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The purpose of this internship project research is to assess the ability of Armenian NGOs to contribute to free and fair election processes in the upcoming Parliamentary elections based on analyses of the election programs submitted to Counterpart International, the international consulting organization that is implementing the USAID Civic Advocacy Support Program (CASP) in Armenia.

Political Participation and Free and Fair Elections

The vertical structure of democracy hinges on electing and elections – free, fair, recurrent, and competitive (Sartori 1987).

Political participation is activity by individuals formally intended to influence either who governs or the decisions taken by governments. Both the extent and forms of participation vary between types of regime. Liberal democracies characterized by voluntary participation are more participatory than most authoritarian regimes (Hague et al. 1998).

Classical democratic theory (Berelson, 1954) describes an average citizen as someone who is very knowledgeable about politics and is an active participant in political affairs. The reality comes to show that not many people are interested in educating themselves about politics. Their vote for the president or party is based on a vague understanding of the major issues in question and the solutions proposed.

Thus, the expectations of active and conscious participation were not realized in life. Seymour Lipset (1981), a professor of political science and sociology, provides data on “national American elections” pointing out that the voting turnout decreased since the year 1896 “when 80 per cent of those eligible went to polls” (p. 185). Giovanni Sartori (1987) explains this fact associating it with the “habituation to voting” (p. 108). Lipset (1981) brings forward three factors that account for the low rate in voting turnout: „ stability of the system ... decline [in] major social conflicts, and an increase in cross-pressures” (p. 185). He believes that participation is preferred in any society where the government wants to

introduce changes in the system; fundamental changes in governing structure without preliminary consensus with the population is more likely to bring social upheavals, hatred towards authorities and even result in revolution and thinks that citizen involvement in political affairs is the most effective instrument for prevention of dissatisfaction and aggression that accompany political changes. (Lipset 1981)

Sartori (1987) discusses three possible solutions for increasing levels of participation and voting turnout. The first problem to overcome is information. It can be „ too much,” „ one sided,” or of „ poor quality,” (Sartori, 1987, 104). The voter often has difficulty in absorbing the amount of information. He is also unable to make a rational choice, when the information does not reveal the truth or lacks completeness. This is a reason for his withdrawal from political realm. However, Sartori points out that “if the purpose is to reach out at larger audiences, a better or higher quality of the media may not serve that purpose” (1987, 105).

As a next remedy for increasing voting turnout, it is suggested to establish a “participatory democracy” (Sartori, 1987, 104). The assumption is that it will increase voters’ interest by engaging them in decision-making process (Sartori, 1987). Sartori (1987) considers this idea utopian: „ participatory democracy” becomes unrealistic because of the „ knowledge crisis” (Sartori, 1987, p.120).

The third solution to the above mentioned problem is “increased levels of education” (Sartori, 1987, 120). Lipset (1981) states that a great percentage of those who vote is educated. According to him, education is closely connected with active participation in politics. Sartori disagrees on this, pointing out that “one can be highly literate and yet remain politically illiterate” (1987, p.106).

Lipset (1981) brings an example of many developed democratic countries that have high “rates of participation” and demonstrate constant stability in their political system. Those are Australia, Great Britain, the Scandinavian countries and New Zealand. In these countries the

increase in participation was achieved through a gradual process of involving the “lower strata,” improving the educational system and showing the benefits of participation to their own interests.

Participation is a necessary condition to make democratic system flexible and responsive to public needs. High rate in voting turnout is not an impossible task to achieve, but it is a long and gradual process. It requires increase in the level of education and assistance in realizing the benefits of participation. And in this point the role of civil society in raising public awareness and civic education, in public mobilization to participate in elections becomes crucial.

In a report commissioned by the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, two Canadian election officers (Gould and Jackson 1995) suggest that the key test for the elections of being free and fair is whether the will of the majority of voters is expressed freely, clearly and knowledgeably, and in secret'. According to them, a free election is: “1) an electoral process which respects human rights and freedoms (speech, association to register as an elector, a party or a candidate, from coercion, of access to the polls to vote in secret, to complain); and 2) an electoral process with a level playing field, including: non-partisan administration of the election; constitutional protection of election law; universal suffrage and accessible polling places; balanced reporting by the media; equitable access to resources for campaigns; open and transparent counting of the vote; equitable and no coercive treatment to parties, candidate and electors by government, the police, the military and the judiciary” (Gould and Jackson 1995, p.36) .

Sidney Verba and Horman H. Nie (1972) found out that if respondents are strongly identify with a party and are otherwise cognitively „ pledged into the larger world of politics there is high probability that they will vote. Another particularly strong predictor of participation sums to be the respondents' sense of external political efficacy – their perception

that purposive action directed at the political system (such as voting) would or would not produce positive results.

Do the respondents believe that in their own personal life, purposive actions will succeed in producing desired results; or do they think that life is dominated by change without their participation. According to Hadley, response to this question powerfully determines the voting behavior of the citizens (Hadley 1978).

2003 Elections in Armenia

Fourteen years since declaring independence from the Soviet Union, Armenia's democratic transition remains incomplete. Democratic reform efforts have stalled, and the trend towards authoritarianism has gradually increased. (USAID 2005)

The main divide in Armenia's political landscape is between pro-government coalition supporters who allegedly misuse government resources to maintain their grip on power and anti-government opposition supporters who are focused on removing the president and overturning the results of the 2003 elections through a boycott of Parliament and sporadic street protests. The resulting political stalemate has hampered reforms and contributed to Armenia's ongoing regional isolation. (USAID 2005)

In 2003, Armenia held presidential and parliamentary elections with widely disputed results. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe/Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR 2004), which led international election observation efforts, reported that the elections did not meet international standards but that the flaws were not enough to reverse the results.

