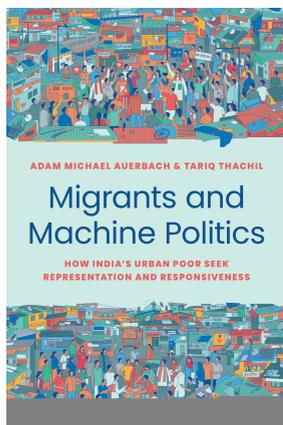

Book Reviews

Adam M. Auerbach and Tariq Thachil 2023: *Migrants and Machine Politics: How India's Urban Poor Seek Representation and Responsiveness*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.



In bringing together interdisciplinary literature from political science, anthropology, geography and urban studies, this well-researched book highlights the workings of micro-level urban politics in the global South. It provides an in-depth analysis of the formation of party machines in India, defined by the authors as 'pyramidal hierarchies of party workers that mobilize low-income voters during elections' (p. 5). Auerbach and Thachil highlight the relationships between patrons, brokers and urban slum residents (or clients) as they navigate party machines. This book is particularly relevant to urban scholars of the global South, where urbanization is increasingly characterized by a growth in densely packed informal settlements inhabited by poor migrants. The

authors connect the physical city and the policies that run it to the micro-politics and competition of party machines.

Auerbach and Thachil argue that 'understanding how urban political networks form reveals who secures representation and accountability within city politics' (p. 6). Party machines are conditioned by competition at four stages of the 'selection framework' (p. 20), and these four stages are reflected in the structure of the book, with chapters 2 to 5 discussing, respectively: how residents choose who becomes a leader; how leaders decide whose concerns are important and what to relay to patrons; how patrons choose brokers; and how patrons respond to claims and make their assessments.

A major forte of *Migrants and Machine Politics* is that the justifications for the research are explicitly laid out and the authors build a well-defined case for the originality and urgency of their work. They clearly demonstrate where findings add to, or diverge from, existing studies. The book makes multiple important and timely theoretical contributions to studies on clientelism. First, it takes a bottom-up approach which contrasts with previous research that has focused on the top-down decisions taken by elite politicians and patrons rather than on the choices made by slum residents and leaders. Second, it emphasizes that ethnicity does not have as substantial an impact on the materialization and development of party machines as previously argued. Finally, it draws attention to the importance of routine politics

beyond election periods. Empirically, the book provides detailed understandings of the political networks in Indian slums which, as the authors note, have not received sufficient attention in the literature.

Broadly, this book is concerned with the processes through which poor migrants in the urban global South arrange for political representation and make demands on elected politicians. Contrary to other studies on the politics of the urban poor, Auerbach and Thachil show how the most vulnerable residents of cities do have the agency to make claims, albeit through intermediaries who are themselves slum residents and who liaise between locals and politicians. Slum residents are not controlled by powerful political agents from above; they are motivated agents who individually and collectively carefully select entrepreneurial brokers who are tasked with attending to, and solving, their issues. Fundamentally, urban migrants in India are active participants in politics and create relationships with brokers in order for their demands to be heard and their petitions considered. These ties are based not only on their everyday concerns, but also reflect *who* residents feel can most effectively relay these concerns to state representatives. As such, the urban poor assertively craft relationships to manoeuvre through the opaque governance structures in order to reach suitable patrons.

As the 'voice' of slum residents, brokers have their own goals and motivations to retain and strengthen their local standing, which Auerbach and Thachil's grassroots analysis highlights. Attention to the emergence of these local leaders shows how residents are encouraged to support them and also illuminates the characteristics of the residents that they prioritize. These brokers are responsible for producing favourable results, as the enormous competition within city politics continually threatens their leadership status and puts their long-term career in politics at risk. Similarly, patrons constantly take into account the settlement, the intermediary broker, and the type of demands being made when deciding which requests to fulfil and what goods to offer.

The strongest element of *Migrants and Machine Politics* is the careful and extensive mixed-methods approach that underpins it. The authors employ primary (ethnography, interviews, surveys) and secondary (previous studies and surveys) research to present their multi-level analysis of residents, brokers and politicians aligned with the Bharatiya Janata Party or the Indian National Congress in the slums of Jaipur and Bhopal. This fieldwork—which took 'nearly a decade to complete' (p. 219)—comprises a sizeable sample generated through a meticulous process. The framework is controlled for possible skews or outliers in the data, and Auerbach and Thachil undertake parallel analyses to ensure the soundness of their conclusions.

The innovative use of a forced-choice conjoint experiment reveals which choices shape party machines, and why. However, more reflection on the authors' positionalities and the fieldwork experience would be welcome, particularly given the lengthy fieldwork process and ambitious choice of methods. Additionally, the quantitative analysis reads at times in a somewhat formulaic manner, which could have been addressed by integrating more quotes from interviews. There is also a minor weakness throughout the book (although this does not take away from the potency of the main argument) in that the terms 'party worker', 'slum leader' and 'broker' are used synonymously. In practice, an individual may occupy one or more of these roles and a note delineating between these labels would therefore have been

helpful, especially for readers without significant knowledge of terminology in political science.

Despite these minor critiques, this is overall a comprehensive and interesting study of political networks in urban slums, and the ideas presented here will undoubtedly inform future research on democratic representation in cities. In particular, *Migrants and Machine Politics* opens up new avenues for understanding urban citizenship and claims-making through intersectional identities and their impact on networks in party machines.

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