

Study reveals remarkably high proportion of national elections are not free and fair

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Credit: University of Birmingham

Researchers from the University of Birmingham and the London School of Economics have found that the number of elections across the world has reached an all-time high, but that this has done little to increase the quality of democracy in the world.

The findings published today by Yale Books in 'How to rig an [election](#)' demonstrate that a remarkably high proportion of [national elections](#) are not free and fair – enabling authoritarian leaders to remain in power – with the emergence of [new technology](#) playing a part in the process of manipulation.

Based on more than 500 interviews, and their own experience of watching elections on the ground in countries including; Belarus, Kenya, Madagascar, Nigeria, Thailand and Tunisia, Professor Nic Cheeseman and Dr. Brian Klaas reveal the extent of the democratic decay that has benefitted dictators around the world.

Most worryingly, the research demonstrates that not only do elections often fail to remove authoritarian leaders from power, but in many cases they actually give ailing authoritarian regimes a boost, making them appear more legitimate and opening up new funding streams.

As a result, authoritarian systems that hold elections turn out to be more stable than those that do not.

Professor Nic Cheeseman, University of Birmingham said:

'The finding that many authoritarian leaders are using the image of democracy to strengthen their hold on power should act as an important wake up call for everyone who cares about political inclusion, accountability and human rights.

'The manipulation of elections is becoming increasingly hi-tech and

subtle following the emergence of new technology and strategies that makes it easier than ever before to create fake news, marginalise opponents, and hack the electoral system.

'To fight back, those who want to defend democracy need to update their own playbook – and fast'.

In documenting these processes, *How to rig an election* provides an engrossing analysis of the pseudo-democratic methods employed by leaders around the world to retain control.

More specifically, the researchers expose the limitations of national elections as a means of promoting democratization, and reveal the six essential strategies available to dictators – the authoritarian toolbox – to undermine the electoral process in order to guarantee victory for themselves. These include:

- "Invisible rigging" – gerrymandering and exclusion
- Buying hearts and minds
- Divide & rule strategies and the use of political violence
- Stuffing the ballot box in ways old and new
- Hacking the election using new technology
- Tricking the international community into endorsing the result

This eye-opening study offers a sobering overview of corrupted professional politics, while providing fertile intellectual ground for the development of new solutions for protecting democracy from authoritarian subversion.

The conclusion to each chapter, and to the book itself, provides numerous suggestions of ways to defend [democracy](#) and strengthen elections based on first-hand experience.

Provided by University of Birmingham

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