The elections gave the pro-government parties a strong majority in Parliament. The two main opposition forces, the Justice Alliance and the National Unity Party, won 24 out of a total of 131 seats. In the same elections, voters rejected constitutional amendments which,

among other things, would have reduced the powers of the presidency in some areas, eliminated a ban on dual citizenship, granted foreigners the right to own land in Armenia, and allowed non-citizens to vote. (Freedom House 2004)

Armenia's democratic development has proceeded unevenly in the 14 years since independence. Although Armenia was one of the first Soviet republics to end Communist rule, the absence of an effective system of checks and balances, the concentration of power in the presidency, the centralized system of government, and the lack of an independent civil service have fostered weak governance and widespread corruption. (Freedom House 2004)

This has been exacerbated by the close links between the country's political and business elites, which have impeded the development of a more transparent political system. Elections have generally failed to meet international standards, contributing to public cynicism toward the authorities and skepticism about the value of participating in political and civic activities. (Freedom House 2004)

The failure of authorities to ensure democratic elections has contributed to a lack of public confidence in the electoral process and Armenia's progress toward a functioning democracy. The Parliament approved revisions to the electoral code in May 2005, with the aim of addressing some of the flaws that have characterized Armenia's elections. These include a reduction in the number of presidential appointees on election commissions and an increase in the number of parliamentary seats allocated by proportional representation at the expense of those contested under the single-mandate system, with a view to reducing opportunities for vote buying. (OSCE/ODIHR 2004) A new national voter's register has also been compiled. According to Freedom House, Armenia's rating for electoral process remains unchanged at 5.75. Although the revised electoral code improves the legal framework for elections, its success will depend on its implementation, particularly with regard to the

authorities' commitment to identify and take measures against those guilty of electoral violations. (Freedom House 2004)

Nowadays, the public all over the world is increasingly losing confidence in politicians, mainly because of their financial misconduct. The current public perception indicates that most politicians are motivated by individual greed rather than by a willingness to serve people. According to the Transparency International Global Corruption Report (2005), in opinion of 55,000 interviewees from 69 countries, political parties are the most corrupt institutions, along with the police and courts.

In the period of transition, an election system is evidently one of the most affected institutions within the weak state. In the vast majority of the post-Communist states, including Armenia, election processes are normally accompanied by controlling media and biting journalists, repressing opposition and human rights activists, stuffing ballots and using falsified voters' lists, buying votes and bribing members of electoral commissions. In other words, selling influence and buying power are a common place in the Armenian political life, where for the last decade local and national elections failed to meet international standards of fair, free and transparent elections. The CRD/TI Armenia monitoring of the 2003 Parliamentary elections revealed numerous cases of violation of the party finance legislation by three political parties, members of the Coalition Government, formed in June 2003. Besides, 75% of respondents of the Yerevan phone survey reported about bribes offered to them or to their relatives by representatives of the parties which won the elections. (CRD/TI 2003)

Voters have become increasingly disenchanted and disengaged from politics. The turnout for the 2003 parliamentary elections was the lowest since independence at 52 percent and a IFES (2004) survey found that less than one quarter of the Armenian public believed that the 2003 presidential and parliamentary elections were fair.

Despite improvements in certain areas of the electoral process over Armenia's May 25 elections, the referendum for the new constitution also failed to cross the threshold for democratic elections. There is an atmosphere of cynicism, frustration and anxiety surrounding Armenia's electoral processes, evidenced by low voter turnout, lack of confidence in the ability of election authorities to act impartially and the absence of processes to effectively redress electoral disputes. According to National Democratic Institution (NDI 2003) mission, vote buying was widely practiced by several political parties in the pre-election period; the political environment was tainted by the activities of so-called "neighborhood guys" (local criminal elements), who often threaten voters and seek to pressure some candidates; despite some improvements in the TV coverage, bias in favor of pro-government parties continued in the private television news and in the print media, contrary to journalistic ethics and pressures against and intimidation of journalists added to an environment of self-censorship that undermines press freedoms that are necessary for a democratic election process; there were significant instances of electoral violations, including intimidation of proxies and observers.

Nonetheless, according to the same National Democracy Institute, political parties campaigned actively in these elections; domestic civic organizations mobilized to monitor the election process, and voting proceeded with fewer incidents than in past elections.

Civil Society

Civil society refers to the establishment and functioning of social activities and groupings independent of the state, although they can and should interact with the latter. Robert Miller defines civil society as „a sphere of social activity free of the interference of the communist party-state,“ and Hosking defines it as ”institutions and associations independent of the state and the ruling party” (Holms 1997) .

Civil society is a necessary condition for democratic consolidation, because it plays a vital role in the process of legitimization of political institutions, mitigating their uncertainty and normalizing democratic politics. A strong civil society, and human potential embedded in its many associations, is considered to be a necessity to a strong democracy. But the relationship is rather complex and the pathways are many and complicated.

Civil Society contributes in diverse ways to deepening, consolidating and maintaining democracy. It supplements the role of political parties in stimulating political participation and increasing citizen's political efficacy and skill. (Diamond et. al 1998)

According to Hague (1998) such institutions form part of the collective life of society, and of liberal democracy, but are voluntary in character and autonomous from the government, Where a civil society is absent, as in totalitarian regimes, there are only two groups; rulers and ruled. (Hague et al. 1998)

Danielian (1998) argues that in democracies people can have real representative, accountable and responsive to their needs government, if they actively participate in politics, Otherwise, the system ceases to be peoples rule, One of the primary forms of political participation is via interests or lobby group.

Linz and Stepan (2001) define "civil society" as arena of the polity where self-organizing and relatively autonomous groups, movements, and individual attempt to articulate values, to create associations and solidarities and to advance their interests. Civil society can include manifold social movements and associations from all social strata.

Civil society involves citizens acting collectively in a public sphere to express their interests, achieve mutual goals, make demands on the state, and hold state officials responsive. Civil society is the middle link between the private sphere and the state, the protection of which the actors of civil society need in order to assure their autonomy and

freedom of action. Hence, the civil society not only restricts state power but legitimates state authority when that authority is based on the rule of law.

According to Diamond (1994), to be effective the civil society should not contain uncompromising interest groups or groups with antidemocratic goals and methods, and have appropriate level of organizational institutionalization, contributing to the stability, predictability, and governability of a democratic regime. Another important factor for benefiting democracy is the ability of civil society to become more pluralistic without becoming fragmented. At last, civil society serves democracy best, when it is solid, providing individual with opportunities to full participation in society's life.

The first and most basic role of civil society is to limit and control the power of the state. Some other functions of it are to expose the corrupt conduct of public officials and lobby for good governance reforms, to promote political participation, help to develop the other values of democratic life: tolerance, moderation, compromise, and respect for opposing points of view; programs for democratic civic education in the schools; serve as an arena for the expression of diverse interests, and to lobby for the needs and concerns of their members; to provide new forms of interest and solidarity that cut across old forms of tribal, linguistic, religious, and other identity ties, to provide a training ground for future political leaders; help to inform the public about important public issues. Civil society has to play significant role in mediating and helping to resolve conflict, in monitoring the conduct of elections.

