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ELECTIONS DURING WARTIME: DEMOCRATIC PARADOXES AND THE CASE OF UKRAINE

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the paradox of elections during wartime, focusing on Ukraine as a contemporary case study and a threat to political legitimacy. However, in times of full-scale war, the suspension of elections may itself become a democratic act — one that safeguards equality of participation, the right to vote, and the fairness of competition. The analysis draws upon classical and contemporary theories of democracy (Schumpeter 1942; Dahl 1971; Lijphart 1999; Diamond 2019; Norris 2014) and employs a comparative approach. Historical examples include the United States during the Civil War, the United Kingdom in World War II, and Israel during its multiple wars, while more recent cases include Afghanistan, Colombia, and election postponements during the COVID-19 pandemic. These examples reveal both the risks and justifications of postponement, as well as their long-term implications for democratic resilience. Ukraine provides a unique context for studying this dilemma. While a broad parliamentary consensus currently supports postponement until martial law is lifted, the debate about sequencing future elections — presidential, parliamentary, and local — raises fundamental questions about legitimacy, public trust, and political competition. The findings suggest that under exceptional conditions, electoral postponement can be consistent with democracy if guided by constitutional safeguards, international law, and Council of Europe standards. At

under normal democratic conditions, postponing elections is typically regarded as a deviation from constitutional order. At the same time, postponement without transparent criteria risks undermining democratic continuity and fostering authoritarian entrenchment. The paper concludes by offering a framework for distinguishing between necessary postponement and abuse, and for designing mechanisms that protect both national security and democratic legitimacy.

Keywords: Ukraine; wartime elections; democratic integrity; electoral postponement; constitutional law

INTRODUCTION

Democracy is often defined through its procedural foundations, with elections at the core of popular sovereignty. Joseph Schumpeter (1942) famously conceptualized democracy as a method of competitive leadership selection through free elections, while Robert Dahl (1971) expanded this notion through his framework of polyarchy, emphasizing contestation and participation as the essential criteria for democratic governance. Later, Arend Lijphart (1999) underscored the importance of institutional design in ensuring inclusivity, and Larry Diamond (2019) pointed to the global challenges of democratic backsliding and erosion of electoral integrity. Pippa Norris (2014), in turn, stressed the role of trust and perceptions of

electoral integrity as key determinants of legitimacy. A shared element across these theoretical traditions is the centrality of free, fair, and periodic elections as both a normative and procedural cornerstone of democracy. Yet, these definitions and standards have largely been elaborated for times of peace and stability. The outbreak of large-scale war presents a profound challenge: should elections still be held under conditions where territorial integrity is compromised, millions of citizens are displaced, and security risks make universal participation impossible?

This paper engages with this paradox by focusing on Ukraine as a case study. Since the Russian full-scale invasion in February 2022, Ukraine has suspended scheduled elections under martial law. While such postponement might appear undemocratic, it also reflects a deeper democratic rationale: ensuring that elections are not only formally periodic but also substantively inclusive, competitive, and legitimate. The Ukrainian case is situated within a broader comparative context. Democracies and fragile states alike have faced similar dilemmas during times of crisis. The United States held elections during the Civil War (though excluding secessionist states), while the United Kingdom postponed elections during World War II. Israel has both postponed and conducted elections amid armed conflicts. In Afghanistan and Colombia, elections were organized under conditions of active violence, often at great cost to voters and candidates. More recently, over 80 countries postponed elections due to the COVID-19 pandemic (James & Alihodžić 2020). These cases illustrate both the risks and justifications of postponement and provide valuable insights into the conditions under which delaying elections may reinforce rather than undermine democratic legitimacy.

Against this backdrop, Ukraine provides an important test case for rethinking the normative and institutional foundations of democracy in wartime. By

analyzing its constitutional provisions, parliamentary debates, public opinion, and comparative precedents, this paper asks: When is postponement democratic? And how can states balance the imperatives of security with the core principles of democratic legitimacy?

Research Questions

This study is guided by three central research questions:

1. Under what conditions can the postponement of elections during wartime be considered consistent with democratic integrity?
2. How do comparative constitutional frameworks regulate electoral postponements in times of war and crisis, and what lessons are most relevant for Ukraine?
3. To what extent can the Ukrainian case contribute to broader theories of democracy and electoral resilience under conditions of interstate conflict?

