

## Cleaning up dirty elections

### Summary and policy-relevant findings



Kenyan soldiers guarding ballot boxes in 2007. © Irin www.irinnews.org

Statistical analysis on elections and growth explains the links between fair elections, growth, natural resources and strong political institutions. Researchers at the Centre for the Study of African Economies (CSAE) at the University of Oxford used a new data set spanning nearly 30 years and 155 countries to analyse why in weak democracies politicians are likely to use dirty tactics in elections and pursue bad policies once elected. The main findings are:

- Using dirty tactics during elections helps politicians that are already in office. If they use illegal practices to win elections, they can expect to be in office around 2.5 times longer than if they participated in fair elections;
- Dirty elections are bad for economic growth by skewing politicians' incentives towards pursuing bad policies rather than good ones;
- Checks and balances are effective in reducing the incentives to cheat and implement bad policies.
- International aid has no clear effect on the quality of elections, unless there are effective checks and balances.
- Small, poor but resource-rich countries are more prone to dirty elections.

These findings illustrate that governments and international agencies need to actively support fair and free elections as there are strong incentives for politicians to use dirty tactics. The focus of such support should be on those small, poor but resource-rich countries that are more prone to dirty elections. The most effective assistance for free and fair elections is to encourage the creation of checks and balances rather than through the giving of aid.

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## Policy Context

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, many countries are holding regular democratic elections. Countries that have free and fair elections tend to have higher rates of economic growth. This is because politicians, who want to remain in office, must deliver effective economic policy in order to get re-elected.

However, in a country with weak political institutions, politicians already in power have many resources available to them to manipulate elections. Leaders who are not openly contested in elections and who are unchecked in their policy, will tend to steal government funds. As politicians pursue these fraudulent practices, they limit the resources available for development and slow down economic growth.

## Project findings in more detail

Researchers from the CSAE used a new international data set based on the political history of 155 countries between 1975 and 2004 to study the weaknesses of democracy and its consequences.

The four key findings are:

- Cheating substantially prolongs an incumbent politician's time in office.

Analysis of nearly 30 years of data on political change showed that incumbent politicians who ran in fair elections could expect to spend 6.4 years in office. Those incumbent politicians, who successfully manipulated elections, remained in power for 15.8 years on average.

- Politicians who have used dirty electoral tactics have reason to pursue bad policies.

In societies with clean elections politicians can extend their time in office by 40% by implementing policies to encourage growth. However, politicians that use unfair election practices have much less reason to promote growth because growth only extends their time in office by 23%.

- Checks and balances are effective in keeping elections clean.

Term limits, a free press and constitutional checks and balances are the most effective checks.

- Aid has little effect on the conduct of elections.

The reason for this is that aid replaces taxation as a source of revenue for the government. This makes the political process less accountable. In fact, in countries with a weak political system, aid makes a clean election even less likely.

The authors point out that some countries are more prone to dirty elections than others. Small, poor countries, which are endowed with natural resources, such as oil, will struggle to have fair elections.

## Future research

Future research will analyse data on whether external checks and balances such as election observers are effective in creating or improving accountability in those countries where the institutional checks and balances are weak.

## For more detailed information

Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler "Democracy's Achilles Heel or How to Win an Election without Really Trying". CSAE Working Paper. Available at:  
<http://www.csae.ox.ac.uk/workingpapers/pdfs/2009-08text.pdf>

## ABOUT THE RESEARCHERS

**Paul Collier** is the Director of the Centre for the Study of African Economies and Professor of Economics and Professorial Fellow of St Anthony's College at the University of Oxford. He is the author of "The Bottom Billion" and his research concentrates on political economy of democracy, particularly in Africa.

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The Centre for the Study of African Economies (CSAE) is an economic research centre within the Department of Economics at Oxford University. The CSAE carries out economic research with a particular focus on Africa. Its aim is to improve economic and social conditions in the poorest societies. CSAE researchers often use unique data which give them unrivalled insight into the underlying issues. The resulting policy recommendations address questions in the economic and political spheres as well as in civil society in developing countries. These recommendations based on quantitative analysis are the distinctive feature of the CSAE's work and set it apart from many other research institutions. CSAE research is funded by the UNIDO, the World Bank, the ESRC, the Department for International Development (DFID), and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The views expressed are not necessarily those of the funding bodies. **Briefing paper prepared by Naureen Karachiwalla and Alex Teytelboym. Series Editor: Karin Loudon.**