E-voting and Election Validity Discourse: Examining the Impact of E-voting on Kenyan Elections

TREO Talk Paper

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Abstract

This TREO talk submission is designed to seek feedback on a research proposal that seeks to investigate the impact e-voting systems are having on the ways different stakeholders discursively evaluate the legitimacy of national elections. E-voting has typically been recommended in response to shortcomings or major failures in more traditional approaches to tallying ballots. In the US, for example, after the Florida debacle in the year 2000 general elections, the US Congress passed the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) of 2002. One of the 3 goals of HAVA was to replace punchcard and lever-based voting systems in order to eliminate the issue of “hanging chads” that had plagued the 2000 elections. HAVA consequently with its $3.8 million budget was influential in the development of Direct Recording Electronic (DRE) systems and the spread of e-voting across the US. Kenya experienced a similar, but more cataclysmic stimulus to implement e-voting mechanisms after a contested presidential elections results led to violence that left over 100 people dead and up to 600,000 people displaced. In the wake of this tragedy Kenya moved towards the adoption an electronic voting process and its 2013 elections were billed as the most modern election in African history.

While electronic voting can result in improvements such as faster tallying times and increasing voter turnout rates, the technology is not without flaws. In Florida’s congressional house elections that took place on November 7, 2006, for example, election results were marred by a malfunction in the electronic voting systems that failed to register the votes of over 18,000 voters in District 13 of Sarasota County. Indeed, as indicated by a Brennan Center for Justice Report there has been a steady flow of news reports detailing issues of failed electronic voting machines following every recent major election cycle and this is projected to get worse as the systems age. Kenya’s attempt to achieve a technical solution to its perennial concerns with electoral fraud and corruption were also marred by pervasive technological glitches that jettisoned the country’s high expectations for its 2013 elections.

Now with a new round of national elections in Kenya slated for August 2017 there has been contentious debate in political circles regarding the proper role of information technology in the election process. This study proposes to follow this debate in an attempt to develop a deeper understanding of the interplay between technology and the conflicting social values that shape Kenya’s electoral process.