ENHANCING ELECTORAL INTEGRITY: A PRE-POST ASSESSMENT OF POLLING STAFF TRAINING IN PUNJAB, PAKISTAN

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Abstract

Ensuring transparent and fair elections critically relies on the competence of polling staff. This study rigorously assesses the impact of training on the electoral knowledge and skills of polling staff in Punjab, Pakistan, a crucial component for building electoral capacity. Employing a pre- and post-assessment framework, a standardized questionnaire covering electoral procedures and legal provisions was administered to a large cohort of 7,575 participants. The findings reveal a substantial and statistically significant improvement in knowledge, with mean scores rising from 72.53% pre-training to 92.47% post-training ($t(16.75) = 4.25$, $p = 0.00079$). A reduction in the standard deviation further underscores the consistent improvement in participants' electoral understanding. This research highlights that comprehensive training is not merely a formality but a powerful mechanism for minimizing procedural errors, ensuring legal compliance, and building staff confidence. The study contributes significantly to the capacity-building efforts of Election Management Bodies (EMBs), particularly in developing countries across Asia, by demonstrating the pivotal role of training in fostering freer, fairer, and more transparent democratic governance and strengthening public trust.

Keywords: Polling Staff Training, Electoral Capacity Building, Pakistan Elections, Election Management Bodies, Electoral Competence

Introduction

Effective training is widely recognized as a fundamental driver of efficiency and performance across various domains, providing a systematic approach to task execution (Bowes, 2008). It ensures that assigned jobs are performed without legal complications, establishing proper standards and uniform operating procedures (Topno, 2012). The evaluation of training initiatives often reveals significant positive outcomes, with examples like Motorola demonstrating substantial returns on investment in employee training. Studies also highlight that investments in training can lead to improved market performance (Bassi et al., 2000), though it is acknowledged that not all training expenditures are effective (Pastor, 1999; Mohanty et al., 2019).

In the context of democratic governance, election administration serves as a critical pillar, as it underpins the legitimacy of leadership selection from local to national levels through the will of the people. A core function of election administration is to register eligible voters and to count votes impartially and accurately. Transparent electoral processes rely heavily on the competence of polling staff, who play a pivotal role in ensuring election integrity. Furthermore, an understanding of the electoral system is crucial for all potential participants, as highlighted by concerns about overseas citizens who may be eligible voters but face challenges due to limited awareness of the system (Barreto et al., 2006). Despite the extensive literature on election procedures and voting systems, there remains a notable gap in academic research specifically addressing the impact and effectiveness of training for polling staff. This lacuna often indicates a lack of emphasis by governments on integrating such vital training into mainstream political discourse, potentially hindering election management bodies from effectively fulfilling their mandates, especially in critical areas such as polling staff training. The integrity of elections in Pakistan, in particular, has frequently been scrutinized, with concerns raised about the transparency of the electoral process (Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency, 2024).

Recognizing this critical need, this study aims to address how training influences the knowledge and preparedness of polling staff for election duties. Specifically, it seeks to: (1) assess the baseline knowledge of polling staff prior to training, (2) analyze the enhancement of their knowledge following the training intervention, and (3) determine whether any observed improvement in knowledge after pre- and post-assessment is statistically significant. This investigation will shed light on the pivotal role of comprehensive training programs in bolstering electoral capacity and promoting democratic governance.

Literature Review

This section reviews the existing literature pertinent to electoral training, its legal underpinnings, the context of electoral integrity in Pakistan, theoretical models of training evaluation, and broader socio-political challenges affecting voter participation.

Legal Framework for Electoral Training in Pakistan

The importance of electoral training and public awareness is formally recognized in Pakistan's legal framework. Section 12 of the Elections Act, 2017, mandates explicitly "Measures for training and public awareness" to ensure transparent, free, and fair elections. Under this provision, the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) is obligated to:

1) Conduct comprehensive training programs for all election officials, including those from the Commission, government departments, autonomous/semi-autonomous bodies, and even judicial officers assigned to election duties.

2) Advise various public institutions, such as educational and training bodies, on developing programs that promote a thorough understanding of electoral laws and best practices.

3) Implement public awareness campaigns, utilizing media efforts to maximize voter enrollment and participation, with a particular focus on empowering women. These campaigns

also aim to inform citizens about voting procedures and underscore the importance of electoral integrity.

