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BOOKS IN
REVIEW

HOW TO UN-RIG AN ELECTION

Alberto Simpser

How to Rig an Election. By Nic Cheeseman and Brian Klaas. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018. 317 pages.

From bribing voters in Nigeria, to redistricting for political advantage in the United States, to killing a leading opposition candidate in Pakistan, *How to Rig an Election* chronicles the many ways in which governments around the world contrive to gain an unfair electoral advantage. Cheeseman and Klaas's book is full of almost-unbelievable anecdotes from around the world. For example, in 2006 Madagascar's President Marc Ravalomanana managed to bar an opposition candidate from running for office by refusing to let his plane land. In 2010, operatives of Ukrainian prime minister Viktor Yanukovich presumably gave voters in pro-opposition areas ballot-marking pens filled with disappearing ink. In the 1998 St. Petersburg mayoral election, authorities helped to ensure the defeat of opposition candidate Oleg Sergeyev by recruiting two other people named Oleg Sergeyev to run against him. While election rigging is not always this colorful, it is without doubt a major issue today: Most of the countries on our planet call themselves democracies and hold regular elections to fill political offices, yet many fall short of basic democratic standards. This book makes this point forcefully, and that is reason enough to recommend it.

Cheeseman and Klaas organize their book around major categories of election manipulation, including chapters on gerrymandering, vote buying, repression, election hacking, ballot-box stuffing, and fooling the international community. Each chapter gives copious examples of

the tactic in action, then ends with suggestions for policies to eliminate or at least mitigate the type of rigging in question. The chapter headings are deliberately broad: Examples in the vote-buying chapter run the gamut from handing out bags of money at rallies—as Ugandan president Yoweri Museveni did in 2013—to excessive spending on campaign ads. And the chapter on election hacking covers not only the actual hacking of electronic voting systems, but also the use of social media to spread false information and the fabrication of lies to discredit media outlets. While Cheeseman and Klaas draw on examples from the United States and other established democracies, as well as historical case studies, the book focuses on modern “counterfeit democracies,” a term that encompasses all electoral regimes except those that are “pure authoritarian” or “electorally democratic.” This range of countries overlaps with what Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way call “competitive authoritarianism,” Andreas Schedler calls “electoral authoritarianism,” and Larry Diamond calls “hybrid regimes.”

Cheeseman and Klaas’s book has many strengths. First, it sounds the alarm about the quality of elections in today’s world with clarity and force. While this alarm has often been sounded before, the erosion that democracy has suffered over the past decade makes this sounding especially timely. Second, the authors’ ample personal experience observing elections around the world allows them to illustrate their claims with vivid firsthand accounts. Third, the book analyzes gerrymandering, fake news, and abuses of social media as tools of election rigging on the same level as vote buying and repression. While these tactics have often been studied separately, they certainly all belong in the manipulator’s toolbox. Finally, the writing is nontechnical and readily accessible to any general reader or policy maker; no initiation into the jargon of contemporary social science is required.

That said, there are places where the authors might have delved deeper. First, the discussion of policy recommendations is not as polished as the description of rigging tactics. To be sure, some excellent strategies for guarding against fraud are proffered in these pages, including the use of independent electoral commissions and parallel vote tabulations. Students of election administration may find such expedients familiar, but in a book aimed at a wider readership it is heartening to read about them just the same. This increases the chagrin that one feels when noting how Cheeseman and Klaas immediately undercut some of their main policy recommendations—such as digitizing elections or reforming international electoral observation—by acknowledging the chief limitation of such strategies: They can be effective only with the help of a benevolent political leader or a strong rule of law (which it is not in the interest of an authoritarian ruler to provide), or if political incentives take second place to normative democratic commitments (also a generally unlikely prospect). After recommending the digitizing of elections in a section on “how to

stop rigging,” the authors point to a key danger: Digitizing places electoral results in the hands of whoever controls the computer system. This means that, in most cases, it would be best not to digitize elections. To take another example, the discussion of how to reduce vote buying recommends strengthening regulation and enforcement, but again notes that those in power will most likely have no incentive to do anything of the sort.

