



# Open Anthropology

A PUBLIC JOURNAL OF THE AMERICAN ANTHROPOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

Volume 4, Number 2

October 2016

## Anthropology in an Election Year

The Editors' Note: Anthropology in an Election Year

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To the list of reasons why the 2016 presidential contest in the United States has been especially notable and newsworthy, we might add the number of superlatives surrounding it. Headlines refer to the two leading contenders—Hillary Rodham Clinton and Donald J. Trump—as the “[least trusted](#)” and “[most unfavorable candidates ever](#)”. Despite the unpopularity of the candidates, the 2016 election itself has been described as “[the most important of our lives](#)” and indeed “[ever](#)”—or at least “[since 1932](#)”. (For more on this particular claim, see also [this](#) and [this](#).) It is predicted that 2016 will be the “[most expensive election](#)” in history. Although historians suggest that it might not, in fact, be [the longest and bitterest campaign in the U.S.](#), clinical psychologists reported seeing unprecedented levels of “[stress and anxiety](#)” associated with this election in their clients. In sum, the 2016 presidential contest is already being characterized as the [worst election, ever](#). Or, if you are on Twitter, it is the #WorstElectionEver.

The discontent, frustration, anger, and worry—and also the hope, optimism, and resolve—on display in the 2016 election are not unique to it or to the electoral politics of the U.S. Indeed, in all of the places where anthropologists pursue their studies, they have been bearing witness to citizens and voters expressing their concerns and criticisms about the qualities of their elected leaders, the legitimacy of the processes that bring parties into power, the responsibilities and rights of the electorate itself in addition to broader and deeper questions about the nature of democracy—or of democracies. As [Julia Paley](#) noted in her 2002 *Annual Review of Anthropology* article, “[Toward an Anthropology of Democracy](#),” the grounding of anthropologists in the ethnographic method and “their relationships with people outside of formal and elite political institutions, and their attention to alternative worldviews have led them

to look beyond official political transitions to the local meanings, circulating discourses, multiple contestations, and changing forms of powering accompanying the installation of new political regimes” (470).

Thus, despite our being in a particular time and place of election coverage fatigue—a [point of saturation](#) that apparently had been reached already around the time of the nominating conventions of the major parties in the U.S.—we are dedicating the October 2016 edition of *Open Anthropology* to theme of “Anthropology in an Election Year.” In this issue, we have collected pieces that speak to some of the themes and tropes which have emerged not only during the latest presidential contest in the U.S., but also in the work of political anthropologists documenting and detailing elections and campaigns in settings including eastern Europe, east Africa, and south Asia. While a concentration of the pieces included here is based on observation and analysis in the U.S., the accounts from other contexts provide much needed perspective and insight.

In addition to the articles included in this issue of *Open Anthropology*, we recommend to readers the pieces on voting to be published in [Anthropology News](#). The [Association for Political and Legal Anthropology](#) (APLA) is an invaluable resource for students and professionals interested in anthropological perspectives on politics, and APLA’s journal, [PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review](#), is one of the publications of the American Anthropological Association from which we drew a number of the articles featured here.

### **Politics in culture, culture in politics**

What distinguishes political anthropology from other fields of study interested in political systems is the critical observation that politics is not a field of thought and action apart, but critically a part of the rest of social life and cultural experience. This is the starting point for the first four selections featured in this issue of *Open Anthropology*. In “[Election Day: The Construction of Democracy through Technique](#),” published in *Cultural Anthropology* in 2004, [Kimberley A. Coles](#) draws from her ethnographic research on elections in Bosnia-Herzegovina, where she initially became involved as a volunteer international electoral worker. Between 1997 and 2000, she participated in or observed a total of five elections. She reports that the concern of the electoral workers was not with politics, but with the process and logistics of the election itself. The article opens with a discussion of the invisible ink that had been used as precaution against voter fraud—it was sprayed on the voter’s right index finger when she or he received a ballot. Then this practice or what Coles calls an electoral “technique” was ended abruptly in November 2000, with no explanation given, thus puzzling the voters, who perceive the invisible ink as a marker of the reliability of the electoral process. Yet, Coles notes that the use of invisible ink had been flawed, and other identification checks more recently put in place were, in fact, more reliable. In other words, “the presence of invisible ink (or its absence) is not just instrumental” (553), but is symbolic of the state of elections in Bosnia. “Election day is not only about ‘democratic value’ such as tolerance and inclusion or the participation of national

subjects in the nation-state but also about the construction of an election as an acultural and apolitical event” (557).

