



DISCARDED CANDIDATES: Waste as Metaphor in Local Government Elections in Australia (and Elsewhere)

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Saturday, 6 p.m., December 4, 2021, and the polls have just closed for the New South Wales (NSW) local government elections. The bake sale organized by the Parents and Friends' Association has sold out of election-themed cakes, and the sausage sizzle has done a roaring trade selling “democracy sausages” or their vegan equivalents.¹ Candidates and their supporters are taking down corflutes, being sure to pick up the plastic ties that have fallen on the ground. The bins are emptied of “How-to-Vote” leaflets, and the cardboard voting booths have been packed away. Scrutineers are having their debrief before the start of counting, while other campaign volunteers take down the details of the election party where they will anxiously await the results. On Monday, polling stations will return to their regular status as schools, churches, and community centers. Another festival of Australian democracy will be complete (Brett 2019; Hauser and Singer 1986).

Bessie's party was subdued: a family dinner with a bottle of wine.² She had contested as an independent in her first council election, and had been living and breathing the election since June. Elections scheduled for September were postponed until December due to COVID-19, resulting in a long, drawn-out campaign. But now, the hours spent developing campaign material, letterboxing,

speaking to voters on pre-poll, and today a full day of running between polling stations had finally come to an end. Bessie was exhausted: feelings that only deepened as the results started to trickle in. Votes accumulated for her competitors, yet hers remained stubbornly low. By the end of the night it was clear that she had failed to become a councillor, and that she was the worst performing candidate in her ward. When we touched base a couple of days later, she was despondent, but also angry. She described the elections as a waste: “The time commitment for this is extraordinary—and for no benefit, no outcome” (conversation, December 2021).

While Bessie felt her campaign had no benefit, her activities had been vital to the making of democracy. Candidates are key actors in performing the practices and rituals that sustain the legitimacy of the electoral process, the viability of its institutional features, and the forging of relations between representative and represented (Crewe 2021; Hauser and Singer 1986; Paley 2008). Even, and especially, Bessie’s loss was crucial. Representative democracy requires a surplus of candidates for there to be a process of selection. Uncontested elections or those without real opposition fail in their key role of producing a legitimate and popularly accepted result. Elections translate a pile of votes into a decision as to who will be the people’s representative (Crewe 2021), and by a process of elimination, produce discarded candidates. The integrity of the election requires these discarded candidates to quickly and quietly exit the scene, and to largely take care of their own disposal. When they do not, for example when Donald Trump disputed the election results in 2020, electoral systems are weakened by mistrust.

Elections generate two types of excesses to form a representative body: the overinvestment by individual candidates (time, money, material), and the surplus candidates themselves. The anthropology of waste provides lenses to examine electoral systems in a fresh light. Mary Douglas’s (1966) structural-symbolic approach has long been drawn on to consider how the removal of “matter out of place” proves critical to social order. More recently, ethnographers of waste management go beyond understanding the social classifications that categorize certain objects and people as waste to examine its afterlives: its (affecting) capacities and affordances, its entanglements in webs of labor and power, and its circulations in local and global systems (Reno 2015). Taking inspiration from this body of work, I rethink elections as systems of discarding, in which “people are valued and devalued, become disposable or dominant” (Liboiron and Lepawsky 2022, 3). Following Max Liboiron and Josh Lepawsky (2022) I aim to

defamiliarize and denaturalize Australia's vernacular democracy, casting the production of surplus and its inevitable waste as central to its operation.

In challenging the taken-for-granted nature of Australian local elections, I seek new possibilities to reimagine its processes and afterlives. Electoral democracies in which one representative is selected to stand in for the many constitutes but one possibility for democratic practice—a system disdained by the ancient Greeks, as it “significantly disempowers those who are compelled to relinquish their voice” (Nugent 2019, 32; see also Shah 2021). The finality of the decision/election can be a full stop for participation for voters *and candidates* in democratic decision-making, arguably a waste given the investments in *becoming* representative (Saward 2020). Discard studies invites us to rethink waste management to *discard well*; that is, being accountable to the discarded, and establishing means of revaluing those who have been devalued through processes of production (Liboiron and Lepawsky 2022). Acts of repair, rehabilitation, and stewardship (Lau 2023; Martínez 2017) can revalue unsuccessful candidates within democratic systems, or in the least, arrest the “electoral ripples” (Govindrajan 2018) that cause long-lasting negative consequences. Attention to waste and wasting in elections marks a crucial first step to transforming electoral practices into more caring democratic systems.

These themes are explored through the experiences of candidates such as Bessie who contested and (mostly) lost the 2021 local government elections in NSW. Unsuccessful candidates offer windows into electoral processes, while their experiences are worthy of attention as an underappreciated aftermath of elections (Govindrajan 2018; Erazo and Benitez 2022). After identifying conceptual and theoretical approaches in waste and discard studies that reveal elections in a new light, as well as outlining the specifics of the ethnographic study, the empirical material presents different stages of the value cycle: the production of surplus candidates; the value creation of campaign practices; the waste inherent in their excessiveness; consequent depletion of candidates; and their ultimate sacrifice to propel democracy forward. The final section offers an alternative: discarding well.

ELECTIONS AS SYSTEMS OF DISCARDING

Anthropologists' attention to the practices, rituals, and symbols of elections reveals their role in the substantive workings of democracy (Paley 2008). Elections do not in themselves constitute democracy, but in representative democracies they play an important role in establishing its legitimacy and the

acceptance of rule (Nugent 2019). Electoral rituals establish, make evident, and show commitment to a particular understanding of power (Collins 2021; Hauser and Singer 1986; Lama-Rewal 2009), and they establish and renew “the mysterious link between representative and the represented” (Crewe 2021, 31). Practices and technologies remove doubt as to the veracity of the result, and hence ensure the ongoing viability of electoral democracies (Crewe 2021). As periodic and spectacular events (Hauser and Singer 1986) or as penetrating all spheres of life (Buyandelgar 2022), elections are productive of systems of power and rule, citizenship, and political imaginings (Moore 2019).

