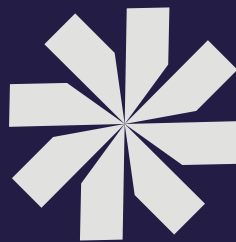


Opportunities to reduce plastic pollution in elections

Policy brief for electoral management bodies and political parties

Barack Aran

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Table of acronyms

CCC	The Climate Change Commission
COMELEC	The Philippines Commission on Elections
DENR	Department of Environment and Natural Resources
EMBs	Electoral Management Bodies
EC	Electoral Code
ECI	Election Commission of India
PPs	Political parties
PVC	Polyvinyl chloride
RA	Republic Act
SUPs	single-use plastics

1. Introduction: The opportunity to reduce plastic pollution in elections

Election and political campaign materials such as ballot boxes, laminated voter cards, security seals, campaign posters and banners reach all corners of a country, including remote locations, during the electoral process. These materials are often produced from and packed with single-use plastic and non-biodegradable materials or so-called virgin plastic. Plastic production, its use and disposal are energy-intensive and a major driver of pollution, as well as of biodiversity loss, on land and at sea, with broad impacts on ecosystems.

We know that pollution stemming from the production, use and disposal of plastic-based products, profoundly affects both land and marine ecosystems, as well as the species inhabiting them – including human beings. Chemical emissions associated with plastic production and waste management pollute air, water and soil. Chemicals present in plastics and microplastics leach into ecosystems and enter the food chains of animals and humans alike.

Inadequate reuse or recycling, and increased waste generated from parties' campaign materials and plastic-based equipment used in electoral processes create more and more concerns. A lot of these materials are left unattended, and are not collected after the campaigns and the elections are over, resulting in a considerable impact on the environment.

Reducing plastic production and consumption during elections would contribute to less plastic pollution and might trigger a new way of thinking around plastic pollution among other actors. This policy paper proposes that electoral management bodies (EMBs)

and political parties (PPs) can mitigate the environmental impact of delivering elections and political campaigns by reducing the usage of plastic origin materials.

Broadly speaking, making elections more environmentally friendly aligns with the democratic values of short- and long-term public interest and inclusion, and can make a positive contribution in several ways. It can **influence broader societal attitudes towards sustainability**, by encouraging eco-friendly behaviours among political parties, candidates and voters. It can contribute to national **climate change mitigation efforts**, by reducing the carbon footprint of the elections.

Also, by minimising non-biodegradable materials and reducing pollution from campaign events, more environmentally friendly elections can lead to cleaner air, quieter environments, and improved **public health**. Avoiding plastics and in particular, single-use plastics (SUPs), and using biodegradable and recycled materials helps **conserve resources** like paper, promotes efficiency, aids tree cover conservation, and **reduces waste**.

While promoting plastic-free electoral processes that are aligned with global efforts to address the climate crisis and protect our planet's fragile ecosystems, this paper also considers that certain electoral processes are time- and security-sensitive and cannot fully align with environmental concerns.

Accordingly, this paper will address different stages of the supply chain management, highlighting areas and processes where a more environmentally friendly approach is not detrimental to electoral integrity.

Figure 1. Examples of various plastic-related materials used during elections and political campaigns



Ballot boxes' security seals



Plastic ballot boxes



Plastic-related packaging



Assorted rubber stamps and indelible ink containers



Polythene tamper-proof envelopes



Palletised ballot paper on shrink wraps



Ball pens of plastic origin



Reflective vest made with plastic stripes or name tags



Campaign banners or posters

2. Understanding plastic-free elections and eco-friendly campaigns

The extensive environmental footprint of an electoral process is often overlooked. The “green elections” approach refers to initiatives and practices aimed at reducing the environmental impact of electoral processes, like reducing plastic and paper usage, shifting to recycled materials and online campaigning, as well as using renewable energy. This approach includes encouraging electoral actors like the EMBs and political parties to make their operations more eco-friendly, not only during the elections but throughout the electoral cycle.

A significant amount of plastic waste is generated from election and campaign materials production, packaging and usage. EMBs and PPs should work on ways of managing electoral plastic waste to avoid it ending up in the environment, and use biodegradable materials whenever possible.