In “[The ‘Trials and Errors’ of Politics: Municipal Elections at the Lebanese Border](#),” published in *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review* in 2011, [Michelle Obeid](#) takes up Coles’ assertion that while elections are constructed as “culturally neutral,” they are nevertheless embedded in social life and cultural experience. Here, she examines a particular case of what has been called the “Islamization” of politics. Obeid offers an account of 2004 municipal elections in northeastern Lebanon, which unexpectedly swept a host of Islamist candidates into office in a community previously known for an orientation toward secular and left-leaning politics. In her telling, the results of the election ought to be understood not so much as a sign of Islamization, but of the frustrations and hopes of voters deciding among candidates representing more or less the same practices and ideas that were perceived as already not especially effective or accountable. They cast their ballots with a spirit of political experimentation—or as one individual explained: “If they fail us, we will not vote for them next time” (263). So-called Islamization, then, does not explain the actions of this electorate. Instead, their voting ought to be recognized as “a dynamic attempt on the part of the electorate to fulfill the original promise of democracy: debating and negotiating the process of representation to create transformation” (264).

Electoral violence is another matter of urgent concern that has become essentialized rather than examined with careful attention to the contexts and conditions in which has occurred. The latter sort of consideration is the aim of [Scott Matter](#)’s 2010 article in *PoLAR*, “[Clashing Claims: Neopatrimonial Governance, Land Tenure Transformation, and Violence at Enoosupukia, Kenya](#)”. Between 1991 and 1997, about 1,500 people died and more than 300,000 more were displaced in the clashes that erupted around elections in Kenya during that time. In the region of Enoosupukia, where Matter conducted his fieldwork, these incidents of violence were explained in terms of conflicts between politicized ethnic groups—specifically, Masai pastoralists and Kikuyu farmers—that the ruling elite had been manipulated, if not orchestrated, in order to maintain their own position. However, this explanation, widely accepted, does not explain the motivations of the ordinary people themselves who participated in the violence or the relationships between patrons and clients invested each in the other’s claims. Following the work of other scholars of African politics, Matter describes a neopatrimonial system in which the impersonal law and policy of the state—notably, those governing land—become negotiated and circulated in the personal relations of patrons and clients. During the 1980s and 1990s, efforts at political liberalization such as the inclusion of opposition parties in the general elections not only failed to weaken neopatrimonialism, but apparently strengthened it. “The threat of political competition had implications for clients as well as for their patrons. Risking disconnection from state power, patrons had to maintain links to sufficiently large voting constituencies. Clients, meanwhile, had to choose which patrons to support, as visible support for losing candidates could lead to disconnection, even retribution” (77).

Issues of patronage and a perspective on the transactions of electoral politics are the focus, too, of [Lisa Bjorkman](#)'s 2014 *American Ethnologist* piece, "[You Can't Buy a Vote](#)": Meanings of Money in a Mumbai Election". Rumors of vote buying abounded during 2012 municipal elections in Mumbai, the most populous city in the world's largest democracy. Claims of this kind can be interpreted as the complaints of an urban middle class against a mass of slum dwellers perceived as held in the pockets of corrupt politicians who remain entrenched in their offices. Yet, other frustrations were voiced also. The campaigns that had spent the most cash came nowhere close to victory, and the candidates groused that their funds had been mismanaged by the community "brokers" whom they had entrusted to do outreach. Seeking to understand both the talk of rampant vote buying and the poor returns on these electoral expenditures, Bjorkman follows the money that one candidate entrusted to one such broker, a social worker in the neighborhood, in her ultimately unsuccessful bid for office. Bjorkman suggests that money works "not as the medium of purchase but, rather, as gifts that are productive and performative of enduring relations and alliances" (628). Contrary to rumor, candidates cannot, in fact, buy votes. Instead, "the mediating power of cash allows money to be put to work in the hope of inducing reciprocity. But giving cash is also a wager—a bet placed on social workers whom the candidate hopes, through the gift-bet, to convince of the strength of his or her networks and thus of an inevitable and desirable win" (631). Drawn from the particularities of electioneering in Mumbai, the insights here clearly have relevance in other settings.

