Book Review

Adam Ziegfeld, The George Washington University


Why do the poor sometimes vote for parties that serve the interests of the wealthy? In his excellent new book, Elite Parties, Poor Voters, Tariq Thachil takes on this puzzle, explaining how India’s Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has won increasing electoral support among historically marginalized communities—namely, the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs)—despite its long-standing association with Hindu upper castes. Thachil argues that an elite party can win votes from the poor through the provision of low-cost social services by its organizational affiliates. Elite Parties, Poor Voters masterfully walks a number of proverbial tightropes at once. It offers a parsimonious theoretical argument without sacrificing nuance; it is grounded in qualitative fieldwork, while making use of sophisticated quantitative methods; and it represents a timely, much-needed treatment of Indian politics that speaks to the wider comparative poli-ties, Poor Voters demonstrates how India’s Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has won increasing electoral support among historically marginalized communities—namely, the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs)—despite its long-standing association with Hindu upper castes. Thachil argues that an elite party can win votes from the poor through the provision of low-cost social services by its organizational affiliates. Elite Parties, Poor Voters masterfully walks a number of proverbial tightropes at once. It offers a parsimonious theoretical argument without sacrificing nuance; it is grounded in qualitative fieldwork, while making use of sophisticated quantitative methods; and it represents a timely, much-needed treatment of Indian politics that speaks to the wider comparative politics literature and travels—as the book’s penultimate chapter demonstrates—beyond India.

In its theoretical argument about how elite parties can win poor votes through service provision, Elite Parties, Poor Voters makes several major empirical claims. First, the BJP engages in an electoral division of labor, offering rich voters positions of patronage and power within the party as well as their preferred programmatic positions, all the while wooing poor voters with privately provided services, primarily in health and education. This strategy succeeds with the rich because it does not upend the party’s fundamentally elite nature, and it succeeds with the poor because it provides them with much needed services. Second, the BJP translates service provision into votes because members of the party’s organizational affiliates—that is, other Hindu nationalist organizations—embed themselves in communities as ostensibly nonpartisan service providers. Such a strategy allows activists to gently persuade disadvantaged voters to consider voting for a party of which they have traditionally been distrustful and to recruit new activists who enjoy local support. Third, service fails as a strategy in contexts where poor voters have, as an alternative to the BJP, the option of a party that either implements genuinely pro-poor policies or successfully politicizes an elite/nonelite social cleavage. In the former case, voters do not need to take advantage of what the BJP’s service affiliates offer, while in the latter case, voters benefit from services but remain highly distrustful of the BJP.

Thachil tests these claims using a truly impressive array of evidence: public opinion data, BJP party manifestos, data on the activities of BJP service affiliates, and interviews with both voters and elites. The book is a model of high-quality empirical research. On the one hand, the book demonstrates how convincing an explanation can be when an author collects precisely the data that are needed for the question at hand. Much of the book’s evidence is original, including voter surveys in the three states that constitute much of the book’s focus: Chhattisgarh, Kerala, and Uttar Pradesh. On the other hand, Thachil also demonstrates how to piece together a compelling case with data that are sometimes less than ideal, as in the case of nation-wide public opinion data, by combining multiple pieces of evidence and submitting them to a range of empirical tests. The result is a book that painstakingly substantiates each part of its theoretical argument. Moreover, I can think of few books that so effectively combine state-of-the-art quantitative analysis with rich qualitative evidence.

Elite Parties, Poor Voters makes an important contribution to political science scholarship on electoral politics. In showing how a political party can deploy distinct tactics to attract different kinds of voters and simultaneously appeal to social groups with seemingly irreconcilable preferences, Thachil pushes the literature on political parties to avoid thinking of party strategy in overly simple ways. His book therefore serves as an important corrective to both those in the Downsian tradition, who tend to see parties’ appeals as primarily oriented around specific policy prom-
ises, as well as those working on clientelism, who risk seeing programmatic politics as entirely absent. Furthermore, the book points to the need to generate more complex models of voting behavior that acknowledge how different types of voters respond to different types of appeals. Finally, Elite Parties, Poor Voters is at the forefront of a new generation of research on nonprogrammatic politics. Whereas much of the literature has focused narrowly on vote-winning strategies that involve a vote-for-cash transaction monitored by political parties to ensure that voters do not defect to another party, cutting edge research in the field is now identifying alternative nonprogrammatic ways in which parties appeal to voters, ones which do not necessarily require the kind of labor-intensive and sometimes coercive monitoring described in the vote-buying literature. This book’s focus on service provision as one such nonprogrammatic strategy makes it a crucial intervention in this literature.

Thachil’s book is also a timely contribution to the literature on Indian politics. The BJP has been one of India’s two main parties since the mid-1990s, and in 2014 it won an impressive victory in national elections. Thachil’s book is the best, most comprehensive account of the BJP’s recent electoral expansion. Elite Parties, Poor Voters distinguishes itself from existing work on the BJP by weaving together a complex, but eminently digestible, portrait of the party. News headlines, and even some scholarship, often reduce the BJP to its Hindu nationalism, while scholars challenging this characterization emphasize the role of caste and middle-class economic aspirations in bolstering the BJP’s electoral fortunes. Thachil’s book brings together these many strands, not simply by saying that, yes, they all matter, but by making clear precisely how religion, caste, and economic issues all fit into the BJP’s identity and electoral strategy. Indeed, Thachil’s nuanced portrait of the BJP exemplifies the book’s remarkable ability to embrace complexity without losing sight of its core argument and theoretical contribution. Elite Parties, Poor Voters represents the best of what comparative politics has to offer.