Contribution Statement

This article contributes to the literature on electoral integrity and democratic resilience in three ways.

First, it extends existing typologies of electoral postponement—primarily developed in the context of civil wars, transitions, or natural disasters—by applying them to the case of full-scale interstate war.

Second, it provides a comparative constitutional analysis that situates Ukraine within a broader family of democracies where postponement is legally embedded rather than politically improvised.

Third, it advances a normative and practical framework of feasibility, legitimacy, and trust as readiness indicators for wartime elections, thereby offering a conceptual tool that can inform both academic debates and policy design in Ukraine and beyond.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative, multi-method approach, integrating normative analysis, comparative constitutional inquiry, and case study research. The objective is not only to assess whether electoral postponement in wartime can be democratic, but also to develop a framework for evaluating Ukraine's electoral challenges in light of international democratic standards.

1. Normative analysis

The first step involves examining the normative frameworks of democracy and electoral integrity, with particular emphasis on the principle of periodic elections, universality of suffrage, and legitimacy. Foundational texts (Dahl, 1971; Beetham, 1994; Norris, 2014) and international standards, including Article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (UN, 1966), the Venice Commission's Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters (Council of Europe, 2002), and OSCE/ODIHR guidelines (2016), serve as the basis for identifying core democratic attributes. Special attention is given to scholarship that theorizes postponement under crisis conditions, particularly the typologies of James and Alihodžić (2020) and the feasibility–legitimacy–trust framework (Alihodžić et al., 2019).

2. Comparative constitutional analysis

The study then applies a comparative lens by analyzing how consolidated democracies regulate elections during states of war or emergency. Constitutional provisions in Poland, Lithuania, Estonia, Germany, Canada, and France are systematically reviewed to identify common design principles: legality, temporal limits, and legitimacy safeguards. These comparisons allow for situating Ukraine within the mainstream of democratic practice, countering claims

that postponement during war is inherently anti-democratic.

3. Case study: Ukraine

The Ukrainian case is examined as a contemporary laboratory of democratic resilience under interstate war. The analysis draws upon:

- Primary legal texts: the Constitution of Ukraine (1996), the Law on the Legal Regime of Martial Law (2015), and the Electoral Code.

- Institutional reports: documents from the Central Election Commission (CEC), the State Voter Register (SVR), and the Council of Europe's risk assessments of alternative voting methods (CoE, 2021).

- Empirical data: statistics from UNHCR (2025) on refugees, figures on internally displaced persons (IDPs), and the Razumkov Center's public opinion surveys (2025) on wartime elections.

- Illustrative examples: the discrepancy in voter registration in destroyed cities such as Bakhmut (Pravda, 2025), and the expansion of Ukraine's armed forces to approximately 880,000 personnel (RBC-Ukraine, 2025).

4. Analytical strategy

The study applies a triangulation of sources to ensure validity: theoretical insights are juxtaposed with constitutional rules and empirical realities. Analysis proceeds in three steps:

1. Mapping the normative paradox: identifying tensions between periodicity and universality.

2. Comparative benchmarking: evaluating Ukrainian law against democratic emergency provisions elsewhere.

3. Readiness assessment: operationalizing conditions under which elections could be safely and democratically resumed in Ukraine, focusing on feasibility, legitimacy, and trust.

Limitations

The study is limited by the ongoing and fluid nature of the war, which prevents definitive forecasting of electoral timing. It also relies on secondary sources and available institutional reports, as direct fieldwork on election administration in wartime Ukraine is not feasible. Nevertheless, the combination of normative, comparative, and case-based methods ensures a robust analytical framework that can guide both academic debate and policy design.

