

Transparency International Anti-Corruption Helpdesk Answer

Integrity pledges: a tool against corruption

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Integrity pledges are non-binding social contracts through which participants announce their commitment to act against corruption. Pledges can be signed by candidates for office, public officials, political parties, members of the government, as well as other stakeholders. They may be accompanied by other measures designed to give substance to the enshrined principles of integrity and transparency, such as declarations of assets and liabilities and declarations of interests. Integrity pledges differ from policy commitments, which refer to the promise of enacting specific policies. Elections are opportunities to level pressure on candidates – including to local office – to behave ethically and to declare their support for anti-corruption policies.

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Query

How have integrity pledges been used to combat corruption and promote transparency during and after elections?

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Integrity Pledges

Integrity pledges are non-binding social contracts through which participants announce their commitment to act against corruption. Pledges can be signed by candidates for office, public officials, political parties, members of the government, as well as other stakeholders.

As such, integrity pledges are distinct from more specific policy commitments, though both can be employed in the fight against corruption.

While integrity pledges prescribe general behaviour and principles to be embodied by the pledge maker, policy commitments refer to the promise of enacting and implementing specific policies on a range of topics. While policy commitments thus go far beyond anti-corruption reforms, integrity pledges refer to a personal or institutional commitment to adopt integrity and transparency as guiding principles in all actions.

These instruments complement each other and are mutually reinforcing, but, depending on advocacy goals, can be pursued separately or jointly. Having said that, where anti-corruption policies are adopted without genuine corresponding commitments to act with integrity, the effect of these policies is likely to be limited. On the contrary, where integrity pledges reflect and reinforce social norms that condemn corruption, they can underpin broader anti-corruption reforms (Jackson 2018).

Main points

- Integrity pledges are non-binding social contracts through which participants announce their commitment to act against corruption.
- Integrity pledges may be accompanied by other tools designed to give tangible form to the enshrined principles of integrity and transparency, such as declarations of assets and liabilities and declarations of interests.
- In the context of an electoral process, integrity pledges may encourage candidates to behave in an honest manner and to ensure voters take part in free and fair elections.

Another important difference between integrity pledges and policy commitments is that the former depends solely on the pledge makers. They are able to fulfil the pledge to act with integrity solely on the basis of their own actions, unmediated by external players. Adoption of any public policy in any democracy, on the other hand, depends on the will and action of several parties. That is why policy commitments, such as those expressed in party manifestos, are likely to be mediated by other parties and institutions, and as a result the actual form their implementation takes is typically moderated from the original plan.

In general, integrity pledges include – among others – a commitment to act honestly and openly in all aspects; to promote transparency and accountability; to abide by the law and ethical principles; to respect the electoral process and strengthen democratic core values.

The examples below focus mostly on integrity pledges used in the context of elections. That is not, however, their only use – in India, for instance, ‘Integrity Pledges’ may be signed by all individuals and organisations (Indian Central Vigilance Commission 2018).

Elections are opportunities to level pressure on candidates to behave in an ethical manner and to declare their support for anti-corruption policies. It is, after all, the moment when potential holders of public office wish to present themselves in the best possible light in order to win votes. A major challenge for civil society organisations who decide to use integrity pledges as an advocacy tool is to ensure that commitments made during electoral campaigns are not conveniently forgotten once the votes have been tallied.

Both integrity pledges and policy commitments often attract extensive publicity, and usually the names and signatures of participants are widely advertised in the media. Such public commitments put additional pressure on the participants to take the fight against corruption seriously and offer a viable mechanism for strengthening political accountability. Despite not being legally binding, they provide an added mechanism for the public to demand that politicians comply with previously agreed-upon behaviour or face the consequences at the next election.

Integrity pledges may be accompanied by other tools designed to give substance to the enshrined principles of integrity and transparency, such as declarations of assets and liabilities and declarations of interests.

Declarations of assets and liabilities

Asset declarations have been widely recognised as important tools in the fight against corruption and may be required as part of an Integrity Pledge.

The United Nations Convention against Corruption determines, for example, that “Each State Party shall consider establishing, in accordance with its domestic law, effective financial disclosure systems for appropriate public officials and shall provide for appropriate sanctions for non-compliance” (Art. 52, par. 6). The Inter-American Convention against Corruption (Art. 3, par. 4) and the African Union Convention on Prevention and Combating Corruption (Art. 7, par. 1) have similar provisions.

