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A Picture of Democracy

How digital cameras and smartphones might reduce corruption in Afghanistan and elsewhere.

By Ray Fisman | Posted Friday, Oct. 21, 2011, at 7:13 AM



Will digital photo monitoring fix electoral corruption in developing countries?
Photograph by Behrouz Mehri/AFP/Getty Images.

With the deadline approaching for troop withdrawals from Iraq and Afghanistan, the U.S. is facing the unhappy prospect of handing off military and political control of both countries to thoroughly corrupt regimes. Of the 178 countries in Transparency International's [Corruption Perception Index](#), Iraq comes in at 175; Afghanistan is tied with Burma for 176th. The prognosis for a transition to honest and accountable government is pretty grim.

At the same time, some innovative experiments in the democratic process provide at least a glimmer of hope for nudging these countries toward more inclusive government. A [study](#) just released by Michael Callen and James Long, a pair of ambitious doctoral students at the University of California-San Diego, exemplifies these efforts. The two researchers evaluated whether low-end digital cameras could be a cheap and easy technological fix for election fraud in Afghanistan's 2010 parliamentary elections. Their results are promising. At polling stations where locally reported vote counts were digitally photographed, reports of electoral fraud were as much as 60 percent lower, and the vote counts of politically connected candidates—the ones most likely to have rigged elections—were reduced by about one-quarter.

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Callen and Long's study is part of a [larger effort](#) to figure out how to tweak the political process to improve the functioning of democracy. Figuring out what does and doesn't work well to ensure free and fair elections is a thorny problem. Clearly, you can't just compare measures of electoral irregularities in countries that utilize electronic ballots to those that use pen and paper. Expensive, computerized voting systems



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are more common in richer countries, and countries that lack a commitment to the democratic process may be unwilling to invest in advanced election technologies, regardless of their economic means. So many political researchers have joined a [movement within the social sciences](#) to try to understand what works in electoral politics by running randomized trials in [India](#), [Benin](#), and elsewhere.

If computerized balloting and transmission of results would be too expensive for a country like Afghanistan,

mobile-phone technology holds much greater promise. (Besides, given the amount of corruption, any fancy election equipment would just get stolen anyway.) For improving election accountability, authors Callen and Long took as inspiration a [study of teacher absenteeism](#) in India, which showed that simply having a student photograph his teacher each morning sitting with the other students cut teacher absences in half and boosted students' test scores.

For their election study, Callen and Long applied the same camera-audit approach to crack down on a common form of election fraud. In Afghanistan, votes are counted and recorded locally, and the results posted at each polling station. To determine the election winners, these ballots and results are sent to a provincial station for aggregation, and finally on to the national election center in Kabul. Somewhere between the local polling stations and the election headquarters in Kabul, the numbers can mysteriously shift in favor of a candidate who has, for example, bribed a provincial official to rig the numbers in his favor.

Working with a USAID [Development Innovation Venture grant](#), and partnering with Democracy International, a fair election NGO on the ground in Afghanistan, Callen and Long hired a team of Afghans to travel to 471 randomly selected polling stations scattered throughout the country and act as election monitors. As votes were being cast on Election Day, the monitors in 238 of these voting stations delivered letters to polling managers, informing them that posted results would be photographed upon announcement and then compared to the official vote counts announced in Kabul. The following day, the monitors ventured forth in all 471 locales, cameras in hand, to take digital photos of local election results. After that, each monitor canvassed community members for any reports that election materials had been stolen or tampered with. By comparing voting patterns and reports of tampering in the 238 communities where election officials had been informed of the camera audit, to those where no such forewarning occurred, the researchers were able to infer the impact on a couple of methods of election fraud.

Citizens reported rumors that results had been manipulated or election materials stolen in nearly 19 percent of "control" stations where no warning letters were delivered. There were such reports in only 7 percent of the 238 "treatment" stations. The impact was even stronger in communities where leading candidates had personal ties to provincial election officers, i.e., those in which changing results or substituting false ones would have been easiest.

Of course, with one avenue of electoral fraud shut down, candidates determined to circumvent the democratic process turned to other forms of cheating. Indeed, complaints of voting irregularities, such as candidates claiming that their supporters' votes were somehow unrecorded or invalidated, were higher at polling stations where station managers knew they'd get camera audits.

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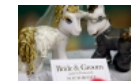
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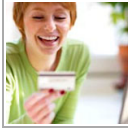
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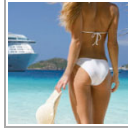
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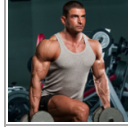
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Ray Fisman is the Lambert Family professor of social enterprise and director of the Social Enterprise Program at the Columbia Business School. He is the co-author, with Tim Sullivan, of The Org: The Underlying Logic of the Office.



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