

Book Review: Elite Statecraft and Election Administration: Bending the Rules of the Game?

Blog Admin

*Electoral administration is a topic that only occasionally and dramatically breaks into the public consciousness, but is otherwise the province of the political obsessive. Paul Brighton finds that some of the most important examples of such moments are surprisingly absent from **Elite Statecraft and Election Administration**, but nonetheless he believes that **Toby S. James** has written a timely book which serves as a useful reminder that the prominence of electoral administration constitutes a barometer for democratic vitality.*

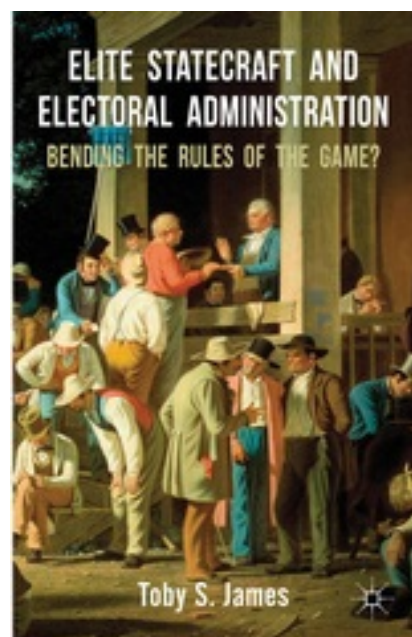


Elite Statecraft and Election Administration: Bending the Rules of the Game? Toby S. James. Palgrave Macmillan. 2012.

Find this book:

One of the most gripping books ever written covered the apparently arcane topic of election administration. It wasn't this book; and, perhaps surprisingly, it isn't even cited by Toby S. James in his new book *Elite Statecraft and Election Administration*. Arguably it should be, as it covers in a visceral and human way many of the issues worked through here in a more abstract and academic style.

The book is *Means of Ascent* by Robert Caro: Volume 2 in his titanic sequence of *The Years of Lyndon Johnson*. It shows how, in 1948, LBJ took election manipulation to the very limits of what was then legal – and then a bit further still – in his campaign for the Texas Senate primary race of that year. Voter registration, turnout manipulation, and a host of other methods were used to convert his opponent's huge initial advantage into an LBJ majority of 87. For years, Johnson gloried in the nickname Landslide Lyndon.



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Of course, as Jones rightly observes, in 2000, we all became instant election administration experts. As we awaited the outcome of the Florida deadlock, we all took part in discussions of the intricacies of ballot design, butterflies, hanging chads and the rest, as the future leadership of the USA was resolved. "... [H]uge numbers of ballots were rejected because administrators were not able to agree whether the punch card machine had adequately marked their ballots".

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For the rest of the time the topic is the province of the anorak and the political obsessive. However, as Jones argues, the extent to which governing parties can make the minutiae of election administration work to their own advantage, while varying according to setting and circumstance, remains considerable. This, of course, is where Lyndon Johnson comes in. It was his Voting Rights Act which ended the situation where most people of colour simply could not vote in the Deep South up to the 1960s. Whether it was the poll tax, literacy tests (set according to the whim of the local electoral officials) or other bureaucratic obstacles, election results were more or less blatantly gerrymandered.

Fifty years on, that couldn't recur, surely? Well, not in that crude form perhaps. But there are still things that happen at the margins. How easy do you make it to register to vote? Do you tie it in with other essentials of life such as ID card, bank or passport? Do you register as an individual or as part of a household? If you fail to make yourself eligible for jury service, should you also, in effect, if not as a matter of public policy, forfeit your right to vote?

One of the criticisms of the UK Poll Tax was that it effectively tied electoral registration with "community charge" registration. "Some names which are on the electoral register will not be on the community charge register". Therefore there should be an "annual comparison of electoral and community charges registers to identify differences". More broadly, the book goes on to claim that, as part of elite statecraft, parties do act on the broad assumptions that are made about their approaches to election administration. In his case studies of the USA and the UK, Jones sets out the perception that parties of the broad left (Democrats, Labour) tend to extend voter registration and involvement, on the basis that higher turnouts tend to favour the Left; while parties of the Right favour a more restrictive approach, as, arguably, low turnouts can favour the chances of the Right. That is not, of course, to say that low turnout elections automatically produce Conservative or Republican administrations. After all, William Hague was no nearer winning the 2001 election on a 59% turnout than he would have been if it had been 72% as in 1997, or 77% as in 1992. But it can help to turn close elections at the margins.

One issue that is not really addressed by Jones is, nevertheless, important. The parties of the centre-left, with their more expansive approach to the size of the electorate, have an easier rhetorical task. It sounds both inspiring and a bit like motherhood and apple pie to advocate electoral opportunity for all. No-one can publicly disagree. The parties of the right, however, have to make their case *sotto voce*, or by having recourse to entirely different arguments: the importance of avoiding voter fraud, for instance. We have already seen the attempt to align the electoral and poll tax registers; and the toxic controversies around both voting registration and allegations of gerrymandered party memberships seen some years ago in areas of Birmingham were used by the Right as an example of rampant abuse.

In the current UK Parliament, we have already seen matters of electoral process twice take centre stage at Westminster (if not in the minds of a majority of the voters): over the referendum on the Alternative Vote, and the Tory-Lib Dem row over seats redistribution. These are not strictly within the confines of election administration in Jones's definition, but they are its cousins. In that sense, this is a timely book. It needed sharper proofing, and an eye for the odd error (Reagan, not Bush, was President in 1986, *pace* p. 96, for example; and Britain fought in World War One from 1914-18, not 1915-18 as claimed on p.129). However, it serves as a useful reminder that, in an era of close elections on both sides of the Atlantic, it is when election administration moves centre stage, as in 2000, that our democracies wobble.

Paul Brighton is Head of Department of Media and Film at the [University of Wolverhampton](#). He grew up in Wolverhampton and attended Wolverhampton Grammar School, winning an Open Scholarship to Trinity Hall, Cambridge. He got a First in English and, after postgraduate research at Cambridge, worked for the media. He was a BBC Radio presenter for twenty years, before becoming Head of Broadcasting and Journalism at University of Wolverhampton. His book *News Values* was published by SAGE in 2007. He is now Head of Media, Film, Deaf Studies and Interpreting; and his next book *Original Spin: Prime Ministers and the Press in Victorian Britain* will be published by I.B. Tauris. [Read reviews by Paul](#).