Candidates are key actors in elections and the making of democracy. Elections can be all-consuming, entailing long days and considerable personal sacrifices (Crewe 2021; Buyandelgar 2022; Kramer 2022). First-time candidates must learn and implement the culturally variable pragmatic rules of elections, in the process reproducing the particularized features of vernacular democracies (Bailey 2001; Collins 2021). Candidates accommodate, perform, and reproduce cultural electoral repertoires, but they also generate new political stylizations and practices in ways that reshape the nature of politics and social organization (Buyandelgar 2022; Simon 2010). In short, candidates’ electoral activities produce value necessary for the sustaining and *reimagining* of political life (Collins 2021; Moore 2019).

Interest in candidates as an object of study is mostly extinguished at the point when they lose. Studies that do examine their experiences (Erazo and Benitez 2022) or offer firsthand accounts (Billy 2002; Kidu and Setae 2002) show that electoral losses can be traumatic. William Shaffir and Steven Kleinknecht (2005) describe them as a “death.” Candidates’ visions of their future, and future selves, become extinguished. Elections can be life-changing moments, a matter of life and death, with “the *potential* to radically change individual political trajectories” (Picherit 2020, 84; emphasis original). The social consequences of elections linger past election day in what Radhika Govindran (2018) describes as “electoral ripples.” These studies point to the potential trauma and harm of contesting (and losing) an election, precisely as it is the moment when the value invested and acquired through electoral processes radically depreciates in a single day.

Discard studies and the anthropology of waste offer three orienting lenses to examine these processes of valuing, devaluing, and discarding in elections. The first underlines the excess inherent in producing democracy, and the inevitable need to discard such excess. The urgency of waste management arises from

the acceleration of overproduction and hyperconsumption (Isenhour and Reno 2019). The rivalrous emulation of an election campaign in which candidates seek to outdo each other has parallels with Georges Bataille's (2003) account of the potlatch (Frow 2002). While conspicuous consumption may not in itself be how one defeats a rival in an election, campaigns nonetheless trigger comparison, emulation, and ultimately destructiveness (Frow 2002) as candidates exhaust their resources in competition. On losing an election, these candidates are then sacrificed at the altar of democracy. Their sacrifice is not a by-product of elections, but rather the motor that propels the system forward (to paraphrase Reno 2014, 14). As Joshua Reno (2014, 9) argues, we must continue to be attentive to these "critical expenditures" and their role in the continuation of life.³

The second lens draws on the influential work of Mary Douglas, and the extension of her thinking on purity and pollution by anthropologists of waste. She describes dirt (or waste) as "matter out of place" that disrupts or offends "order in a culturally-specific system of classification" (Alexander and O'Hare 2020, 4). In this way, waste is "both an unwanted, unintended side effect of human activities and inevitably also a social construct—an entity that only comes into being due to our incessant need to create social order amidst a chaotic world" (Eriksen and Schober 2017, 283). Douglas (1966, 94) describes the restriction that order requires, in which from all possible materials, "a limited selection has been made"; that is, entailing processes of inclusion and exclusion (Eriksen and Schober 2017). In this way, "Waste is not *an* object. . . . Waste is something we *do*"; it is a process and practice of counting what is of value, and identifying waste as "value's co-constitutive other" (Doherty 2022, 6). Jacob Doherty (2022) corrects common readings of waste by highlighting that selection does not entail *exclusion* so much as *inclusion* into systems of production. Waste is value's other—together they constitute worlds.

The third lens in discard studies offers recuperative possibilities. "Waste is something we do," but it is also "something we undo" (Doherty 2022, 6; emphasis removed). Considering what happens to waste after it has been discarded constitutes the first step to improve waste management, and to practice discarding well (Liboiron and Lepawsky 2022). Reno (2015, 562) notes that "at all stages of the dumping process . . . wastes can be recovered, remade, and given life as part of a new creative process." He raises the tantalizing prospect that "making waste is part of what makes us the ethical selves we want to become" (Reno 2015, 559). Francisco Martínez (2017) argues that waste studies need to be complemented with studies of repair, commitment, and rehabilitation. His ecology

of care pays attention to the life-value cycle, the ways that things become more or less valuable, lose and regain value. Attention also needs to be placed on stewardship and living with waste that cannot be transformed (Lau 2023). This final lens of discarding well opens up new possibilities for revaluing and being accountable to discarded candidates.

In sum, the anthropology of waste invites new readings of electoral processes by a) drawing attention to the excessive surplus inherent in making democracy and its destructive potential; b) defamiliarizing and denaturalizing vernacular democracies by questioning the classification of unsuccessful candidates as no longer holding value within representative democracy, and; c) inviting reflection on how to discard better, through acts of revaluing and repair. I examine each of these in turn through an ethnography of a local government election.

ELECTION RESEARCH

The first week after an election is particularly grueling for an anthropologist. Alongside celebrations with newly (re)elected representatives stand conversations with candidates who have lost, including those who suffered humiliation at the ballot box. But elections are also addictive, for ethnographers as much as candidates (Crewe 2021). Often overlooked by political scientists, local-level elections hold particular appeal to anthropologists because of their proximity of relations (Copus 2016), the importance of local political idioms (Bedi 2016), and the diversity of electoral cultures and political repertoires (Barnett and Shalaby 2024). The barriers to entry are relatively low, especially in contexts where party endorsement is not common, allowing for a greater diversity of candidates (Breux, Couture and Koop 2019). The stakes can, nonetheless, be high. Contesting a local election entails hypervisibility and a testing of relatively close and intimate relationships (Jakimow 2020).