The G-20 has also agreed to High-Level Principles on Asset Disclosure by Public Officials, recognising that “a rigorous system of asset disclosure by relevant officials... [is] a powerful tool to prevent conflicts of interest, corruption and hold governments accountable” (G-20 2012).

Asset declarations have three basic objectives: (i) to increase transparency and the trust of citizens in public administration; (ii) to help prevent conflicts of interests; and (iii) to monitor fluctuations in the wealth of individual politicians and civil servants that could indicate wrongdoing (OECD 2011).

While there is no agreed-upon consensus on who should release a declaration of assets, there are criteria can be used to determine who should be subject to such requirements: branch of government, hierarchy, position, function, risk of corruption and classification as Politically-Exposed Person (Rossi et. al. 2017).

Though less common, declarations of assets may also be required from candidates to public office. Elections laws in some countries demand filling of said declarations along with relevant documentation in order for the candidacy to be registered. That is the case in India, Bangladesh, (Martini 2013) and Brazil, for example. In this case, the asset declarations are designed to provide information to voters on the candidate’s wealth and interests.

Asset declarations should include information pertaining to real estate, financial investments and business assets, bank accounts, vehicles and other moveable assets, as well as liabilities (debts, loans and other obligations). Detailed information on the assets – full description, its value, how and where they were acquired, nature of the ownership

– should also be provided (Martini 2011). Information on family members and close associates' assets may also be relevant, considering the possibility that corrupt officials use others' accounts to hide their assets (Martini 2014a).

Voluntarily providing a declaration of assets – or publicising a declaration required by law – can be seen as a sign of a given candidate's commitment to transparency. As such, proactive financial disclosure can form part of a wider integrity package that could also include pledges.

Standards must be applied, however, to prevent candidates from enjoying the benefits (i.e. positive publicity), without providing complete or precise information on their assets. Martini (2013) further notes that disclosure of financial information should be done in a timely and user-friendly manner to enable the information to be scrutinised by voters and the press. However, due to privacy or security concerns, in some settings identifying details, such as the address of the personal residence, are omitted from public display.

Declaration on Interests

Declarations of interests are important tools to prevent conflicts of interest, which can be conceptualised as a conflict between officials' personal interests and their duty as civil servants (OECD 2005).

Conflict of interests are a great concern because, even if they do not necessarily translate into corruption, they may lead a public official to make decisions which are not in the public's best interests. Presenting a declaration of interests is also a sign of commitment to transparency, especially for someone seeking public office. It provides a comprehensive insight into a candidate's history and activities.

The UNCAC determines that States “shall endeavour, where appropriate and in accordance with the fundamental principles of its domestic law, to establish measures and systems requiring public officials to make declarations to appropriate authorities regarding, inter alia, their outside activities, employment, investments, assets and substantial gifts or benefits from which a conflict of

interest may result with respect to their functions as public officials” (art. 8, par. 5).

A declaration of interests must include information on financial interests, as well as all sources of income. Participation on boards and directorships, gifts given and received, as well as access to inside information must all be declared. Interests abroad are of particular importance and should be included in the declaration. Relevant information concerning family members and close associates should also be presented.

This declaration will serve as a baseline on which further declarations might be evaluated, especially the ones presented under legally-binding rules for elected officials.

Declarations of interests may also be useful in monitoring the management of conflicts of interest in case the individual does get elected.

Assignment of financial interests into a 'blind trust' arrangement, divestment or liquidation and recusal from participating in decision-making processes are all forms of managing possible conflicts of interest (Martini 2013).

Electoral Process

In the context of an electoral process, integrity pledges may also be used to encourage candidates to behave in a proper manner and to ensure voters take part in free and fair elections.

Besides committing candidates to follow the law and respect election rules, pledges may also delve deeper and require something more, so as to strengthen the democratic process. Pledges may encourage candidates to participate in debates, present their manifestos and persuade citizens to take part in the democratic process.