Because civil society is independent of the state doesn't mean that it must always criticize and oppose the state. In fact, by making the state at all levels more accountable, responsive, inclusive, and effective—and hence more legitimate—a forceful civil society strengthens citizens' respect for the state and promotes their positive engagement with it. Despite its important role in initiating and consolidating democracy, it should be not forgotten, that interest groups cannot substitute the political parties.

Danielian (1992) puts the stress on the importance of availability of diverse information in promoting the liberal democracy. She argues that the advocacy NGOs are the natural by-product of democratic way of government in the era of globalization. She highlights the importance of some kind of private associational life. According to her plurality of interested voices, that can be introduced by NGOs are the basic essence of liberal democracy. “Because a plurality of interested voices taking stands on various issues is an important assumption of our democratic state, one necessary question for analysis is whether or not such pluralities do indeed exist in the various forums for political participation.” (Danielian, 1992, p.64)

To conclude, civil society plays a significant role in building and consolidating democracy. And although its role is not the most important and powerful, the more active, pluralistic, and resourceful, institutionalized, and democratic is civil society, and the more effectively it balances the tensions in its relations with the state, the more likely it is that democracy will emerge and endure. A democratic state cannot be stable unless it is effective and legitimate, with the respect and support of its citizens. Civil society is a check, a monitor, but also a vital partner in the quest for this kind of positive relationship between the democratic state and its citizens.

While a vibrant civil society is recognized as an important element of democracy building, “free and fair elections” are seen as the most vital and basic factors in a democracy since they are the sole means of granting the government the authority and legitimacy to govern.

Civil Society in Armenia

Armenia's rating for civil society remains at 3.50 (on a scale of 1-7, with 1 as the highest and 7 as the lowest rate) owing to evidence of increased politicization of the education system, which offsets the positive steps toward regulating lobbying activities. (Freedom House 2004)

The situation is explained by the lack of consistent systematic work for forming a positive image of the NGO by the mass media. To the contrary, the mass media sometimes gave mostly negative information about NGOs, describing them as organizations, exclusively busy with searching for grants. Actually, neither NGOs, nor mass media have reached understanding of the mutual goals and the need to consolidate their efforts. (Freedom House 2004)

According to Babayan (2001), there are other factors complicating the development of this sector: the imperfect normative base, regulating interaction of the state bodies and public associations, the lack of a mechanism for cooperation of the three sectors of society, absence of a system in the organization of the financial support and preferential taxation; the lack of rooted charity traditions, absence of the middle class as a financial base for the activity of independent non-commercial organizations, insufficient awareness about development programs, the mechanisms of their elaboration, the place of public organizations in their realization; insufficiency of necessary organizational and methodical assistance from some governmental bodies.

Civil society groups in Armenia are becoming more active in public life but remain hampered by financial constraints and a reliance on external funding, mainly from diasporic groups and international organizations. According to Babayan (2001), for the realization of their public mission, the NGOs use various financing sources that can be divided into three blocs: -foreign aid; domestic financing sources; the activities of public organizations.

According to UNDP (1998) In Armenia NGOs are not financially viable. They either do not function at all or depend on donor support, for which they have to compete. This fact makes the NGOs accountable more to the donors than to their constituents, since they have to adopt their needs and objectives to the interests of the donors.

A change in form of government always requires the politically active population to learn new habits, but the transition from communism to democracy is especially acute. In post communist states, both elites and citizens need to learn that mass participation need no longer be a cynical exercise in manipulation by the rulers. Experience suggests that acquiring these new operating procedures is a difficult task. Establishing democratic institutions is one thing, unlearning old assumptions about the limited role for voluntary participation is another. (Hague et. al 1998)

The most substantial channel for financing the activity of the public sector in Armenia is the foreign aid. What the NGOs have achieved today is mainly based on the financial support from international organizations and donors. (Babayan 2001)

Foreign grants are also an active form of support and they are still on of the most civilized ways of financing of the third sector. It is not easy to get them. On one hand, receiving international sources requires accurate financing account, possession of special knowledge about the rules of functioning of such system, experience of work and high professionalism. On the other hand, financing the projects, the grantors prefer the projects with new approaches to the solution of problems, set up in them. Under that form of financing, dependence and firm control on the part of donors is inevitable for NGOs, however, this does not make the competition for participation in the international projects tenses. The domestic resources are another source of subsistence for public organizations – they include the resources of private business and individual donations (support from private persons), as well as the state assistance. (Babayan 2001)

The problem of getting resources and fund-raising deserves a special attention. This issue is painful for the Armenian NGOs due to the lack of constructive assistance from the state. (Babayan 2001), which nevertheless arose a lot of controversies, assuming dependency which is in conflict just with the notion of civil society organization. The argument for this model is

quite solid: the fear of the public organizations to lose their independence and become dependent on the state structures in designing their policy and programs of actions.

And finally, the less spread channel of financing is the very activity of public organizations, i.e. self-financing.

As many leaders explained NGOs care today more about being accountable to donor organizations rather than to their own beneficiaries and constituencies, They are more concerned about image building in relation to donors rather than with the public. Most likely NGOs have more expectations today of benefits from the donor community rather than from seeking more public support. According to the assessment of NGO sector in Armenia (Blue and Ghazaryan, 2004) ”there is a significant level of NGOS detachment from the society.”

The study by Blue and Ghazaryan (2004) revealed that almost all NGOs are actively involved in fund raising activities predominately within Armenia, but including principally the donor community with offices in Yerevan (USA, Europe, NIS countries).

This study aims to research the following questions.

1. What activities do Armenian NGOs propose to ensure free and fair elections?
2. What are the problems on the way to free and fair elections in Armenia?
3. How do the NGOs identify and analyze the root causes of problems on the way to achieve free and fare elections?
4. To what extent do the NGOs take into account international and domestic observers’ reports?
5. To what extent NGOs see a need for studying “success stories” of other transition countries for designing and implementing election specific initiatives?

6. What are the main impediments on the way of NGOs to contribute most effectively to free and fair elections?

Methodology:

The methodology employed for this research is the content analysis of NGO grant applications for the upcoming 2007 Parliamentary Elections submitted to USAID Civic Advocacy Support Program (CASP), implemented by Counterpart International, content analysis of international reports on past elections in Armenia, and in-depth interviews with NGO leaders. Interviews with the NGO leaders were conducted with guarantees of confidentiality. Ten respondents were selected randomly out of the leaders of 99 civil society organizations submitted their proposal to CASP

The USAID CASP, implemented by Counterpart International, announced its solicitation of Letters of Interest (LOI)'s from civil society organizations (CSOs) to receive grant support from CASP for election-related projects in August 2006. In an effort to strengthen and expand the role and participation of CSOs and the Armenian public in the election process, CASP sought to competitively select non-partisan election related initiatives for funding. In the context of this grant competition, "Civil Society Organizations" include the broadest group of non-government entities, including associations, unions, for-profit business pursuing a public purpose, media and non-profit organizations.

