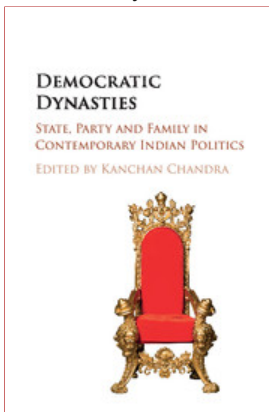


[Home](#)[About Us](#)[Biennial Conference](#)[Awards & Projects](#)[Book Reviews & Blog](#)[News](#)[Join Us](#)[Contact us](#)

Review of: Kanchan Chandra, Ed., *Democratic Dynasties: State, Party and Family in Contemporary Indian Politics*

Submitted by ASEASUK on Mon, 12/10/2018 - 09:02



[Kanchan Chandra, Ed., 2016. *Democratic Dynasties: State, Party and Family in Contemporary Indian Politics*, Cambridge University Press](#)

By *Michael Buehler*

Recent years have seen an upsurge in works on authoritarianism in general and subnational authoritarianism in particular. In this context, the growing presence of dynasties in politics around the world is often understood as yet another indicator for a global democratic roll-back. “Democratic Dynasties: State, Party and Family in Contemporary Indian Politics,” edited by Kanchan Chandra, positions itself against this literature by proposing “a rethinking of the simplistic view that dynastic politics is a violation of democracy” (p.3). Dynasties are not only a “systemic product of modern democratic institutions” (p.5), but can also lead to more inclusive politics than is commonly assumed.

Concretely, Chandra and her co-authors believe that dynasties are the result of two institutional dimensions: the state and political parties. They argue that the number of dynasties has increased because of “the large returns associated with state office” as well as “the organizational weakness of political parties” (p. 3). These two variables account for the variance in political dynasties between and within countries, so Chandra and her co-authors. If holding state office only offers low returns, the number of dynasties may be low. Likewise, if party institutionalization is strong, the presence of dynasties may be low.

Furthermore, the book shows that dynasties have allowed subaltern groups to increase their presence in politics. While this is hardly an ideal way to create a more inclusive political system, Chandra and her co-authors argue that politically marginalized groups may still do better if dynasties are present than if they are absent.

These two arguments are examined from different angles throughout the book. After an introduction that provides readers with a review of the research on dynasties in legislative elections as well as an overview of political dynasties in India, Chapter 2, examines why most (royal) dynasties that established themselves during the colonial period disappeared once India had become a democracy. Lloyd Rudolph and Susan Rudolph argue that these old dynasties ignored new forms of political participation that were introduced by political parties and which organized the electorate along horizontal lines. Instead, old dynasts relied on clientelistic politics in their campaigns, which limited their ability to mobilize the masses of voters needed to win public office. In Chapter 3, Francesca Jensenius shows that dynasties in India are anything but a “feudal remnant” (p. 84). She finds that there is “no overall systemic difference between constituencies that elect [or] do not elect dynasties” (p. 85), thereby confirming the book’s overall argument that dynasties are institutionally, not locally, conditioned. Adam Ziegfeld in Chapter 4 keeps with the book’s overall theme and shows how parties shape the rise and fall of political dynasties in India. Concretely, more autocratic parties, older parties and the inclinations of party leaders all determine levels of support for dynastic candidates in Indian legislative elections. Likewise, Amrita Basu shows in Chapter 5 that dynasties in India “emerge from the ballot box rather than aristocratic lineage or wealth accumulated before 1947” (p. 137). These modern dynasties have catapulted women into Indian politics to such a degree that “dynasticism among women is associated with greater representation of lower caste and Muslim women...” (p. 147). Dynasties have not only increased the presence of subaltern women in Indian politics but also allowed said women to challenge gender dynamics within their own families, Basu shows. In chapter 6, Simon Chauchard looks at disadvantaged groups and backward castes. While some dynasties have

