

Reviews

Sarah Birch, Frances Millard, Marina Popescu & Kieran Williams, *Embodying Democracy: Electoral System Design in Post-Communist Europe*. Basingstoke, Hampshire & New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002, xiii+241 pp., £50.00 h/b.

Frances Millard, *Elections, Parties, and Representation in Post-Communist Europe*. Basingstoke, Hampshire & New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, xxiii+350 pp., £55.00 h/b.

BOTH BOOKS REVIEWED HERE ARE TRULY IMPRESSIVE. No wonder: both are outcomes of an exceptionally impressive enterprise, the project on Political Transformation and the Electoral Process in Post-Communist Europe, based at the University of Essex. As stated on the project's website (available at: <http://www.essex.ac.uk/elections/>) its principal aim is 'to explain the role of electoral systems in the process of democratisation in post-communist Europe'. (The website itself is simple in design, rich in content, and easy to navigate, but in urgent need of updates.) To accomplish this goal, the project's principal investigators—the four authors of *Embodying Democracy*—created a database which is searchable through the cited website and contains election related documents: electoral laws (and related legislature), election results at both the national and the constituency levels, and, wherever available, information about candidates. To gather all this data under one roof has been a formidable task in its own right, for which generations of researchers across the world should be grateful to the principal investigators, their staff, and their sponsors (the 'One Europe or Several?' programme of the Economic and Social Research Council). Yet even more challenging is the mission of transforming this wealth of empirical data into a literature that is impressive in terms of the depth of analysis and breadth of theory employed. The volumes under review here are only two of several, past and hopefully future, attempts to respond to this challenge.

In *Elections, Parties, and Representation in Post-Communist Europe* Frances Millard presents a general, but also detailed, picture of the development of post-communist states as representative democracies. She defines her task as 'fundamentally analytical and empirical' and one 'that is theoretically grounded, but (. . .) is not a work of theory-building' (p. 9). She goes on to say that her book 'contains a great deal of thick description' (p. 9). Indeed, the product lives up to this promise: there are 280 pages of dense text that oscillates between description and analysis, followed by almost 40 pages of endnotes and another 20-plus of bibliography. The opening chapter contains a discussion of basic concepts, such as political representation, democracy and democratisation, as well as a general examination of the role played by political parties and elections in generating representative governments. Chapter 2 takes a more in-depth look at the role of elections in the process of political representation and the pressures the examined polities have been facing due to both their communist past and the standards established, for better or worse, by their new Western European role models. Chapter 3 examines the types of political parties that emerged during the post-communist transitions. Chapter 4 provides a general overview of patterns of voting behaviour, with particular attention being devoted to turnout, usually very high in the first elections and then universally declining, often to alarmingly low levels. In Chapter 5, the voters and the parties meet face-to-face, as electoral outcomes are examined and the handicaps of incumbency exposed. The patterns of electoral success in consecutive elections and the electoral fortunes and misfortunes of 'new' and 'radical' parties are also discussed. In Chapter 6, the author focuses again on political parties, this time in order to examine the development (or more often lack thereof) of party systems.

The next three chapters deal with the candidates contesting elections and their background, beginning with a general discussion of the candidate selection process (Chapter 7), to an examination of the representation of women (Chapter 8) and national minorities (Chapter 9). Of the latter two, Chapter 8 contains a thorough, if concise, discussion of theoretical approaches to the representation of women and their applicability to the Central and Eastern European political

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reality. The author wisely avoids comparisons between the representation of women now and then (in communist times), when the proportion of women in representative bodies was predetermined by arbitrary quotas set for various social and demographic categories (in addition to women also for youth, workers, and peasants). Nevertheless, the author focuses her analysis on the numerical aspect of gender (in)equality, without addressing the issue of the substantive representation of gender specific interests (such as the passage of legislation promoting—or denying—gender equality) which, in practice, is often unrelated to the proportion of women

elected to representative bodies. With regard to ethnic minorities, Millard concludes her review of the many ways in which post-communist electoral systems have addressed this issue with a rather upbeat comment: 'ethnicity is clearly not an automatic recipe for conflict' (p. 252). Finally, Chapter 10 shifts the focus back to parties and the electoral process, to recapitulate the findings of the entire book.

