

Book Review

Strong Patronage, Weak Parties: The Case for Electoral Reform in the Philippines, edited by Paul Hutchcroft. Manila: Anvil Publishing, 2019. Pp. 209. ISBN 9789712734939.

Cleo Anne A. Calimbahin

Design matters. Looking at the results and the conduct of the 2019 elections, the Philippines needs to seriously consider how common and recurring challenges of elections are to be addressed. Among other things, issues of campaign finance, high cost of running for public office, and vote buying continue to persist. Campaigns and preelection conversations revolve around personalities rather than programs and policies. Less-than-ideal candidates with cases in graft courts continue to win—these range from plunder cases to violations of the Code of Conduct and Ethical Standards for Public Officials and Employees. And lastly, the promising party list system has not improved the representation of marginalized and minority groups. Instead, it has become an alternative way for traditional politicians to stay in or reenter the halls of Congress. With 51 party list groups winning 61 seats in Congress, the once-promising party list system does not promote party institutionalization or proportional representation.

Strong Patronage, Weak Parties, edited by Paul Hutchcroft, provides substantive information and insights on how redesigning the electoral system can lead to better electoral outcomes. The book focuses on effective ways to translate votes into seats. It provides a comparative look at how electoral system redesign can be effective with less unintended consequences. The volume examines the text and context of the pressing need for meaningful political reform in the Philippines, with the aim of presenting electoral system redesign as another option to change the way politics is done in the Philippines.

In the last three years, there has been an increasing interest and discussion on constitutional change that can facilitate the proposed shifts in the country's political structures. The dominant view is to reexamine the representational structure of the government and the kind of central-subnational level organization that it should adopt. Much of the conversation has revolved around the shift from presidentialism to parliamentarism and the move from a unitary form of government to a federal one. To this, the author contends that not enough attention has been given to electoral system redesign, which offers a third way toward political reform. Thus, the book engages readers to take a closer look at how this alternative can be equally potent in driving political reform and change.

The volume mentions some examples of electoral system redesign such as proportional representation, closed-list PR, and zipper system for equal gender representation that can help build genuine programmatic political parties. The measure can address the weak and non-programmatic political parties in countries such as the Philippines. Electoral system redesign is composed of multiple options as pointed out by Benjamin Reilly in Chapter 3.

The book, composed of ten chapters, is largely comparative in nature both across space and time, with contributions from international and local Philippine experts. While international experts provide "comparative insights," Philippine experts provide "comparative experience with more explicit and finely tuned prescriptions" (p. X). The different chapters walk readers through the need to talk about electoral system redesign, and how it can shape positive development outcomes, including when and how these reforms could take place. The chapters by Allen Hicken and Edward Aspinall provide readers with accounts of how electoral redesign has taken root and shaped the political dynamics and structures in other countries. These provide insights regarding repercussions of timing, conditions, and alterations in different states and societies. It is helpful to see how institutional redesign has been implemented in other countries and what their outcomes have been.

The chapters that focus on the Philippines direct the spotlight on the critical issues of patronage, electoral integrity, and underrepresentation that can be addressed had electoral system redesign been part of the reform agenda. Ramon Casiple provides readers with an informative account of the political party-reform initiative across time. Meredith Weiss highlights the manifestations of patronage in electoral politics in the 2016 national elections. Julio

Teehankee explains why the party list system has failed to provide increased representation for the marginal sectors. The flaws of the party list system, according to Teehankee, can be traced to its “definition, implementation, and interpretation.” (p. X). Socorro Reyes includes a prescription for increased women participation that can be achieved through an electoral system redesign. Nico Ravanilla argues that the multi-member plurality system contributes to the weakening of party identity and party building. Those engaged in public policy, political science, election studies, Southeast Asian studies, and democracy studies will find this book a good resource with rich material for research and policy papers. The book should serve as a nudge to consider and converse about electoral system redesign. And while the editor took time to explain that this volume is not about electoral administration, since this is about the electoral framework rather than election management, members of the Commission on Elections (COMELEC) will benefit from reading on how election redesign is possible and how it can happen. While electoral management bodies vary in their roles and responsibilities and COMELEC is largely confined to standard election administration duties—for example, conducting and tabulating of votes, registration of voters, registration of candidates and political parties, and oversight of campaign finance—it is important to cultivate election experts from within the organization. Given its mandate, the COMELEC is fundamentally responsible for ensuring the legitimacy of the electoral process. Any electoral system redesign will mean a change in procedure, implementation, enforcement, and dispute resolution. COMELEC needs to enhance its capacity in order to respond to this. Reform advocates need to consider that the constitutional commission will need, now more than ever, capacity and autonomy building.

The edited volume provides new materials that stakeholders can use to start a discussion or to launch further research to see how viable this electoral reform initiative is. More importantly, the authors remind us that there are alternative ways to address the country’s pressing problems—to look at the electoral system which needs to be part of the conversation regarding political reform.

By suggesting that electoral redesign is possible and that it can change outcomes to make elections fair and representative is the main contribution of this book. Too many pundits have offered solutions to the problems that assail the country. It is time to read what experts have to say about designing and reengineering institutions.

Will this book gain traction during the administration of President Rodrigo Duterte? The post-2019 rhetoric on election reform has sadly been limited to the electoral process, and oddly limited to observations about the malfunctioning of vote counting machines.

It is uncertain if a constitutional change is still on the horizon. The campaign for federalism seems to have waned. Lawmakers are now busy with the coming 2022 national elections, and that means a fractured body with shifting factions and alliances. While the president enjoys a high approval rating, he often sounds besieged and too insecure to initiate large institutional (and constitutional) reforms. And if the recent 2019 State of the Nation Address were to be the gauge, it is hard to imagine that a meaningful conversation on electoral reforms is in the offing. If that is the case, then we have to carefully read this volume because there might be a greater need for electoral system redesign after 2022.

Cleo Anne A. Calimbahin, Ph.D. is an associate professor at the Department of Political Science, De La Salle University Manila.