Recent elections all over the globe have shown the vulnerabilities of the electoral process in the face of evolving technologies. Fake news, social media bots and hackers have upended elections and threatened political systems in developed and developing countries alike.

As a consequence, efforts to commit candidates to a conscientious use of technology – such as

pledging not to use bots – are becoming increasingly common (Howard 2014).

Integrity measures at local government level

The measures described above are mostly thought of in terms of national politics. However, there is a growing trend towards transferring powers and responsibilities from central government to the subnational level. While decentralisation processes can help strengthen accountability by bringing government closer to the people, decentralising services can also simply decentralise corruption.

At the local level, citizens and public officials more frequently come into close and direct contact. This, combined with the fact that local officials often enjoy longer tenure than their national counterparts, affords them greater opportunities to develop corrupt networks, favouritism, nepotism, patronage and other forms of unethical behaviour (Martini 2014b).

In addition, remuneration at the local government level is often low in comparison to the national level and the institutions that are designed to hold public officials to account at the local level are not always adequate (Martini 2014). Monitoring by the media and civic institutions can also be weak (Transparency International 2009).

In principle, local officials should adhere to the same standards of conduct as other public officials as described in Article 8 of the UN Convention against Corruption (UNCAC). As such, general provisions developed for government officials at the national level also apply to the local level, especially with regards to conflict of interest, abuse of office, gifts, disclosure of assets, use of state property or assets, undue influence, outside income, post-employment, etc (Chêne 2014).

While integrity at local level is often particularly problematic, the frequent contact between the public and officials in this space affords citizens the chance to hold governments to account (Ferreira da Cruz 2015).

Consequentially, both integrity pledges as well as asset and interest disclosure regimes can be particularly powerful instruments in local politics.

Examples by Country

The country examples below demonstrate that integrity pledges and policy commitments are widely used in the run-up to an election as a way for civil society organisations to influence the political debate and extract verifiable promises from the candidates and political parties. The main intention may be to ensure the integrity of the elections or to guarantee that specific policies will be enacted once the elections are over.

Australia

In 2015, the St. James Ethics Centre and The Sidney Morning Herald designed the ‘Politicians’ Pledge’ which was presented to candidates for the New South Wales state election.

The pledge contained generic commitments divided into two categories: those taken “in pursuit of power” (during the elections) and those taken, eventually, “in the exercise of power”.

They were mostly sweeping promises to “act in good conscience”, “respect the intrinsic dignity of all”, “abide by the letter and spirit of the Constitution and uphold the rule of law” and “exercise the privileges and discharge the duties of public office with dignity, care and honour” (The Sydney Morning Herald 2015).

Approximately 23 per cent of candidates in that elections (215 candidates) committed to the Politician’s Pledge (The Guardian 2015). The idea of partnering with a media outlet ensures that the pledge and, especially, the pledgees receive the publicity that motivates them to commit. It also allows for a greater dissemination of the pledges, as readers are invited to act as disseminators.

Bangladesh

Transparency International Bangladesh introduced Integrity Pledges as a “micro-level social accountability process designed to promote participatory and accountable governance at the level of service delivery by a voluntary

engagement of stakeholders” (Transparency International Bangladesh 2017).

It is a non-binding social contract involving local-level public representatives, officials and service providers, as well as service recipients in vital sectors such as education, health and local government.

Through the Integrity Pledges, all parties make commitments to work together to (Transparency International Bangladesh 2012):

- prevent and control abuse of power for private gain;
- eliminate all forms of unauthorised payments, including bribery for services rendered;
- ensure and promote participation of service recipients in decisions that affect the content and quality of services provided;
- ensure transparency in public contracts and in implementing work under such contracts; and
- promote disclosure and transparency to ensure accountability in all related actions.

The signing of an Integrity Pledge is the result of a longer process designed to measure the degree of satisfaction of service recipients, establish a dialogue between interested parties and widen avenues of public participation.

Integrity pledges in different realms – local government, primary educations, secondary and higher education and local health complexes – are composed of specific sets of commitments made by each of the parties involved. Their results are measured through specific indicators (Transparency International Bangladesh 2012).

