

**RESTRUCTURING A
STUDENT
GOVERNMENT
ELECTION
COMMISSION:
ENHANCING
CREDIBILITY &
INSTILLING TRUST**

Created by

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RESTRUCTURING A STUDENT GOVERNMENT ELECTION COMMISSION ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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May we continue to expand and make space for research in this field.

RESTRUCTURING A STUDENT GOVERNMENT ELECTION COMMISSION INTRODUCTION

Election Commissions are neutral bodies put in place to facilitate elections and ensure that they run smoothly to signal the validity and veracity of election cycles and results, respectively. In my term as Chair for the Harvard Undergraduate Council Election Commission, there have been many monumental moments relating to election policy changes, ticket dissolution, administration involvement, recalling candidates, and more. The winning ticket of the most recent UC Presidential election won on the platform of dissolving the UC, and as of March 30, 2022, the UC Election Commission has been dissolved. The UC Election Commission has since been replaced with the Harvard Undergraduate Association (HUA) Election Commission, which facilitated the inaugural HUA election on April 30, 2022. As a result of the dissolution and recognizing that the new Commission was going to be built from scratch, it became clear that there exists a need for documentation regarding what a successful election commission should consist of/keep in mind. A successful commission may be defined as one that constituents feel is credible and trustworthy, such that neither fairness of the process nor correctness of the results are called into question. Through holding a focus group, conducting expert and empirical interviews, and analyzing the content of the newfound HUA Election Commission, I have conducted research that has allowed me to create a blueprint of action for future iterations of the Election Commission. The question guiding this blueprint is: how can the Undergraduate Council Election Commission restructure its current framework to enhance credibility and instill trust within the student body? Some of the key highlights I found were to assign roles, approve rules early, involve professionals, establish and maintain independence, focus on logistics, and remain unnoticed. The blueprint is a handbook with recommendations to cultivate more seamless election cycles for years to come.

RESTRUCTURING A STUDENT GOVERNMENT ELECTION COMMISSION RECOMMENDATIONS

Assign Roles

- An election commission should be composed of an odd number of individuals -- 3 is too few, and anything greater than 9 will inevitably lead to too many cooks in the kitchen
 - The number must be odd to avoid an even split when voting on penalties for rule infractions and other matters
- Be it internally or externally, roles need to be defined to ensure constant and consistent communication (person X organizes debates, person Y spearheads responding to email complaints, person Z ensures the voting platform is up and running, etc.)
 - Each individual should oversee 1-2 components of an election cycle, so as not to overwhelm any one individual

Approve Rules and Timelines Early.

- As soon as a commission is established, a rules meeting should be held to discuss and draft rules and timelines for all election cycles
 - It's important to consult the student government's constitution to ensure the rules and timelines align with what is outlined in the document
 - Rules should be explicit and concise (highlight the most important ones)
- Once the commission has agreed upon a set of rules, the document should be frozen
 - Unless the commission agrees to go through a formal procedure to amend the approved rules, no changes should be made, especially not during an election cycle

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Involve Professionals

- Due to the often contentious nature of student government elections, it's important to have professional support as backup to uphold public perception of election integrity
 - Invite an adult advisor to be present in discussions when it comes to altering election rules or handling major campaign violations, as they can often provide unbiased insight due to the fact that they are not peers
- When referendum questions are present on a ballot, consult a statistician to ensure unbiased phrasing of the question
 - Establish a relationship with a professor in the Statistics department
- Involve campus IT services in the test run of the voting platform

Establish and Maintain Independence

- The election commission is a neutral body, independent of the student government and other organizations on campus
 - This should be made clear, especially when collaborating to host events like candidate debates
- Ensure that the student government constitution does not inhibit the autonomy of the commission in any way, and if it does, advocate for change
- Commissioners should disclose relationships to any candidates to the commission's advisor so the advisor has insight and can give perspective that serves as a means of checks-and-balances when rulings are being made

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Focus on Logistics

- The role of an election commission is to oversee the process and enforce the rules of a given election cycle, nothing more
- All aspects of the process (meetings with candidates, campaign and voting timelines, ballot structure, voter eligibility, etc.) should be well thought out above all
- Stick to the script
 - Candidate & Constituent desires for the election commission to take on additional roles such as increasing voter turnout, sending out additional email updates, etc. do not fall under the purview of the commission

Remain Unnoticed

- Send out clear, consistent, and concise information
 - There should be a set schedule for student body communication via email, and a centralized platform for all things related to the election cycle (platforms, timelines, candidate events, etc.)
 - Watch the wording of emails (keep it professional) and avoid spelling errors/date or time discrepancies (this can lead to distrust)
- Evaluate the email inbox of the commission
 - Requests for comment from news publications on anything other than election results should be few and far between
 - During an election cycle, there should be little to no complaints about the election process (address these quickly), primarily reports of rules violations

