

EVOLUTIONARY VOTING

MISSING LINKS

by Henry Valentino

In the beginning...

The use of technology in elections can be traced back to the first real breakthrough in voting machines, the old mechanical lever machines, which saw their first official use in the U.S. in 1892 in Lockport, New York. By 1930, almost every major city in the U.S. was using mechanical lever machines for elections. Thirty years later, over 50% of the votes cast in elections in the U.S. were cast on mechanical lever machines. In the U.S. 2000 Presidential Election, over one in five votes (20.7%) were still being cast using 100-year-old technology.

Missing Links creep in

Governments spend millions of dollars on elections, but even those with the most money, experience, and advanced technology can become complacent and allow missing links to develop in the process. For example, would the butterfly ballot we heard so much about in one Florida county have been used if it were field tested before the election? Would fewer voters have failed to punch the ballots properly if an effective voter education program addressed this issue? Clearly these were missing links in the U.S. election process. No matter what technology a government uses, whether paper ballots or Internet voting, missing links can have a devastating effect.



Missing links can be found in almost every election; but emerging democracies, where many election officials do not have the benefit of experience or continuity, are especially vulnerable. In some instances, missing links can be intentional. I once met with an election commission in an emerging democracy that decided the law did not empower the commission to conduct a voter education program. They reasoned that the political parties were responsible for voter education. When asked, "whom would the public blame if they did not understand the voting process, the election commission or the political parties?" the commission corrected the potential missing link.

Why not just use paper ballots?

The desire to simplify and speed-up voting and tabulation of results while minimizing the opportunity for fraud and error have driven the evolution of machines and technology in elections. Election officials manufacturing equipment used in elections know the advantages and disadvantages as well as the accuracy and inaccuracy of the specific equipment used in elections. Voters around the world were educated on these specifics as the U.S. struggled to tabulate results of its 2000 Presidential Election. This single election will have more impact on defining the specifications for equipment and technology used in elections and on the laws and procedures for conducting elections than any other event in the previous 100 years of using machines for voting.

Is international assistance causing missing links?

Missing links can sometimes be created by outside players. Emerging democracies frequently request assistance from the international community to conduct their elections. In these cases, the international organizations must be responsible to ensure the assistance they provide is proper and adequate for the recipient. Too often, international assistance focuses on the weeks prior to an election and on the election itself. The link of what happens after the election is often missing. Countries with a history of authoritarian rule, domination by a single political party, fraud, or civil unrest are most vulnerable during the time between the closing of the polls and the declaration of the winners.

Case Study: Indonesia

The 1999 Presidential Elections in Indonesia are a good example of a proper mix of technology and planning. Indonesia instituted a comprehensive voter information and education program to inform voters of what to expect in their first free elections in 35 years. The law required the official results to be reported through the various electoral levels—from 350,000 polling places to 70,000 villages to 4,200 sub-districts to 329 districts to 27 provinces. All counting was done manually.

To overcome potential delays of reporting unofficial results, the international community organized a Joint Operations Media Center to collect the results by phone and fax from the 4,200 sub-districts. A staff of 475 installed 220 telephone lines, 100 computers, and 50 fax machines. Unofficial results were released as received and given to the public by radio, television, and print news media. Within two weeks, sufficient data had been reported to indicate the outcome of the elections.

The missing link in Indonesia was the lack of cooperation among the 48 political parties that made up the election commission, who could not agree on releasing the official results. Three months later, the government declared the official results without agreement in the election commission.

Use technology, but plan well

My experience in the use of technology in emerging democracies leads to several admonitions:

- Use technology where possible to enhance and improve the electoral process and reduce the missing links.
- Don't expect technology to replace good, old-fashion planning and experience.
- Make sure your plans cover the entire election process from pre-registration to seating of the winners.
- Keep the process transparent and keep the public informed.
- Finally, eliminate your missing links.

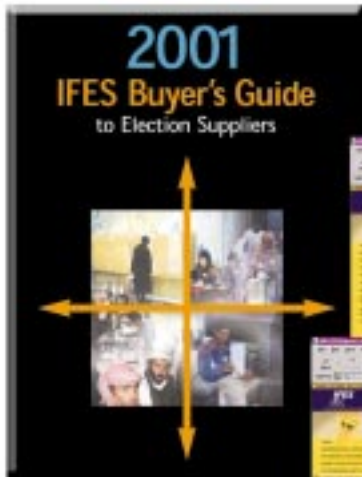
Henry Valentino is currently IFES' Senior Media Advisor in Indonesia.

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