Brazil

In Brazil, there have been several initiatives which could be classified as integrity pledges over the past few years. It is not a new trend, however: in 2002, then-Presidential candidate Lula signed an anti-corruption pledge presented by *Transparência Brasil*, TI’s national chapter in Brazil at the time. It was composed of a series of policy commitments, including the creation of an Anti-corruption Agency (Transparency International 2002).

Since 2002, UOL News has maintained a searchable database ([Políticos do Brasil](#)) about political candidates, including their asset declaration information.

On the issue of technology and ethics, the “#NãoValeTudo”¹ initiative presented a pledge for candidates running for office in the 2018 elections. Through this pledge, candidates committed themselves to not resorting to fake news, to a conscientious use of social media, to carefully and diligently handling private voters and supporters’ information, among other issues (NãoValeTudo 2018).

Also in 2018, Transparency International Brazil spearheaded an initiative called *United against Corruption* (Unidos Contra a Corrupção 2018). It provided candidates for Parliament with the opportunity of committing themselves to supporting an anti-corruption reform agenda, known as the ‘New Measures against Corruption’ (Transparency International Brazil 2018). Though it amounts to a policy commitment, there were other pre-requisites to making the pledge, including a review of candidates’ past behaviour such as indictments and convictions that could disqualify them from pledging.

In order to fully join *United against Corruption*, candidates also had to commit to the *Pledge for Democracy*, which was also, in itself, a mixture of integrity pledge and policy commitments. Through the Pledge for Democracy, candidates could affirm their intentions to (Pacto pela Democracia 2018):

- defend democratic values and ideals, while repudiating violence and discrimination;
- campaign according to election laws and be fully transparent;
- present their ideas and governing plans clearly and participate in public debates;
- encourage citizen participation in the elections and highlight the importance of voting.

Its main policy commitment was to support a wide-ranging political reform.

¹ Roughly translated to “Not everything is fair game”.

Both the *United against Corruption* and the *Pledge for Democracy* provided candidates platforms on social media and video streaming with which to advertise their adherence to these pledges. They also offered easily accessible tools for voters to identify candidates which had committed to them.

Since the election, *United against Corruption* has evolved into an effort of congregating elected officials into a multi-party caucus to push for anti-corruption reforms.

Egypt

Before the 2014 presidential elections, Transparency International presented a pledge for candidates to sign. The idea was to publicly commit them to a well-defined agenda for tackling corruption if elected. The policy commitment included five points:

- Within six months of assuming office establish an expert legislative committee that has broad powers to strengthen current anti-corruption legislation.
- Establish a politically-independent and well-resourced anticorruption commission with prosecutorial powers that unifies the work of current anti-corruption bodies.
- Establish specialised independent courts tasked to deal with corruption cases in a timely manner.
- Create legislation to protect whistleblowers and encourage the reporting of corruption incidents.
- Create legislation for access to information, enabling civil society and citizens' participation in monitoring and holding public officials to account.

European Union

In 2014, the European chapters of Transparency International presented the Anti-Corruption Pledge to all candidates to the European Parliament.

Through the pledge, candidates from all 28 member states could present their commitment to

“fighting corruption and promoting transparency, accountability and integrity in EU institutions, policies and legislation” (Anti-Corruption Pledge 2014).

More specifically, it consisted of a mixture of integrity pledges and anti-corruption policy commitments. On one hand, signatories committed to upholding the Code of Conduct for Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) and to publishing a ‘legislative footprint’² to any report they drafted. On the other hand, it also contained policy commitments referring to integrity and transparency in public spending and the adoption of legislation destined to protect whistleblowers.

By the time of the 2014 elections more than 500 candidates and national political parties had signed the Anti-Corruption Pledge (Transparency International Lithuania 2014). The pledge remained available for MEPs after the elections and, by February 2015, more than 180 MEPs had pledged to fight corruption. They eventually formed an Intergroup (or caucus) on Integrity, Transparency, Anti-corruption and Organised Crime (Transparency International EU 2015). This is an example of transferring an election strategy into a platform for advocacy and lobbying of anti-corruption policies.

Malaysia

In 2012, Transparency International Malaysia launched the Election Integrity Pledge, made available to all candidates running for public office in the 13th Malaysian General Elections.

The Election Integrity Pledge was a voluntary, non-binding social contract through which candidates pledged “to promote integrity, good governance, transparency and accountability in government at both state and federal level and to uphold the rule of law” (Transparency International Malaysia. 2013).

