



Elections in Hard Times

Why are “free and fair” elections so often followed by democratic backsliding? *Elections in Hard Times* answers this critical question, showing why even clean elections fail to advance democracy when held amidst challenging structural conditions. The book opens with a comprehensive, accessible synthesis of fifty years of research on elections and democratization, a resource for experts, policymakers, and students. It then develops a new theory of why elections fail in countries with little democratic history or fiscal resources, and a history of violent conflict. In a series of five empirical chapters, the book leverages an eclectic mix of cross-national data, short case studies, and surveys of voters to support this theory. It closes with a careful examination of popular strategies of democracy promotion, evaluating steps designed to support elections. This book will attract academic experts on democratization and elections, students, and policymakers.

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Thomas Edward Flores , Irfan Nooruddin
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Elections in Hard Times

Building Stronger Democracies
in the 21st Century

THOMAS EDWARD FLORES

AND

IRFAN NOORUDDIN



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To our parents

Ernesto Javier and Lillian Belle Flores

and

Noëlle Marie Vaz and Irshad Ali Nooruddin

Because, ah them that's got are them that gets
And I ain't got nothin yet
That old sayin them that's got are them that gets
Is somethin I can't see
If ya gotta have somethin
Before you can get somethin
How do ya get your first is still a mystery to me

Ray Charles and Ricca Z. Harper, "I Ain't Got Nothing Yet
(Them That Got)"

*(Lyrics reproduced with permission)**

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Preface

Democracy is in global retreat forty years after the Third Wave of Democracy began. The Arab Spring has ended in reinforced authoritarianism in Egypt, civil war in Libya, and the most fragile of democratic politics in Tunisia. Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan continues to crack down on the press and punish dissent, firing or reassigning thousands of police officers and judges. Elections in Sub-Saharan Africa are followed by violence as often as peace. The likes of Paul Kagame, Vladimir Putin, Robert Mugabe, and Hun Sen, meanwhile, continue in power as they "win" tarnished elections. In Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán openly advocates abandoning liberal democracy in favor of an "illiberal state." Even in Western Europe, a supposed bastion of electoral democracy, confidence in democracy seems to be declining amid high unemployment and hostility towards migrants.

Democracy promoters have reacted to their cause's perceived global decay with public alarm and despondence. Freedom House's *Freedom in the World 2015* report is sub-titled "Discarding Democracy: Return to the Iron Fist," betraying its gloomy outlook. The National Endowment for Democracy, meanwhile, recently published a new volume titled *Democracy in Decline?*, which includes an entry from Francis Fukuyama, who famously predicted in the heady days of the early 1990s that liberal democracy would be the endpoint of history. If an organization whose entire mission centers on supporting democratic change questions whether democracy is in decline, the answer almost certainly would seem to be yes. Even *The Economist*, the classically liberal news magazine, dedicated a special issue in 2014 to this democratic malaise, asking, "What's gone wrong with democracy?"

For many, the answer to this question is elections themselves. Rather than seeds of democratic change, elections have become a veritable scapegoat, blamed for everything from entrenching autocrats to causing civil war. Preeminent scholars in political science have painstakingly shown how incumbents cheat to win elections, even as

Western monitoring organizations try to stop them. Bad elections, they argue, yield bad democracy. *The Economist* itself blames elections when it contends that, “One reason why so many democratic experiments have failed recently is that they put too much emphasis on elections and too little on the other essential features of democracy.”

In this book, we offer a different interpretation of elections’ role in democratic change. Elections rapidly spread to every corner of the globe after about 1988 in what we call the “electoral boom.” They also became dramatically more competitive, despite claims to the contrary, as international pressure forced incumbents to eschew many forms of manipulation. Yet elections since 1988 have been followed by little democratic change; in fact, they have been as likely to be followed by authoritarian reversal as democratic progress.

Why did elections lose their democratizing power just as they spread globally and improved in transparency? Our answer centers on the political-economic context in which elections take place. When election winners take power, voters demand performance, particularly economic growth. True, an election winner does enjoy some degree of *contingent legitimacy*, that democratic honeymoon period that comes with winning a clean election. Yet voters are impatient for results and that places politicians in a bind, since they often inherit low stocks of what we call *performance legitimacy* – that is, the ability to generate public goods. What is a rational incumbent to do? An obvious re-election strategy is to buy off some voters with bribes and suppress dissent among others. This, however, is harder to do when a deep stock of *democratic-institutional legitimacy* constrains the incumbent from subverting democratic rule. Elections, then, are more likely to end in disappointment when held in places with shallower stocks of legitimacy. Elections in these circumstances more likely begin the low-legitimacy trap that so worries democracy promoters – elections, poor government performance, democratic erosion, voter disillusionment with democracy, and then more elections.