Several examples can be found like vegetation shelters and plant-based temporary polling infrastructure. While some of these alternatives are already in use in countries like India, it is important to test the feasibility of alternatives beforehand so as not to produce additional waste due to unsuitable solutions.

Candidates and parties should consider eco-friendly and more sustainable campaign material alternatives such as recycled paper, biodegradable banners, and reusable materials. Leveraging digital platforms for campaigning where feasible (websites, social media and email) can also reduce plastic, paper waste and be economically effective as it reduces clean-up costs.

While the choice of material is an important factor in the plastic-free elections approach, supply chains and associated logistics also play an important role to reduce plastic products and waste as well as carbon emissions.



3. International regulations and standards for sustainability

Various global regulations geared to the reduction of plastic pollution are discussed below. EMBs and PPs may consult and consider these to address plastic pollution. While this is not a complete list, it offers a first overview to EMBS and PPs, and it stresses the importance of consulting with national legal, policy and environmental experts to determine which regulations and standards are relevant to a specific product or service.

Standard	Description
ISO 14001	This standard specifies the requirements for an environmental management system (EMS). An EMS is a systematic approach to managing environmental aspects of an organisation's activities, products, and services.
ISO 26000	This standard guides social responsibility. Organisations are responsible for the impacts of their activities on society.
GRI Standards	The GRI Standards are guidelines for reporting sustainability performance. They cover a wide range of sustainability topics, including environmental, social, and economic performance.
ISO 21067-1:2016	Specifies general terms relating to the classification of packaging and its particular role in the supply chain.
ISO 24161:2022	Waste management collection and transportation.
ISO 15270:2008	Recycling – guidelines for the recovery and recycling of plastics waste.
ISO 17088:2021	Plastics – organic recycling – specifications for compostable plastics.

Assessing national and international regulations and standards for sustainability is an important part of ensuring that a product or service meets the required environmental and social performance levels. This can be a complex process, as there are often multiple regulations and standards to consider, and they can vary from country to country.

There are several factors to consider when assessing national and international regulations and standards for sustainability:

- the specific product or service being assessed
- the intended market for the product or service

- the relevant regulations and standards
- the implications of not meeting the required standards

Once the relevant regulations and standards have been identified, they need to be applied to determine whether the product or service meets the required levels of environmental and social performance. This can involve several activities, such as: a) reviewing the text of the regulations and standards, b) consulting with experts in the field, c) conducting testing and analysis, and d) learning from regional EMBs, PPs or global case studies.

4. Operational modalities to achieve more environmentally friendly elections

4.1 Reducing plastic through improved procurement processes

EMBs and PPs might consider the following steps to ensuring sustainability within their procurement during the electoral cycle. Sustainable procurement of election materials is a complex process, often delayed by different actors and circumstances. A timely procurement within set timelines can make a difference to the environmental impact, as planned distribution processes can be kept, and best solutions can be put in place. Every delay in a procurement timeline will make it more unlikely that sustainable solutions can be put in place as concessions will have to be made either due to pricing or availability. The following points should be considered to secure more environmentally friendly procurement processes:

- **Setting clear sustainable goals for procurement planning.**¹ Define key parameters like the biodegradability of a product or eco-friendly packaging, for instance, or the avoidance of plastic where possible. Other goals might involve procuring products with a long life cycle, reducing the environmental impact by reducing waste. Once goals have been set, starting to develop a plan to achieve them is critical. EMBs and PPs can start with the development of specifications around the chosen goal, for instance, adapting biodegradable specifications, or plastic-origin specifications, for example, the proportion of recycled plastic.

- **Use sustainable procurement tools and resources.** There are several tools and resources available to help EMBs and PPs with sustainable procurement. These include standards, guidelines, and software. Using these tools can help make more informed decisions.

- **Eco-friendly packaging approaches**² should be looked into by the EMBs and PPs, giving room for reusable rather than single-use packaging; recycling avenues should be considered before contracting suppliers, as well as in-depth consideration of hazardous substances. (See examples below.)