Research on the 2021 NSW local elections began in February 2021 at workshops for women “aspirants.” These were my entry point to meet potential candidates, eleven of whom agreed to be followed through their campaigns. The participants hailed from regional centers (4), rural shires (3), and metropolitan councils (4), and comprised four culturally and racially marginalized (CARM) women, seven white women, and one woman with a disability, with ages ranging from the mid-thirties to late fifties. Of the eleven participants, three decided not to contest the election, and out of the eight who did, three were elected. All but one of the participants contested as an independent candidate. Geographically, NSW is similar in size to Pakistan, yet distance barely mattered during NSW’s

107-day lockdown (June 26–October 11) when all conversations took place over Zoom, phone, or email. I also followed online campaigns and community forums, and participated in a closed Facebook group for female candidates. After lockdown restrictions lifted, I resumed in-person catchups, including one more trip to regional NSW, and campaigned for the four candidates in Greater Sydney.

I am a white, cisgendered woman in my forties, without children and without disability. None of these characteristics correlate with whom I developed more sustained relationships, that is, the six women with whom I remain friends and in regular contact until today. The closeness of ties seemed to depend more on the gregarious nature of my interlocutors, and my direct role in their campaigns. My analysis is informed by conversations with other councillors, candidates, and their support teams, as well as ongoing ethnographic research on two councils. The material presented here is, however, mostly from the journeys of the eleven women: from the moment of recruitment, during the extended campaign period through to election day, and their recollections twelve months later. I start at the beginning, when they were encouraged to contest.

A SURPLUS OF CANDIDATES

Elections need candidates. A higher number of surplus candidates above the number of positions indicates robust political participation and competition. Uncontested elections are indicative of democratic weakness, if not dysfunction. Hence democracy is premised on an overproduction of candidates, with practices to determine candidates' relative value, who is disposable and hence necessarily discarded to ensure the ongoing life of democracy (Reno 2015). The strength and legitimacy of a democracy further depends on *who* contests (Kwok and Pietsch 2017), with a particular focus on gender parity in public office in Australia, as well as globally. Gender equality has long focused on overcoming social, economic, and political *exclusion*, with the goal of social *inclusion* (Breux, Couture and Koop 2019). Discard studies invites us to examine how women are *included* into systems premised on overproduction and, inevitably, waste (Doherty 2022).

Before each local government election in NSW, the Office for Local Government (OLG), a NSW state department, invests in programs to increase both the number and diversity of candidates. In 2021, OLG funded a series of workshops across NSW, delivered by the Australian Local Government Women's Association, NSW (ALGWA) and Women for Election Australia (WFEA).⁴ These half- and full-day events aimed to inspire women to nominate as candidates and to help them navigate the election itself. Presenters from ALGWA—all sitting

councillors—focused on reassuring women that they had what it takes, explaining what a councillor does, then convincing women that they could do it. Few attendees lacked the knowledge or confidence to *be* a councillor; rather, their anxieties were about the election itself. The workshops by ALGWA provided campaign tips, but generally elections were presented as an unpleasant stage to be gotten through on the way to becoming a councillor. One presenter described the elections as one of the worst experiences of her life, but counselled: “Don’t let the negatives outweigh the positives. Being on council has been the most rewarding experience of my life.”

In contrast, WFEA’s presenters foregrounded the election, presenting its contestation as an achievement in itself. They did not claim that the campaign would be easy, but they said that it was worth it. Their feminist approach encouraged women to see their candidacy as part of the fight for gender equality in local government, and to define success beyond the ballot box. Participants felt inspired. Keetie said the workshop was the “moment of going from saying a mumbly thing [being non-committal] to saying, ‘Yes, I’m running for council’” (conversation, July 2021). These efforts coincided with, and were perhaps partially responsible for the increase in the percentage of councillors identifying as women elected in 2021: 39.5 percent, up from 31.2 percent in 2016/17. There was, however, no progress—and minimal funding—toward improving the representation of CARM women. Out of 3,865 candidates who contested elections conducted by the NSW Electoral Commission (NSWEC),⁵ 1,610 identified as women (41 percent), of which 473 were elected to council. Put differently, for every female candidate who won an election, 2.4 lost.

These losses, the 1,137 unsuccessful female candidates, are central to democratic systems. Their production, participation in value-assigning practices, and then elimination from the selection of council prove critical to the creation of order (a representative governing body) from disorder (Douglas 1966). The election can be seen as a periodic suspension of order, with (too) many voices, (too) many representative claims, (too) many potential governors. Such disorder is crucial to destructive power and new potentialities (Douglas 1966): in this case, producing a new governing body. To re-establish order, classificatory practices that assign value, identify candidates to be discarded, and the removal of these excess candidates are required. Women are encouraged to sign up for inclusion into a system of production which produces not only councillors but also necessarily “critical expenditures” (Reno 2014): candidates discarded to keep democracy vibrant.

Helen was one of these critical expenditures. When I first met her, she was undecided whether to contest, as doing so would inevitably affect her standing in her small rural shire. After attending an ALGWA workshop, she nominated. One of only two women among eight candidates vying for seven council positions, her candidacy proved doubly important: first in avoiding an uncontested election (enabling a period of disorder), and second in increasing female participation. She was also a workshop participant who had become a candidate: a key indicator of success for ALGWA and OLG. Helen was unsuccessful, the only candidate to be discarded in her shire. Like other candidates, she did not make a fuss and simply congratulated the winners. But she has been irrevocably changed, feeling tarnished as she bumps into voters/friends in the supermarket and streets. Her candidacy made the election possible, yet from her perspective, there is an affective afterlife to being made surplus to the social order.

