

REVIEWS

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Book Review

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FREE AND FAIR ELECTIONS



Jovanović, Milan. 2023. *Slobodni i poštteni izbori: Standardi,*

In light of numerous electoral disputes in Serbia and the renewed focus of the domestic public on debates surrounding electoral reform and the electoral system as a whole, Professor Milan Jovanović's monograph "Free and Fair Elections" emerges as a timely and valuable contribution to both the theoretical and practical examination of this important and complex issue. From the very introduction, the author problematizes the terms "free" and "fair" elections, thereby setting a polemical tone for the entire book. In this way, he engages in a debate over terms frequently used in both public and expert discourse yet often treated as normative axioms without precise definitions or a clear understanding of what they actually entail.

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According to Jovanović, the electoral process has, to a large extent, become a battleground for questions of political distrust. It appears that even developed democracies in the 21st century have significantly deviated from the ideal image of elections as a functional mechanism for expressing citizens' free political will and for effectively translating their votes into seats in representative bodies – that, in turn, are expected to act in the best interest of the public. While this loss of trust may seem all too familiar to audiences in Serbia, it is by no means a uniquely domestic phenomenon. The proliferation of problems concerning global trust in electoral institutions (and the political system more broadly) is driven by a host of factors, many of which are not strictly political in nature. Perhaps most notable among them is the overwhelming availability of both verified and unverified information, along with citizens' ability (through social media and new technologies) not only to participate in public opinion but to shape it themselves, at any given moment, without any form of verification or accountability from responsible media or institutions.

When projected to the field of electoral processes, this situation of stark transparency places every possible mistake by electoral administrations under intense

scrutiny. At the same time, the public is becoming increasingly aware of the numerous opportunities for error, oversight, manipulation, or electoral fraud inherent in such a complex process. Complexity itself is an additional factor, where public misunderstanding of many of the electoral institutions only deepens distrust. And of course, in many countries, political actors often attempt to justify their own electoral outcomes by attributing them to manipulation by their opponents. In the broader context of democratic fatigue, declining voter turnout, the rise of populist parties, and waning trust in political processes, media, elites, and democratic institutions as a whole, it is only logical that trust in elections is also eroding. For this reason, the author argues – perhaps paradoxically – that it is of utmost importance to clearly define the concept of free and fair elections and, crucially, to adhere to that definition in the actual implementation of electoral procedures. The sheer scale of this process, as the most widespread political activity in any society, and the inherent complexity of elections, which involve a wide array of actions, inevitably contain numerous potential points of failure that can undermine the very idea of a free and fair contest. After all, Sartori famously described elections as the most manipulative instrument

of politics. Moreover, it is worth emphasizing once again that determining the criteria for the quality of elections is not only a matter of practical implementation but also of theoretical debate over the very meaning of the concepts involved.

It is precisely for this reason that the central chapters of Jovanović's book offer a significant synthesis of knowledge on this topic, presented across several complementary domains. One of them is a review of international electoral standards, their development, and practical application. The author emphasizes that globally there is no single binding document or universally accepted understanding of what a free electoral process should look like. Nevertheless, the general concept outlined in the 1950s soon became widespread through the efforts of international organizations, and later through organizations specifically focused on electoral processes. This concept, like many others in the social sciences, is naturally subject to reinterpretation and evolves in response to changing historical and societal contexts. Various international charters and conventions, valuable primarily for promoting a broader understanding of what electoral competition should ideally entail, may carry limited legal force, but they have played a key role in the diffusion of these ideas into national legal

frameworks, contributing to the standardization and unification of electoral laws. This has further led to similar legal definitions of electoral institutions across the globe, despite numerous differences in how those institutions are implemented, which are often shaped by cultural or political conditions.