4) Regularly review existing election-related laws, rules, and regulations, and recommend necessary amendments to the federal government to enhance fairness, transparency, and combat corrupt practices.

Furthermore, Section 14 of the Elections Act, 2017, stipulates that a comprehensive Action Plan, required four months before a general election, must detail administrative measures, including the appointment and training of various election officials. This encompasses District Returning Officers (DROs), Returning Officers (ROs), Assistant Returning Officers (AROs), Presiding Officers (PRos), Assistant Presiding Officers (APOs), Polling Officers (POs), and other essential personnel. These legal provisions underscore the foundational role of training in upholding the integrity of the electoral process.

Context of Electoral Integrity in Pakistan

The question of electoral integrity has historically been a significant concern in Pakistan. Political parties frequently express concerns about the transparency of the electoral process. For instance, the Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency (PILDAT) reported that the General Election 2024 was perceived as only 49% fair, marking it the "least fair election" compared to previous ones (Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency, 2024). Such persistent doubts about the fairness and transparency of elections highlight the critical need for robust training programs that can instill confidence and competence among polling staff, thereby strengthening the democratic process.

The Role and Design of Polling Staff Training

Effective election administration relies heavily on well-prepared polling staff. The training curriculum for election modules is meticulously designed to cover key operational aspects, including conflict resolution, the correct issuance and handling of ballot papers, accurate management of voter lists, and strategies to prevent voter duplication. Seasoned election experts typically deliver these training sessions from the ECP, who possess over a decade of experience in electoral affairs. The pedagogical approach often combines traditional lectures with informative videos, mock polls, and role-play exercises. This blended learning approach aims to clarify ambiguities and prepare polling staff to handle various scenarios they might encounter during electoral processes effectively (Kropf et al., 2020; Kimball et al., 2006). Such comprehensive training ensures that election officials are equipped with the administrative skills essential for transparent and fair elections, addressing critical issues like the timely delivery of election materials and preventing biases that could affect voter turnout (Cain et al., 2008; Collard, 2019; Collyer & Vathi, 2007).

Theoretical Foundations of Training Evaluation

Evaluation is an indispensable component of any training program, as it provides a systematic method for assessing its importance and value and identifying areas for improvement (Phillips, 1996; Topno, 2012). Pre- and post-assessment training, in particular, offers a precise comparative measure of knowledge acquisition and improvement (Holli & Calabrese, 1998). Beyond mere knowledge transfer, practical training also plays a crucial role in building the resilience, self-confidence, and preparedness of polling staff to navigate complex and challenging electoral environments, including managing threats and legal complications (Hostetter & Lebron, 2024; Clark & Barsky, 2024; Coll, 2024).

Several models exist for measuring the effectiveness of training programs, with the Kirkpatrick Model among the most widely recognized. Donald Kirkpatrick introduced this model in 1959, focusing on four levels of evaluation:

1) Reaction: Assesses participants' feelings about the training program.
2) Learning: Measures the knowledge gained by participants before and after the training.
3) Behavior: Evaluates whether participants' job performance changes after training.

4) Results: Examines the tangible outcomes and impact of the training on organizational goals (Kirkpatrick et al., 1970; Topno, 2012).

Other notable models include David Reay's Three-Phase Model (comprising trial, ongoing learning, and final phases) and Peter Bramley's Model of Evaluation, which outlines five stages: during training, after training, learning, behavior adopted after training, and its overall effectiveness (Mohanty et al., 2019). These models provide structured approaches to gauge the success and impact of training interventions.

Broader Challenges to Electoral Participation in Pakistan

Effective electoral administration must also contend with socio-economic and cultural factors that can impede broad-based political participation.

1) Illiteracy and Voter Engagement: Illiteracy poses a significant challenge to political participation, as illiterate individuals often lack awareness of the electoral system and may be reluctant to engage. Studies show that illiterate individuals are less likely to register to vote compared to their literate counterparts, contributing to unstable and fluctuating political participation (Mahmood et al., 2014). Given that illiteracy can undermine the foundations of democracy, the Election Act 2017 in Pakistan mandates public awareness campaigns and training as essential prerequisites for elections.