Civil society organizations with relevant mission, strategy, expertise and capacity and proven political neutrality to carry out election-related initiatives have been encouraged to submit Letters of Interest. CSOs with relevant experience such as awareness raising, public/civic campaign, issue advocacy, constituency building and mobilization, human rights monitoring have been particularly welcome to apply for this Grant.

Findings

NGO activities proposed to ensure free and fair elections

The regional distribution of the initiatives proposed is rather uneven (see appendix B). The overwhelming number of the proposals came from Yerevan-based organizations, followed by Syunik, Shirak and Lori marzes.

The content analysis revealed that the majority of the NGOs proposed awareness raising campaign, employing activities as publication of awareness raising booklets, leaflets, guidelines, brochures, PSAs (public service advertisements) ,dialogue and debates, rallies, concerts, candidate questionnaire, town hall meetings, trainings, high tech activities, exit polls and post-election surveys. (See appendix E.) This component comprises the 68% of all activities proposed. (See appendix C.)

The mission of NGOs for awareness-raising is to provide reliable, accurate information to citizens, empower residents with skills and mechanisms to make their “voice” heard in public life and government decision-making, and establish constructive relationships between citizens and government and other community stakeholders.

Publications of different kinds provide public with information and mobilize it to vote making clear the importance of each vote, active participation and free and fair election in general, recalling belief that the civic participation and control over electoral processes can play a significant role towards establishment of an irreversible democracy, outlining the knowledgeable approach towards organizing and holding democratic elections, and steps voters can take to identify what it is they are looking for in a candidate, obtain (and objectively consider) information about the candidates, evaluate candidate platforms or voting records, assess candidate leadership qualities, and make a final decision. These printed materials will encourage Armenian citizens to exercise their democratic rights and responsibilities to vote and to keep elected officials accountable to their constituencies.

In addition, proposed post-election publications, which are planned to be compiled after summarizing the results of the elections will outline and summarize the results of elections

and will be distributed to the political parties, non-governmental organizations, the media, as well as to foreign diplomatic missions and representatives of international human rights organizations.

Web sites

Some organizations proposed to open a website providing full coverage of the elections - pre-election, election and post-election campaigns. There will be updated information on the Parties, NGOs and individual candidates with equal access for all of them. The websites are to be impartial and available to everyone. Also some links are proposed to the site of election news. These sites could turn to a perfect source of information in the future, during the 2008 Presidential elections. The providers of the important and up-to-date information will be all the Parties, candidates, NGOs and state institutions.

On the day of the elections pages of the website are to be entirely dedicated to the election process with an update on the number of participated voters once every three hours. The website will also contain the preliminary and concluding reports of the day.

Town Hall Meetings

Town Hall Meetings make possible engagement and meaningful opportunities for citizens to participate in public decision making. This process addresses the needs of today's citizens, decision makers and democracy. It creates an opportunity for the general public to give those in leadership positions direct, substantive feedback on key public issues. Each meeting engages hundreds of citizens at a time, effectively and quickly summarizing citizen input and widely disseminating the results through media coverage. NGO's role as a neutral convener increases the confidence among citizens and decision-makers that the content, process and

outcomes are fair and balanced. It is planned to bring together various representatives from different interest groups: public sector, businesses, NGOs, unemployed, students, etc.

The proposed trainings are intended to train proxies of political parties and members of non-governmental organizations registered for carrying out observer missions during upcoming elections.

Another way to ensure free and fair elections is to organize monitoring of electoral processes. Other issues of importance on Election Day are the registration of the party lists and the candidates nominated for majority vote in single-member constituencies; political rallies, including the coverage of activities of different political forces by the public media; the voting process and the counting of votes. The preliminary results of the monitoring are to be reported to the public regularly, by means of media briefings and press releases.

Public campaigns

The proposed projects aim at promoting corruption-free elections through a public campaign to increase awareness on corrupt practices, break the wall of fear, apathy and cynicism in society and influence voters' attitudes and activism in participating, monitoring and resisting corrupt practices. Through targeting various groups within society, such as NGOs, youth, journalists, those working in the Arts and even the Diaspora, the projects will strive to reach out to as many people as possible in order to generate broader civic activism and stronger resistance to corrupt behaviors and falsified elections. Such a campaign will help strengthen the role of civil society in the election process and promote more informed and well-grounded decisions of voters.

Activities planned within these projects include development and dissemination of promotional materials (e.g. flyers, T-shirts, caps, badges, billboards, posters, etc.) with a campaign logo, organization of poster, essay and journalist award competitions, rallies, actions, press conferences, moderation of online discussions, observation of elections,

development of position statements and as a conclusion, development of a report on transparency of 2007 parliamentary elections.

Cultural events

By means of cultural events the awareness of the voters (especially at age of 18-25) will be increased about their rights, and the procedures of the election, about the new Electoral Code, about the social monitoring methods of the elections, and about the importance of the monitoring. The goal of the event is to make their national, patriotic spirit wake up, to motivate their feelings and to form a willingness of involvement in the politics, to increase the awareness about the present situation of the election process, about the importance of the elections.

Different competitions, exhibitions have been proposed in the framework of this program: competitions on posters, photo-pictures, flyers, essays, motivating population, especially for youth to think about the importance of free and fair elections, to form own opinion, to share it, and to express their critical point of views with others .

Exit polls

The NGOs proposed to initiate exit polls intend to apply an innovative SMS exit-poll mechanism during the Election Day, later on comparing official results with the exit-poll results, as well as investigating particular cases of violation and fraud.

The second major group proposed media campaign and media monitoring (14%)

It is vital to increase citizen activity and raise the public awareness on the eve of the elections. Free and fair elections are impossible when the society is unaware and passive. In Armenia many voters (especially in rural areas) are completely unaware of the political procedures and they don't realize the role and significance of their participation in the elections. Therefore, several programs are aimed at raising the awareness and activity of the regional residents. At this point the role of media is great. According to one of the proposals, the TV means could have more impact in Armenia: "In most cases a 2-3-minute video-clip

can be more effective and impressive than a booklet having more than thousands copies.” The programs suggest the following means of raising public awareness: PSAs, meetings and debates with candidates, “hot-lines”, dialogues, talk-shows which will increasing the level of voters’ awareness and acknowledgment of voters’ rights, as well as at enhancing civil activity which will contribute to the provision of free, fair and transparent elections.

