REF2021

Institution: University of Birmingham

Unit of Assessment: UoA 19, Politics and International Studies

Title of case study: Combating electoral manipulation and strengthening legislative scrutiny in Africa and beyond

Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2018-2018

Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:

Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Nic Cheeseman	Professor of Democracy and International Development	2017–present
Susan Dodsworth	Post-Doctoral Fellow	2017–2019

Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2017-2020

Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No

1. Summary of the impact

Cheeseman's **deep election monitoring (DEM)** provides a new model to combat electoral manipulation which represents a real threat to democratic stability. To date, this new form of election observation has been adopted by the UK in Kenya, Ethiopia, and Malawi, and the United Nations in Nigeria. It has resulted **in effective interventions and ensured a smooth transfer of power, without mass demonstrations, civil unrest and loss of life**. Changes in the Westminster Foundation of Democracy's approach have improved **legislative accountability in six countries** that are home to over 170 million people, and has **changed how they manage their democracy promotion programmes**. In addition, **better government policy has been implemented in 38 developing countries.**

2. Underpinning research

Cheeseman's research focuses on elections in regimes that claim to be democracies but feature predominantly authoritarian political systems. The team that he leads as part of the Political Economy of Democracy Promotion project has conducted nationally representative surveys (three countries, 8,500 respondents), semi-structured interviews (200 in six countries), and comparative cross-national analysis in order to better understand how authoritarian leaders manipulate the image of democracy to sustain authoritarian rule. This work has generated four key findings that have collectively helped to place electoral fraud and the need to strengthen domestic accountability mechanisms at the heart of the academic and policy debate in the field of democratization.

F1. The average quality of elections is low, especially in new democracies, and new strategies of electoral manipulation are becoming increasingly widely used. *How to rig an election* [R1] documented the existence of a "Dictator's Toolbox" of six strategies that enable incumbents to achieve an unfair electoral advantage, and revealed how authoritarian leaders can swap out of overt political violence and in to subtler strategies such as "low profile" intimidation in order to make manipulation harder to detect.

F2. Existing techniques of election observation are insufficient to detect and expose fraud. Traditional methods of election monitoring which rely on randomly deploying a small number of teams to watch the process of voting at the polling station level have been shown to be poorly placed to detect fraud in a new era of strategic rigging [R1, R2]. They also have limited usefulness — because they were not designed for this purpose — when it comes to helping international donors to identify the most effective interventions to reduce and manage electoral controversies during the campaign itself.

F3. International democracy promotion is most likely to be successful when Western aid donors adopt a 'portfolio' approach, identifying a mixture of projects with different profiles. Programs designed to support democracy abroad can be better designed and targeted by moving away from planning and evaluating individual projects on a case-by-case basis. Instead, it is critical to consider the distribution — or portfolio — of projects being undertaken on the basis of two dimensions: narrow vs inclusive approaches and institutional vs issue-based interventions [R3]. By developing a typology based on different combinations of these two dimensions, Cheeseman revealed how donors can select programs with different risk profiles to balance their desire for 'big wins' against the need to demonstrate value for money.

F4. Technocratic approaches to strengthening civil society are unlikely to generate systematic transformation unless they adopt an inclusive approach that engages with local contexts and populations [R4, R5]. Cross-national collaborations are only likely to build the critical mass required to generate systemic change within civil society if they engage with more explicitly political organizations and are able to contextualize their approaches.

3. References to the research
R1. Nic Cheeseman, *How to Rig an Election*, Yale University Press, 2018.

R2. Nic Cheeseman, Gabrielle Lynch and Justin Willis, 'Digital Dilemmas: The Unintended Consequences of Election Technology', *Democratization* 25, 8 (2018): 1397–1418.
DOI: 10.1080/13510347.2018.1470165

R3. Nic Cheeseman and Susan Dodsworth, 'Risk, politics, and development: Lessons from the UK's democracy aid', *Public Administration and Development* 38, 2 (2018): 53–64.
DOI: 10.1002/pad.1822

R4. Nic Cheeseman and Susan Dodsworth, 'Ten Challenges in Democracy Support and How to Overcome Them', *Global Policy*, (2018).
DOI: 10.1111/1758-5899.12567

R5. Nic Cheeseman and Susan Dodsworth, 'The Promise — and Pitfalls — of Collaborating with Development Organizations in Africa', *African Affairs* 117, 466 (2018): 130–145.
DOI: 10.1093/afraf/adx041

Evidence of quality
- Grant of £470,000 from the East African Research Fund of the UK Government for "Early Warning and Long-term Monitoring" of the Kenyan general elections of 2017 (EA/014).
- Grant of £120,000 as part of the Anti-Corruption Evidence research consortium (ACE) funded by DFID and based at School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) for research on anti-corruption messaging in Nigeria.

4. Details of the impact
Cheeseman has **changed UK policy in respect of electoral monitoring and approach to elections**. His work on democracy has also changed the way that the Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD) works with civil society on **legislative scrutiny** and has significantly contributed to changes in the way that **democracy promotion programmes are managed**.

1. **Transforming policy through the UK Government's (FCO) adoption of 'deep election monitoring'**

The FCO has changed its approach to election monitoring, adopting a new model of 'deep election monitoring' (DEM) that was developed by Cheeseman [C1; F2]. The DEM approach provides **international donors advance warnings of likely 'trouble-spots' and improves the efficacy of their interventions** [F1]. This approach combines the expertise of UK researchers with country experts, and is **regarded as best practice**. For example, the UK High Commissioner for Kenya and the Head of Governance for DFID/FCDO Kenya, describe DEM as a model "for the real-time use of external evidence in international policy-making" [C2] and "for

how the British government can engage with policy-makers to try and ensure more credible, peaceful and inclusive elections" [C3]. That this is so is further evidenced by its adoption in other countries, including Nigeria [C4] and Ethiopia [C5]. Through this method, international donors, including the UK Government, are better able to understand key electoral risks and so design more effective interventions. This has in turn helped to better manage electoral controversies in countries with a combined population of over 300 million [C2, C3, C6].