2) Gender Disparities in Political Participation: Female voter turnout in Pakistani politics remains notably low. This phenomenon is often attributed to Pakistan's male-dominated societal structure, where women's political engagement is often indirectly influenced by discussions with male family members. Additionally, women frequently face mobility issues on election day. Challenges such as combined polling stations and cultural practices, like wearing a veil, can lead to reluctance among women to vote or to be seen at polling stations, further limiting their direct participation and awareness of voting procedures (Mahmood et al., 2014; Pallister, 2020; Dark III, 2003).

Models of Voter Behavior

Understanding voter behavior is crucial for designing effective electoral processes and training. Lafleur & Sánchez-Domínguez (2015) identified four models that shed light on external voting behavior:

1) Social Voting Model: Posits that voting is a collective effort, with voters' decisions shaped by discussions within their social groups. Media influence and socio-economic, religious, and ethnic factors also play pivotal roles in molding public opinion and voter choices.

2) Ideological Model: Emphasizes the significance of ideological factors, in which group membership and psychological attachment to a particular ideology can influence voters, even motivating them to vote from abroad.

3) Interest-Driven Model: While often criticized for its value-oriented and materialistic approach, this model suggests that voters primarily support parties that protect their personal interests, potentially overshadowing other factors.

4) Transnational Model: Highlights citizens' social, economic, political, and religious engagement with their home countries, suggesting that such engagement can drive political participation regardless of physical location.

These models provide theoretical insights into the complex motivations and influences on voters, which electoral training and public awareness campaigns aim to address to foster more informed and active participation.

Methodology

In this study, a questionnaire was designed that highlighted the important and legal aspects of elections. Eleven questions were developed in consultation with ECP's legal experts, which covered all aspects of legal and procedural matters. These questions were piloted with the ECP staff to assess their clarity and to determine whether they understood them; then they were used

in the main training to build knowledge. Table 1 shows the total number of respondents who participated in the pre- and post-assessment study. This study highlights the pre- and post-assessments of Punjab, Pakistan's most populous province, which comprises 52.9% of the country's total population.

In Punjab, Pre-assessment questionnaires were completed by 7,775 participants, comprising 5,119 males (66%) and 2,656 females (34%). All participants from the government departments whose names are finalized by the Election Commission of Pakistan for placement at different polling stations across Pakistan will ensure the smooth conduct of the polling process. Afterward, the same questionnaire was distributed to participants to assess the effectiveness of the training. In the post-assessment, 7575 participants participated, comprising 4964 males (65%) and 2611 females (34%), and evaluated the comparison between pre- and post-assessments and measured improvement in knowledge (Table 2).

Table 1 Distribution of Polling Staff Respondents by Gender: Pre- and Post-Assessment in Punjab Province

Region	Pre-assessment (No. of Respondents)			Post-assessment (No. of Respondents)		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Punjab	5115	2656	7775	4964	2611	7575

Table 2 Polling Staff Knowledge Performance by Question: Pre-Training, Post-Training, and Percentage Improvement

| Sr. No	Questions	Pre-Assessment	Post Assessment	Improvement in knowledge
1	Who will take the oath of office from the Presiding Officer as per the election law?	85.2%	94.8%	9.6%
2	Whose responsibility is it to remove all symbols of campaigning in an area of 100 meters from the polling station?	55.6%	80.8%	25.2%
3	Who is responsible for the correct entry of all information on the counterfoil of the ballot paper?	84.6%	95.5%	10.8%
4	How much fee will the presiding officer charge from the agent or candidate challenging the voter?	81.8%	99.0%	17.3%
5	Will the tendered vote count?	65.6%	97.5%	31.9%
6	Under which section of the Elections Act, 2017, is the presiding officer at the polling station vested with the powers of a magistrate first class?	61.1%	91.0%	30.0%
7	What is a torn or damaged ballot paper from the polling staff during polling?	85.7%	97.4%	11.7%
8	Which form will be used to prepare the statement of count as per the election rules?	84.4%	95.7%	11.2%
9	Which form will be used to verify the empty ballot box in accordance with election rules?	56.3%	83.0%	26.7%

Sr. No	Questions	Pre-Assessment	Post Assessment	Improvement in knowledge
10	What is the packet prepared for the valid votes cast from the ballot box in favor of each candidate?	85.0%	97.3%	12.3%
11	Which packet will be used for the unused ballot paper?	52.5%	85.1%	32.6%
Total		**72.5%**	**92.47%**	**19.9%**

Results

This section presents the results of the pre- and post-training assessments, evaluating the effectiveness of the training program for polling staff in Punjab, Pakistan. The analysis focuses on descriptive statistics, comparative performance across specific questions, and the statistical significance of the observed improvements.