TV broadcasts are to provide the audience with experts’ observations of the types of violations and fraud during former elections and alert voters on possible irregularities, candidates’ presentation of their programs, analysis of that programs and dialogue-debates.

Sometimes the citizens are unable to make a choice and vote because of lack of impartial and unbiased information. Information needed by various stakeholders in order to properly understand, cover and observe elections is not centralized, not always in the right language and often one-sided. Media coverage is based on poor reporting and biases. In order to solve this problem everyone engaged in election-related activities (coverage, observation, assistance etc) needs a convenient source of reliable information on the election, its background, stakeholders and relevant legislation, and also the news media need to be given meaningful feedback on their work in order that they can do a better job in the next round of elections.

The media campaigns are proposed to improve quality of public information about the 2007 election, assess the quality of the media coverage and propose improvements for next election, provide media, observers and other stakeholders with a source of accurate information about the election, including its background, legal framework, parties and platforms, official structures, and assess the quality of election coverage by broadcast media and propose remedies for the next round of elections.

The rest of proposals were divided into two categories: voter registration and legal advocacy with 13% and 5% respectively.

These proposals include activities such as correction of election lists and recovering voting right of people not included in those lists, which will provide each voter with opportunity to exercise his/her voting right.

On the day of the elections NGO representatives plan be present at the courts of general competence and, based on the protocols stating about violations during the elections communicated to them by external observers, will file complaints seeking to restore the rights of voters or observers. Independent, objective and up-to-date information on the number of participated voters and the number of complaints (as well as other information related to observation mission) will be communicated to the general public by means of the Internet, e-mail and screens installed in several places.

One of the NGOs intends to invite international observers from Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Georgia, who possess a big experience in court observation in their countries and the CIS. According to this organization, it is very important that observers from the former Soviet Union countries are involved, because there is a necessity to make an alternative report based on an alternative observation, as during the last several elections the CIS observers gave non-objective assessment that was always in keeping with the official results. Based on their findings, they will organize a press conference and will make a report on the results of their observation mission.

On the day of the elections observers will carry out judicial observation in first-instance courts of Armenia. They will observe the judicial activities and record those violations, which may occur during the judicial review of the electoral right. Upon the conclusion of the activities a report will be drawn.

A public surveys are planned to be conducted during the implementation of these programs, both before and after the vote. The results of the surveys are going to be highlighted in the report.

The issues and target groups, on which the proposed activities are focused on, could be divided into four major categories: first-time voters and youth in general (31 proposals), disabled people (17 proposals), women (8 proposals) and special interest (12 proposals). (See Appendix D)

Youth

The goal of the proposed initiative is to contribute to increased capacity of the youth for better understanding the election processes for minimizing the routes for fraud.

In order to achieve this goal, the following activities are proposed: to select the target group from the active regional youth; to provide training to the target group on the legal framework of the elections and particularly the new Electoral Code; to organize live TV talk shows in the target regions prior to the election day for explaining the main aspects of the election process and alerting the public about possible violations. As a result of these projects the awareness about the electoral rights of young people will be increased. They will have active participation in the process of election, will have direct influence on formation of state power, will support the development of democracy, the protection of human rights, and strengthening of the community and the country.

One of the proposed activities is the election game: “Moot Elections”: youth will have the opportunity to exercise their knowledge about electoral systems in an interactive manner, by participation in Moot Elections, the format of which will be simplified, but as much as possible similar to current Armenian one, thus empowering motivated youth of Armenia with comprehensive and interactive tools to develop a high degree of understanding and appreciation of voter rights and responsibilities in practice.

Disabled people

The proposals focused on disabled people as target group suggest activities aimed at increasing the level of participation of disabled and people with special needs in elections. To

obtain this goal several steps have been proposed: such as acquiring lists of disabled people, checking their involvement in electoral lists before elections, publishing and delivering informative handouts with acting legislation messages to disabled people about their electoral rights, identification of disabled issues, lobbying to include the above mentioned issues in National Assembly candidates' and parties' platforms, conducting surveys among disabled people to identify the assistance needs of them for participation in elections, and providing transportation on election day for alone, disabled and sick people.

Women

The projects targeting women aim at addressing selected key women's political participation issues. Basically these projects could be defined as across-the-board projects since they incorporate innovative interventions, supplement them with operations research and include an advocacy component. However, the main focus is on action-oriented and action-centered innovations. The projects aimed at increasing the role of women in politics, democratic reforms and building of a civil society in Armenia, with particular focus on young women's role.

Issue-based projects

Most issue-based projects start with studying programs of all political parties running for the National Assembly by analyzing those programs through the prism of particular constituents problems and preparing a list or a letter where all relevant problems will be listed, send it to all political parties and majority system candidates asking the candidates to clarify their positions on the revealed problems and to list the actions they plan to undertake in case they are elected, thus drawing all candidates' attention to the particular issue-related problems before the election campaigns start.

After having a clear understanding of which candidates are more "issue-friendly" and which are not the organizations with this type of proposals do not plan to start a campaign

calling upon their constituents to cast their vote for particular candidates or political parties. Rather they will call upon their constituents to make an effort and to inquire independently about their candidates' positions on the problems identified by the organization or by voters themselves.

Problems on the way to assuring free and fair elections

According to the interviews conducted with NGO leaders, the problems on the way to assure free and fair elections are related not as much to imperfect legislation, as to unawareness of public in their rights and responsibilities; inability of people to find out where to apply, at the case of violations even if they understand that their rights are violated; the fact that the violators are never punished; the “power monopoly:” the officials get their goals by all means; economic conditions and apathy as the result of poor economic situation; the passiveness of electorate, because of lack of democratic traditions during all history of Armenia, Soviet heritage, consequences of totalitarian regime; the weak civil society, the low level of knowledge and understanding of democratic values, loopholes in the Electoral code; stereotyping, and respective attitude towards women in a male-oriented society.

In case there is a viable political will in Armenia, the Electoral Code of the country provides a substantial basis for the conduct of elections, the results of which can accurately reflect the preferences of the constituencies and allow the formation of authorities enjoying the citizens' trust. This, however, does not guarantee a flawless election, because the fair implementation of the Code remains crucial for the conduct of genuinely democratic elections” (NGO leader).

