

Supporting Democratic Institutions and Clean and Peaceful Elections

Summary and policy-relevant findings



A woman is helped by a member of the polling staff to cast her vote at a polling station in Freetown Sierra Leone 2007
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When political leaders are subject to few checks and balances in poor countries, they have the incentives and opportunities to distort elections through fraud and violence. The result is often poor economic policy, voter apathy, the entrenchment of vote rigging behaviour, divisive ethnic politics and, in some cases, electoral violence.

iiG research shows that carefully constructed interventions can reduce violence, increase voter turnout, and limit the effectiveness of vote buying. Policy recommendations to governments, donors, NGOs and the international community are as follows:

- Educate the public early: Voter education initiatives, early in the campaign season, are a proven cornerstone of interventions to minimise fraud, violence, and increase voter turnout.
- Actively support transparency and accountability: Government institutions with electoral responsibilities need support to demand accountability from candidates on their spending. National electoral commissions need support to be fully independent bodies.
- Promote the development of strong institutions: Elections are clean to the extent that checks and balances are strong. Term limits, a free press, and constitutional checks and balances are the most effective instruments. Small, poor but resource-rich countries are particularly vulnerable to distortions in democratic processes.
- Address grievances and inequalities: Peaceful democratic transitions are more difficult to achieve when people hold grievances and perceptions that specific (ethnic) groups have been favoured more than others. Reforming institutions to provide justice and resources for all can contribute to achieving prosperity with peace.
- Prevent future outbreaks of violence by passing laws to appropriately penalise the use of violence during election periods.

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Policy context

The soundness of economic policies under a particular political leader has a great deal to do with how that leader came to power. In short, “honest elections increase accountability and thereby discipline governments to improve economic policy and governance, but if candidates can win by fraud this chain is broken” (Collier and Chauvet, 2009). Therefore, donors should support efforts to have free and fair elections in order to substantially improve economic policies in poor countries.

Overview

This brief summarises a critical body of recent research into voter behaviour and election-related fraud and violence, including vote buying, intimidation, ballot rigging, and corruption in campaign finance. The projects were collaborative efforts between researchers at the Centre for the Study of African Economies (CSAE) at Oxford University and partners in Kenya, Nigeria, Benin, and Sao Tome & Principe.

A wide range of methods were employed by the researchers depending on the line of enquiry, ranging from unique field experiments in Sao Tome & Principe, Benin and Nigeria, to the analysis of new international data sets.

Findings in more detail

Why does cheating happen?

Incumbents have strong incentives to cheat in elections: those using dirty politics stay in office 2.5 times longer than those leaders who do not (Collier and Hoeffler, 2009). Dirty politics are less feasible in strong institutional environments, especially those with effective term limits, a free press, and constitutional checks and balances.

What are the long term effects of cheating?

Violence and electoral cheating reduce trust in institutions and among people. In Kenya for instance, those who were affected by electoral violence in 2007 are now more likely to: resort to violence to solve their problems, ignore the law and disagree with holding elections as a way to elect leaders (Collier et al. 2010).

What forms does cheating take and what can be done about it?

Often, it is incumbents who use patronage networks and public resources to buy votes and

rig elections, and challengers who use violence and intimidation. Vicente and Wantchekon (2009) review field experiments using voter education initiatives in Benin and Sao Tome & Principe. They find that effective constraints on incumbents include term limits, a strong, independent national electoral commission which supports secret balloting, and clean campaign financing.

Carefully constructed voter education initiatives should be run in parallel with the institutional measures outlined above. CSAE researchers have shown that such initiatives can reduce the effectiveness of fraudulent and violent tactics. Collier and Vicente (2008) and Fafchamps and Vicente (2009) document a successful intervention with ActionAid to counteract violence during Nigeria's 2007 general election. Areas targeted for the campaign experienced, in relation to non-targeted areas: less violence, fewer votes for violent politicians, and higher voter turnout. Furthermore, the campaign reached not just those who were individually approached but all of those who lived in the campaign area. The campaign was also particularly effective with those people less likely to benefit from local political deals such as the poor and those working outside the district.

Even under circumstances where vote buying is prevalent, voter education can encourage voters who have accepted bribes to ‘vote in conscience’ when at the polls. Vicente (2007) carefully constructed and evaluated a voter education initiative in Sao Tome & Principe, not long after oil production had begun. Under circumstances of ballot secrecy and a voter education campaign, a number of voters that sold votes were able to defect and vote ‘in conscience’ on election day.

Although ethnic attachments are also important determinants of voting behaviour, voters' preferences are also tied to the perceived performance of political leaders (Vicente and Wantchekon, 2009; Gutiérrez-Romero, 2009). All initiatives should promote the view that voting is an evaluation of the public goods a particular leader has championed for the community. In an in-depth study on Kenya's 2007 MP elections and the Constituency Development Fund, Gutiérrez-Romero notes that “MPs running more health or water projects had a greater chance of being re-elected.”

Economic aid on the other hand may not be effective to stop cheating because it is often misused in poor countries with weak institutional environments. Therefore, policy makers should target efforts towards improving the effectiveness of checks and balances in poor countries. They should in particular prioritise small, but resource-rich poor countries as they possess exceptional vulnerability to fraudulent practices.

Ongoing and Future research

Future research is being carried out on: the effectiveness of new approaches to prevent fraud and violence, understanding how observers affect the conduct of elections, and evaluating the links between community development projects and the perception that communities have of local and national government.

For more detailed information

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Paul Collier & Lisa Chauvet (2009) "Elections and Economic Policy in Developing Countries". Economic Policy, Volume 24, Number 59, July.

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Information about Researchers

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