Overview of Participant Demographics and Assessment Structure

The study encompassed 7,575 participants from Punjab, Pakistan, the most populous province. A comprehensive questionnaire comprising 11 standard questions was designed to cover essential electoral procedures and legal provisions, and to assess participants' knowledge both before and after the training intervention.
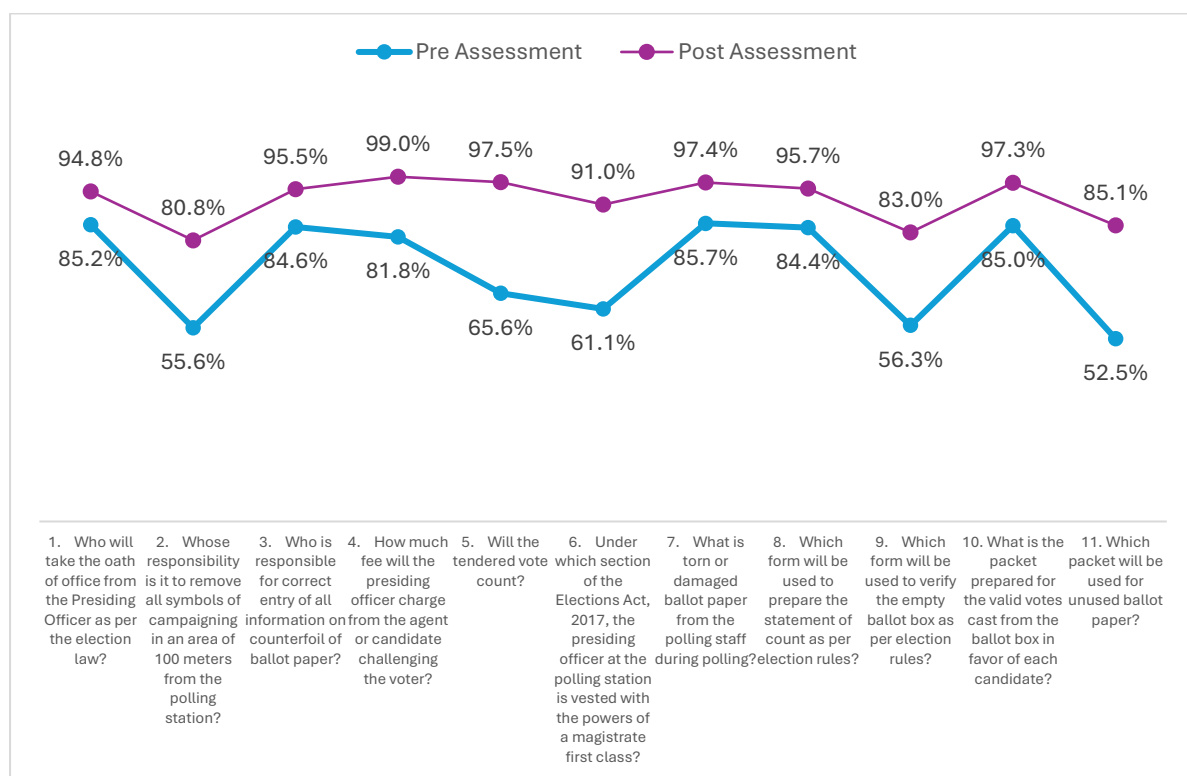
Figure 1 Question-Specific Knowledge Scores of Polling Staff: Pre- and Post-Training Comparison in Punjab Province

Overall Knowledge Improvement: Descriptive Statistics

The results demonstrate a substantial and consistent improvement in participants' electoral knowledge following the training program.

Pre-Training Assessment: Before the training, participants exhibited a mean knowledge score of 72.53% with a standard deviation (SD) of 14.11%. The relatively high standard deviation indicates considerable variability in participants' knowledge levels at the outset.

Post-Training Assessment: Following the training, the mean knowledge score increased to 92.47%, while the standard deviation decreased to 6.50%. This reduction in variability suggests a more uniform and higher level of understanding across the participant group.