emerged among these castes and have thereby broadened the political arena, overall, there are only few dynasties consisting of members from backward castes and mostly confined to the subnational level. This absence of backward caste dynasties therefore indicates “a form of persistent political inequity,” according to Chauchard (p. 205). Chapter 7 then looks at why forward castes have a dynastic advantage. Kanchan Chandra finds that the candidate selection process within parties favors candidates from forward castes. Party leaders support candidates who are either representing powerful factions within parties or candidates that belong to factions that are so weak that they pose no threat to party leaders. Based on this logic, candidates from forward castes are likely to be selected in parties representing forward castes (because in these parties they oversee strong factions) *but also* in parties representing subaltern groups (because in these parties they are weak players in intraparty power struggles.) In short, again, intra-party politics, not conditions inherent to local constituencies, shape the dynamics associated with dynasties consisting of politicians from forward looking castes. Chapter 8 by Anjali Thomas Bohlken examines whether dynasties act a substitute for political experience. She shows that for members of parliament who are male and from forward castes, dynastic ties indeed act as substitutes for political experience. However, for all other groups, dynastic ties do not seem to make up for a lack of political experience. In other words, dynasts from subaltern groups do not seem to have a particular advantage over non-dynasts from subaltern groups when it comes to winning and succeeding in politics. In this context, the question whether the presence of dynasties is “normative troubling” from a democracy theory point of view, “a closer look at the evidence may reveal that family ties may actually serve as a useful function within the organizational constraints that Indian parties typically face” (p. 262). At the same time, family connections seem to work to different degrees for candidates from dominant and subaltern groups.

The book makes several important contributions to the study of political monopolies in general and dynastic politics in particular. For instance, the volume provides a detailed sociology of dynasties that can serve as a blueprint for the study of such political monopolies in other countries and regions of the world. In addition, the book raises important questions about the democratizing potential of dynasties, especially in the context of low quality electoral democracies in developing countries. Finally, the book also opens up new and important avenues into the relationship between party *internal* dynamics and the rise and fall of political dynasties.

At the same time, there are several issues that are problematic. For instance, the main argument of the book, namely that most dynasties are not the result of “traditional” politics associated with certain “cultures” but originate in institutional change associated with democratization is hardly as new and innovative an insight as the authors claim. Students of Southeast Asian politics, for instance, have shown for decades that democratization has facilitated the rise of political families across the region and that these dynasties are by no means a sign of “primordial” politics.^[1] Furthermore, the focus on institutions as determinants of dynastic politics is rather narrow and the subsequent discussion therefore underdeveloped. Concretely, the book examines only dynasties in *legislative* politics. In reality, however, dynasties often emerge in conjunction with dynasties in executive politics. In many countries, in other words, one cannot be understood without the other. The fact that dynastic developments in executive politics are excluded from the analyses here therefore diminishes to some degree explanations for why dynasties in legislative politics emerge and collapse. More importantly, a more critical discussion of the role of “political institutions” behind the dynastication of politics would have been useful. “Spoils” associated with public office as well as party dynamics are the two “institutional conditions” considered to shape variance in dynastic politics in India and beyond, according to the authors of the book under review here. However, what if “spoils” associated with public office as well as party internal dynamics are themselves determined by characteristics of local constituencies? Whether or not the local economy lends itself to monopolization, for instance, shapes the rents associated with public office in many countries around the world.^[2] Likewise, local economic conditions not only determine whether electorates are “locked-in” or relatively free (despite being poor) which subsequently shapes parties’ electoral strategies but also the very structure of party internal hierarchies.^[3] All this raises the question whether institutions are indeed the causes behind variegated patterns in the rise and fall of dynasties in India and beyond or whether they are simply epiphenomena of local conditions not examined in this book.^[4] Most likely, the dynamics surrounding dynastic politics are defined by a combination of factors endogenous and exogenous to institutions.^[5] A more critical discussion of the role institutions may or may not play with regard to the emergence and collapse of dynasties around the world, while also taking the findings of the broader literature on the nexus between democratization and dynasties into account would have strengthened the explanatory power of the theoretical arguments put forward in the book.

[1] See, among others, Anderson, Benedict. “Cacique democracy and the Philippines: origins and dreams.” *New Left Review* 169 (1988): 3-31; Sidel, John Thayer. *Capital, coercion, and crime: Bossism in the Philippines*. Stanford University Press, 1999.

[2] See, for instance, Migdal, Joel S. *Strong societies and weak states: state-society relations and state capabilities in the Third World*. Princeton University Press, 1988; Scott, James C. *Seeing like a state: How certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed*. Yale University Press, 1998.

[3] See, for instance, Panebianco Angelo. *Political Parties: Organization and Power*. London and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988.

[4] For a critical assessment of institutional explanations in the literature on authoritarianism more broadly, see Pepinsky, Thomas. "The institutional turn in comparative authoritarianism." *British Journal of Political Science* 44, no. 3 (2014): 631-653.

[5] See, Buehler, Michael. *The ephemeral nature of political monopolies in Indonesian politics* (forthcoming).

[ASEASUK's blog](#)

2018 ASEASUK [Login](#)