- **Reducing the use of new printing paper for internal EMB or PP administrative processes.**

There is a serious amount of paper-based internal processes within EMBs or PPs that could be easily digitalised. Recycled paper could be used instead of new paper which is often packed in laminated plastic packaging. Examples of paper-based processes are: procurement contracts for goods and services, staff contracts, candidate registration processes, and so on; procedures that could be digitalised to reduce paper as well as plastic waste during normal business operations.

- **Consider the entire lifecycle of the product or service.** When making procurement decisions, consider the environmental and social impacts of the product or service throughout its lifecycle, from production to disposal.

1. ISO 20400:2017 Sustainable procurement – Guidance <https://www.iso.org/obp/ui/en/#iso:std:iso:20400:ed-1:v1:en>

2. Material choices for environment-friendly packaging design https://greentechknowledgehub.de/sites/default/files/2022-08/Material_choices_for_environment_friendly_packaging_design.pdf

Examples of sustainable packaging strategies³

- Insulated packing option from sheep wool that can maintain chilled or frozen products, or at room temperatures, and be used up to four times.
- Use of green recyclable box which can be used up to 14 times – (see green packaging options, footnote 3 below).
- Made-to-order, custom packaging with every product 100% reusable, recyclable or compostable; for instance, EMB-ordered solar kits may be wrapped with visibility signage to be used during polls.
- Smart, space-saving packaging: suppliers must avoid packing small deliveries in huge boxes that are often costly. Systems and software can help select right-sized boxes for each shipment, to ensure more boxes can be packed in each shipment, resulting in a reduction of the overall number of shipments needed, thereby saving emissions as well as transport costs.
- Transport of election materials using freight companies that have generic, long-lasting packing and handling equipment (for instance bags and crates).

4.2 Reducing plastic in supply chain processes

EMBs and PPs can encourage a shift from traditional practices that contribute to carbon emissions and harm the environment, such as the use of unnecessary plastic-based packaging, inefficient logistics planning leading to increased greenhouse gas emissions, the use of fossil fuel energy sources rather than renewable energy, the use of plastic-based materials that may contain toxic chemicals, and inadequate or non-existent waste disposal measures. An environmentally conscious approach to the supply chain across the electoral cycle calls for efficient supply chain practices to be put in place to ensure product quality without further compromising the wellbeing of our planet and society.

- **Change management and life cycle thinking⁴ for better planning of the environmental friendly supply chain.**⁵ All aspects of the electoral supply chain should be planned, factoring in cleaner production, sustainable technology, electoral stakeholders' corporate social responsibility, environmental management, reverse logistics, or recycle-reuse aspects.
- **Engaging and collaboration with suppliers.** Suppliers are an important part of EMBs' sustainable procurement journeys. They provide information about their own sustainability practices and help find more sustainable products and services. Engaging with suppliers early on and throughout the procurement process supports sustainability throughout the electoral cycle.

3. Green packaging and why it's important to your business: <https://www.dhl.com/discover/en-nz/logistics-advice/sustainability-and-green-logistics/sustainable-packaging-in-logistics>

4. What is Life Cycle Thinking? <https://www.lifecycleinitiative.org/activities/what-is-life-cycle-thinking/>

5. Greener Supply Chain Management: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/earth-and-planetary-sciences/green-supply-chain-management>

▪ **Giving preference to local suppliers where possible.** Local suppliers are often more sustainable than their global counterparts. This is because they have shorter supply chains and are less likely to use overseas freight from air and shipping that needs additional packaging. Another risk from international freight is potential damage to election cargo, creating reproduction needs to meet election requirements.

▪ **Support organisations that are working to improve sustainability.** When EMBs source, purchase, and procure from these organisations, benefits result from supporting their work and making a difference in the world.

▪ **Planning of waste collection and transportation management.** A significant amount of plastic waste is generated from election and campaign materials production, packaging and usage. EMBs and PPs should work on restrictions on imports of plastic waste to find circular and climate-friendly ways of

managing it. Plastic waste should not find its way to soils, rivers and oceans.

▪ **An increase in recycling frequency to dispose of plastic waste for energy recovery.** Turning plastic waste into usable heat, electricity or fuel through incineration or other processes should be increased to avoid additional greenhouse gas emissions or conversion from fossil fuels. Disposal should not lead to the generation of dangerous chemicals; stricter limits could be introduced, banning certain chemicals and keeping pollutants away from the recycling process.