The authors cannot be blamed for the practical difficulties inherent in efforts to rein in election rigging. But they could have offered more creative policy recommendations. For example, why not study the possibility of offering amnesty to authoritarian rulers? Such rulers often manipulate elections because they fear what would happen to them if they were to leave power, so why not give them a way out? And how about exploring ways to create a reputational mechanism that would follow election-rigging leaders around for the rest of their careers? Then too, the book could also have benefited from more discussion of the growing body of experimental evidence that provides convincing information about the effectiveness of different interventions against rigging. Finally, the great potential of domestic electoral observation to reduce rigging gets too little attention.

My second major critique of the book is that it often glosses over important conceptual distinctions and unresolved debates in the relevant academic literature. In the chapter on vote buying, for example, the authors speak of excessive campaign spending (on, say, televised advertising) or pay hikes for civil servants in the same breath as exchanging cash for votes, while these are two quite different animals. Moreover, the discussion of vote buying leaves out research findings about the range of reasons—other than monitoring and punishment—that citizens may have for carrying out their end of the vote-buying bargain, such as norms of reciprocity. It also fails to clarify the distinction between buying votes and buying turnout—the latter being a simpler matter in that it does not require the regime to monitor whom citizens actually vote for. Various techniques of election forensics are listed as promising tools to reduce rigging, while such techniques’ limitations go uncited. Many forms of rigging, alas, leave no forensic “fingerprints.” The authors doubtless know this, but not all their readers will. Finally, despite the authors’ claim that rigging today is marked by substantial innovation, all the rigging tactics discussed in the book are quite old, with the exception of some of those related to digital technology.

At times, the book passes over gray areas in existing knowledge. Gerrymandering is presented as an unadulterated evil, but the authors do not explain that there is no universally accepted way to draw district boundaries. Moreover, although the book purports to focus on “counterfeit democracies,” many of the regimes that Cheeseman and Klaas cite the most often—including the governments of Azerbaijan, Belarus, and Kazakh-

stan—are actually pure autocracies. There is also a related, unresolved tension in the authors' discussion of election rigging's goals. Early in the book, they claim that rulers usually rig elections simply because they need to win them and that large margins of victory expose incumbents to international ridicule. But later in the book, the authors present other reasons to rig, including boosting margins of victory (p. 118), demoralizing the opposition (p. 160), and demonstrating the ruler's grip on power (p. 216). Indeed, the authors make the point that authoritarian rulers often face no international sanctions or other costs—not even ridicule—for flagrant rigging, even when major powers know quite well that electoral chicanery has transpired. Some of the cases that the authors discuss, including those of Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Rwanda, and Uganda, have been noted by myself and others as instances in which rigging is best understood as a means of demoralizing opponents and displaying the rigger's power rather than as cases where oversized victory margins reflect an effort to reduce the rigger's uncertainty about the outcome.

Despite my reservations, this book is a thoroughly documented, broadly accessible, and timely contribution that calls new attention to the problem of counterfeit democracy. General readers and practitioners stand to learn the most from it, but even scholars and election experts will find interesting ideas and examples throughout.

Alberto Simpser is associate professor of political science at the Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México (ITAM) in Mexico City. He is author of *Why Governments and Parties Manipulate Elections: Theory, Practice, and Implications* (2013).

BOOKS RECEIVED

The books listed below were recently received by the editors. A listing here does not preclude a review in a future issue.

Advanced Democracies

The Alt Right: What Everyone Needs to Know. By George Hawley. Oxford University Press, 2018. 248 pp.

The American Revolution: A World War. Edited by David Allison and Larrie Ferreiro. Smithsonian, 2018. 274 pp.

As a City on a Hill: The Story of America's Most Famous Lay Sermon. By Daniel Rodgers. Princeton University Press, 2018. 355 pp.

Cyberwar: How Russian Hackers and Trolls Helped Elect a President. By Kathleen Hall Jamieson. Oxford University Press, 2018. 314 pp.

