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Review of Elections in Nepal: Identifying the Politically Excluded Groups: A Study of the Parliamentary Election Results From 1991 to 2013 by Kåre Vollan.

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This Review is brought to you for free and open access by the DigitalCommons@Macalester College at DigitalCommons@Macalester College. It has been accepted for inclusion in HIMALAYA, the Journal of

comprehensive peace agreement that heralded the end of the Maoist civil war recorded the aspirations for an “inclusive and democratic” state (Government of Nepal and Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist). 2006. *Comprehensive Peace Agreement*. Kathmandu: Government of Nepal, Item 3.5). The major political parties subsequently agreed to establish a new electoral system, and to hold democratic elections for a constituent assembly that would be inclusive of all the different caste, ethnic, and religious groups of Nepal. This mixed electoral system included both a first past the post (FPTP) and a parallel proportional representation (PR) component, with quotas for all ethnic groups.

This book, by elections expert Kåre Vollan, analyses the FPTP election results, both before and after these changes, with a view towards more targeted quotas. Hence, the main purpose of the book is to identify those groups that have been able to be elected without affirmative action and those that have not (Preface). This is no easy task.

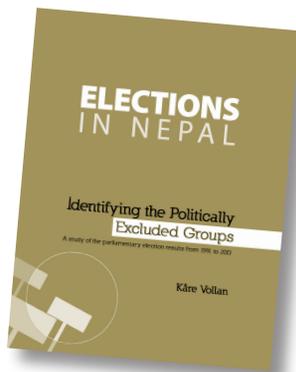
Nepal has a complex and often overlapping diversity of ethnic, caste, and religious groups. Indeed, the classification of these groups was changed between the 2001 and 2011 census, with the number of recognised groups increased from 100 to 125, making comparison especially difficult (pp. 11-13). Vollan tackles this head-on and spends some time ensuring correspondence between the two census frameworks, so that they can be consistently applied to the election results.

The classifications are themselves valuable, as there are currently many different approaches. For example, Vollan explains that the 2008 and 2013 elections placed Tarai Janajatis within the Madhesi category, even though they are normally counted

amongst other (hill) Janajatis (p. 2). Similarly, Muslims are sometimes counted as Madhesi and sometimes not (pp. 12-13). Although I think that using the official election categories would have provided more policy relevance to his work, and it does get a little confusing at times, Vollan makes a strong case for his chosen approach.

Other authors have sought to analyse election results to identify the proportionality of caste, ethnic, and religious representation, often arriving at different conclusions (e.g. Michael Breen. 2018. *The Road to Federalism in Nepal, Myanmar and Sri Lanka: Finding the Middle Ground*. Oxon, UK and New York: Routledge; Mahendra Lawoti. 2010. *Federal State Building: Challenges in Framing the New Nepali Constitution*. Kathmandu: Bhrikuti Academic Publications). This is because so much depends on how you classify the different groups. Vollan provides disaggregated data (Appendices C-F, pp. 39-56) so that alternative classification approaches can be used, if preferred. Further, Vollan provides data on gender representation (pp. 19-22), which is presented in broad ethnic, caste, and religious categories.

So what did he find? Using two thresholds for inclusion, at 90% and 60% of the groups share of the population, Vollan shows that not much has changed since 1991. There was a large jump in the representation of excluded groups in 2008, but a reversion in 2013. Further, it mattered little which threshold was applied. Only two small groups shifted from excluded to not excluded when a threshold of just 60% was used. The excluded groups are then lumped together, distinct from other groups that might otherwise fall within the same category (e.g. Janajatis are divided into excluded and not excluded).



Elections in Nepal: Identifying the Politically Excluded Groups: A Study of the Parliamentary Election Results From 1991 to 2013.

Kåre Vollan. Kathmandu: Social Science Baha & Himal Books, 2015. 56 pages. ISBN 9789937290579.

Reviewed by Michael Breen

Nepal’s modern politics have been punctuated by the politics of identity. For too long, the state’s institutions have been dominated by men from particular caste and ethnic groups to the exclusion of others. The 2006

This book is a valuable resource for political scientists, policy-makers, civil society organizations, and other interested persons, collating an impressive and comprehensive approach to categorizing ethnic, caste, and religious groups in Nepal and relating it to electoral outcomes.

Breen on *Elections in Nepal: Identifying the Politically Excluded Groups: A Study of the Parliamentary Election Results From 1991 to 2013*.

But there are some important questions which Vollan does not address. Firstly, what effect did the change in electoral system have? The data is there, but the analysis is not. Although Vollan rightly compares only the FPTP components (because a PR component did not exist prior to 2008), the introduction of the PR component, and the new political party rules, inevitably impacted on the parties' decision-making and the peoples' voting behavior.

The constitution and electoral system did not impose quotas on FPTP electoral outcomes. However, the interim constitution did require political parties to put forth an inclusive list (Article 63(4)). Elsewhere, I have shown that the impact of these rules was substantial and carried through to the next election (Breen 2018, pp. 160-161). It forced the major parties to become more multiethnic in composition and policy, notwithstanding some backtracking.

An alternative interpretation is simply that the 2008 election results were more inclusive because the Maoist party won the most seats. The drop in the representation of excluded groups in 2013 (back to its 1990s levels) is equated with the poorer showing of the main Maoist parties.

These sorts of inquiries are not the stated purpose of the book. But if Vollan wants to make policy proposals, which he does, then

some interpretation is required. For example, Vollan states that "it was quite clear ... that women and Dalits would win FPTP seats far below their proportional share of the population" (p. 6), and that therefore such groups should be over-represented in the PR portion. This oversimplifies that distinction between mixed-member proportional (MMP) systems (which Vollan seems to advocate) and parallel systems (which Nepal has).

MMP systems are compensatory and so aim for proportionality in the overall results. Parallel systems aim to achieve the benefits of both types of electoral systems. A FPTP system supports stable governing majorities, while a PR system supports inclusion. The use of parallel systems is increasingly common in Asia, having been adopted in the Philippines, East Timor and Japan, among others (Benjamin Reilly, 2007. "Democratization and Electoral Reform in the Asia-Pacific Region: Is There an 'Asian Model' of Democracy?," *Comparative Political Studies* 40(11), pp. 1350-1371). Political inclusion is just one objective.

Vollan rounds out the book with his policy suggestions. He recommends a shift to minimum representation for excluded groups only, rather than a quota for all groups. This, he argues, would obviate the need for all candidates to declare their identity, as "invoking groups rights should be an individual choice" (p. 25). Vollan also argues for a sunset clause that can be applied on a group-by-group

basis — once a particular group passes the threshold, affirmative action for that group is no longer required (pp. 26-28). This may come too close to micro-management. For example, some groups are so small (at less than 0.01% of the population) that a single representative would make it overrepresented by more than 25 times. However, it would prevent political parties from gaming the system to maintain the status quo.

In all, this book is a valuable resource for political scientists, policy-makers, civil society organisations and other interested persons, collating an impressive and comprehensive approach to categorizing ethnic, caste, and religious groups in Nepal and relating it to electoral outcomes. It is likely to have an ongoing value and enables future results to be compared using the same framework.

Michael Breen is a McKenzie Postdoctoral Fellow in the School of Social and Political Science at The University of Melbourne. Breen's research focuses on federalism in Asia, the management of ethnic diversity, and the use of deliberative democracy tools in constitution-making. Prior to academia, Breen was a policy maker, negotiator, and advisor in various government departments in Australia, and in international organizations including the United Nations Development Programme in Nepal.