How problems are identified

As a result of interviews with NGO leaders it became clear that the NGOs identify problems on the way to contribute to free and fair elections based on the reports of both domestic and international observers, and their own survey and research. (See Appendix F)

According to the answers of NGO leaders they identify the problems took place during 2003 elections studying analysis of public policies, international and domestic reports, other countries' experience. The NGOs with well defined constituents, mostly the issue-based ones identify the issues of concern of the targeted group as a result of their everyday work, receiving calls and complains.

Some of them consider all the available reports of previous elections, and try to find out the information about how did the other countries in eastern and Central Europe overcome the problems of fraudulent elections and what role did the civil society of that countries play in promoting free and fair elections.

Experience of “success stories”

There have been four types of answers to the question about the consideration of other countries' experience and “success stories.”

In the first group could be classified the organizations which take into consideration the experience of other countries, but try to adapt to Armenian specifics.

Some other organizations proposed to use the experience of Germany and Baltic countries: so called “E-democracy,” others the “NY district” experience, in other words to implement in Armenia activities that have resulted in desirable outcomes abroad.

The NGOs in third group said that they did not take into account the “success stories” for this particular program, but they have analyzed and know the civil society activities in many countries in transition. They could not recall what particular ideas they borrowed for their election program.

And in the fourth group are the organizations that think that they take into account the specifics of Armenia, they know the problems and possible solutions, and didn't think of "implanting" the foreign ideas in Armenia.

The major impediments

The most salient impediment is considered to be the financial one, because the organizations rely heavily on grants, although some of the leaders mentioned that financial impediments depend also on the size of program: for smaller ones they have their own resources. This fact affects also the possibility of the NGOs to have a strategic plan. There is no fundraising possibility, and no sense of becoming taxpayer because of imperfect tax environment: the expenses are more than the profits.

Another important impediment is the human factor, because these organizations cannot be sure of their result unless people whom they train or apply to will get everything provided, and implement the intentions.

Some of the leaders mentioned the problem of cooperation with provider-organizations, objective problems like winter time, poor conditions in the villages, additional expenses.

The main problem is the one of cooperation: we have a bitter experience of partners' unreliability.

One of the interviewees claimed the right for the NGOs to have the right by the law to be in the election committees, proclaiming that they have no other problems, because they rely on the donations of their members, and the NGO is a service provider.

How the NGOs contribute to free and fair elections without grants

Many NGOs are going to contribute to free and fair elections at any case, at least on voluntary bases (especially the ones targeting youth), but in smaller scope and not with the projects proposed because for the implementation of those they need financial support.

At any case we'll bring our contribution to Parliamentary Elections, because we have a large constituency, mostly young people from the schools and universities. NGO leader

At least we will do the analysis of party programs, elucidating the consumer right issues to keep the elected officials responsible. NGO leader

At the case we don't have the grant, we'll implement another program because this program was designed taking into account the requirements and specifics of this particular grant. NGO leader

The only thing we can do at the case of not having the grant, we can organize the observations on the Election Day on the voluntary bases. NGO leader

To conclude, even the willingness to contribute to the promotion of free and fair elections is rather high, the activities which will be implemented could be only in the smaller scope and smaller versions of the initiatives proposed, mostly because of lack of financial means.

Analysis

Based on the findings of this research, it could be stated that the most organized, experienced and capable organizations, although as most of NGOs facing financial difficulties, are those based in Yerevan. Also the NGOs situated in Syunik, Shirk and Lori marzes have been rather active during this program.

The civil society organizations proposed open, non-partisan election-specific initiatives employing all possible activities, considering all problems and errors of previous election experience in Armenia and other countries, especially countries in transition, targeting various ranges of groups, especially the underrepresented and vulnerable groups of people.

The organizations proposed non-partisan election related initiatives to be implemented before, on and after Election Day, contributing to the public awareness raising, civic education, voters' rights monitoring and protection, legal consultancy and aid, post-election studies and analysis, for revealing the major shortcomings and finding out the reasons of those.

. The projects proposed are intended to result in the following: strengthen the role and participation of civil society organizations and the public in the election process; increase citizen awareness and knowledge of information and events revolving around 2007 and 2008 election cycles; increase and improve citizen, candidate, and political party dialogue for more responsive policy platforms and accountability.

These results will be achieved through activities that foster meaningful participation of Armenian citizens at the different cycles of the 2007 Parliamentary elections, and strengthen the capacity of CSOs to carry out election-specific initiatives to raise voter awareness, encourage public participation, particularly underrepresented voters and ensure transparency and accountability in election processes, because these are the means to change the political culture and to be used during the next, the Presidential Elections.

The projects proposed are focused on the root causes of problems identified in past elections. Activities and planned outputs of initiatives are in compliance with the election legislation of the Republic of Armenia. Grant projects include but are not limited to non-partisan monitoring of all elements necessary for a democratic electoral process, awareness raising campaigns on electoral rights and principles and raising public participation, particularly among underrepresented and first-time voters. Well-justified partnership and coalitions between CSOs are established for greater effectiveness of activities and expansive results of projects.

In spite of certain progress of the country in the process of democratization, fair elections have still to become a practice in Armenia. Violations, falsifications and fraud are widely put into action practically in all elections that have been conducted in our country since Independence. This fact seriously jeopardizes not only the international image of Armenia, but creates very detrimental and apathetic atmosphere in the society.

Violations take place in all stages of the election process: election campaigns, during voting inside the precincts and adjoining territories, as well as during the vote count. Overcoming such a destructive practice is the task of all sectors of the society and in the first place the voters themselves. Although some grave violations are out of control of the voters, much can be done by ordinary people to prevent fraud and thus realize their right of exercising power. In order to be able to change the situation, it is important to increase awareness of carefully selected target groups of the election process, who, in their turn are able to spread out knowledge among population.

All the NGOs in their attempt to contribute to free and fair elections, considered all the sources available: the reports and recommendations of international organizations and observers, domestic reports and the results of their own surveys studies and research. All the proposals have been based on justified and clearly stated problems; objectives have been established based on the identified problems, and proposed initiatives are logical solution for those.

Many of the organizations consider the “success stories” of other countries, but not many of them proposed to borrow particular experience. The interviews revealed that some leaders think that they know exactly the problems in Armenia, the remedies and solutions and do not need to implant foreign ideas. Nevertheless, there are several proposals based on activities implemented in Western countries, such as E-democracy and SMS exit-polls.

