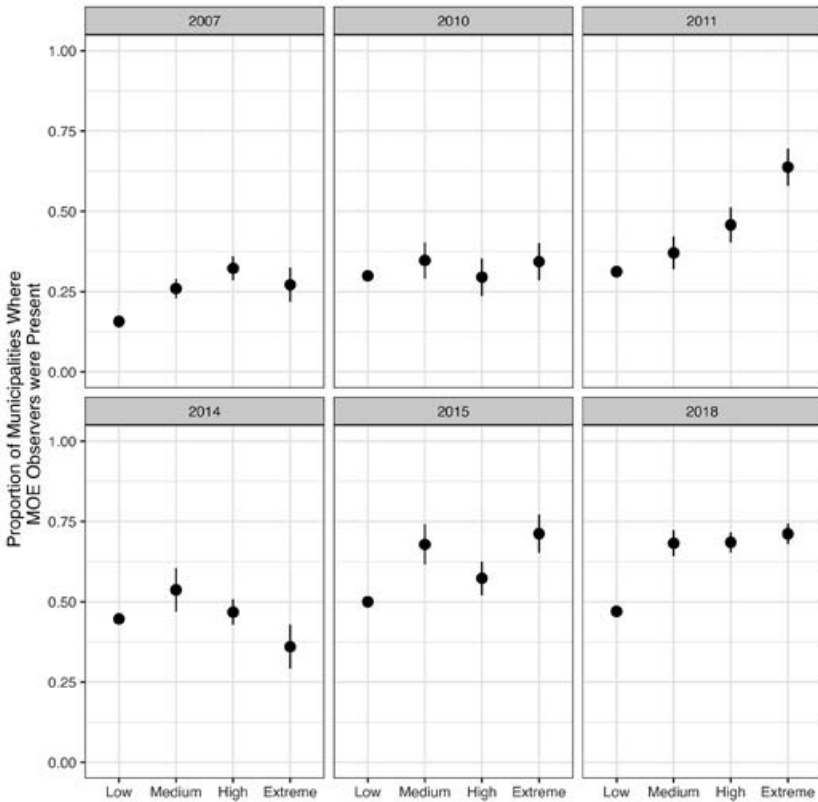
might change citizens' relationship with the electoral process. Their presence can dissuade those committing fraud and encourage polling workers and other electoral authorities to perform their work diligently.

MOE's presence in the Colombian territory has expanded over time: observers were present on election day in 21 per cent and 51 per cent of all municipalities in 2007 and in 2018, respectively. MOE uses its knowledge about electoral corruption, embedded in its mapping initiatives, when sending its observers to different locations. Figure 8.2 demonstrates that observers are more likely to be present in localities where the MOE had diagnosed higher risks of electoral fraud and violence. The coverage of municipalities with extreme risk by observers reached more than 60 per cent in the 2011 (local), 2015 (local) and 2018 (national elections), an important increase in comparison to that reached in the 2007, 2010, and 2014 elections. The other side of the coin is that, even in 2015 and 2018, approximately 25 per cent of municipalities that face extreme risks of electoral fraud and violence did not have an independent electoral observer in any of its polling places.

Observers follow a strict protocol and fill a module with specific questions on dozens of aspects of electoral integrity as well as open-ended questions in which observers can report the details of what they experienced from when the polling stations opened until when the votes were counted. The data supplied by observers is essential for MOE's official report on every election. Observers can also take pictures (including of vote tallies) and produce videos (for example, of vote or turnout buying) with their cellphones that can later be used as proof of electoral fraud. The data produced by observers at polling stations on election day allows the MOE to obtain a more accurate picture of the details about the electoral process across thousands of polling stations in the country. Over time, digital technology has allowed the data produced by observers to have more consequences in real time. As of 2022, the MOE produces three reports as the election day progresses and sheds light on the most problematic aspects of electoral integrity as the election is taking place. The data, including pictures and videos, produced by observers is an important asset in combination with reports from citizens made possible by MOE's platform *Pilas con el Voto* to shed light on electoral fraud in Colombia to provide evidence of and to deter fraud.

### ***Pilas Con el Voto (Watch Out the Vote)***

Electoral observation, in addition to being labour-intensive, has limited capacity in reporting the types of electoral fraud that happen outside of polling stations such as vote buying and irregularities in campaign financing. For this reason, the MOE has expanded its reach with the use of crowd-sourcing technology. *Pilas con el voto* (Watch Out the Vote; [www.pilasconelvoto.com](http://www.pilasconelvoto.com)) is



Source: Analyses by the author based on the data provided by the *Misión de Observación Electoral* (MOE).