### **Kin in the game**

Kinship is a running theme in the next three selections featured here. In her 2010 *PoLAR* article, "[Pater Rules Best: Political Kinship and Party Politics in Tanzania's Presidential Elections](#)," [Kristin D. Phillips](#) considers a question of broad significance that perennially vexes and perplexes observers, not only in Tanzania, but also elsewhere: "Why, according to the election results, were some of the poorest people in Tanzania the most fervently united around their leaders and yet so clearly the least served by their support" (110). In particular, the *Chama Cha Mapinduzi* (CCM) has not only maintained its status as the ruling party, but it appears to have become even more powerful since the introduction of a multiparty system in 1992. Drawing from 18 months of ethnographic research in central Tanzania during the mid-2000s, Phillips points to the symbolic associations that CCM leaders have cultivated between the party and eldership, kinship, and provision. Through their speeches, advertisements, and *takrima* gifts of free clothing and food that candidates distribute at their rallies, "elites deploy paternalistic narratives to assert the common sense that it is naturally a father who can best look after his own child, to confirm rural Tanzanians' sense of themselves as citizens of a socialist gerontocracy, and to produce a sense of historical continuity in a time of volatile transformation" (126).

In contrast to the attention given to the political importance of kinship and especially the conceptualization of leadership as paternalistic, the participation of women in electoral politics has been overlooked and neglected. [Katherine Bowie](#) seeks to address this oversight in "[Standing in the Shadows: Of Matrilocality and the Role of Women in a Village Election in Northern Thailand](#)," her 2008 *American Ethnologist* article in which she describes a district election in the

northern province of Chiang Mai. The same law that allowed Thai women to vote in 1897—making Thailand one of the first countries to extend this right—also disallowed them from running for positions such as village head. An amendment was not made until 1982, and until recently, few women have held public office. Yet, Bowie suggests that women have played and continue to play an important and necessary part in the electoral politics of Thailand, which ought not come as a surprise given both the long history of women’s suffrage there and the significance of matrilineality and matrilocality in Thai kinship. Men’s success in running for and undertaking the work of public office depends on “the political networks provided by their wives, sisters and mothers [which] are not incidental but, rather, fundamental to an understanding of successful campaigns. Not holding formal office has allowed women to claim plausible deniability, enabling them to mitigate discord” (148).

The importance of kinship in U.S. politics had been the topic of [Jack Weatherford](#)’s 1981 book, *Tribes on the Hill: The U.S. Congress, Rituals and Realities*, and of his 1993 *PoLAR* article, “[Tribal Politics in Washington](#)”. “For most tribes, kinship is the only one resource used by rising leaders, but in Washington kinship and marriage are fast becoming defining principles that determines who gets and who holds power. Once families and clans become as established and enduring as they now seem to be in American politics, they deviate from tribal politics and take a major step toward the familial politics of reigning aristocracies and royal dynasties” (39). At the time, Weatherford counted about 20 percent of the seats in the House and Senate to be in the hands of the relatives and former aides of members of Congress. Since then, of course, the Oval Office has been occupied by a father and son, George H.W. Bush and George W. Bush, and the wife of a former president—who also has been elected a Senator and served as a Secretary of State—is a leading contender in 2016.

### **Engaged, enraged, and disempowered voters**

The rates of electoral participation in the U.S. have been documented as [among the lowest](#) among highly developed, democratized nations. In the weeks leading to Election Day in the U.S., there has been speculation on the effects that the unpopularity of the candidates will have on voter turnout. While some pundits predict that voter dissatisfaction will [encourage](#) voters to head to the polls, there are other, [less sanguine](#) takes on the disinterest of black voters and millennials.