Two examples of countries where the DEM has been successfully used are Kenya and Malawi:
- The DEM was utilized in the 2017 Kenyan election, resulting in a more **effective international response** [C2, C7]. Significantly, the DEM helped — along with broader international and domestic efforts to deter violence — to **reduce the number of fatalities** linked to the election from more than 1,000 in 2007 [C7] to 92 in 2017. The DEM was used to predict that the election would result in a narrow and disputed victory for the incumbent. Through regular reports and face-to-face briefings with the UK High Commissioner, the researchers advised Western aid donors to establish effective conflict resolution mechanisms ahead of election day [C3]. These included back-room channels for private negotiations between the leading candidates and investments in local peace programmes.
- Malawi pursued a similar approach ahead of the re-run presidential election of 2020. The DEM "played a role in persuading President Mutharika and the ruling party to **allow high quality elections and ultimately accept defeat**" [C6] — **sparing the country the mass demonstrations that resulted in the death or serious injury** of over 60 people following the disputed 2019 poll. In order to design interventions to prevent a repeat of the 2019 elections — which were nullified in the courts amid accusations of electoral manipulation — Cheeseman teamed up with leading Malawian researchers to advise the UK High Commissioner and DFID's Senior Governance Adviser over a period of three months [C6]. This involved drawing on the lessons from *How to Rig an Election* [R1] to identify the most likely areas of electoral manipulation [F1, F2], identifying key messages to dissuade President Peter Mutharika from pursuing these strategies, and drafting statements for the High Commission to communicate these messages both publicly and privately [C6].

2. **Improving quality of legislative scrutiny by changing how the Westminster Foundation for Democracy works with civil society**

The Westminster Foundation for Democracy has **changed its approach to strengthening legislative accountability** by integrating civil society partners in this area of their democracy promotion work for the first time [C8, C9], **resulting in improved quality of legislative scrutiny in six of their partner countries** that are home to over 170 million people (Kenya, Malawi, Uganda, Nigeria, Albania and Kyrgyzstan). The Westminster Foundation for Democracy — the UK's premier democracy promotion organization that is funded directly by the UK Government with an annual budget of over £7 million — has **changed the way it works with civil society groups** since 2018 following research-based advice from Cheeseman and Dodsworth [F3]. From then, civil society groups became a core component of their strategic plan [C8]. The WFD's Head of Research confirmed the significance of this new approach, which "explicitly integrates civil society partners for the first time" [C9], enabling WFD to work with a broader range of political and technical groups **to strengthen legislative committees and provide parliamentarians with greater access to information, enhancing accountability in new democracies** [F4]. As a result, since 2018 WFD has been spending around £2 million of its budget more effectively [C9]. In turn, this has facilitated greater strengthening of democratic processes and institutions than was previously possible and delivering "tangible benefits" [C9] to the legislatures and civil society groups that the WFD supports in 30 developing countries with over 400 million citizens [C8].

This NGO influence came about after the WFD invited Cheeseman to establish the Political Economy of Democracy Promotion project as a collaboration between WFD and the University of Birmingham [C10]. In 2017, the researchers and WFD identified how best to work with civil

society and manage political risk as two areas in which academic research could benefit the organization, subsequently producing a working paper on each topic [F4]. The trust built up through the project enabled the key findings to be quickly incorporated into WFD programming, leading to the investment of funds in a way that more effectively leverages the influence and information of civil society groups.

3. **Changing the management of democracy promotion programmes**

The WFD have implemented **a fundamentally new approach to its own internal programme management**. Cheeseman and Dodsworth's work on portfolio approaches was used to restructure the way the WFD selects and monitors programmes, so that their risks and potential benefits are considered as a group rather than on a case-by-case basis [F3]. As a result, the WFD has been able to keep democracy promotion programmes running even in extremely difficult cases in which countries have undertaken an authoritarian turn, as in Venezuela [C9]. WFD estimates that this has improved the quality of legislative scrutiny, and hence improved government policy in key areas such as the budget and healthcare for over 170 million people across six countries [C9].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact
C1. East Africa Research Fund grant from Foreign Commonwealth Office/Department for International Development (DFID) in Kenya for Deep Election Monitoring [Available as PDF]
C2. Testimony from UK High Commissioner for Kenya (27th September 2018) [Available as PDF]
C3. Testimony from Head of Governance, FCDO Kenya (18th November 2020) [Available as PDF]
C4. Terms of Reference for the Deep Election Monitoring project to be replicated in Nigeria [Available as PDF]
C5. Terms of Reference for the Deep Election Monitoring project to be replicated in Ethiopia [Available as PDF]
C6. Testimony from former British High Commissioner to Malawi, FCDO (17th December 2020) [Available as PDF]
C7. DFID evaluation of support to Kenyan elections, November 2019 [Available as PDF]
C8. Westminster Foundation for Democracy strategic plans for 2017–2022 [Available as PDF]
C9. Testimony from Research Director, Westminster Foundation for Democracy, UK [Available as PDF]
C10. Westminster Foundation for Democracy contract with the University of Birmingham [Available as PDF]