Not all losing candidates had negative experiences, and not all candidates were in it to win it.⁶ But in the urgency to have a surplus of (diverse) candidates, recruitment is often prioritized over honest conversations about what an election could cost candidates. After gushing about the WFEA workshop in July, Keetie was more critical after she decided to withdraw her candidacy: “Did I have my eyes open before the campaign? Did I know all that it would entail? Probably not. I just thought, you know what, I am going to do this. . . . What is on the other side of that decision, *it should not just be about getting people to run*” (conversation, October 2021). Her criticism that programs simply encouraged women to become candidates without honest discussions about what it entails speaks to the downsides of (political) inclusion into electoral systems (of waste). Increased female candidacy produces not only more legitimate electoral contests but also greater numbers of women who invest in, and lose, elections. In NSW, emphasis is placed on the former, but with little acknowledgment of the latter (I will return to this point below).

AN EXCESS OF VALUE

Helen adds value to democracy not simply by becoming a surplus candidate that allows a (s)election, but also through her campaigning. While the conventional wisdom of how to play the game of elections (Bailey 2001) is seen primarily from the perspective of how to win, campaign practices also perform important functions. Candidates learn how to navigate appropriate practices within the strategic field of elections (Collins 2021) through workshops and emulating

previous campaigns and other candidates. Through emulation and experimentation, Australia's vernacular democracy is produced anew. I examine three of the most typical practices, unpacking the value they create, and the excessiveness that leads to waste.

Corflutes are signs made of corrugated polypropylene (a type of plastic) that usually measure 60cm by 90cm, with a width of 3-5mm. They contain an image of the candidate or party and slogan. Their appearance on public poles, fences, and front yards are often the first sign that an election is nearing. Ubiquitous in elections in many countries, they are particularly important in the "low information context" of local elections, where media coverage is limited (Breux, Couture and Koop 2019). Without information about each candidate, voters make "information shortcuts": assumptions about a candidate based on stereotypes associated with gender, race, age, and so on (Breux, Couture and Koop 2019). Corflutes enable these shortcuts, arguably leading voters to make decisions in ways that privilege male and white candidates.

The environmental impact of corflutes concerned both candidates and community groups. While they add to the festive feel of elections, support local printers, and provide awareness, they also, mostly, end up in landfill. Community Facebook pages debated whether they should be allowed, and candidates worried about the cost. Cathy only printed fifty, and at \$12 AUD each, they were a major expense. Further, she knew some would get damaged: "I'm preparing myself that I will get something drawn on my face." She noted this had happened to another candidate, and "it really shook them." At risk is not only the financial cost but also the violation of having a blown-up image of oneself defaced. Corflutes are not simply an expense; they are an overt representation of self in public.

The affective power of corflutes, like other forms of garbage (Doherty 2022), continue after the election. Daisy had kept corflutes from an unsuccessful 2017 campaign, reusing them for 2021. While the move was cost-effective, as the campaign dragged on, the signs started to get to her: "I can't wait for it to be over. In my garage I have so many corflutes, old ones. I am so sick of looking at them. After [the election] I will be able to call the council and get them to pick up the whole lot, get them out of my sight." Keetie drove her car around for months with corflutes on her backseat, nagging her to start putting them up. They added to the pressure to keep her campaign going, even as her mental health was deteriorating. When she finally pulled out of the campaign, she drove the corflutes to the garbage tip. Dumping large photos of one's self engendered

difficult emotions: the letting go of the self-imaginary as councillor, as well as unwelcome reminders of the financial burden of the campaign.

Letterboxing provides voters detailed information about a candidate through a leaflet or card delivered to each residence. The message, images, and format require considerable thought. Printing is a considerable expense, with increased costs if they are professionally delivered. To reduce costs, most candidates organize volunteers where they can, and do much of the letterboxing themselves. Daisy attempted to letterbox her ward of more than 75,000 residents with just the help of a friend. Soon realizing the impossibility of the task, she gave up and dipped into her savings to have the leaflets professionally delivered. Bessie wore out two pair of shoes, while Christine had a large team of volunteers to letterbox, in wards of 15,000 and 30,000, respectively. It is a campaign practice that takes a lot of time, energy, money, and organization.

A leaflet helps voters know more about the candidates and their positions on local issues, yet not all voters are appreciative. Community Facebook groups complained about the “rubbish” that arrived in their mailbox during the election and “goes straight to recycling!” Adjudicating this line between valuable service and waste is the ubiquitous “no junk mail” sign on mailboxes. Political material is exempt from the standards of the Australian Catalogue Association, classified as intrinsically of value to recipients and hence able to be dropped in letterboxes with this sign. Yet public opinion is divided. Letterboxing with environmentally friendly candidate Christine, we agonized over whether dropping leaflets in “no junk mail” labeled letterboxes would do more harm than good. There were also debates in her team as to whether to letterbox in areas that were overwhelming inhabited by international students not eligible to vote. Despite the additional cost it was decided to be worthwhile, as *all* residents should know the issues in the area, and we were educating potential future Australian voters.

The activity has a further, less recognized value for democracy. Rachel spent several days letterboxing businesses in her electorate. Walking through the more industrial—and neglected—parts of town alerted her to the deterioration of council infrastructure and land. Cathy letterboxed nearly the entire shire with only minimal support from family. She found it was a way to be attentive to the environment and the different housing conditions of residents. Cathy also ran into people as they gardened or walked the dog, and it was a legitimate way to introduce herself and make a connection during lockdown. She often left personal notes on her leaflets (“you have the prettiest letterbox in town”; “love your garden!”) that gave a sense of proximity even without a face-to-face interaction.

Hence this activity—seen as mundane and rote—educated and informed potential future representatives, and started the process of building a relationship between representatives and represented.

How-to-vote (HTVs) leaflets are handed out at pre-poll and on election day instructing people how to vote optimally for their choice of candidate in NSW’s preferential voting system. Preferential voting was developed in Australia to avoid the pitfalls of a first-past-the-post electoral system in which a candidate can be elected with a minority of public support (Brett 2019). It also prevents wasted votes; voters can confidently vote for a party or candidate who is unlikely to be elected, knowing that their preference will then go to an ideologically aligned candidate. Candidates do preference deals with other candidates to boost their electoral chances or keep certain candidates out. If this sounds complicated, it is. Citizens voting in their fifth or sixth election can still spoil their ballot by not numbering the boxes correctly. The leaflets inform voters how to number boxes on the ballot paper in ways that best support their first choice of candidate and navigate the confusing (and often misleading) array of minor parties.