Figure 8.2 Presence of MOE observers on election day by risks of electoral fraud and violence over time

a digital platform that allows citizens to report electoral fraud and irregularities in real time and went online prior to the 2011 subnational elections. It uses crowdsourcing technology and allows citizens to upload detailed information about irregularities and attach documents, pictures, videos, and audio recordings. Citizens can submit non-anonymous or anonymous reports that reach lawyers and experts specialised in electoral law and corruption who work for MOE. Anonymous reports can be important in regions that lack state presence or where armed groups operate.

The platform allows the MOE to filter in citizens' allegations and to direct them to the appropriate investigative authorities, based on the information that is submitted. MOE staff have institutional interface with oversight agencies such as the Procuraduría General de la Nación (equivalent to the Office of the Inspector General in some countries), the Consejo Nacional Electoral (National Electoral Council), and the Fiscalía de la Nación (General Prosecutorial Office of the Nation).

*Pilas con el Voto* also takes advantage of the relationship between MOE and mass media outlets, as well as their digital presence. It works in partnership with some of the most important national media outlets in Colombia (for example, Blu Radio, Radio Caracol) as well as important regional newspapers (for example, *El Nuevo Día* – based in Tolima; *El Pilón* – based in Valledupar; *15* – based in Bucaramanga; *La Nación* – based in Neiva; *La Opinión* – based in Cúcuta). Reports of electoral irregularities and fraud can also be directly shared with journalists. When submitting a report through *Pilas con el Voto*, citizens are asked if they would like to share their evidence with journalists and to be contacted by them. Even though the crowdsourcing platform allows for citizens to have their identities as whistleblowers protected, some of the actions allow those conducting electoral fraud to identify them or target their communities or social groups in response.

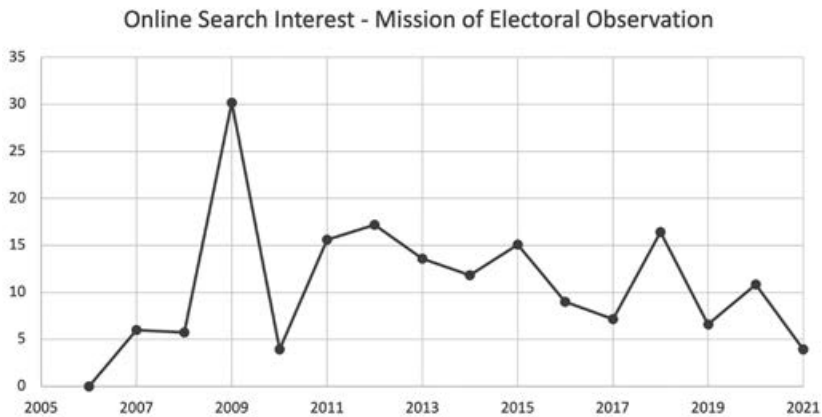
MOE uses the information submitted by citizens in combination with reports by its observers and traditional media to corroborate evidence of electoral malfeasance and submit it to the investigative authorities. By channelling reports of wrongdoing, it puts pressure on public institutions to perform their constitutional duties. The platform's success has led the Ministry of Interior to create its own platform in 2013 to which evidence of fraud can be submitted, the Unity of Automatic Reception for Electoral Transparency (Unidad de Recepción Inmediata para la Transparencia Electoral, URIEL as a Spanish acronym). The importance of the MOE is further exemplified by the fact that 90.6 per cent and 83 per cent of reports containing electoral irregularities obtained by URIEL in the 2014 and 2015 elections were actually sent by the MOE itself (Garbiras-Díaz & Montenegro, 2020).

## CHALLENGES AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

Through the combination of bottom-up monitoring technologies and expert knowledge, the MOE has managed to establish itself as a central civil society watchdog in discussions about electoral integrity. It gathers information by engaging citizens and produces knowledge that raises awareness about electoral corruption. Despite its solid institutional creation and capacity to innovate, the MOE faces many of the challenges faced by other bottom-up initiatives in terms of citizens' involvement, as well as its dependence on funding

from international sources. Its advocacy for more ambitious anti-corruption and electoral reforms has not been very successful.

Garbiras-Díaz and Montenegro (2022) find that publicising *Pilas con el Voto* is effective but that many citizens who are willing to report electoral fraud still do not know about its existence or need a nudge to be reminded of it. Citizens in municipalities that receive many ads about *Pilas con el Voto* on social media are more likely to report electoral fraud. The online campaign also has negative electoral consequences for candidates who are associated with electoral corruption, who lose votes as a result. The authors also find that political parties respond to citizens monitoring elections when sent a letter by the Procuraduría General de la Nación (equivalent to the Office of the Inspector General in some countries) announcing that citizens are being encouraged to report electoral irregularities.