Theoretical Framework: Democracy, Elections, and Crisis

At the core of democratic theory lies the principle that government derives its legitimacy from the consent of the governed, expressed through free and fair elections (Dahl, 1971; Diamond, 1999). Elections serve three interrelated functions: they establish accountability between rulers and citizens, enable the peaceful alternation of power, and confer legitimacy upon political institutions (Beetham, 1994; Norris, 2014). International standards further codify these requirements. Article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) guarantees every citizen the right “to vote and to be elected at genuine periodic elections... by universal and equal suffrage and by secret ballot, guaranteeing the free expression of the will of the electors” (United Nations, 1966). The Venice Commission’s Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters emphasizes universality, equality, freedom, secrecy, and periodicity as essential principles of democratic elections (Council of Europe, 2002). Similarly, OSCE/ODIHR guidelines underline that elections must be “free, fair, transparent, and held at regular intervals” (OSCE/ODIHR, 2016).

Yet, as several scholars note, these standards were developed primarily for peacetime conditions and presuppose the stability of institutions, territorial

integrity, and basic security (Schedler, 2002; Norris, 2014). They offer limited guidance for situations in which war, mass displacement, or existential threats render “periodicity” and “universality” mutually exclusive. For example, conducting elections during full-scale hostilities may formally uphold periodicity but undermine equality, safety, and meaningful participation, whereas postponement may breach procedural periodicity while preserving the substantive integrity of electoral competition (James & Alihodžić, 2020; Elklit & Reynolds, 2005). This tension becomes particularly acute in interstate wars, where the very survival of the state is at stake. Much of the existing scholarship on electoral postponement has focused on civil wars, transitions, or post-conflict elections (Brancati & Snyder, 2013; Jarstad & Sisk, 2008). Ukraine, however, represents a distinct category: elections disrupted not by domestic collapse but by external military aggression. In this context, the conventional binary between “holding” and “postponing” elections requires reconceptualization through the lens of democratic resilience. Therefore, democracy cannot be evaluated solely by procedural regularity. Instead, it must be assessed by its capacity to preserve political equality, genuine competition, and institutional legitimacy—even when this requires temporary deviations from periodicity. The Ukrainian case illustrates that under conditions of war, postponement may paradoxically serve not as democratic erosion but as a safeguard of democratic continuity and protection.

Normative Framework: When Is Postponement Democratic?

The postponement of elections presents a fundamental normative dilemma: under what conditions can delaying the vote be justified without undermining democracy itself? While democratic standards emphasize the necessity of periodic elections, they also implicitly

acknowledge that extraordinary circumstances may justify exceptions. Political scientists and legal scholars have attempted to conceptualize these exceptions by developing typologies that help distinguish between necessary postponement and authoritarian abuse.

James and Alihodžić (2020) propose a widely cited typology of seven forms of electoral postponement:

1. Cancelled elections, in which contests are eliminated entirely.
2. Crisis postponements, justified by emergencies such as war, pandemics, or natural disasters.
3. Transition postponements, occurring during regime change or constitutional transformation.
4. Technical delays, linked to logistical or administrative shortcomings.
5. Candidate death, requiring the rescheduling of elections.
6. Humanitarian postponements, designed to protect citizens from threats to life and health.
7. Annulled elections, in which results are invalidated and rerun.

Among these, humanitarian postponements are particularly relevant to the Ukrainian case. James and Alihodžić (2020) argue that in situations of natural disasters, pandemics, or armed conflict, postponement may be more consistent with democratic principles than proceeding under unsafe conditions. Elections held amid life-threatening circumstances risk undermining inclusiveness, fairness, and legitimacy; by contrast, postponement can operate as a protective mechanism that safeguards both the integrity of the electoral process and the fundamental rights of citizens. This framework aligns with broader debates in comparative politics. Scholars of post-conflict elections caution that premature or technically compromised contests may destabilize fragile states (Brancati & Snyder, 2013; Jarstad & Sisk, 2008). Others highlight that legitimacy derives

not only from procedural regularity but also from the feasibility and perceived fairness of elections (Norris, 2014; Elklit & Reynolds, 2005). The feasibility–legitimacy–trust triad developed by Alihodžić and Matatu (2022) further underscores that elections should only proceed when they are technically feasible, socially legitimate, and trusted by both domestic stakeholders and international observers.

Applying this normative framework to Ukraine suggests that postponement under martial law can paradoxically be democratic—provided it is temporary, justified by transparent and objective criteria, and clearly linked to the restoration of electoral conditions. In this sense, Ukraine exemplifies how electoral postponement in wartime can align with democratic principles, as long as institutional safeguards prevent its manipulation for authoritarian entrenchment.