Handing out HTVs and speaking to voters is made more important because of compulsory voting.⁷ Campaign teams do not need to encourage people to vote, but they do need to educate ill-informed voters. Handing out HTVs at polling stations offers an opportunity to promote their own candidate (or themselves), but some campaigners will also take voters through all of their options—often pointing to the different confluents—so that voters make an informed choice. Campaigners also help voters navigate the practicalities of voting and the complicated ballot paper. A joy of handing out is speaking to voters casting their first ballot in Australia—some on turning eighteen, others who have recently become Australian citizens. Hence, while many people complain about having to “run the gauntlet” of “hustlers” before entering the polling station, they play an important role in producing democracy with Australian characteristics. At the same time, they also add to the material waste of elections. The bins at polling stations quickly fill with discarded HTVs destined for landfill.

Handing out HTVs can also be a waste of time. As voting is compulsory, ample opportunity must be provided for voters to cast their ballot (Brett 2019), including a period of pre-poll for voters who cannot attend election day. In 2021, pre-poll was Monday to Saturday for two weeks.⁸ While this was great for voters and ethnographers (pre-poll is a wonderful place for gossip), it created a headache for candidates. Most had to rearrange their lives to be at pre-poll for all eleven days, taking time off work and arranging childcare. The number of voters

was mostly a trickle. The wife of one candidate was visibly annoyed when we had one voter in one hour on a hot day: “Pre-poll should not be this long,” she complained. When it started to rain at another, an exasperated candidate said, “Oh, that’s good, now we can all waste our time here, get wet, and speak to no one.” While handing out HTVs is an important practice for Australia’s electoral system, it also generates waste: the material waste of HTVs, the financial waste of HTVs that are not handed out, and the waste of time on polling stations.

THE VALUE OF CAMPAIGN ACTIVITIES

Campaign activities prove valuable to democracies in several ways: they help the electorate make an informed choice; ensure votes reflect preferences; and contribute to the “becoming of” representatives (Saward 2020). They also add to the festive feel of elections as a liminal (disorderly) state between governing orders. Yet many, if not the majority of voters do not appreciate the efforts of candidates. Some voters are unambiguously contemptuous if not rude as they walk past supporters handing out HTV cards. Bessie was outraged: “It is like we are doing them some kind of disservice” (conversation, November 2021). This statement contains not only a complaint about the lack of respect for candidates but also an appreciation of what candidates contribute to democracy. She continued: “I was thinking when standing on pre-poll: this is quite a service that you’re doing for the community as a candidate, and explaining who the candidates are and trying to inform them so that they can make an informed decision” (conversation, November 2021).

The differing perception of whether campaign activities are valuable democratic practices or simply harass voters appears to lie in the extent to which they are seen in excess of that required. Complaints center around how corflutes are *hung up everywhere*, giving a messy appearance to local environments; the *piling up* of leaflets in letterboxes; the need to push past *so many* campaigners. In the production of democratic expression and debate, there is an excess, beyond that required, to achieve the core fundamentals of democratic systems. The excessiveness of election activities may be a source of annoyance—but it is also an expectation in “vibrant” (read messy, noisy, excessive) democracies. This disorder marks the destructive power crucial to the emergence of a new order. These practices of wasteful expenditures have an unacknowledged impact, however: the wearing down of candidates.

DEPLETION

It was not only the general public that criticized electoral waste. Candidates pointed to the excessive use of resources and the consequent triumph of the most cashed-up candidates. Bessie's explanation for her electoral defeat centered on the excessiveness of other campaigns. A successful candidate had done three professional letterbox drops: "That's somewhere between \$10,000 to \$15,000 [\$6,500–\$9,800 USD] worth of letterbox dropping that's been spent just on one campaign." She continued:

The other thing is the excessive number of corflutes. [Candidate name's] corflutes kept growing and growing. . . . They were everywhere. . . . The visibility of [three candidate names] was excessive. Then all they could do with those [after the election] is put them in landfill. . . . And I suppose they can stick new 'how-to-vote-forms' over the top or something [for re-use in future elections]. But it's really, really excessive" (conversation, December 2021).

Bessie extrapolates from her own wasted time, effort, and money to the election as a whole: "You've got to spend somewhere around \$20,000 to \$25,000 [\$13–\$16,000 USD] to be successful." Multiplying this amount by the number of candidates: "Out of all that effort, and out of \$100,000 [\$65,000 USD], you got two candidates [elected as councillors]. It's actually funny. This seems to be an inefficient way to select councillors" (conversation, December 2021).

It is this excessiveness that makes the analogy of the potlatch apt for examining election campaigns. The desire not to be outdone by competitors results in an escalation of resources spent on an excess of value-producing activities for electoral democracies. A candidate does not need 150 corflutes to make oneself visible to voters; they only need to ensure their presence is greater than that of their competitors. It is this "invidious emulation," that is, "a desire to buy prestige at the expense of one's rivals by means of profligate expenditure" (Frow 2002), which makes campaigns wasteful. The result—much like a potlatch—is destructive, as candidates deplete their resources, often for few benefits. Bessie noted: "This isn't a trivial day or it's not a trivial process. . . . It's upset all the things that I do on a day-to-day basis, and the family life was just chaotic. . . . Oh, and the time commitment for this is extraordinary—and for no benefit, no outcome" (conversation, December 2021). At the end of a long and tiring campaign, Bessie felt depleted.