Two articles consider what it means to cultivate political participation. In “[The Role of Music in Materializing Politics](#),” a 2004 piece published in *PoLAR*, [Margaret Dorsey](#) considers music as a medium that can generate political engagement, as demonstrated in the story of a song that contributed to the success of a political campaign. For Ed Aparicio, running for District Court in Hildago County (south Texas), the turning point of his struggling campaign came in the form of a song that was “gifted” to him, unsolicited, by an area musician who took interest in the candidate after they met at a pachanga or party featuring food, drink, and music. Written in the locally familiar genre of corrido or ballad, the song communicated a connection between the community and Aparicio, whom his opponent had depicted as an “outsider” from Washington



State who had no roots in the area. The song not only was used in the campaign, but it became popular among listeners, one of whom remarked, “I have been singin’ this song, and I just can’t get it out of my mind” (74). In contrast, a later candidate, attempting to duplicate Aparicio’s success, hired a professional musician to write a campaign song. This “bought” song, however, did not have the same reach or impact on the audience—and the election Dorsey suggests: “New voting publics emerge where people can make symbolic forms their own. The music is so much more than a text that people latch onto. Musical sound is inseparable from the text. Audiences socialize—discussing, dining, drinking, singing to the music and the text—while marketers and producers tend to calculate text x + candidate y = politics” (89).

Political engagement is the topic also of [Sara M. Bergstresser](#)’s 2008 *Anthropology News* report, “[Citizenship and Social Participation: Voting for People with Psychiatric Disabilities](#)”. In it, Bergstresser reports on a pilot study that she undertook in the U.S. on various efforts to promote social participation among individuals with diagnosed mental illness. In particular, she describes voting as an especially important and meaningful entrée into political and social citizenship: “That one vote counts as much as any other is an empowering component of democratic equality” (8). While it is widely assumed that persons with mental illness might not have the competency to vote, [research](#) suggests otherwise. Removing structural barriers, including legislation, and supporting the right of these individuals to vote also contributes to the larger political system.

The next two selections seem especially salient for 2016. In “[Individualism and Hierarchy: A Grid/Group Analysis of American Political Culture](#),” [Ted C. Lewellen](#), who died in 2006, argued that in the U.S., “the lack of correspondence between individualism and hierarchy creates a situation of personal and political impotence” (47). The piece, published in *PoLAR* in 1993, refers to the structural inequalities of income and wealth distribution, political power, and mobility that have become a particular focus in recent years. Although not a piece about politics per se, [Bruce Grindal](#), in his 2011 *Anthropology and Humanism* piece, “[Confrontation, Understanding, and Friendship in a Redneck Culture](#),” described the insights gained from his long-term fieldwork and friendship with the men working at the Down Home Auto Repair in Tallahassee, Florida. In the lead-up to the 2008 election that ushered Barack Obama into the White House, Grindal, who died in 2012, noted the reluctance of these men to talk politics with him, which initially led him to assume they hold diametrically opposed positions. “For years, I have been hammering away at the right-wing politics of Reagan and especially G.W. Bush, that their policies were contrary to the interests of the working man, even telling them that only two kinds of people vote Republican: rich people and stupid people. But alas, to no avail. The boys studiously avoided any discussion of politics” (96). Then, one of the mechanics told Grindal: “Because in Florida, convicted felons can’t vote, and many of the guys that worked here have served time. You talk politics, and especially voting, you just rub it in” (96-97).

## **Looking presidential**

What it means to look like—and look at—a president is the topic of the next two articles featured in this collection. Inevitably, any discussion of politics, voting, and especially the U.S. presidency must turn to the topic of media, which [Michael Silverstein](#) discusses in “[What Goes Around...: Some Shtick from ‘Tricky Dick’ and the Circulation of U.S. Presidential Image](#),” published in 2011 in the *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*. It is not only that the workings of American democracy have been understood to require a free press reporting on the activities of its elected leaders, but also that “the chief way we come to ‘know’ our political figures is through the art of their words and their surroundings that creates and maintains a biographical world in which they can seem to exist” (71). The focus of this piece is on an exchange that occurred between then President Richard M. Nixon and White House correspondent Helen Thomas. A press account from UPI, the wire service employing Thomas, subsequently reported on the interaction: “President Nixon, a gentleman of the old school, teased a newspaper woman yesterday about wearing slacks to the White House and made it clear that he prefers dresses on women” (quoted on 59). Silverstein provides a reading of the interaction during a bill-signing ceremony in the Oval Office, which itself took place in the summer of 1973, when newspapers were reporting daily on Congressional testimony concerning what is familiar today as the Watergate scandal. “What is interesting is that it reveals—or verbally constructs for the readership as it construes—something of the character of this president: both as a small-minded person willing to attempt this sort of ‘private,’ interpersonal degradation at a moment of public triumph for his political persona” (64). The analysis of message is presented at greater length in Michael Lempert and Michael Silverstein’s 2012 book *Creatures of Politics: Media, Message, and the American Presidency*—see this 2013 [review](#) by [Diane Riskedahl](#) in the *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*. No doubt these insights will contribute to the scholarship that is certain to be produced concerning the 2016 U.S. presidential contest.