Electoral Postponements in Times of Crisis: Typologies and the Ukrainian Case

Electoral postponements are not unique to Ukraine; they have occurred across different regions and political systems whenever crises disrupted the regular democratic cycle. Examining these precedents situates Ukraine's current challenges within a broader comparative framework and demonstrates that temporary suspension of elections, under specific conditions, can remain compatible with democratic practice. Historical precedents. During the U.S. Civil War, the 1864 presidential election proceeded despite ongoing armed conflict, illustrating the resilience of constitutional order. Yet, congressional and local contests in Confederate-controlled territories were suspended, raising questions about inclusiveness and representativeness (McPherson, 1988). By contrast, in the United Kingdom during World War II, parliamentary elections were postponed for a decade (1935–1945), with mandates extended through special

legislation to preserve national unity during existential war (Thompson, 2017). These divergent strategies illustrate the spectrum between procedural continuity and the prioritization of stability and survival.

Contemporary conflict-affected states. In Afghanistan and Iraq, repeated postponements reflected both security breakdowns and logistical impossibilities. Elections held prematurely in insecure environments often resulted in attacks on polling stations, intimidation of candidates, and reduced turnout, undermining legitimacy (Reilly, 2006; Brancati & Snyder, 2013). Colombia's elections during its protracted civil conflict formally preserved democratic continuity but were distorted by targeted violence, which restricted candidate mobility and voter participation (Gutiérrez Sanín & González, 2012). By contrast, Israel has managed to conduct elections despite recurrent wars and terrorist threats, relying on effective security measures and public trust in electoral institutions (Hazan, 2020). Elections during global crises. The COVID-19 pandemic triggered a global wave of electoral postponements. International IDEA documented more than 75 national elections delayed between 2020 and 2022, many on humanitarian grounds (James & Alihodžić, 2020). Canada provides another example: elections in wildfire-affected regions were postponed locally, illustrating that democratic systems can adapt to extraordinary circumstances without undermining overall legitimacy (Elections Canada, 2023).

The Ukrainian case. Ukraine's context combines elements of these typologies but is distinguished by the scale and nature of the threat: a full-scale interstate war, massive internal displacement, and millions of citizens abroad. Unlike pandemic-related postponements, which were temporary and geographically limited, Ukraine confronts open-ended conditions that prevent equal participation

for nearly ten million displaced persons and active-duty soldiers. Unlike the United Kingdom during World War II, Ukraine lacks geographical insulation from attacks; Russian missiles can reach polling stations nationwide within minutes. Moreover, unlike post-conflict transitions in Afghanistan or Iraq, Ukraine is not constructing democratic institutions from scratch but defending already consolidated democratic structures. Postponement here, therefore, is less about regime-building than about safeguarding the survival and legitimacy of an established democracy. Taken together, these comparisons demonstrate that electoral postponement in wartime must not be assessed solely through the lens of periodicity. Instead, it should be evaluated against the broader democratic principles of equality, fairness, and inclusiveness. In Ukraine's case, temporary postponement is consistent with these principles insofar as it protects life, prevents large-scale exclusion, and sustains public trust in the eventual resumption of elections.

Comparative Constitutional Approaches to Wartime Elections

A comparative constitutional perspective demonstrates that temporary deviations from electoral periodicity during war are not anomalies but rather mainstream safeguards embedded in many consolidated democracies. These frameworks are designed to reconcile the normative tension between periodicity and feasibility by making postponement lawful, temporary, and reviewable (Elklit & Reynolds, 2005; James & Alihodžić, 2020). Emergency clauses typically suspend elections during martial law or states of defense/emergency and extend mandates with explicit provisions for rescheduling once hostilities cease. Ukraine. The Constitution of Ukraine (1996) and the Law on the Legal Regime of Martial Law explicitly prohibit holding national elections during martial law; terms of elected bodies are extended until elections can be convened after its

termination (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 2015). This provides ex ante predictability: suspension functions as a constitutional safeguard, rather than an ad hoc political decision.

