

# The Despot's Apprentice: How to rig an election

In his new book, *The Despot's Apprentice: Donald Trump's Attack on Democracy*, **Brian Klaas** (LSE) sets out how Donald Trump deploys the methods of authoritarian rulers – in attacking the press, undermining the rule of law and filling government posts with family members and cronies – to corrode the norms of democracy. In this extract, from the chapter “How to rig an election”, he examines how voter suppression, a preferred tactic of autocrats across the globe, continues to be a threat to US democracy.



President Trump with President Duterte, The Philippines. Picture by [Shealah Craighead](#) (official White House image)

Donald Trump is the most unpopular president in modern American history. His approval ratings fell into the mid-30s after just a few months in office, a feat never accomplished so quickly in the history of American polling. Moreover, those dismal ratings were caused by Trump's behavior, rather than a war-turned quagmire or an economy in recession—the two toxins that tend to doom presidential approval ratings. In poll after poll, it seems, most Americans find Trump embarrassing rather than inspiring.

Trump's unpopularity will have electoral consequences. It could torpedo the Republicans' hopes to retain control of Congress after the 2018 midterm elections. And if his personal ratings remain this dismal, his own reelection is highly unlikely. That is, unless Trump finds a new way to mimic autocrats around the world: by unfairly tilting the election in his favor.

There are many ways to rig an election. In 2013, Azerbaijan's dictator, Ilham Aliyev, accidentally (and tragically) released election results on an iPhone app the day before voting took place. In Ukraine's 2004 election, observers in opposition strongholds were astonished to see ballots marked just a few minutes earlier suddenly appear to be blank. Those voters had been given pens that used disappearing ink; their votes were invalidated when counted because they appeared to be blank protest votes, rather than votes for their preferred candidate. In the 1998 St. Petersburg mayoral elections in Russia, the ruling party tried to split the vote for opposition candidate Oleg Sergeyev by finding two people—one a pensioner, the other a plumber—also named Oleg Sergeyev. Because voters couldn't tell which Oleg was which, all three received votes, and the actual candidate lost.

Savvy despots and dictators are constantly coming up with innovative ways to rig an election. But the goal is always the same: to hold elections that the ruling regime cannot lose. Incumbents use rigged elections to legitimize their rule—even though in truth they only win because they stacked the deck against the opposition. But perhaps the smartest, most sophisticated and most subtle type of modern election rigging is voter suppression—dealing opposition voters out of the game altogether. If the incumbent's supporters can cast ballots but the opposition's can't, there's not as much need for heavy-handed tactics such as ballot box stuffing and assassinating opponents.

On the west coast of Central Africa lies Equatorial Guinea, a kleptocratic dictatorship ruled by Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo. He has been in power since 1979, when Jimmy Carter was in the White House—six US presidents ago. In other words, Obiang has been in power for a long time. Obiang is brutal and cruel. But he is also a master of voter suppression. The Gabonese minority within Equatorial Guinea disproportionately opposes the government, having long been denied equal rights. They have faced constant abuse—occasionally even lynchings—simply because their skin is darker. But these days, many Gabonese are more hopeful. They now believe in the possibility, slim as it may seem, that they can secure change at the ballot box.

Obiang is not letting them achieve change easily. He is putting nearly insurmountable barriers in the way of minority voting within Equatorial Guinea. In some minority-heavy regions that are far more likely to support regime change, Obiang's cronies have instituted a poll tax, forcing ethnic minorities to pay it at least two years before the next election. Those who forget to pay, or who simply can't afford to pay, are disqualified from casting a ballot. Those who manage to make the payment are subjected on arrival at the polls to so-called "literacy tests." These tests are administered at the discretion of the voting precinct staff. While data is scant because the government does not allow it to be studied directly, it is clear that the literacy test is not applied evenly. Voters from the lighter-skinned ethnic groups, who tend to support the government, never seem to have to take these tests.

Here are a few questions from the tests (in translation). Question 20: "Spell backwards, forwards." Question 21: "Print the word 'vote' upside down, but in the correct order." And my personal favorite, Question 23: "Draw a figure that is square in shape. Divide it in half by drawing a straight line from its northeast corner to its southwest corner, and then divide it once more by drawing a broken line from the middle of its western side to the middle of its eastern side." The test was designed to make sure that most Gabonese fail it. It's a sinister masterstroke from a self-interested regime seeking to preserve its power while disempowering anyone who could oppose it. And it works.

Except, of course, none of the above is actually about Equatorial Guinea. It's about the civil rights era in the American South. Substitute the Gabonese for African-Americans; the poll taxes in West Africa for poll taxes in Mississippi; and the "literacy test" is from Louisiana as recently as 1964. You don't have to travel to a corrupt African kleptocracy to take a masterclass in voter suppression; many Americans have witnessed it firsthand. (For what it's worth, Teodoro Obiang actually is a despot who has ruled Equatorial Guinea with an iron fist since 1979, but he doesn't bother with anything other than sham elections, since he does not even allow an opposition party to exist.)

Unfortunately, voter suppression is not a tactic that has been relegated to the dustbin of American history. Instead, it is alive and well, and it poses a unique threat to the fairness and integrity of elections in the United States. With Donald Trump's rise to the presidency, voter suppression efforts in America are about to get a steroid injection. And as voter suppression efforts grow more muscular, the voices of minorities in America will quickly grow weaker.

Donald Trump lost the popular vote in 2016 to Hillary Clinton by nearly 3 million votes. He would not be president if roughly 80,000 voters in three states—Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, and Michigan—had flipped their votes to Clinton, or if 80,000 more voters in those three states had shown up to cast ballots for her. In 2018, the majority of voters are likely to vote for Democrats in House races. The best way for Republicans to maintain control of the House despite winning fewer votes than the Democrats is to manipulate the rules of the game—through voter suppression and gerrymandering—in order to retain power, against the will of most Americans.

*This is an extract from [The Despot's Apprentice: Donald Trump's Attack on Democracy](#), published by Hurst. This post represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit.*

*You can read our interview with Brian Klaas [here](#).*

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## About the author

*[Dr Brian Klaas](#) is a Fellow in Comparative Politics at the London School of Economics. He focuses on global democracy, democratic transitions, political violence and volatility (particularly coups and civil wars), and rigged elections – and the economic risks of all these challenges. He is also a former US campaign adviser. Twitter [@brianklaas](#)*



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