

BOOK REVIEW/ COMPTE RENDU

Norris, Pippa, *Why Electoral Integrity Matters*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014. 312 pp. \$30.95 paper (9781107684706)

There is a saying in politics that the people in democracies get the government they deserve. Since citizens delegate certain powers to their government and choose their representatives, those who vote (or don't vote) ultimately bear responsibility for the form their government takes. We are often also told that those who don't vote don't get to complain, for elections are the heart of the democratic process. But in *Why Electoral Integrity Matters*, Pippa Norris shows how frequently elections around the world stray from democratic norms, and indeed how often failures in electoral oversight persist in spite of the will of the people. Flawed elections, Norris argues, are a detriment to the people's belief in the legitimacy of the state and its institutions. Electoral flaws may range from outright fraud (e.g., the stuffing of ballot boxes), to maladministration (e.g., erroneous voter lists), to systematic forms of exclusion (e.g., onerous voter registration requirements), to deceptive campaigning (e.g., robocalls), to political interference (e.g., pro-incumbency bias in state-run media), to outright state violence (e.g., intimidation at polling stations). In Canada, for example, we see ruling parties attempt to influence the make-up of the voting public, as with recent federal legislation (i.e., the Fair Elections Act) impeding Elections Canada's ability to actively promote voting. There is a potentially insidious motive at work in this legislation, given the likely anti-incumbency bias of disaffected non-voters, and seeing as electoral management bodies around the world, on the contrary, are seeking to "develop effective outreach programs designed to strengthen voter education and citizen participation, especially programs targeting the poor, the younger generation, women, and minorities" (87). Obviously, flawed elections are a problem in both the Global North and the Global South. However, Norris suggests overall that established or consolidated democracies have more robust mechanisms for ensuring fair elections, and for responding to misconduct when it takes place.

Why Electoral Integrity Matters is concerned primarily with the consistency between global electoral norms and electoral realities. Norris highlights the increasingly widespread importance of fair and transpar-

ent elections for a government's attainment of popular legitimacy – in Lipset's words, "the capacity of a political system to engender and maintain the belief that existing political institutions are the most appropriate and proper ones for the society" (14). Ever since the ideals were set out in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the global standard for political legitimacy has been government that reflects the "genuine will of the people" (21). We see in the past half-century an increasing convergence of countries' internal standards of political legitimacy and global democratic norms. Whereas Weber famously distinguished different modes of political legitimacy, whether they be charismatic, traditional or rational-legal, for all but a couple Gulf region absolute monarchies, the rational-legal form has carried the day according to Norris (115).

The scope of this work is unprecedented in its comparative approach to electoral systems. Norris offers a meta-analysis of datasets from the large-scale, longitudinal surveys undertaken by election monitoring agencies and international democracy advocates to find correlations between circumstances around elections and citizens' beliefs about political legitimacy. Formulating a social psychology of democratic citizenship, Norris empirically demonstrates across a series of chapters that electoral integrity does indeed matter to people in democratic nations. When elections fail to meet normative standards, institutions fail to attain popular legitimacy. The people in such scenarios frequently proceed to express their discontent by protest, rebellion, and sometimes by undertaking regime-change. This is not a question of the uninformed perceptions or the misperceptions of the people for Norris. She compares large-scale studies with local expert evaluations to argue that "the collective public appears capable of making fairly rational and accurate assessments about the quality of elections" (110) – that the people generally do notice when elections are mishandled.

Lingering behind Norris' thesis is the alternate question: are there cases where elections (be they fair or unfair) do *not* really matter? Norris suggests there are circumstances where electoral integrity is seen as secondary to other quality-of-life measures, as during certain financial crises, or where electoral misconduct pales in the face of other political scandals. Hence, Norris does not fall victim to simply fetishizing elections as such. Arguing against the 1990s electoral fallacy – that if you simply introduce elections, societies will democratize – Norris shows her political-sociological mettle, demonstrating that democratic states need institutional supports like independent courts, civil society groups, a free press, and a division between government and state bureaucracy to ensure a culture of democracy. However, there are other problems of a sociological nature that Norris points to but does not unpack. For ex-

ample, in deeply divided societies where there exists a paucity of social trust, even a government elected fairly may still be perceived as illegitimate by a large part of the population. Norris occasionally points to the causes of depressed voter turnout, but the pressing question of apathy or complacency in the West – for example, the general downward trend in voter turnout for Canadian general elections – is not really broached. There remain unanswered questions pertaining to how votes are counted or interpreted in the selection of leaders: is a proportional representation system more democratic than a first-past-the-post system? Should we consider strategic votes as equally in the spirit of democracy as non-strategic voting? What about mandatory voting versus voluntary voting? These are larger questions of validity rather than the rule-governed proceduralism that Norris is concerned with. In fact, Norris deliberately chooses to focus in on the concept of electoral integrity over “democratic values and principles” (37) as a way of measuring elections, since values come with too much ambiguity. Procedural consistency we can at least measure and advocate for in good faith.

This tension between procedure and norms, however, persists in the book. For as much as Norris advocates for the advancement of global norms around elections, some norms remain in dispute. The most notable disagreement pertains to free speech and election financing. The recent ruling by the US Supreme Court in favour of Citizens United allows corporate bodies unfettered expenditure in electioneering communications. This appears strikingly at odds with most established democracies, which seek to treat the public sphere as an open but balanced realm for the exchange of ideas, rather than one potentially dominated by the loudest or wealthiest voices. This is a difficulty that Norris points to frequently, but does not really situate within larger political-economic debates about the effects of capitalism on democratic institutions, preferring a democratization theory focused on building strong institutions and oversight. The problem is that there are fundamental disagreements about what constitutes a good democracy, and indeed how to bring one about. By one measure, a balance needs to be struck between freedom and equality, two facets of democracy that in their pure forms exist in tension with each other. It is difficult to talk in depth about electoral integrity without also engaging thoroughly in the debates around the ideals – liberal or free-market norms vs. egalitarian norms – that elections are measured against. One hopes Norris delves more deeply into these discussions in the two upcoming books from her series: *Why Elections Fail* (2015) and *Strengthening Electoral Integrity* (2016). For Norris is otherwise compelling in her writing, providing empirical verification for what many readers may already have intuited on some level, that elec-

toral integrity is of central importance to political legitimacy in democratic societies, and a state or government's failure to meet these normative standards is frequently met with by popular upheaval and protest. In democracies, we may say, the chickens eventually come home to roost. Perhaps Franz Fanon (1965) was most apt in this case, remarking that ultimately "a government...gets the people it deserves" (198).

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REFERENCES

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