For the NGO sector as a whole, the most pervasive issue is long-term financial viability. There is no doubt that the financial viability of the NGO sector depends on the overall expansion and vitality of the Armenian economy, long with improvements in employment and personal income. Although the Armenian economy is in better shape than in several years ago, it is by no means yet able to claim much sustained increases in employment:

clearly there is more wealth in the country, but what is there is highly concentrated in a relatively small percentage of the population.

In spite of generally agreed positive improvements in the NGO registration law, there is a definite dissatisfaction with the legal environment regulating NGO financial operations in Armenia: present legislation is not supporting NGOs in their attempts to be financially sustainable.

Most of the NGO leaders stated that their plans related to achieving financial viability differ from their present ways of fund seeking. In other words, they do envision less reliance on donor grants, but not complete withdrawal, and not very soon. Thus, the future expectation of NGOs still hinges on international foundations, planning to finance their organization over the long term through international donors.

As Armenian NGOs look to the future, they still believe that foreign donors in one form or another will play a majority role in providing financial support, and this may will be the case. The challenge for the international organizations and other foreign donors will be to learn how to leverage their long term funding against continued progress in developing an array of Armenian funding source.

Conclusions and recommendations

Some conclusions are drawn and recommendations are put forward based on the findings of this research.

It could be recommended to the civil society organizations to enhance financial viability, to create immediate contact and activities with constituents, to work with better defined target groups, to conduct more research to find out the preferences and moods of both candidates and constituents, to provide link and serve as a bridge between electorate and the parties by the means of generating and disseminating information, to open up space for debate and dialogue.

In addition to opening up the space for debate, the NGOs can become initiators of an educational process that informs voters on laws, policies, and proposed legislation. Although they are ready to conduct pre-election education of voters, who will have to understand the importance of voting as political participation, Election Day monitoring, and post-election research in the sense of clearly identified problem and correct and effective solutions to those, they are weak financially.

Although by the means proposed the population would learn more about their fundamental rights, becoming more prone to exercise them at large, all the activities could remain on the paper without funding of foreign organizations, in this particular case USAID.

Research findings suggest there is a need to improve the public image and credibility of the sector, and for this improvement it could be recommended to promote the tangible impact of NGOs' work; involving more beneficiaries and supporters in the work of NGOs; enlarging NGO support bases through membership and volunteering; increasing the transparency of NGOs; improving NGO skills in dealing with sensitive issues and public opinion; developing NGO PR skills; developing journalists' understanding of NGOs and encouraging media support for publicity, fundraising initiatives; and involving other sectors in promoting the NGO sector by publicizing positive experiences of partnership.

It could be recommended to strengthen the financial sustainability to reduce donor dependency of the sector by the means of improvement of fundraising capacity, not to rely too much on foreign financial aid (still crucial for the NGO sector of Armenia), further developing NGO skills and strategies to access public and business funds; stimulating corporate and public philanthropy; improving NGO image and credibility. Some financial independence could be gained also by service providing, activity which is already practiced in Armenia, developing skills in appropriate income generation.

Research findings suggest the need to improve co-operation in the sector to better serve community needs and interests by increasing the sharing of information within the sector; raising awareness about co-operation as a long-term task which requires certain shifts in culture; engaging in networks and coalitions around specific issues.

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FIX QUOTATION MARKS THROUGHOUT – SEE GREEN BELOW AS ONE EXAMPLE

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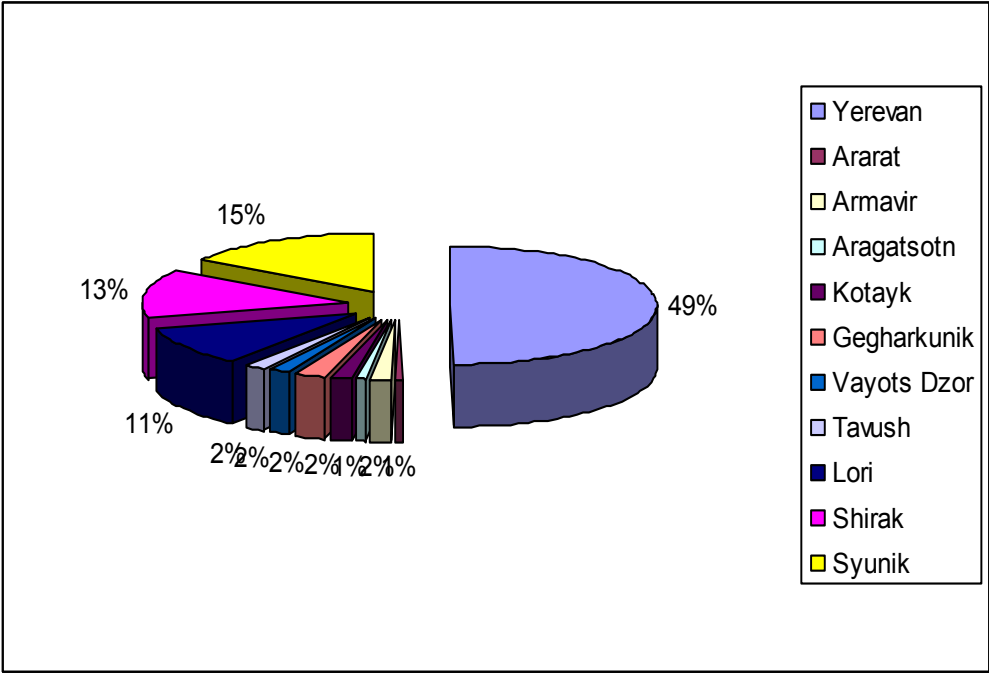
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Appendix A

