How to Rig an Election

Authors _ Nic Cheeseman and **Brian Klaas**
Publisher _ Yale University Press, 2018. 320 p. Hardcover $26.00. ISBN: 978-0-300-20443-8
Reviewer _ Michael Whitlow, Westminster Law Library, University of Denver Sturm College of Law

Democracy is under attack. At first, it's easy to dismiss or assimilate a statement like that according to your partisan politics. The sad truth however is that an increasing number of observers are sounding the alarm that democracy truly is in retreat on a global scale.[i] Whatever your opinions on the state of American politics, the fact remains that speech rights, press freedoms, and election fairness are backsliding not just in the United States, but also in Europe, Asia, and Africa.

Into this context comes Cheeseman and Klaas's book *How to Rig an Election*. When I first saw the title, my initial reaction was to expect an assessment of American politics generally or a polemic post-mortem on the 2016 presidential election. Instead, their treatise is a perfect primer on all the ways in which democracy can be subverted by autocrats and authoritarians. The American system is by no means exempted from their analysis, but they specifically go beyond our borders to look at methods of election rigging in Africa, Europe, and Asia, especially sub-Saharan Africa, the former Soviet bloc, and repressive Middle Eastern regime responses to the Arab Spring.

After a lengthy introduction that serves as an important overview, the book is divided into six main chapters, each discussing in detail a specific form of election rigging. By detail, I mean that the authors not only describe all the various methods, overt and covert, that regimes can utilize to accomplish a particular form of rigging, but they also use at least one historical example of each detailed method drawn from interviews with citizens and government officials as well as observations from journalists and professional election monitors. The result is that the text does not deal in hypotheticals, but is solidly grounded in reality.

Chapter 1 focuses on "invisible" rigging methods such as gerrymandering and voter suppression methods. This is one of the areas in which our own country is truly taken to task as not only an exemplar, but the progenitor of such

methods. Chapter 2 discusses bribery, not just of officials and monitors, but even of the electorate. From the cronyism of Tammany Hall to infrastructure, government contracts, and outright cash payments, some regimes retain power by ensuring it's in the best interests of enough (or the right) people. Chapter 3 begins delving into the darker side of electoral manipulation with a focus on political violence and the politics of division. Cheeseman and Klaas describe that it is not just the regime's thugs and secret police that enforce these divisions, but cultural and ethnic divisions can be manipulated to turn the populace against itself.

Chapter 4 explores all the ways in which technology can be used against us. The "fake news" phenomenon is of course detailed, but so also are the ways in which voter rolls, ballot machines, and vote tallies can be hacked or digitally manipulated. Chapter 5 covers the various methods of ballot-box stuffing and the associated risks of discovery. Chapter 6 covers the more meta-level approach of public relations efforts to distract and divert attention from the previous efforts to gain international legitimacy. It is in this chapter that the authors truly take the West to task for their history of allowing political expediency and foreign policy agendas to willfully blind them to authoritarian abuses.

Lest you think all is doom and gloom, the authors once again provide concrete suggestions and examples of how to improve democratic systems. Their chapter-length conclusion is very prescriptive, and describes local, national, and international systemic changes that have proven effective. The authors are not shy about warning that these changes will not be quick, cheap, or easy, and they certainly acknowledge that the largest impediment may simply be political will. But they are also not shy about championing democracy as the best available form of government, nor are they shy about charging those who agree with them to fight to implement these changes.

The book is as well-sourced and supported by empirical data as one could desire in a scholarly publication, but where the book truly shines is in its ability to avoid academic jargon and present the material in such a way that any lay reader would understand and benefit from its reading. I managed to read an uncorrected advance proof, in which the graphical data was compiled as an appendix. I hope that the final edition assimilates these charts and graphs into the main body both as a stylistic break and

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i. Larry Diamond, "Facing Up to the Democratic Recession," 2015, https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles /facing-up-to-the-democratic-recession/; Jay Ogilvy, "The Forces Driving Democratic Recession," 2017, https://www.forbes .com/sites/stratfor/2017/05/25/the-forces-driving-democratic -recession/#9864a234db2e; "Democracy Index 2017," Economist Intelligence Unit, 2017, http://www.eiu.com/Handlers /WhitepaperHandler.ashx?fi=Democracy_Index_2017 .pdf&mode=wp&campaignid=DemocracyIndex2017.

a way to bolster the evidentiary paragraphs, but regardless of the final formatting the book provides an excellent resource for anyone with an interest in political systems.