▪ **Waste management should be part of the supply chain, and also regulated in contractual agreements.** For instance, incineration waste should be separated by type, and guidance must be issued on the remanufacturing and refurbishing of waste; and biodegradable packaging options must be considered.



5. Concrete measures to avoid plastic pollution during elections

While Electoral Management Bodies are key actors in electoral processes, they also very often face capacity constraints and limitations either financially or personnel-wise, even as expectations of them seem to rise. As environmental awareness in elections is a new topic for EMBs as well as for PPs, a collaborative approach between EMBs, PPs, civil society groups and the scientific community could yield the best results.

▪ **Use more eco-conscious voter education and campaign materials.** Consider regulation of types of materials used during voter education exercises or electoral campaigns; for instance, reduction of campaign banners/PVC posters made from unregulated high grammage plastic, and advocating the use of eco-friendly materials (such as recycled paper or cloth for banners).

▪ **Eco-friendly specifications of election and campaign materials.**⁶ Use an overview of eco-friendly material specifications focusing on sustainable packaging, product life cycle analysis, waste management, plastic origin, and materials that do not contain toxic substances. Advocating for recycling or reuse should be an approach that EMBs and PPs could consider when specifying electoral or campaign materials.

▪ **Reducing product returns by EMBs or PPs to suppliers or reorders due to errors.**⁷ To avoid reordering, EMBs and PPs ought to provide in-depth and accurate product specifications; share product samples with printers or vendors, or high-quality photos, to provide accurate context; review the procurement documents from the last election, to see whether any comments or issues were brought up about the product; monitor orders closely and avoid late arrival of materials close to polling day affecting distribution timelines; and

request that suppliers improve shipping and freight timelines, accuracy and speed and use protective packaging. Also, they may consider carrying out a post-procurement appraisal, and expand after-sales agreements, warranties and guarantees of election supply procurement to reward best practice.

▪ **Campaign visibility regulation.** Campaign materials like banners or posters cause a lot of pollution to the environment when there are no effective waste management action plans or regulation of material type/grammage. EMBs and PPs could take the lead on this issue by looking into international or regional best practices and lessons learned and initiate a constructive dialogue around possibilities to regulate the use of plastics and specifically single-use plastics. Further consideration could be given to more environmentally friendly options like the use of recycled paper and use of cloth instead of PVC banners or posters where feasible, or avoiding plastic laminated posters or banners.

6. ISO definitions of key terms for plastic pollution: <https://www.iso.org/files/live/sites/isoorg/files/store/en/PUB100472.pdf>

7. IEBC Postpones Mombasa, Kakamega Governor Elections over Harassment of Staff <https://www.citizen.digital/news/iebc-postpones-mombasa-kakamega-governor-elections-over-harassment-of-staff-n304060>

6. Recommendations

6.1 Recommendations for electoral management bodies (EMBs)

- **Advocate for bulk biodegradable packaging**,⁸ reducing additional unnecessary inner packaging, for instance the use of biodegradable utensils or food containers during voter education sessions or for poll worker meals.
- **Review of specifications for election materials** where budget allows, avoiding plastic and single-use plastics and giving preference to eco-design materials, to reduce adverse environmental impacts throughout their life cycle.
- **Consider waste management and transportation:** advocating for recycling, reuse, repurposing, and Environmental Due Diligence (EDD) assessments.
- **Consider upgradability**, that is, the characteristic of a product that allows its modules or parts to be separately upgraded or replaced without having to replace the entire product, for instance the use of old ballot boxes to pack or transport sensitive electoral equipment, such as voting machines or printers.
- **Consider the life cycle assessment of products:** the consecutive and interlinked stages of a product system, from raw material acquisition or generation from natural resources, to final disposal.
- **Advocating for eco-friendly polling infrastructure:** for instance, polling shelters and booths made with sustainable plant materials or biodegradable polymers.⁹
- **Plan for the disposal of materials in a way that minimises environmental impacts:** for instance, the segregation of incinerable waste, litter, reusable packaging waste for future usage, refurbishable components, and upgradable components.