As noted above, Millard makes it clear that her book neither stems from nor seeks to develop a theory of political representation, even in a most modest way. An old maxim, once upon a time popular among social scientists, says 'there is nothing as practical as a good theory'. A theory—even a modest one—will always be helpful in generating and selecting empirical evidence, constructing arguments and organising the narrative. Millard claims that 'political science has little theory of representation' (p. 9)—a claim this reviewer is game to accept. Yet her writing is at its best when it is grounded solidly in theory, as evidenced by the chapter on the representation of women. When theory is lacking, her narration wanders back and forth between description (admittedly rather thick than thin) and analysis, often losing focus and leading to repetitiveness (see a substantial overlap between Chapters 3 and 10). This problem is particularly acute—and difficult to explain—in Millard's analysis of political parties and party systems. Her classification of parties in post-communist polities into three broad categories—ideological, electoral and populist—has a high degree of validity, but still is only one of many ways parties in post-communist Europe may be, and are being, classified by the myriad of scholars writing on the subject. Even the author herself departs, whenever convenient, from this classification, either by breaking those types into sub-types, or by introducing different categories (such as 'new' and 'radical' parties, analysed in Chapter 5) which crosscut the original ones. She cites the classical works on party and party system development (Duverger, Panebianco, Lipset and Rokkan) but none of the abundant scholarship focused specifically on parties in post-communist polities. It is almost unfair to point out bibliographical omissions to an author who not only cites over 4,000 sources in English and in the native tongues of the region, but is also able to extract many original ideas from obscure publications. Yet a critical look at propositions presented by Herbert Kitschelt (Millard cites his monumental work co-authored with Zdenka Mansfeldova, Radoslaw Markowski and Gabor Toka, but not his earlier theoretical contributions) or Geoffrey Evans and Stephen Whitefield (her fellow Britons are nowhere to be found) would have given Millard's arguments better focus and have added more weight to many of her points. These authors employed disciplined theorising informed by the literature on both Western and Eastern Europe, their contributions have been widely read and cited by scholars within the region itself, and have become the inspiration for hypotheses that have been tested empirically. It is true that Kitschelt and the Evans-Whitefield tandem focus their theories on the substance of party competition while Millard has not addressed this issue in any systematic way, but then the question is why has she not done so? After all, the fortunes and misfortunes of political parties analysed in Chapter 5 are not unrelated to parties' positions on various substantive policy issues (the supply side of the political process) and voters' substantive expectations (the demand side). Another shortcoming of the book is related to the selection of examined cases. The author presents a convincing argument (p. 15) for the exclusion of Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and post-Yugoslav states other than Slovenia, and a not so convincing one for the exclusion of Albania. (I guess the issue here is not so much in the flaws of Albanian democracy,

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as in the access to reliable data.) Yet the real problem lies with the inclusion of Russia and Ukraine (in addition to Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia). Throughout the book, the author, after presenting well-documented generalisations about the 10 cases, breaks her narrative to explain why Russia and Ukraine deviate from a given pattern. Instead of this single volume, I would have preferred the author to have written two volumes, which would have been more cohesive and compact: one about Central and Eastern Europe, and the other about Russia and Ukraine.

The other volume reviewed here, *Embodying Democracy*, is devoted to a description and explanation of electoral system design in post-communist states during the first decade of transition. Its focus is on the question of how and why a given system was chosen or changed. (A companion volume—not a subject of this review—written by Sarah Birch and published by Palgrave, deals with the fascinating issue of the effects of electoral systems on party system development.) *Embodying Democracy* opens with a chapter introducing the major issues of electoral reform in post-communist states, followed by country-specific chapters on Poland, Hungary, the Czech and Slovak Republics (covered in a single chapter), Romania, Bulgaria, Russia and Ukraine. The concluding chapter is devoted to a presentation of the general features of post-communist electoral reform and an explanation of its outcomes, with a thoughtful section analysing the sources of inter-state variations. The book stands out among the many volumes on post-communist transition organised into country-specific chapters because it

applies very disciplined analytical reasoning and a single explanatory framework, which the authors dub 'contextualised rationality'. It assumes that electoral systems are shaped by an interplay of contextual forces, such as historical legacies, foreign influences, and social and institutional factors on the one hand, and rational calculations of involved actors on the other. The analyses of national cases not only confirm the soundness of this reasoning, but also fill the analytical framework with often fascinating detail. I only wish that the authors had expanded their analyses to also include regulations pertaining to the election of the so-called upper chambers in bi-cameral systems, as these often ignored bodies are not irrelevant to the political representation process. Furthermore, as the Polish case illustrates, the very different electoral regulations for the Sejm and the Senate can bring, consistently over time, very similar political outcomes, hence pointing out the existence of limits to electioneering.

One more minor remark: in both books (Millard, p. 30; *Embodying Democracy*, p. 4) the authors cite, uncritically, J. Arch Getty's assertion that, in 1936, Stalin prepared for competitive elections to the Supreme Soviet, only to suddenly reverse his position. Other historians are very sceptical of this claim: while there is evidence that the option of competitive elections was debated in the USSR at that time, Getty never presented any actual evidence of Stalin's intentions.

Both books reviewed here offer a wealth of empirical data coupled with penetrating, original analyses. They already are an indispensable resource for students of elections in post-communist Europe and beyond, and will play this role for the years to come.

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