Poland. Article 228(7) of the 1997 Polish Constitution prohibits elections to the Sejm, Senate, presidency, and local self-government during a state of emergency, including martial law, and for 90 days thereafter. Mandates are automatically extended. This “cooling-off” period is designed to prevent elections from taking place under residual coercion or administrative disruption (Konstytucja Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, 1997). Lithuania. Following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Lithuania amended its Constitution in April 2022. Article 143 now authorizes extensions of mandates for the Seimas, the President, and municipal councils if elections fall during wartime, but requires that new elections be held within three months after hostilities end. This amendment explicitly constitutionalized wartime sequencing logic (Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania, 2022).

Estonia. Article 131 of the Estonian Constitution stipulates that during a state of emergency or war, elections to the Riigikogu, the presidency, and municipal councils are suspended. Terms of office are extended, with elections mandated within three months after the emergency ends (Constitution of the Republic of Estonia, 1992). Germany. The German Basic Law (Grundgesetz) similarly addresses wartime continuity. Article 115h provides that if the Bundestag’s mandate expires during a declared state of defense, its term is automatically extended, and elections must be held within six months after the defense state ends. This framework constitutionalizes continuity while avoiding indefinite suspension (Grundgesetz für die Bundesrepublik Deutschland, 1949).

Canada. The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms limits the House of

Commons and provincial legislatures to five-year terms (s. 4.1). Section 4.2 permits extensions during war, invasion, or insurrection, but only with approval from two-thirds of the relevant chamber. This supermajority requirement serves as a safeguard against partisan abuse (Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, 1982).

France. The French Constitution provides emergency governance mechanisms through Article 16 (extraordinary presidential powers) and Article 36 (état de siège). Although it does not contain an explicit general clause on electoral postponement, historical practice shows that election calendars can be legally adjusted under these emergency regimes via organic or ordinary legislation (Constitution de la République Française, 1958). Conclusion. These comparative examples show that wartime electoral postponement is a constitutionalized and predictable practice across democracies, not an erosion of democracy. By grounding suspension in constitutional law, states provide legal clarity, prevent opportunistic manipulation, and ensure that postponement remains temporary and bound by principles of democratic accountability. Ukraine’s framework thus aligns with international democratic practice, though its particular challenge lies in adapting these safeguards to the realities of high-intensity interstate war.

Synthesis: Design Principles and Relevance to Ukraine

Comparative constitutional practice reveals three recurring design elements that reconcile the tension between periodicity and democratic feasibility. First, legality and ex ante clarity: postponement and mandate extension are constitutionalized, reducing the scope for improvisation or partisan manipulation (Poland, Lithuania, Estonia, Germany, Canada). Second, temporal limits and “return rules”: deadlines are imposed for resuming elections after hostilities, such as three months in Lithuania and Estonia, six

months in Germany, and a supermajority threshold in Canada to renew extensions. Third, legitimacy safeguards: cooling-off periods (Poland), supermajority votes (Canada), and ex post scheduling duties (Lithuania, Estonia, Germany) discipline executive discretion and support both domestic and international recognition of electoral outcomes. For Ukraine, these elements legitimize constitutional postponement during full-scale interstate war, while emphasizing the necessity of clear benchmarks for resumption—security, inclusiveness, and administrative readiness. In short, postponement is democratic when it is rule-bound, temporary, and explicitly oriented toward restoring equal participation and genuine competition (Norris, 2014; James & Alihodžić, 2020).

Ukrainian Context and Key Challenges

1) Legal–institutional baseline

Ukraine’s Constitution and the Law on Martial Law prohibit national elections during martial law, extending mandates until elections are convened thereafter (Constitution of Ukraine, 1996; Law on Martial Law, 2015). This model aligns with comparative democracies where postponement is pre-constitutionalized, not ad hoc (Poland, Lithuania, Estonia, Germany, Canada). Analytical implication: The issue is not legality—permitted or prohibited—but readiness: when elections can be held while respecting universality and equality of suffrage (Venice Commission, 2002; OSCE/ODIHR, 2016).

2) State Voter Register (SVR), internal and external displacement

Ukraine’s SVR is address-based. After February 2022, its updates were suspended, with only partial reactivation in December 2023. Displacement is unprecedented: ≈6.9 million refugees abroad (≈4.8 million voters) and ≈4.6 million IDPs (≈4.5 million voters)

(UNHCR, 2025). Most displaced persons did not change electoral addresses. For instance, as of March 2025, nearly 56,000 voters remain registered in Bakhmut—despite the city having been effectively destroyed and depopulated (Ukrainska Pravda, 2025).