This depletion was common to all candidates, exacerbated by the drawn-out campaign. When Daisy heard the news that the elections were postponed due to the lockdown, “I bawled my eyes out” (via text, June 2021). A few weeks after the announcement, Daisy and her friend were in her living room crossing out the old date on leaflets about to be letterboxed, adding the new date in black marker pen and stamping it with “date changed.” “And of course, I did not have the date on it once, but twice, one on the outside, and another on the inside,” she said (conversation, August 2021). There was no possibility of reprinting the leaflets. Already “I am stripping my savings dry.” Nor could she decide to simply not undertake this practice, as her competitors’ leaflets came to her own letterbox daily. Daisy’s labor exemplifies the cost of the election for candidates in terms of time and money, and how often candidates reduce the cost of one by expending the other.

By late September, Daisy was struggling to keep going: “There are now sixty-seven days to go. Which is still some time . . . I am exhausted, though, Tanya. Before I was ready to go, ready and excited and full of beans. Now, I am just thinking, whatever. . . . Self-doubt is really creeping in . . . I think, who is going to vote for you, get a grip [Daisy]” (conversation, September 2021). Daisy was unsuccessful. A couple of weeks after the election, she described her state as “Exhausted: exhausted emotionally, physically, mentally, any way you can imagine. Yes, exhausted” (conversation, December 2021). The election had completely worn her down, and worn her out. Volunteers also spend their time, which creates emotional baggage for candidates. As Daisy said apologetically: “I feel like I have wasted your and everyone’s time” (conversation, December 2021).

Even though the COVID-19–related postponement exacerbated impacts, costs that wear down candidates are common to each election. Cathy explained, “The personal investment is enormous. In terms of time and money. I have taken two weeks leave for pre-polling.” The time commitments of the election were the added incentive Cathy needed to leave her job in October, but then money became even tighter. She added: “I have not told my husband how much all of this is costing me. I will not get much change from \$5,000 [\$3,215 USD]” (conversation, July 2021). All this investment was for a grossly underremunerated position of councillor (Jakimow and Henaway 2023). “I did think about pulling out. I thought, why am I doing this? I will be surviving off \$33 [AUD] a day [as a councillor], and having to fight even harder for things” (conversation, October 2021).⁹ Alongside the depletion of time and savings, her emotional resilience had also taken a hit. Long days campaigning were often interspersed with unpleasant

encounters: the business owner complaining about corflutes; the returning officer who was rude; the residents who took their frustrations of council out on her. Cathy is tough, “I am the rock of my family” (conversation, November 2021), but even she broke down and cried on more than one occasion. “I am just exhausted, and then these things happen and I wonder, what the fuck am I doing this for?” (conversation, November 2021)? Unlike Daisy, though, Cathy won, and while her sacrifices were not forgotten, they did not weigh her down.

Candidates who invested in an election only to lose provide a distinct vantage point to read elections as systems of waste. Candidates are included into a system structured on excess and waste, of which their candidacy is arguable one type. Both Bessie and Daisy were critical of the encouragement of women to contest elections without providing material support, as well as of the way elections are contested. Their suggestions for improvement tellingly entailed reducing waste. Daisy suggested that the electoral commission could stick up a copy of each candidate’s HTV in the voting booth to reduce campaign costs and paper waste. Bessie had more radical suggestions: “The letterbox drops are crucial, but my suggestion . . . is that the councils do the sending out. I don’t think it’s fair on candidates to fund a big campaign. . . . The other thing is the excessive number of corflutes. . . . They were everywhere . . . excessive. Then all [the candidates] could do was put them in landfill. There should be a limit, a number per candidate” (conversation, December 2021).

These suggestions would achieve the functions of campaigns for democratic systems (informed voters) but limit the excess. Bessie’s suggestions address the invidious emulation of the potlatch, “leveling the playing the field,” as she explicitly put it. At stake is not only the depletion of candidates but also the disruption of a system that rewards economically strong candidates. That is, it is the arrest of the conversion of economic power into political power that the potlatch enables, and which Bessie argues stands counter to a healthy democracy.

SACRIFICE

Women, people with low incomes, and youth are all disadvantaged when economic elites are the only people who can contest, or win, an election (Murray 2023). While some otherwise credible candidates simply do not nominate as candidates, others contest in suboptimal ways, sacrificing time, money, and energy for no return. Daisy exhausted her savings, but on reflection, she never had a chance: “Look, it’s like, how do I compete against them. How? I can’t It does boil down to money, money talks. Money can get you interviews, money

can get your face plastered on every street corner. Money can get advertisements popping up on Facebook. It's all money. It's not even [pause] I could be a better councillor . . . but does the public know that? No . . . because I don't have the money" (conversation, December 2021). It is excessiveness, a bombardment, that gets one elected according to Daisy. I am not suggesting that only cashed-up candidates had a realistic chance of success. Other candidates won with relatively cheap campaigns on the strength of their personal qualities, or competed in low-key electoral cultures. Nonetheless, [Emma Crewe \(2021, 50\)](#) cautions against the "pseudo-magical trust in the results of elections as the driver of democracy, and our fetishizing of voting" that fail to acknowledge their limitations. Good candidates won, and lost, in 2021, as is likely true in most elections.

What happens to these candidates—these critical expenditures required for elections but discarded at its pivotal moment—is rarely considered. Daisy created value by being a candidate, engaging in practices that informed voters, and by becoming representative through processes of listening to voters' concerns and representing these in public forums. The value for her was, however, uncertain. Eleven months after the election we met to discuss a draft research report on the elections. Reliving the experience through the findings was not easy, re-engendering the feelings of the campaign, and her loss. I asked if she regretted contesting: "Yes, I do, I do regret it. Mentally, emotionally, and financially it just drained me" (conversation, November 2022). She still remembered the exact number of votes (first preferences) she received: a dishearteningly small number for all she had invested. "If I had lost by a little, or even if I had gotten 2,000 votes, I could have dusted myself off and tried again next time, but the result was just demoralizing." Daisy was a so-called surplus candidate, essential to hold an election, only to be discarded after the selection had been made.