6.2 Recommendations for political parties and campaign candidates

- **Rethinking campaign materials and shifting away from plastic:** candidates and parties can adopt sustainable alternatives such as recycled paper, biodegradable banners, and reusable materials.
- **Review of specifications for campaign materials avoiding plastic and single-use plastics**, and reducing the grammage on posters and banners. Legislation targeting a ban on use of SUPs in political visibility campaign materials can be advocated for by parties, in addition to bans on non-biodegradable materials.

8. ISO 21067: 1: 2016 Packaging: vocabulary. Part 1: General terms: <https://www.iso.org/standard/66981.html>

9. New biodegradable polymer: <https://www.drishtiias.com/daily-news-analysis/new-biodegradable-polymer>

7. Case studies

7.1 Philippines

In the Philippines, the recent *Barangay and Sangguniang Kabataan* elections (BSKE) – namely, elections for the most local level of government (*barangay*) and for the community councils that represent youth in a *barangay* – provide an interesting example of multi-stakeholder efforts to mitigate plastic pollution during elections.

The Commission on Elections (COMELEC) reported that 1,414,487 individuals submitted their certificates of candidacy for the BSKE on 30 October 2023. Ahead of the BSKE, the Climate Change Commission (CCC) called on COMELEC to formulate a policy that would prohibit the use of plastic-made campaign materials and hazardous substances in candidates' campaign sorties and activities (Philippine News Agency).¹⁰ These included tarpaulins, handouts, flyers and *banderitas* (small flags).

Candidates were asked to dispose of campaign materials at the end of campaigning as stipulated by the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR), which initiated waste management of over 113,000 campaign materials nationally that had mostly been placed or used in violation of the Republic Act (RA).¹¹ This led to the removal and proper disposal of materials that had been placed on walls and trees nationally to address climate change.

The reuse, repurposing, and recycling of election waste¹² were witnessed under the guidance of Eco Waste, a stakeholder that supported elected candidates in taking initiatives to manage campaign plastic waste. Various environmental stakeholders joined hands with Eco Waste and Greenpeace Philippines. Mother Earth Foundation and Zero Waste Philippines advocated for the government to take proactive steps to integrate waste and toxin prevention in future elections.

The Philippines is a major ocean polluter of plastic. However, a legal framework to mitigate plastic pollution has been put in place, including the "Single-Use Plastics Regulation and Management Act of 2022", which led to the phasing out and eventual ban of SUPs in the country, and supports the development and use of more eco-friendly packaging for, among others, campaign materials. This framework also includes the Republic Act (RA) and Ecological Solid Waste Management Act of 2000.

10. CCC calls for ban on plastic poll campaign materials: [https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1209447#:~:text=MANILA%20%E2%80%93%20The%20Climate%20Change%20Commission,Sangguniang%20Kabataan%20Elections%20\(BSKE\)](https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1209447#:~:text=MANILA%20%E2%80%93%20The%20Climate%20Change%20Commission,Sangguniang%20Kabataan%20Elections%20(BSKE))

11. Candidates to clean up the posters placed on trees and walls at end of elections and use proper disposal https://denr.gov.ph/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/DENR_News_Alerts_May_13_2022_Friday.pdf

12. DENR tells candidates to dispose of campaign materials properly: <https://nswmc.emb.gov.ph/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/DENR-tells-candidates-to-dispose-of-campaign-materials-properly.pdf>

7.2 Indonesia

In Indonesia, the world's second largest manufacturer of plastics, election waste includes campaign props, billboards, large posters and plastic banners, which need to be managed so they do not end up in landfills. The overuse of polyvinyl chloride (PVC) banners in political campaigns is a growing concern for environmentalists. A conservative estimate suggests that over 1,889,958 kilograms of PVC material alone was required for legislative and presidential campaigns across 7,000 locations across Indonesia. This is equivalent to the weight of about 300 adult African white rhinos (The Jakarta Post).¹³

According to Zero Waste Center, Indonesia produces over 5.9 million tonnes of plastic waste per year, with only about 10% of it ending up in recycling centres. In this context, the nearly 1,800 tonnes of PVC used for the legislative and presidential campaigns may be a drop in the ocean, but an avoidable one, not least because only 2% of this collected plastic waste can be recycled effectively, 14% of the plastic waste is burned, while 4% ends up in landfills.