Table 3 Overall Mean Knowledge Scores and Standard Deviations of Polling Staff: Pre- and Post-Training Assessment

Assessment Type	Mean Score (%)	Standard Deviation
Pre-Training	72.53	14.11
Post-Training	92.46	6.50

Table 3 clearly summarizes these mean scores and standard deviations, illustrating the pronounced positive impact of the training. Overall, a 19.93% increase in post-assessment scores was observed, signaling substantial improvements in knowledge. These findings are consistent with the existing literature, which emphasizes that training enhances operational and legal understanding in electoral contexts (ACE Electoral Knowledge Network, 2021; López-Pintor, 2000).

Detailed Performance Across Key Competency Areas

The analysis of individual questions further highlights improvements across specific competency areas:

1) Voter Oath Administration: For instance, the understanding of "Who will take the oath of office from the Presiding Officer as per the election law?" improved from 85.2% to 94.8%.

2) Campaigning Restrictions: Knowledge regarding the responsibility to "remove all symbols of campaigning in an area of 100 meters from the polling station" increased from 55.6% to 80.8%.

3) Ballot Paper Management: Understanding of "Who is responsible for correct entry of all information on counterfoil of ballot paper?" improved from 84.6% to 95.5%.

4) Handling Unused Ballot Papers: Crucially, for question 11, "Which packet will be used for unused ballot paper?", the correct response rate rose from 52.5% before training to 85.1% after training. This specific improvement is particularly noteworthy as it pertains to a practical operational aspect.

These question-specific gains underscore the training's effectiveness in clarifying ambiguities across various critical electoral procedures. As James & Garnett (2020) emphasize, training polling staff is paramount, as they are the direct implementers of the electoral process on the ground.
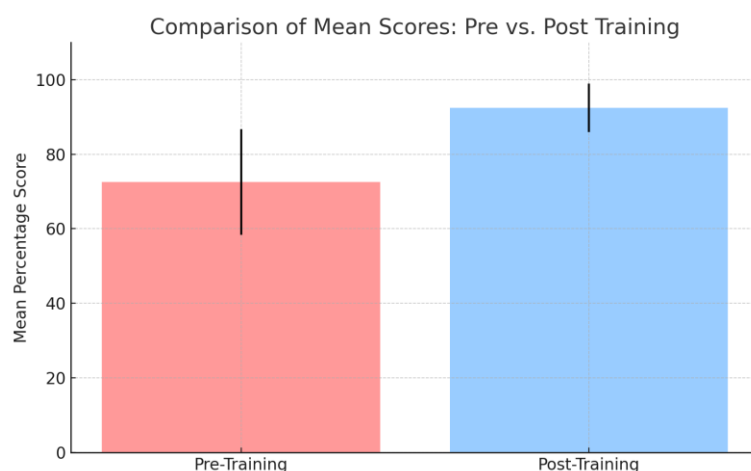
Figure 2 Overall Mean Knowledge Scores of Polling Staff Pre- and Post-Training, with Error Bars Representing Standard Deviation

Statistical Significance of Improvement
To rigorously assess the statistical significance of the observed improvement, an independent t-test (Welch's test) was conducted. This test was chosen because of the anonymity of questionnaire completion, which ensured confidentiality and unbiased responses.
1) Test Statistic: The calculated t-value was 4.25 (with 16.75 degrees of freedom).
2) P-value: The corresponding p-value was 0.00079.
This result indicates that the observed improvement in knowledge post-training is statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). Furthermore, the large effect size associated with this improvement suggests that the training program not only produced statistically reliable gains but also yielded a practically meaningful enhancement in the real-world electoral process. The visual representation in Figure 2 further supports this, showing clear separation and reduced overlap between the pre- and post-training mean scores and their associated standard deviations.