Losing candidates in this way can be seen as analogous to the "accursed share" of human sacrifice ([Bataille 2003](#)). The excessive energy generated by democratic societies finds its outlet in the destruction of candidates, sacrificed not only at the point of election, but through the process of selection itself. For some, the sacrifice means exclusion from prior social relations, and even expulsion. Adele had the roughest ride out of all the candidates I followed. She had long wanted to use her talents for leadership and community mobilization to become a councillor. As the campaign progressed, she had to radically rethink her sense of who she was. In May, rumors started circulating and a Facebook page was established to openly mock her. In August, a local magazine published a scathing article (for which they later had to apologize by court order). By

November, her bank of supporters was getting smaller, and she decided not to have people at polling stations as “it’s pretty nasty out there.” On polling day she received less than 500 votes from 25,000 voters. Within a year she had permanently left the town. Her candidacy, her humiliation, her loss, and ultimately her withdrawal from society was a sacrifice, one that enabled the councillors to take their rightful place (Bataille 2003).

Violence and utter destruction may seem overemphatic to describe the experiences of losing candidates. Indeed, few candidates said that they regretted contesting the election, and some viewed lost elections as valuable preparation for future campaigns. Yet it is also a process in which one’s value (in community and in relation) is enhanced, evaluated, and devalued at the point of selection. Elections can tarnish candidates in ways that have long-term consequences for their social value in, and beyond, local politics. Deeply hurt by her poor performance in the election, Bessie nonetheless put the disappointment behind her and sought alternative avenues to contribute to local government. Her application to join council’s Women’s Advisory Board was rejected. Nor was she selected for any council committees. She returned to the volunteer roles suspended during the election campaign but her status as former candidate engendered suspicion and she ultimately left. The election changed her relationships, seemed to tarnish her, and to devalue what she could contribute to her local community. Bessie did not leave the area like Adele did, yet she had sacrificed her prior life and sense of self in the community, by becoming a candidate. She had not been prepared for this risk.

The inability to find meaningful social activities after the election reveals a lack of appreciation for the contributions a candidate makes during the campaign, and, *as a consequence*, their ongoing value to democratic society. Reaching out to voters, listening to their concerns, and translating campaign messaging are not just electoral but also representational practices. As the campaign progresses, candidates are *becoming* representatives of a particular constituency (Saward 2020). There is a difference, however, between *becoming* representative and being a representative: a difference forged through the election (Saward 2020). At the moment of aggregate judgement by the electorate, representative claims are discarded, and the value acquired by a candidate rapidly depreciates. In some cases, this depreciation appears permanent.

As Erving Goffman (1952) elucidated, such moments in which a person claims a certain status, only to be disabused of new notions, are common. Circumstances in which “a person may be involuntarily deprived of a role under

circumstances which reflect unfavourably on his capacity for it” (Goffman 1952, 454) involve a loss of face, and humiliation. I describe such instances elsewhere as an affective injury, when “the response of the ‘other’ impresses upon, or affects, a person in ways that are counter to, rather than aligned with, their self-understanding” (Jakimow 2018, 551). Few people’s self-understandings (as community leader, popular, well-regarded) are tested and exposed in the way they are in elections. Lost elections can fundamentally shake one’s sense of who one is, and who one is in relation to others. There is no opportunity to “conceal . . . from others and even from himself the facts of his commitment” (Goffman 1952, 460). Rejection is by hard numerical fact, and is public. It is this rejection—or sacrifice—that propels electoral democracies forward, ensures their vitality, through the destruction of candidates.

DISCARDING WELL

The analogy of the sacrifice captures the lack of effort toward the recuperation and repair of unsuccessful candidates. While the election is public, the social practice of “cooling,” that is, “a process of adjustment to an impossible situation” (Goffman 1952, 456), is for candidates primarily a private affair. Our post-election catchups played such a role for many of the candidates I followed. The criticisms of the electoral system expressed in these conversations and shared in this article can in part be considered a self-reparative narrative to recover from an affective injury (Jakimow 2018). The WFEA organized a post-election debrief, though it is telling that it was mostly attended by successful candidates. The smallness of this act of care, and its singular occurrence (the only one conducted by WFEA, ALGWA, or OLG), reinforces the imbalance between the money and effort expended to create a surplus and diversity of candidates, and the lack of attention after they have been discarded. The lack of acts to repair and rehabilitate is, in my opinion, reflective of their (inadequate) ethical commitment (Martínez 2017).

Losing an election is not equivalent to the “wasted lives” of people surplus to the needs of capital or subject to processes of state dehumanization (Eriksen and Schober 2017; Martínez 2017). Yet being discarded at the ballot box is still hurtful—emotionally, socially, financially. Describing unsuccessful candidates as *discarded* invites thinking about how we can *discard well*, through acts of recovery, care, and repair (Martínez 2017). Election debriefs with candidates are inadequate through this lens, as they seek to repair the individual, rather than the relational; in other words, they deal with symptoms, not systems (Liboiron and

Lepawsky 2022). There is no process to arrest the “electoral ripples” that can reverberate through communities after local elections (Govindrajan 2018). Adele, for example, did not leave the town due to her failure to be elected, but because her relationships, and self-in-relation, had been fundamentally transformed. Preventing harassment and bullying during elections would mark an important, preventative, step. There also, however, needs to be a process of revaluing, of providing space for her to return to her pre-election activities after the event, and to repair her relations with others. Reparative acts can also allow unsuccessful candidates to form new involvements, “new framework[s] in which to see himself and judge himself” (Goffman 1952, 456). The exclusion of Bessie from council committees and volunteer opportunities is in this way doubly regrettable. Not only was she denied new frameworks, the value she acquired through the process of *becoming* a representative (even if she did not attain a formal status) was also wasted.