The core of this book is dedicated to testing these arguments. We show that the electoral boom’s very success contained the seed of its disappointment: as elections inexorably spread the world over, they arrived in countries with daunting challenges to democratization. The electoral boom undoubtedly represented a democratic triumph, yet came on the heels of the international upheavals of decolonization, the global debt crisis of the 1980s, and the collapse of Communism and

economic contraction of Eastern Europe. It is precisely these countries where elections arrived: younger, poorer, and more ethnically divided societies with a history of foreign domination. We present robust evidence that elections disappoint when they are held in countries with little democratic experience, scant fiscal space, and a history of civil war. Elections in these circumstances are followed by democratic stasis, voter disillusionment, opposition complaints, worse elections in the future, and entrenched incumbents. Even the more competitive elections in these settings yield no additional democratic dividend. This is our main finding: electoral seeds fail to bear democratic fruit not because they are poor quality, but because of the inhospitable terrain in which they are sown.

What does this mean for democracy promotion in the twenty-first century? There is much room for pessimism, we admit. Any “easy” cases for democracy have already democratized and the countries left – the places where we most dearly wish for democracy’s success – suffer from precisely the challenges we identify here. Nor can democracy promotion succeed merely by improving the quality and integrity of elections. Instead we argue that democracy promoters must seek to supplement depleted stocks of performance and democratic-institutional legitimacy if they are to succeed. The evidence here is not unrelentingly bleak, however. We show that some efforts at democracy promotion do succeed in specific low-legitimacy contexts, especially election observation, democracy aid, and peacekeeping missions that make electoral support an explicit part of their mandate.

The origins of this book date to a late night at the annual meetings of the Midwest Political Science Association (MPSA), as we scribbled on a cocktail napkin in the lobby of the Palmer House Hilton in Chicago, Illinois. That was over ten years ago. Since then, we have accumulated intellectual debts at a rate that would make us blush if we had any shame about such things. Our deepest debt is to three academic giants on whose shoulders we stand. Since we were undergraduates, we have been awed by the intellectual contributions of Robert Dahl, Samuel Huntington, and Adam Przeworski. Their thinking about democracy influences every page of this book. In writing it, we aspire to produce the kind of book they did (and do) – bursting with “big” ideas but grounded in reality. We also owe a deep debt to the members of our dissertation committees at the University of Michigan (go blue!):

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What began as an analysis of post-conflict elections evolved into this book. That metamorphosis was encouraged and enabled by the wise counsel and support of our colleagues. Gaby Lloyd edited, indexed, and improved the entire manuscript. She, Alex Castillo, and Susan Guarda provided research assistance at an early stage of the project. Susan Hyde, Emily Beaulieu, and Daniela Donno generously shared their data and offered useful comments on the whole book. In addition, Carew Boulding, Daniel Corstange, Jennifer Raymond Dresden, Thad Dunning, Terrence Lyons, Niki Marinov, Porter McConnell, Tess McEnery, Will Moore, Agnieszka Paczynska, Heidi Sherman, Joel Simmons, Alberto Simpser, and Lauren Young offered advice at various stages of the book's development. Audiences at Columbia University, Florida State University, the Free University of Berlin, George Mason University, Georgia State University, the International Studies Association, the University of Arizona, the V-DEM Institute at the University of Gothenburg, the University of Michigan, the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, and Yale University also improved this work through their generous comments.

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Our parents, and our brothers and their families, laid the foundation of support upon which all our accomplishments are predicated. To our parents, Ernesto Javier and Lillian Belle Flores and Irshad Ali Nooruddin and Noëlle Marie Vaz, we gratefully dedicate this book. You continue to be our wisest teachers and our truest guides and it is our dearest hope that we make you proud.

Despite the sincere efforts of all named above, errors and omissions remain and we each remind our readers that all mistakes are the fault of the other guy.