Questionnaire the interviews with NGO leaders

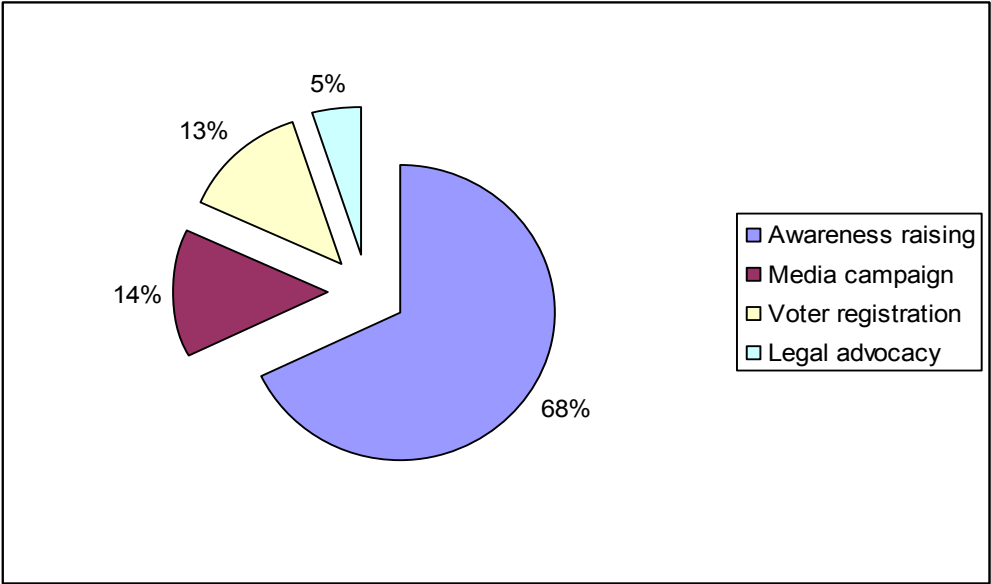
1. On what is based your assessment of past elections?
2. Are you familiar with any “success stories’ in other transitions countries in the sense of NGO sector’s contribution to free and fair elections?
3. Did you consider the experience of any other country in your proposal?
4. What are the main impediments on the way of NGOs to contribute to free and fair elections?
5. Are you going to initiate any election-related activities if you will not be in the list of winner-organizations of this Grant?

Distribution of the NGOs by regions



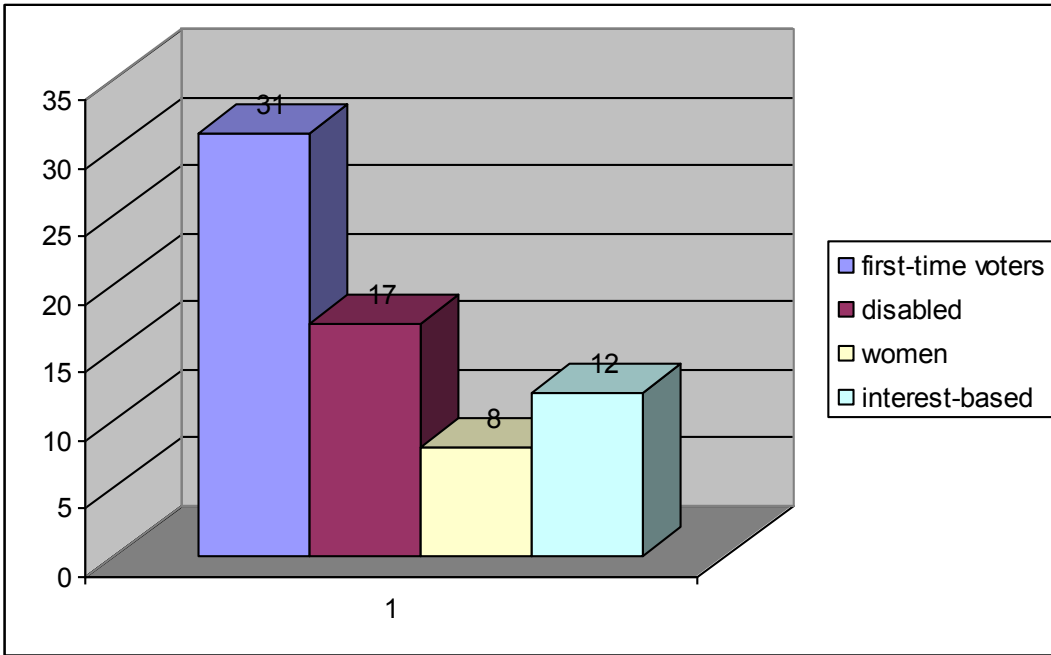
Appendix C

The main types of activities proposed by NGOs

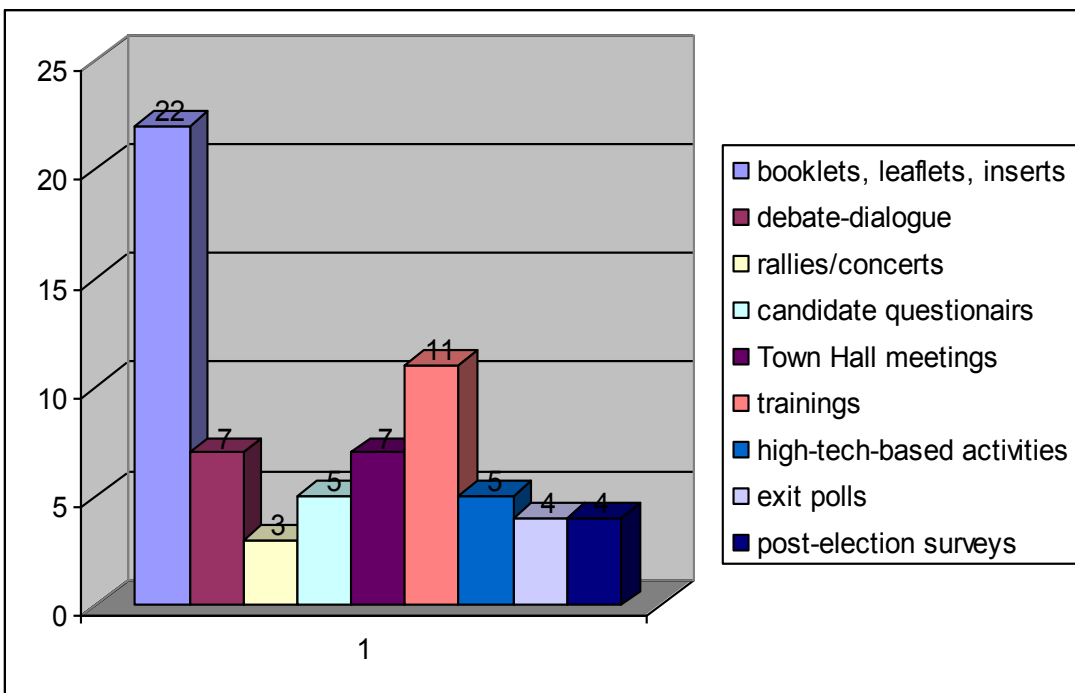


Appendix D

Activities proposed by target group



Appendix E
The means proposed to contribute to free and fair elections



Appendix F