Liboiron and Lepawsky’s (2022, 128–29) principles to discard well involve accountability: “recognizing and acknowledging what is discarded as well as holding an obligation or responsibility to that which has *been* discarded.” Part of Bessie’s frustration is that there was little to no acknowledgment not only of the facts of her loss but also of what she had done for local democracy. She, like others, had been encouraged to contest, but felt abandoned when their loss became evident, as if she was no longer of value. Accountability would be to ensure candidates can continue to contribute to the community no matter the election results: a practice that arguably should be part of any program to encourage women and other underrepresented groups to contest elections.

Not all unsuccessful candidates want to return to public life. Justin Lau (2023) rightly questions the thesis of endless possibilities and untapped potential of waste, while overlooking processes of ruination and the unsalvageable. His proposal for an ethic of care inspires thinking about how we better support candidates through and after their campaigns. Attentiveness to processes of ruination—the depletion of candidates—questions the built-in profligacy of elections, how they demand certain forms of (over)investment. Daisy scaled back her involvement on council committees after the election, not out of embarrassment but from exhaustion. An ethic of care toward candidates would manage election processes in ways that sustain and conserve candidate resources (energy, emotional well-being, money, time), minimalizing deterioration as part of waste management (Reno 2015). Not only will this potentially sustain the energy for democratic participation of “discarded candidates” but it will also minimize the

ongoing financial, emotional, physical, and social consequences of a grueling campaign.

CONCLUSION

Discard studies offers the promise of defamiliarizing systems and denaturalizing practices (Liboiron and Lepawsky 2022). Examining electoral systems through the lens of waste and wasting throws light on the centrality of overinvestment and overproduction in processes of selecting representatives. Those who can invest in (and afford to waste) a greater amount of resources are advantaged in such a system, akin to a potlatch in which expenditure seeks to crush one's opponents (Frow 2002). Rarely acknowledged are the costs borne by "also-rans": the surplus candidates of all genders essential to an election that are discarded at the ballot box. Such an oversight is particularly grave given the efforts directed toward encouraging more female, low-income, racially marginalized, with disability candidates—with limited financial support. They contribute to the legitimacy of electoral democracy and co-produce it through practices. Yet interest in (or caring about) these candidates ends at the moment the votes are counted. Even their final act in making democracy—taking care of their own disposal to ensure the order of electoral systems is sustained—is primarily a private, and unsupported, affair.

To be careless with the *value* acquired and generated in the election at a time of democratic malaise (Cooke, Long and Moore 2019) seems overly profligate. Revaluing discarded candidates can invite a more radical reimagining of democracy, and in particular, representative democracy. Michael Saward (2020, 3) argues that for a democracy to be "more fully, robustly and defensibly democratic," it must be representative in some form: that is, one stands in for the many, as a practical solution to the cacophony of voices and interests (disorder). As David Nugent (2019) notes, however, there are serious drawbacks, including limited opportunity for further voice and democratic participation *as a consequence* of the act of selecting representatives. He invites us not to see representation as a *necessary* feature of democracies, but as a characteristic particular to vernacular democracies. That is, the rapid depreciation of candidates' value may be a fundamental feature of electoral democracies, but not necessarily democracy in a larger sense. Attention to waste and wasting in elections marks a crucial first step to transforming electoral practices into more caring democratic systems. Discarding well may spark alternative imaginaries of democracy—at least that is my hope.¹⁰

ABSTRACT

Elections produce legitimacy, relations between representative and represented, and consent to rule. They are also systems of discarding. Representative democracies require a surplus of candidates who engage in practices and rituals of elections, the majority of which are discarded at the ballot box. Candidates (over)invest in their campaigns, resulting in wasted time, money, and materials. Unsuccessful candidates offer a particular vantage point to view the processes of valuing and devaluing in elections, as they transition from the elevated position of candidate to the abject condition of discarded representative. Through orienting lenses of discard studies and the anthropology of waste, I re-examine campaign practices in 2021 local government elections in New South Wales, Australia, and shed light on the experience of being made surplus to representative democracy. Anthropological approaches to care, repair, (Martínez 2017) and “discarding well” (Liboiron and Lepawsky 2022) provide alternative ways to re-value so-viewed surplus candidates after election day. [elections; democracy; women and politics; waste; Australia]

NOTES

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1. The sausage sizzle is an important part of election day in Australia, with websites dedicated to helping voters locate polling stations that have stalls (<https://democracy-sausage.org/>) (Brett 2019).
2. All names are pseudonyms, the majority selected by the respondents themselves.
3. I am deeply indebted to Justin Lau who helped me see the parallel with the potlatch, and the relevance of Reno’s and Frow’s commentary on it.
4. The latter organization subsequently changed their name to Women for Election.
5. Two out of 124 councils organize their own elections, and hence are not included in the NSWEC statistics.
6. The number of overall candidates includes those who contested as part of a so-called group ticket in an unwinnable position.
7. Voting is compulsory for all federal and state elections in Australia. States differ for local government elections, but they are compulsory in NSW.
8. Postal and phone voting was also possible.
9. I examine the need to address poor councillor remuneration elsewhere (Jakimow and Henaway 2023).
10. Postscript: Local government elections were held again in NSW in September 2024. Bessie contested for a second time, and, while marginally improving her result from the previous election, she still came last in her ward. She wrote on her Facebook page: “Voters don’t realize the enormity and costs that candidates take to go into an election like this, whether they win or are defeated” (September 2024). Daisy did not contest herself, but ran the campaigns of a small party. She had also rejoined council

committees; “I am addicted to politics” she admitted (October 2024). Adele became party branch secretary in her new home, but refused the invitation to stand for council. Only Cathy, who won in 2021, decided to completely sit it out. Three years as councillor had “taken everything out of” her (August 2024). She watched the elections from the sideline with mixed feelings. The enchantments of politics, their addictive-ness, are, I tentatively suggest here, central to the recruitment of willing candidates into the system of excess, waste, and discarding of electoral democracy.

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