Discussion and Conclusion
This study demonstrated that training played a pivotal role in knowledge acquisition and in enhancing overall electoral capacity. The findings and their implications are discussed below, culminating in the overall conclusion and recommendations.
Impact of Training on Knowledge and Electoral Preparedness
The findings unequivocally demonstrate the transformative impact of structured training on polling staff's knowledge and preparedness for election duties. Given that general elections in Pakistan occur every five years, polling staff often overlook legal provisions and the latest developments in electoral law. In this scenario, training is crucial for refreshing knowledge and staying abreast of new developments. Indeed, as highlighted by Kerr & Lührmann (2017), a significant portion of electoral fraud stems from procedural mistakes rather than deliberate malpractice, making training a crucial risk-mitigation strategy. The data presented in the study clearly illustrates this, showing a substantial improvement in correct answers from 72.53% before training to 92.47% afterward, representing an impressive 19.9% gain. This improvement underscores that well-structured training is not merely a procedural formality but a powerful mechanism for ensuring legal compliance and minimizing voter errors.
Enhancement of Competency Across Key Electoral Functions
The comprehensive questionnaire designed for this study covered critical aspects of electoral procedures, including ballot paper validation and handling, removal of election symbols from polling stations, verification of empty ballot boxes, and proper management and placement of ballot papers after polls. Participants showed significant gains across all these areas. For instance, correct responses to Question 11, regarding the packet for unused ballot papers, increased from 52.5% pre-training to 85.1% post-training. This underscores the vital role of training in equipping polling staff, who, as James & Garnett (2020) note, are the primary frontline stakeholders responsible for executing the electoral process.
Promoting Equity and Standardization
Beyond knowledge enhancement, electoral training is instrumental in ensuring equity and standardization across the electoral process. By bringing together polling staff from diverse government institutions, these training sessions provide a common platform for discussion, allowing them to share past experiences and adopt a comprehensive, legally compliant approach as guided by ECP trainers. This approach, as emphasized by the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (2016), is crucial for ensuring consistency and fairness across all polling stations nationwide, thereby reducing existing knowledge disparities.
Limitations and Future Research
While this study robustly demonstrates a statistically significant improvement in knowledge following training, as measured by quantitative methods, it acknowledges certain limitations. Primarily, the study does not directly measure the long-term retention of this knowledge or its

real-time performance application, relying instead on immediate post-training assessments. Although feedback questionnaires, as discussed by LeDuc et al. (2014), provided valuable insights, a deeper understanding of the practical effectiveness of training could be gained. Therefore, future research should incorporate qualitative methods, such as interviews with polling staff and direct observation during elections, to assess the sustained impact of training on actual performance and problem-solving in the field.

Overall Conclusion

This study unequivocally concludes that well-structured and comprehensive training programs are not merely a procedural formality but a powerful and indispensable mechanism for enhancing electoral capacity. The pre- and post-assessment data, involving 7,575 participants, clearly demonstrated a statistically significant improvement in polling staff's knowledge. This substantial gain underscores the critical role of Election Management Bodies (EMBs) in reinforcing the training framework to ensure free, fair, and transparent elections. In developing countries like Pakistan, where political parties often blame EMBs for alleged electoral rigging, proactive and robust training becomes even more vital. EMBs must implement concrete measures to counter such narratives and uphold the principles of transparency and efficiency in increasingly complex democratic processes.

Relevance to Sustainable Development Goal 16

This research strongly aligns with Sustainable Development Goal 16 (SDG 16), which advocates for "Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions." By ensuring fair and transparent elections through practical training, the study directly contributes to fostering robust democratic processes, which are foundational to peace and justice in society. Enhanced public trust in electoral institutions, bolstered by competent polling staff, leads to stronger governance and more legitimate institutions.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are put forth to strengthen electoral capacity further:

1) Mandatory Cyclical Training: Election Management Bodies (EMBs) should mandate regular, cyclical training for all election officials to not only enhance knowledge but also proactively reduce procedural errors and keep staff up to date on changes in electoral law.

2) Standardized Curriculum: Standardize training content and curricula nationwide to minimize disparities in knowledge and practice across different regions, thereby promoting consistency and fairness.

3) Integrated Assessment Tools: Consistently integrate pre- and post-assessment tools to accurately identify knowledge gaps, measure training effectiveness, and inform future program improvements through comprehensive analysis of procedural errors.

4) Knowledge Sharing: EMBs should actively develop and share innovative training frameworks and outcomes with regional and international electoral networks to foster global best practices and promote continuous learning.

5) Refresher Courses: Implement regular refresher courses to ensure long-term knowledge retention and adaptability to evolving electoral laws and technologies, thereby sustaining high levels of staff competence.

Acknowledgements

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