Baobab
Africa

African elections
How to save votes

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COULD smartphones help reduce electoral fraud in Africa and in other regions? At a recent forum hosted by the Brookings Institution on the ways that wireless technologies are affecting politics in various countries, Clark Gibson, a professor at the University of California, San Diego (USCD), presented findings from experiments in Afghanistan and Uganda which suggest that they can. Local researchers were deployed to polling stations armed with digital cameras and smartphones to take photographs of the publicly posted election tallies. The research found that this alone can cut electoral fraud by up to 60%.

The experiment was first developed during the 2010 Afghan elections by James Long and Michael Callen, then UCSD graduate students, with funding from the Development Innovation Ventures section at the United States Agency for International Development. To test the idea that photographic "quick-counts" of election results can reduce ballot rigging the team split a sample of 471 polling stations in Afghanistan into a "treatment" group and a "control" group. The polling stations in the treatment group were sent letters announcing that a researcher would visit shortly after the election to take a digital photograph of the tallies; the polling stations in the control group received no such prior warning. The research concluded that as a result electoral rigging was cut by 25% in the polling stations in the treatment group and the theft of ballot boxes and other election materials was reduced by 60%.

Mr Gibson replicated the experiment during the Ugandan presidential election last year, using a bigger sample of 1,000 polling stations scattered all around the country. Letters were again sent to half the sample reminding them about the requirement to display vote tallies and telling them that a photo would be taken of their count. But crucially, using a special app

developed by engineers at Qualcomm, a big technology company based in San Diego, the researchers this time were able immediately to send their data back to a server at UCSD. Academics there could then check to see if the voting numbers had been falsified by looking for give away number-patterns. They found again that vote tampering and ballot-box theft were much lower among polling stations that had received warning that a photo would be taken of their tally than among those that did not.

Mr Gibson is a seasoned election monitor and has worked on several missions. He hopes that the spread of more and cheaper wireless technology and more off-the-shelf apps will increase government accountability. The next version of the electoral-fraud app will be available on Android and in the cloud, so in the future voters could access it themselves. Smartphone apps will also help in the collection of exit-polling data that can be compared with the actual result. The technology is relatively cheap—smartphones cost around $250—and allows more locals to get involved in monitoring elections. There is a great hunger for democracy in Africa and elsewhere, says, Mr Gibson, you can tell just by looking at the queues of voters who turn out on election day. Nothing is more dispiriting than to learn that their vote has been manipulated.