The case studies of Indonesia and the Philippines provide important insight into how EMBs and PPs could initiate or advocate for the use of more environmentally friendly materials during election processes.

13. Election Plastic Trash in Indonesia <https://www.thejakartapost.com/opinion/2023/08/10/election-trash-is-a-recurrent-challenge-we-can-address.html>

Resources for further reading

Climate strategy and decarbonisation with partners

USAID Climate Strategy 2022–2030: <https://www.usaid.gov/policy/climate-strategy>

FCDO Services Carbon Reduction Plan <https://www.fcodoservices.gov.uk/about/sustainability/carbon-reduction-plan/>

10 principles for an ambitious corporate climate strategy: <https://www.carbone4.com/en/10principles-ambitious-climate-strategy>

Sustainable green procurement

Produce Life Cycle explained: Stage and Examples (investopedia.com)

Green Public Procurement: An Overview of Countries' Green Procurement Practices: Green Public Procurement: An Overview of Countries' Green Procurement Practices (worldbank.org)

The CO2 Performance Ladder as a Tool for Low Carbon Performance: A feasibility study for 10 European countries <https://www.iisd.org/system/files/2023-03/co2-ladder-tool-low-carbon-procurement.pdf>

The role of specifications in sustainable design: <https://www.aia.org/resource-center/role-specifications-sustainable-design>

Sustainable transportation and biofuel adaptation

Establishing a Sustainable Model for Professional Driver Training in Uganda: transaid.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Technical-Brief-PDT-U-Overview-FINAL.pdf

#MovingToZero: How Can We Make Low-Carbon Transport a Reality? <https://worldbank.org/en/topic/transport/brief/moving-to-zero>

Renewable Energy in Transport <https://tcc-gsr.com/responses-to-policies/renewable-energy-in-transport/>

Sustainable waste management

what the EU is doing: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/topics/en/article/20180328STO00751/sustainable-waste-management-what-the-eu-is-doing>

Radically Reducing Plastic Pollution in Indonesia: a Multistakeholder Action Plan: https://pacecircular.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/NPAP-Indonesia-Multistakeholder-Action-Plan_April-2020_compressed%281%29.pdf

ISO definitions of key terms for plastic pollution: <https://www.iso.org/files/live/sites/isoorg/files/store/en/PUB100472.pdf>

Digitalisation and technological adaptation

National Democratic Institute (NDI): Sustainability: <https://www.ndi.org/e-voting-guide/sustainability>

Technologies in Elections – Best Practices in using Digital Tools and Platforms in the Community of Democracies: <https://community-democracies.org/app/uploads/2022/09/Report-Technology-in-Elections.pdf>

Digitalization and Democracy: <https://www.idea.int/theme/digitalization-and-democracy>

Sustainability – communication and inclusion growth

UNDP India: Sustainability and Inclusive Growth <https://www.undp.org/india/sustainable-and-inclusive-growth#:~:text=UNDP's%20Sustainable%20and%20Inclusive%20Growth,economic%20empowerment%20of%20vulnerable%20groups>

Strengthening Election Management Bodies Communications with Political Parties in Elections <https://www.ifes.org/publications/strengthening-election-management-body-communications-political-parties-elections>

About the author



Barack Aran

Barack Aran is passionate about sustainable electoral logistics and the role that timely, environmentally-friendly supply chains can have in ensuring that rights to participate in democratic elections can be exercised without further degradation of the environment.

In recent times, Barack has offered technical advice to some of the world's most complex electoral logistics and operations, with recent ones being Kenya's presidential elections (2017, 2022), Papua New Guinea National Elections (2022), Ethiopia's National Election (2020), and Nigeria's (2019) general election. Barack has in-depth experience in pandemic election logistics, coupled with over 18 years of international experience across Africa and Asia, where most of his work has been featured as success stories.

Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD) is the UK public body dedicated to supporting democracy around the world. Operating internationally, WFD works with parliaments, political parties, and civil society groups as well as on elections to help make political systems fairer, more inclusive and accountable.

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