It is most appropriate for an undergraduate student audience, as it does more to introduce and explain election

rigging methods to readers that are currently unfamiliar with them than it does to enlighten experts in the field. It would be most at home in academic libraries, particularly undergraduate institutions, though it would also be of use in law libraries for students with an interest in election law.

The Internet Trap: How the Digital Economy Builds Monopolies and Undermines Democracy

Author _ Matthew Hindman
Publisher _ Princeton University Press, 2018. 256p. Cloth (also available as an e-book). $29.95.
ISBN: 978-0-691-15926-3
Reviewer _ Clem Guthro, independent librarian

Hindman, an assistant professor of media and public affairs at George Washington University, has written a fascinating book that attempts to upend the common understanding of the internet as a force that provides a level playing field and economic opportunity that is only a click away. In eight chapters, using data-driven research, he shows how very large companies have captured the attention economy, and the danger this poses to news organizations, a key component of our democratic life and values. His book joins several other recent volumes that attempt to show the ways that the attention economy is shaping our lives and work. These include C. C.Bueno, *The Attention Economy: Labour, Time and Power in Cognitive Capitalism*, 2016; J. G. Webster, *The Marketplace of Attention: How Audiences Take Shape in a Digital Age*, 2016; J. Williams, *Stand out of our Light: Freedom and Resistance in the Attention Economy Paperback*, 2018, and T. Wu, *The Attention Merchants: The Epic Scramble to Get Inside Our Heads*, 2016.

Google was one of the first companies to systematically conduct research on user behavior, discovering that small changes resulted in compound instead of incremental changes.

Compound attention on any site is referred to as "stickiness" and Google's research discovered ways to increase stickiness, including increased load speed and offering ancillary services such as email, video, maps, mobile, and office software. Site stickiness created by Google, Facebook, Microsoft, and Yahoo allowed them to capture one-third of all web traffic, and Google and Facebook to capture almost 75 percent of digital advertising revenue in the United States.

Hindman argues that "the digital attention economy increasingly shapes public life, including what content is produced, where audiences go, and ultimately which news and democratic information citizens see" (p. 5). He

attempts to define a new model of audience attention: one that explains the reality of what is happening and dispels the myth that the internet disperses attention and allows small and local sites to flourish.

The playing field is not level in today's network economy. Hindman correctly argues that mega companies' investments in technical infrastructure translate into sites and services with increased efficiency, stickiness, revenue, and dominance in the marketplace. Google, with its blazingly fast architecture, uses load speed as a factor in ranking search results, which favors large organizations that can invest heavily in technology. The unevenness of the playing field further advantages large firms because of their ability to conduct experiments on site usage and layout and leverage what they learn to make their sites stickier. Big brand recognition (e.g., *New York Times*) as well as easy to use sites, usually designed and improved through large scale testing, also favors large sites. Brand loyalty and proficiency of use capture users' attention and makes it hard to switch users to new sites. Hindman argues that this unevenness counters the popular mythology of an internet that is frictionless commerce and a level playing field.

Personalization and recommender systems dominate the internet. Using the Netflix prize, a competition to improve its recommender system, as an example, Hindman shows that, at scale, recommender algorithms often outperform humans. Recommender systems and learning algorithms built and employed by large sites (Google, Facebook, Amazon) are beginning to replace editorial judgment and journalistic and information norms. Hindman rightly worries about the profound effect this has on what content we see and even which sites are presented first in a search. Recommender systems are one of the powerful tools that help grow audiences and give large