

# Critical Perspectives



Critical Perspectives is an online journal written and edited by graduates of global politics, economics and law – a forum through which the thinkers of today may express a range of critical perspectives on the issues of today.

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# Elections, Sovereignty and Nationhood

## **Critical Perspectives – Editorial**

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*“Two very different ideas are usually confounded under the name democracy. The pure idea of democracy, according to its definition, is the government of the whole people by the whole people, equally represented. Democracy as commonly conceived and hitherto practised is the government of the whole people by a mere majority of the people, exclusively represented. The former is synonymous with the equality of all citizens; the latter, strangely confounded with it, is a government of privilege, in favour of the numerical majority, who alone possess practically any voice in the State. This is the inevitable consequence of the manner in which the votes are now taken, to the complete disfranchisement of minorities.”*

John Stuart Mill, Representative Government, 1861

The famous Mill quote describes the inception of elections in modern political consciousness that is well known – our battles for franchise and the ensuing development of the apparatus of liberal democracy. Thus, ‘democratic elections’ are a central bastion of modern democracy today. Their trappings fill our media, predictions of the winners and losers occupy our journalists as protagonists dance across our political stage in rosette techni-colour. Methods and tactics taunt our political scientists, the utility of the dance occupies both the serious-minded and pop-philosopher at once, whilst parallel futures tax economists. Like it or not, the outcomes effect us all. The process of a population transferring sovereignty to chosen delegates is routine in western liberal democracy. Indeed, it is so expected that very attendance to the ballot becomes the challenge. Commentators refer to the pitfalls of electioneering in the language of necessary ‘evils’ and we the electorate barely tolerate the carriage of democracy as unseemly expedience. In other parts of the world elections are either a very real and fought-for privilege, or, or sometimes simultaneously, an imposed cultural oppression. This struggle, found especially in young post-colonial democracies, or those that have returned to democracy (such as many of the former communist-led countries in Central and Eastern Europe), is often passionate, bloody and involved; a far cry from the nonchalant apathy of the west. But is the state itself the instrument of oppression? Is it worth trying to improve its apparatuses, the protection of the legal order, elections, laws

guaranteeing personal freedoms — does all this become irrelevant when faced with central questions of philosophical legitimacy?

Whether imposed, accepted, fought-for or ignored – elections are deeply connected with political culture, identity, the sense of ownership of one's sovereignty and of actualising nationhood. The method and decisions of election time often characterise a country and its population both internally and as viewed from the rest of the world. Thinkers through the ages have wrestled with their meaning, politicians have vied for their recognition, and citizens have grappled with their impact. It could be said that elections signify both the beginning and the end of politics. Thus, by way of an introduction to the debates, philosophies and experience we intend to focus upon in this next evolution of the Aberystwyth alumni journal of political thought, we have chosen to dedicate the first issue of *Critical Perspectives* to 'Elections, Sovereignty and Nationhood'.

The articles in this first issue present a variety of insightful critical perspectives on these interlinked issues. First, we have a very interesting essay by Michael John-Hopkins on Kosovo's independence. Three parliamentary elections have been held in Kosovo since 1999, the latest one in November 2007. Following these elections, a declaration of independence by the pro-independence Kosovar leaders became ever more likely. However, a declaration of independence was postponed until the end of the Serbian presidential elections in February 2008 because most Western leaders had feared that a premature declaration could strengthen the position of the ultra-nationalist candidate, Tomislav Nikolić. However, the pro-Western incumbent, President Boris Tadić, eventually emerged as the winner, and a few days afterwards Kosovo declared its independence. While not so much focusing on the elections themselves, John-Hopkins explores Serbia and Russia's claim that Kosovo's declaration of independence and recognition thereof amounts to a violation of international law. He looks at a number of historical events and documents and provides a contemporary legal analysis that argues in favour of Serbia's claim that it has had continuous sovereign title over Kosovo. His analysis also looks at the wider global context and suggests that Kosovo has to be seen as part of a power struggle between Western powers and Russia.

Many political theorists have argued that elections do not necessarily lead to a fair representation of the electorate's views in actual policy-making. For example, as early as in

the 16<sup>th</sup> century Niccolò Machiavelli argued in *Discourses on Livy* that corruption meant that it was “not the most virtuous but the most powerful who stood for election, and the weak, even if virtuous, were too frightened to run for office.”<sup>1</sup> More often than not, superficial democratic systems lead to the electoral outcomes described by Machiavelli. Unfortunately, there are many of such incomplete, superficial democratic systems in Africa, for many reasons (including the legacy of colonialism) that we cannot explore at this point. However, our third article written by Abi Dymond, provides an insightful critical perspective on the role of elections and international financial institutions in contemporary Zambia. She argues that the pervasive influence of international financial institutions and the similarity between the main Zambian political parties have traditionally meant that the electorate has had little say over Zambia’s economic policy direction. However, her essay demonstrates that the most recent elections in 2006 represent a break from this pattern, with the emergence of a viable opposition party and the country’s completion of the World Bank IMF Highly Indebted Poor Countries Initiative providing a new hope that economic policies are becoming more accountable. Dymond skilfully uses the copper mining sector as an illustration to support her critical analysis of the country’s economic policy.