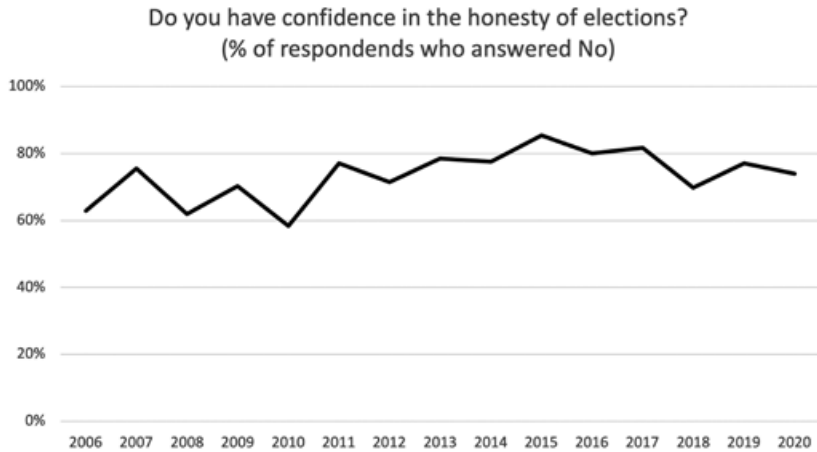


Source: Author's construction based on data from Google Trends. Popularity measure based on all internet searches in Colombia using Google. The index varies from 0 to 100.

*Figure 8.3 Online search interest for Misión de Observación Electoral (Colombia)*

The findings in Garbiras-Díaz and Montenegro (2022) have implications for the use of digital platforms to combat corruption by encouraging citizens' engagement. They show that even in the case of highly technical phenomena such as reporting electoral fraud, when citizens are informed (or reminded) about their existence of platforms, they are more likely to participate. Nevertheless, it remains a challenge to encourage citizens to denounce electoral fraud in more remote areas where internet access continues to be limited.





Source: Own creation based on data from Gallup World Poll (2006–2020) for representative samples of the Colombian population in each survey round.

*Figure 8.4 Citizens' mistrust about the honesty of elections (Colombia)*

The MOE faces challenges in supporting and maintaining citizens' participation both online and offline. According to a measure I created based on Google trends data, the MOE has not been able to increase its digital presence over time in comparison to other kinds of things people do while using this popular search engine (Figure 8.3). Its other activities such as the monitoring of legislative debates on political reforms, and of political violence allows it to maintain an active profile during non-electoral years as well. Figure 8.3 also shows, however, that MOE managed to maintain an active digital presence even in non-electoral years (there were elections in Colombia in 2006, 2007, 2010, 2011, 2014, 2015, 2018 and 2019).<sup>4</sup>

Since MOE's creation in 2006, most Colombians have remained sceptical about the level of honesty in elections (Figure 8.4). Citizens' mistrust of elections is measured by a survey of a representative sample of Colombians every year conducted by Gallup and fluctuates between 60 per cent and 82 per cent. It is challenging to disentangle whether citizens' mistrust of elections is based on objective measures of fraud uncovered by activities performed by the MOE or based on other overlapping phenomena. In addition, many of the reforms it has proposed, which include substantial changes in electoral administration as well as other anti-corruption reforms, have encountered substantial reactions by political elites.

The crowdsourcing platform *Pilas con el Voto* has allowed the MOE to expand its capacity to collect data, protect citizens' anonymity and potential-

ised the verification and publicisation of fraud reports by investigative journalists on the ground. The platform can allow it to reach areas where the presence of electoral observers might be limited. Despite substantial investment in its publicisation, including online social media and through partnerships with traditional media, the platform suffers from many of the problems that characterise other digital platforms, including their limited reach (Garbiras-Díaz & Montenegro, 2020; Adam & Fazekas, 2021). The MOE's strength lies in its capacity to gather, process, and analyse different kinds of data that allow it to paint a more complete picture about the dynamics of electoral corruption throughout Colombia.

## NOTES

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2. On the same topic, see also Chapter 2 in this volume.
3. On the same topic, see also Chapter 4 in this volume.
4. In addition to regularly scheduled elections, the peace agreement referendum between the FARC and the Colombian state was conducted in 2016, and the anti-corruption referendum took place in an election year: 2018.

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