The pledge amounted to a declaration, by candidates, that they intended to follow the

² Defined as “a document that identifies all relevant input from stakeholders. Published as an annex to legislative reports, it could potentially provide insight into who gave input into draft legislation. It helps to ensure that interest groups’ influence on policy-making

is not disproportionate, which could otherwise lead to undue influence”. For more information, see Transparency International 2014.

following principles during and after the elections (Transparency International Malaysia 2012):

- Truth, integrity, ethical conduct and accountability, including not accepting or giving bribes or being involved in any way in corrupt practices;
- Upholding and giving priority to the interests of the Rakyat (*Malaysia's House of Representatives*) as a whole;
- Good governance and transparency; and
- Compliance with all applicable laws and regulations of Malaysia.

Transparency International Malaysia offered some further guidance on the adherence to these principles, including stressing that public funds, resources and facilities should not be used for campaigning.

Candidates who signed the Election Integrity Pledge were listed on a website for voters to consult (Transparency International Malaysia, 2016).

Peru

In Peru, the Jurado Nacional de Elecciones (JNE) created the [Electoral Ethical Pact](#) in 2006. It has been maintained for the following elections and consists of a commitment to generate consensus and promote ethical behavior.

In the run-up to the 2018 regional and municipal elections, the Electoral Ethical Pact demanded candidates commit to the fight against corruption, to a respectful use of social media, to participating in debates and to accepting the elections results, among other prescribed behavior.

The JNE also established the Tribunal de Honor, a citizen court in charge of promoting and ensuring compliance to the Ethical Pact.

Philippines

In the Philippines, the Commission on Elections (COMELEC) presents the Integrity Pledge for all candidates running for office to sign:

"I sign this Integrity Pledge for free, orderly, peaceful, and credible elections, and through my

words and actions, commit to abide by the tenants of our Constitution, election laws, rules and regulations, respecting the sanctity of our electoral exercise. I will not impair, impede or unduly influence the free exercise of the people's right to suffrage. I will ensure the prompt and accurate recording and disclosure of campaign-related expenses. I will not offer or give bribes to corrupt the integrity of our democratic process. As a candidate seeking the people's mandate in order to serve them, I shall respect the norms of conduct expected of public servants and commit to running a clean campaign, observing fairness, common decency, honesty and good faith. Through our words and actions, I and all who stand with me, shall fight against discrimination in all forms: we shall promote gender sensitivity in the campaign; and we shall not tolerate any forms of violence against WOMEN IN POLITICS. All these, I commit and subscribe to, freely and voluntarily, fully accountable to Almighty God and to the Filipino people as my witness".

Though not legally binding, the fact that the pledge is presented by an official government organ as a part of the registration process helps lend it some legitimacy.

Spain

Transparency International España focused its attentions on political parties, instead of candidates, ahead of the 2014 European Elections.

Following a study that revealed that the level of transparency of Spanish political parties remained poor, it presented a Commitment for Political Parties on Transparency and against Corruption.

This was, in some ways, a spin-off from the Anti-Corruption Pledge, though it allowed for some adjustments in the text of the signed commitments. In general, it affirmed the parties' commitment to fighting against corruption and promoting transparency. The improvement of European institutions' social accountability, the use of open data on public procurement, the prevention of conflict of interests and the protection of whistleblowers are some of the measures listed in the commitment. As it stood, it amounted more to policy commitments than to an integrity pledge

(Transparency International Spain 2014a). Nearly all parties signed the Commitment for Political Parties on Transparency and against Corruption.

Transparency International España also took stock of political parties' positions on a number of measures against corruption it had proposed earlier and graded parties in accordance with their answers (Transparency International Spain 2014b).

Solomon Islands

In the build up to the 2014 elections, Transparency Solomon Islands presented the Election Integrity Pledge for candidates to sign. It amounted to a commitment to uphold and promote the principles of transparency and accountability (Solomon Star 2014a).

Inspired by the idea, political parties in the country developed internal Party Candidates Integrity Pledges, which were binding for their own members seeking political office (Solomon Star 2014b). The list of pledged candidates was published before the elections (SIBC 2014).

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