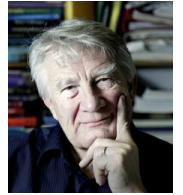


Book Review: The Limits of Electoral Reform

by Blog Admin

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*This book is about how and why electoral reforms disappoint: when we consider campaign finance, direct democracy, or legislative term limits, electoral reforms have limited, and in many cases, no effects. Despite reform advocates' claims, and contrary to the 'institutions matter' literature, findings from **Shaun Bowler and Todd Donovan** suggest there are hard limits to effects of electoral reform. This is certainly a valuable contribution to the literature, concludes **Ron Johnston**.*



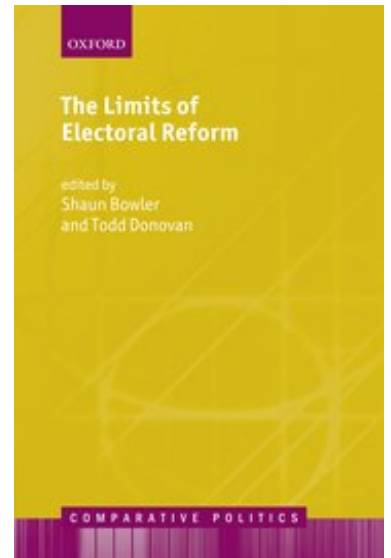
The Limits of Electoral Reform. Shaun Bowler and Todd Donovan. Oxford University Press. March 2013.

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Politicians and others who wish to reform some aspect of electoral practices almost invariably promote their cause by claiming that the changes would enhance such goals as fairness and the quality of representation, and so improve voters' attitudes to politics and politicians and their behaviour – as in electoral turnout levels. Their opponents usually counter with arguments that, if implemented, proposals would advance particular partisan interests only. Who is right? [Shaun Bowler](#) and [Todd Donovan](#) have been addressing this question for some twenty years. *The Limits of Electoral Reform* draws together conclusions from a wide range of investigations, including several original to the book.

Such assessments face substantial problems. There are relatively few researchable cases of major changes such as a switch in the voting system; unravelling the impact of most others, within the context of constantly changing political milieux, is far from straightforward, especially as the impacts may not be immediate. Voters may only be able to evaluate the consequences of legislator term limits after several elections, for example, and on many issues – such as the details of campaign finance regulation – they may in any case be far from well-informed.

Bowler and Donovan have both reviewed a large literature and conducted a number of empirical tests of the argument that institutional changes stimulate alterations to voter attitudes and behaviour. Their approach is neither as 'theory-driven' as Alan Renwick's *The Politics of Electoral Reform* nor as 'theory-light' as David Prosterman's detailed case study of New York *Defining Democracy*. It relies very largely on statistical analyses of available survey data covering four main types of reform: changing the voting system; campaign finance; term limits; and direct democracy. The chapters on the last three are heavily oriented towards the United States' experience.



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The authors' conclusions are clear and unambiguous, within the constraints of the available material – and are almost universally negative. There is very little evidence that any of the reforms studied have transformed voters' attitudes and behaviour; they are no more satisfied with politics in general and elected politicians in particular after the reforms have been implemented (which in many cases they voted for and in some – through popular initiatives – demanded) than they were beforehand. The optimism of proponents of reform is rarely rewarded. Bowler and Donovan argue this is because most of the reforms are of only minor importance to how people view their political milieu: as they put it, 'reforms that are aimed at increasing efficacy, participation, and trust may be running against much more powerful political, economic and social tides' – perhaps even more so over the last decade than its immediate predecessors. Trust in politicians and confidence in their abilities is being substantially eroded, as they prove increasingly unable to manage late capitalism's volatility and guarantee individuals a strong welfare state foundation. Why should voters bother about – let alone make their electoral decisions on the basis of – arcane rules regarding who can give how much to a political party, in what form and how frequently?

It is difficult to gainsay their overall conclusion, and valuable to have such substantial supporting evidence. But in some cases they perhaps underplay what can be assembled. Regarding electoral system change in New Zealand (from first-past-the-post to MMP), for example, they claim that there is 'only limited evidence that the "new" electoral system lived up to expectations and arguments made by pro-reform advocates'. Turnout at general elections may not have increased, but having voted for the reform in 1993, after five general elections using the new system the public voted in 2011 to retain it – and by a larger majority than in 1993.

Other implemented reforms had little relevance to the events and issues that stimulated voter dissatisfaction. UK governments have introduced substantial regulation of aspects of party finance since 2000, but Bowler and Donovan report that public attitudes to politicians have not been affected. Perhaps not surprisingly: the 'scandals' that generated the reform impetus concerned the behaviour of individual MPs ('cash for questions' in the 1990s; abuse of the expenses system a decade later) but the reforms – apart from requiring greater transparency in reporting income sources – largely focused on other issues, such as donations to parties and campaign expenditure limits. Little of the post-2000 regulatory system had a substantial impact on MPs behaviour – and many who stood for re-election in 2010 having been implicated in the scandal two years earlier suffered very little, if at all (probably because the electorate was much more concerned with other matters).

At the end of the book, Bowler and Donovan cast doubts on the validity of the 'new institutionalism' approach within political and economic science. The argument that 'institutions matter' may well influence elite beliefs, perhaps because their behaviour does respond to institutional changes (politicians change their practices when the context is altered). But voters are not so responsive. Many undoubtedly find the rhetoric deployed by pro-reformers unconvincing and are more likely to accept the counter-arguments that in most cases those most ardently canvassing for change, especially if they are politicians in whom trust is any case low, are really promoting sectional interests only. A new status quo will probably be no more or less fair than the existing one – just different groups will either benefit or be disadvantaged. And so, in the larger picture, there seems little point in the change – and if it does happen, there is little evidence that it matters.

This wider contribution to political understanding is somewhat underplayed and the book is presented as a contribution to the more prescribed field of electoral systems and practices. As such it is a valuable contribution to the literature: its introductory chapters provide excellent overviews of the relevant arguments and its four case studies (albeit predominantly North American) provide valuable material for academics, students and politicians sustaining a conclusion readily summarised as 'plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose'.

Ron Johnston is a professor in the School of Geographical Sciences at the University of Bristol who has contributed widely to the literature of electoral studies over the last four decades. His publications include the 2010 British Academy monograph (co-authored with Simon Hix and Iain Mclean) on *Choosing an Electoral System*. [Read more reviews by Ron](#).