Risk: Without systematic updating, SVR undermines universality and equality (Norris, 2014).

Policy conclusion: Needed reforms include (a) an online voter portal, (b) simplified IDP address-change procedures, and (c) active registration for diaspora voters via pre-election applications (OSCE/ODIHR, 2020; International IDEA, 2021).

3) External voting: scale, design, and representation

In 2019, according to the Central Electoral Commission’s analytical report, Ukraine operated 102 external polling stations to accommodate approximately 450,700 overseas voters (Central Electoral Commission of Ukraine, 2019). Today, millions reside abroad, making the consular model unviable. Furthermore, while Ukraine’s domestic elections use an open-list proportional system, external voters cast ballots only for closed national lists—creating systemic distortions as the diaspora grows to ≈16% of the electorate (Lijphart, 1994; Farrell, 2011). Comparative lessons: Turkey expanded diaspora participation via polling in large venues (Aytac & Çarkoğlu, 2020). Options for Ukraine include: (1) additional polling sites beyond consulates, (2) harmonization of ballot design (open lists abroad or an “external district” as in Italy), and (3) limited postal voting with a secure chain of custody. Internet voting: Risk assessments, including CoE-supported reviews (Council of Europe, 2021; Gibson, Cordero, & Karp, 2021), emphasize that short-term implementation of online voting is unrealistic given cybersecurity threats and low public trust.

4) Security, reaction time, and polling infrastructure

Missile and hypersonic threats compress “warning-to-impact” times to mere seconds–minutes nationwide, making evacuation and ballot protection infeasible. In Kharkiv oblast, ≈458 of 1,673 polling premises are destroyed; similar damage is evident in Zaporizhzhia, Donetsk, and Kherson, with Kyiv and Sumy also affected. Comparative lessons: Temporary facilities, duplicate precincts, and shelters as polling places are viable postwar solutions (Hazan & Rahat, 2010; Diamond & Plattner, 2006) but impracticable under current threat intensity.

5) Participation of military personnel

As of early 2025, approximately 880,000 military personnel were reported in service — accounting for about 3 % of the eligible electorate (RBC Ukraine, 2024). While the Electoral Code allows special precincts and 4-hour leave for conscripts, most troops are deployed at the front, away from bases. Comparative mechanisms: Postal voting (U.S.), mobile polling, and forward-deployed hubs. Risks: weak observation, custody vulnerabilities, and command influence (Alvarez, Hall, & Trechsel, 2009; Birch, 2011). Strong safeguards and third-party monitoring are required (OSCE/ODIHR).

6) Political and societal consensus

Parliamentary factions signed a joint declaration rejecting elections during war, agreeing contests may resume no earlier than six months after martial law ends. Public opinion mirrors this: only ≈22% support wartime elections; ≈66% oppose (Razumkov Center, 2025). Views on remote voting are mixed but grow among military and frontline communities. Analytical implication: Elite–mass convergence legitimizes temporary suspension (Linz & Stepan, 1996; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018)—provided transparent criteria for resumption exist.

7) Synthesis: from “prohibition” to “readiness”

Ukraine’s dilemma is structural, not technical. Violations of democratic standards stem not from unwillingness but from impossibility of guaranteeing universality, equality, security, and trust. This aligns with the feasibility–legitimacy–trust framework (Alihodžić et al., 2019).

Readiness thresholds:

- Feasibility: updated SVR, scaled diaspora polling, minimal security standards, emergency protocols.
- Legitimacy: accepted design (diaspora/military inclusion), harmonized ballots, observation.
- Trust: transparent CEC decisions, risk communication, auditing of alternative methods.

When these thresholds are satisfied, sequencing (presidential → parliamentary → local) becomes an administrative-legal task, not a political dilemma, aligning Ukraine with international democratic standards.