Disenfranchising Democracy. By David Bateman. Cambridge University Press, 2018. 348 pp.

The Empty Throne: America's Abdication of Global Leadership. By Ivo Daalder and James Lindsay. PublicAffairs, 2018. 237 pp.

Political Realignment: Economics, Culture, Electoral Change. By Russell Dalton. Oxford University Press, 2018. 268 pp.

The Politics of Petulance: American in an Age of Immaturity. By Alan Wolfe. University of Chicago Press, 2018. 210 pp.

Poor Representation: Congress and the Politics of Poverty in the United States. By Kristina Miller. Cambridge University Press, 2018. 222 pp.

The Public Mapping Project. By Micah Altman and Michael McDonald. Cornell University Press, 2018. 103 pp.

The Turnout Gap: Race, Ethnicity, and Political Inequality in a Diversifying America. By Bernard Fraga. Cambridge University Press, 2018. 274 pp.

Who Donates in Campaigns?: The Importance of Message, Messenger, Medium, and Structure. By David Magleby, Jay Goodliffe, and Joseph Olsen. Cambridge University Press, 2018. 466 pp.

Africa

Electoral Politics in Africa Since 1990: Continuity in Change. By Jamie Bleck and Nicolas van de Walle. Cambridge University Press, 2018. 331 pp.

Turning and Turning: Exploring the Complexities of South Africa's Democracy. By Judith February. Pan Macmillian, 2018. 326 pp.

Asia

Dreamers: How Young Indians Are Changing the World. By Snigdha Poonam. Harvard University Press, 2018. 271 pp.

Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union

Putin's Counterrevolution. By Sergey Aleksashenko. Brookings Institution Press, 2018. 325 pp.

Latin America and the Caribbean

Centro Presidencial: Presidencias y Centros de Gobierno en América Latina, Estados Unidos y Europa. Edited by Jorge Lanzaro. Tecnos, 2018. 437 pp.

Movement-Driven Development: The Politics of Health and Democracy in Brazil. By Christopher Gibson. Stanford University Press, 2018. 305 pp.

Votes for Survival: Regional Clientelism in Latin America. By Simeon Nichter. Cambridge University Press, 2018. 302 pp.

Middle East and North Africa

Inside Tunisia's Al-Nahda: Between Politics and Preaching. By Rory McCarthy. Cambridge University Press, 2018. 234 pp.

Comparative, Theoretical, General

Antisocial Media: How Facebook Disconnects Us and Undermines Democracy. By Siva Vaidhyanathan. Oxford University Press, 2018. 276 pp.

Authoritarianism and the Elite Origins of Democracy. By Michael Albertus and Victor Menaldo. Cambridge University Press, 2018. 326 pp.

Democracy in Small States: Persisting Against All Odds. By Jack Corbett and Wouter Veenendaal. Oxford University Press, 2018. 245 pp.

Feminist Advocacy, Family Law and Violence Against Women: International Perspectives. Edited by Mahnaz Afkhami, Yakin Ertürk, and Ann Elizabeth Mayer. Routledge, 2019. 267 pp.

The Final Act: The Helsinki Accords and the Transformation of the Cold War. By Michael Cotey Morgan. Princeton University Press, 2018. 396 pp.

Future Politics: Living Together in a World Transformed by Tech. By Jamie Susskind. Oxford University Press, 2018. 516 pp.

How to Save a Constitutional Democracy. By Tom Ginsburg and Aziz Huq. University of Chicago Press, 2018. 295 pp.

Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment. By Francis Fukuyama. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018. 218 pp.

Mortal Republic: How Rome Fell into Tyranny. By Edward Watts. Basic Books, 2018. 336 pp.

Responsible Parties: Saving Democracy from Itself. By Frances McCall Rosenbluth and Ian Shapiro. Yale University Press, 2018. 324 pp.

The Struggle for Democracy. By Christopher Meckstroth. Oxford University Press, 2018. 272 pp.

The Virtue of Nationalism. By Yoram Hazony. Basic Books, 2018. 285 pp.