Economic policy is often at the forefront of electoral decision making from the voter perspective – and it is frequently this which informs party political allegiance. Josie Neville explores the phenomenon of affinity with extreme nationalism in modern society in an interesting and challenging piece, which provides the reader with a balanced appraisal of a politics that has been fashionably unfashionable for some time, but which is going through something of a renaissance. Neville’s article examines that which Brendan O’Neill, writing in the *New Statesman*, described as something that “all parties should be concerned about”; the growth of the BNP over the past 15 years - from 7,005 votes in the 1992 general election to 192,746 in 2005.<sup>2</sup> This piece examines identity politics and the phenomenon of our growing need for a ‘tribal’ national identity, the focus on the family unit and locally conceived community that has become popular as contrast to an increasingly globalised world and a return to ‘the old values’. This echoes throughout the ages, none more resonantly than to Mazzini’s critical recovery of the *identity* of a culture is, which for him was a crucial

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<sup>1</sup> Machiavelli, N. (1531) *Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio* (Discourses on the First Decade of Titus Livy)

<sup>2</sup> O’Neill, B., “What’s driving the BNP?”, *New Statesman*, 1 May 2008

dimension of normative political argument “You are men, that is, rational and social creatures capable, by means of community only, of a progress to which no one may assign limits.”<sup>3</sup>

Our choice of focusing on elections in our first issue has also been driven by one of the most exciting presidential elections in the United States of America for many years. The contrast between the two candidates could not be sharper: on the one hand, we have 72-year old senior senator and Vietnam War veteran John McCain from the Republican Party; on the other hand, the junior senator Barack Obama from the Democratic Party might become the first African-American US President. ‘Change’ has emerged as the central theme of both candidates’ campaigns, while McCain has also tried to emphasise his ‘experience’ as a senator and war veteran. For many Americans a multitude of issues are relevant in determining their eventual preference: the solutions to the economic downturn, the need for healthcare reform, new visions for the educational system etc. However, many ‘outsiders’ from the rest of the world are at least as interested as Americans in this crucial electoral battle to replace George W. Bush – and they are particularly interested in American foreign policy, especially after eight years in which a neo-conservative and unilateralist mindset appeared to have dominated US foreign policy. In the fourth article of this issue, Yusuf Yawe takes a critical look at both candidates’ foreign policy agendas and uncovers marked differences in their outlooks. He examines several foreign policy hotspots to demonstrate that Obama’s preference for direct diplomacy contrast sharply with McCain’s rather confrontational and hawkish agenda. As the election draws nearer, such an analysis is more relevant than ever both for Americans and non-Americans.

By contrast, *Critical Perspectives* also includes as this issue’s opinion piece, a suitably provocative critical perspective on the edition’s theme. Jack Gibberd’s challenge to our assumed social contract developed of the electoral tradition asks central questions about motive and allegiance that will rock the reader’s surety of footing. Proffering freedom and self-interest, peace and power, Gibberd grapples with a whirlwind of power, authority and truth. In the words of Rousseau, “As soon as any man says of the affairs of the State ‘What

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<sup>3</sup> Mazzini, J. (1891) *Life And Writings Of Joseph Mazzini Vol IV Critical And Literary* (Smith, Elder & Co; London)

does it matter to me?' the State may be given up for lost."<sup>4</sup> So, perhaps these are questions worth grappling with for a while as we make our choices.

As our five contributions demonstrate, elections are multi-faceted: they can assert a young nation's claim to statehood (Kosovo), they can be the starting point of an economic revival (Zambia), they can also offer an opportunity for nationalist parties to spread their ideology, as threatening as that may be to some (BNP in the UK), they provide an insight into a country's potential foreign policy direction (United States), and they might be guided by less rational motives but rather emotions and instincts ('self-interest'). Our articles thus provide interesting insights into the interplay of elections, sovereignty and nationhood from legal, political, motivational and policy perspectives.

As we enter the final week of US electioneering, a critical perspective on elections and nationhood is ever relevant. We hope you enjoy this critical electoral process!

*Martin and Rebecca*

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<sup>4</sup> Rousseau, J. (1792) *Du Contrat Social* (The Social Contract, Or Principles of Political Right), III Chapter 15