DISCUSSION

The Ukrainian case illustrates how wartime elections crystallize the fundamental tension between periodicity and universality, two core attributes of democratic governance (Norris, 2014; Elklit & Reynolds, 2005). International standards, such as the Venice Commission’s Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters (2002), largely presuppose peacetime conditions in which security, territorial control, and equal participation can be reasonably guaranteed. Ukraine demonstrates that, in contexts of interstate aggression and mass displacement, strict adherence to periodicity may directly undermine universality and equality.

Comparative cases reinforce this paradox. During the U.S. Civil War,

presidential elections were held in 1864, thereby preserving periodicity, yet eleven Confederate states were excluded, undermining universality (McPherson, 1988). By contrast, the United Kingdom postponed general elections for a full decade during World War II (1935–1945), prioritizing stability and national survival over procedural regularity (Smith, 2010). In Afghanistan (2004–2019) and Colombia (1990s–2000s), elections were conducted under violent conditions, but required massive security deployments, resulted in intimidation of candidates, and produced contested legitimacy (Brancati & Snyder, 2013; Call, 2012). Israel offers a hybrid precedent: elections were postponed in 1948 and 1973 due to war, yet subsequently resumed, while local elections in 2023–2024 were delayed amid the Gaza conflict (Hazan & Rahat, 2010).

Ukraine’s situation shares elements of these cases but diverges due to its technological and geopolitical context. Unlike earlier conflicts, modern high-precision weapons compress warning times to seconds, making evacuation and ballot protection impractical. Additionally, Ukraine is evaluated through the lens of EU accession, which requires compliance with contemporary standards of electoral integrity and democratic resilience (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Birch, 2011). Theoretically, Ukraine exemplifies what James and Alihodžić (2020) classify as humanitarian postponements—deferrals justified by existential threats to life, participation, and electoral integrity. Empirically, postponement is supported by both elites and the public, aligning with the feasibility–legitimacy–trust framework (Alihodžić et al., 2019). However, risks remain: prolonged suspension without transparent benchmarks for resumption could lead to authoritarian drift, echoing Schedler’s (2002) warning about “electoral authoritarianism.”

Thus, the Ukrainian case makes two contributions to comparative theory. First,

it underscores the limits of existing electoral standards, which insufficiently account for conditions of interstate war. Second, it suggests that democratic resilience in wartime requires conflict-sensitive electoral frameworks—ones that explicitly balance periodicity, universality, and security to prevent both premature elections and indefinite postponement.

CONCLUSION

Elections held during wartime epitomize a democratic paradox: while they may affirm political legitimacy through procedural continuity, they can simultaneously undermine the very principles they are intended to uphold. The Ukrainian case demonstrates that electoral postponement, when embedded in constitutional provisions, endorsed by parliamentary consensus, and supported by public opinion, can be reconciled with democratic integrity rather than construed as a deviation. The central dilemma is not whether to postpone, but how to design transparent criteria and credible mechanisms for resumption that safeguard universality, equality, and public trust (Norris, 2014; James & Alihodžić, 2020).

Comparative analysis yields three principal insights. First, historical and contemporary precedents—from the postponement of U.K. elections during World War II to humanitarian deferrals during the COVID-19 pandemic—illustrate that postponements are not exceptional anomalies but recurring strategies for preserving stability and legitimacy in times of crisis (Smith, 2010; Brancati & Snyder, 2013). Second, Ukraine highlights qualitatively distinct challenges posed by modern interstate war, including unprecedented displacement, large-scale external voting, and compressed security timelines due to advanced weaponry—conditions that existing international standards, formulated largely for peacetime, fail to

adequately address (Venice Commission, 2002; OSCE/ODIHR, 2016). Third, a forward-looking approach requires reconceptualizing electoral integrity in wartime, shifting the focus from rigid periodicity toward readiness indicators—feasibility, legitimacy, and trust (Alihodžić et al., 2019). Ultimately, Ukraine’s experience underscores a broader lesson for democratic theory and practice: safeguarding democracy during war requires a dynamic balance between resilience and flexibility. Protecting the democratic essence of elections may, paradoxically, necessitate their temporary postponement—but only when such postponement is grounded in law, accompanied by inclusive political consensus, and subject to domestic and international oversight. In this way, wartime electoral governance can simultaneously ensure state survival and lay the normative and institutional foundation for postwar democratic renewal.

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