The second important area of synthesis is an analytical review of influential theoretical concepts in political science literature: concepts that may, in fact, be even more diverse than the definitions of standards found in international documents. At this point, the author distinguishes between different phases of the electoral process where criteria for "free" and "fair" elections can be located: the pre-election period (including candidacy, campaigning, and preparatory activities), election day (focused on the voting process), and the post-election period (which encompasses the translation of votes into mandates, as well as the resolution of electoral disputes). To illustrate the variety of approaches, Jovanović compares the work of Elklit and Reynolds, who situate the assessment of electoral quality within the operational field of election management; with the ten variables of free elections proposed by Bishop and Hoeffler, which cover much broader societal framework, including media and legal standards, also engaging with the concept of

electoral competition, grounded in Sartori's assertion that the quality of an electoral process can be judged based on its competitiveness – that is, the presence of opposition, the possibility of a change of government through elections, and the acceptance of both the legitimacy of the process and the election results by all participating actors. At the end of this section, Jovanović offers a brief but intriguing reflection on the impact of different electoral systems on the overall quality of elections, though he acknowledges that this is a topic deserving of a comprehensive study in its own right.

Toward the end of the monograph, the author turns to what is arguably the most compelling segment of the topic: electoral management – that is, the practical governance of a complex political and administrative process that, in principle, involves the entire political community. This process encompasses hundreds of tasks that must often be executed within very short timeframes, requiring coordination among dozens or even hundreds of bodies, institutions, and individuals, all of which can crucially influence public perceptions of whether an election is free and fair. The author adopts the approach to electoral management developed by Mozaffar and Schedler, who frame this area broadly in terms of three phases. The first is rule-making, which includes not only the specific

procedures for conducting the vote but also earlier decisions regarding the electoral formula, the design of the ballot, the number of electoral districts, and the size of the legislature. The second is rule-implementation, or the organization of elections, where the author discusses the contrast between depoliticized, neutral electoral administrations and the dilemmas faced by many transitional democracies that rely on independent electoral bodies due to well-known deficiencies in public administration. This is particularly relevant for Serbia, which – due to its historical trajectory and the induced distrust among political actors both toward state institutions and toward one another – has, for more than a quarter of a century, relied on an ad hoc parliamentary body to oversee elections. This body is neither a government agency nor an independent institution and thus lacks both the capacity and the authority to improve the electoral process in a systematic way. Third, result verification and dispute resolution are crucial indicators of the overall fairness and democratic character of the process.

Jovanović argues that the key distinction between democratic and authoritarian regimes lies precisely in the quality of electoral management. In democracies, electoral rules are relatively stable and rarely subject to change, while election outcomes remain uncertain. In more

authoritarian forms of governance, the opposite tends to be true: electoral rules are fluid and often shaped by the manipulative interests of those in power, while the outcomes are largely predictable, as the competition takes place on an uneven playing field that heavily favors ruling parties.

In the concluding section of the study, the author adopts a somewhat pessimistic tone in illustrating why electoral reform is often difficult to achieve, even when the need for it is widely acknowledged. He cites findings that suggest political parties are unlikely to change electoral rules as long as the existing electoral arena remains favorable to them – specifically, as long as it allows them to maximize the number of seats won. Complementing this argument is Colomer's study, which finds that the likelihood of electoral reform decreases when there are fewer decision-makers involved (i.e., when the effective number of parties in parliament is low), as these actors tend to preserve their exclusivity and maintain barriers for new competitors. Additionally, the longer a certain system has been in place, the harder it becomes to reform, as all stakeholders grow accustomed to it. This is a particularly troubling insight for Serbia, especially in light of the near-unanimous consensus among experts about the need for

electoral reform. Despite its many flaws, Serbia's current electoral system has remained in place since 2000 and has been used in ten parliamentary election cycles. Nevertheless, Jovanović cautions that most theories of electoral reform view the process primarily through the lens of elites and political actors, whereas the current social context may induce widespread public distrust and bottom-up pressure from citizens – factors that could ultimately serve as a decisive impulse for systemic change.

Milan Jovanović's book, despite its accessible style and ease of reading, is firmly grounded in theory and clearly intended for a professional and academic audience. At the same time, it is closely connected to the practical realities of political life and, as such, represents a valuable resource for future designers of electoral institutions: decision-makers and political practitioners. However, as previously noted, the broader social context in Serbia, in which debates around the most widespread and important political process are unfolding, makes this monograph highly recommended for a general readership as well – namely, for all citizens who actively engage in political processes and seek to better understand them.

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