Presidential image is the topic also of [Kate McClellan](#)’s 2013 “[Presidents at Work: Shop Displays of Political Portraiture in Prewar Damascus](#),” published in *Visual Anthropology Review*. The focus here is on the displays of portraits of the current and former Syrian presidents Bashar al-Asad and (his father) Harez al-Asad. Based on her fieldwork in Damascus in 2005-6 and 2009—before the Damascus Spring of 2011 and the current civil war—McClellan describes the ubiquity of these presidential portraits, hung on the walls of snack shops and fabric stores adjacent to calendars, clocks, framed posters of famous mosques, and snapshots of shopkeepers’ own families. The display of presidential images does not necessary indicate true support for the Asads, but “it is this outward, if tedious, expression of ‘as-if’ support that creates and upholds the Asads’ power” (18). McClellan concludes the piece with thoughts on the violent destruction of these portraits during the uprising and war in Syria. “These symbolic acts of destruction point to the tenuous hold of these kinds of visual regimes; their overbearing ubiquity and familiarity make them easy targets for symbolic protest” (27).

### **The election cycle**

We close this issue with two pieces that offer a bit of perspective on the 2016 U.S. presidential contest. Concerns about campaign finance, balloting, and voter eligibility are in evidence in

James H. Blodgett's 1889 paper, "[Suffrage and Its Mechanism in Great Britain and the United States](#)," Blodgett, of the U.S. Geological Survey, was an active member of the Anthropological Society, to whom he presented his paper, which was later published in the journal then called *The American Anthropologist*. Public funds covered the charges for municipal and school elections in Britain, but candidates for Parliament paid for their own expenses—and there was a movement to change this practice. In contrast with the uniformity of practices and laws governing elections in Great Britain and Canada, Blodgett describes a hodgepodge of customs in the United States at that time, noting even the variability in whether or not paper ballots were provided to voters—in some states, they were supplied by organized political committees—and even the furnishing of the ballot boxes themselves. Some states specified no special requirements for the ballot boxes, but "Ohio requires a box that will stamp each ballot with the name of the precinct, indicate the number of stamped tickets, ring a bell to indicate the deposit of a ticket, having two unlike keys and a crank necessary to open the box or to deposit a vote, at a maximum cost of \$25. Other boxes are tolerated if these are not available" (71). Voter eligibility also varied, not only between Great Britain and the U.S., but within the U.S., where Blodgett noted that a constitutional amendment had removed restriction "by reason of race, color, or previous condition of servitude" (67). Women had general suffrage in Utah and Wyoming and limited suffrage (i.e., school elections) in a dozen other states and territories. Proof of residency also was required, and was determined in several places by ascertaining "where their washing was done" (73).

Finally, it is worth remembering what [James R. McLeod](#) observed in his 1999 *American Anthropologist* article, "[The Sociodrama of Presidential Politics: Rhetoric, Ritual, and Power in the Era of Teledemocracy](#)". McLeod presents a ritual and symbolic analysis of presidential campaigns in the U.S. Drawing on specific examples from the 1988, 1992, and 1996 races, this article might be assigned to today's undergraduate students to provide a bit of (ahem) historical background. In it, he observed: "The United States is disarticulated politically during the election campaign through the use of very powerful rhetoric of unity, disunity, order, anarchy, and chaos. It is then rearticulated through the election/inauguration ritual cycle" (370). Whatever happens in 2016, there is another election to anticipate in four years.

**Acknowledgements.** We wish to give particular recognition to Cassandra Swart, the SUNY Oneonta research assistant who worked tirelessly and enthusiastically on assembling our table of contents. Many thanks to Ed Liebow for his thoughtful suggestions for this issue of OA and to Alisse Waterston for her support and encouragement on undertaking this theme. We are grateful to Chelsea Horton at AAA for the efforts she makes on behalf of this project.



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Lisa Bjorkman – *American Ethnologist*. Vol 41, Issue 4: 617-634 (2014)

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James H. Blodgett – *American Anthropologist*. Vol A2, Issue 1: 63-74 (1889)

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