

Contemporary Voting in Europe

Alexis Chommeloux • Elizabeth Gibson-Morgan
Editors

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Patterns and Trends

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FOREWORD

‘The cure for democracy is more democracy’. So proclaimed American Progressive reformers like ‘Fighting Bob’ La Follette in Wisconsin at the dawn of the twentieth century. In cities and states it was believed that people power, openly expressed at the polls—including the referendum, the primary and the recall—would root out the corruption of capitalist bosses that polluted the American political system and the dreams of Jefferson and his fellow makers of the US constitution. Further, the people would generate not only public honesty but public morality since, by definition, they were the keys to a liberal and decent society. The later discovery that direct democracy could produce mass support for demagogues like Huey Long and Joseph McCarthy (‘No one loves Joe but the people’), not to mention the bizarre but highly influential prejudices of Donald Trump, was thus deeply troubling. In Europe, the cradle of ideas of representative government and parliamentary democracy, the same anxiety is currently powerfully in evidence across the continent. Democracy has never seemed so fragile in post-1945 Europe. Yet it has never been more necessary. This fascinating collective volume, a genuinely international and multidisciplinary work by a range of eminent scholars drawn from Britain, France, Denmark, Germany, Spain, Switzerland and the Balkans, deals in impressive fashion with the challenges to, and potentialities of, democratic politics today. It appears at an acutely sensitive and deeply significant time, with major national and local elections in many countries, and angry debate over the political structures of the European Union (EU), including a vital referendum in the UK in June 2016 on whether to leave or remain in the Union at all, when the victory of the Brexit campaign

demonstrated much public alienation towards political leaders and the ‘Westminster elite’. It will therefore provide an invaluable guide to debate and source of information for the peoples of Europe at a pivotal time in their history and is warmly to be welcomed.

The reasons for the current mood of alienation throughout Europe from traditional parliamentary democracy—indeed a sense of ‘anti-politics’ that has fuelled many extremist movements of both the right and the left—are numerous and profound. Commentators have pointed to crises and even crimes that have cast parliaments into disrepute in many countries: even in the UK, ‘the mother of parliaments’, a series of scandals involved often minor misbehaviour over political expenses and occasional sexual misdemeanours involving several MPs and a few peers. The public esteem of its parliament is shown in polls to be at a low level. Members of parliament are publicly rated by the general public at a level far lower than professions such as doctors, lawyers or academics. And yet the disrepute attaching to politicians goes far wider than this. After all, corruption amongst politicians in countries such as Italy has been endemic over many decades. French politicians were caught up in graft from ‘Panama’ in 1893 to the Stavisky scandal in 1933; ex-presidents like Chirac and Sarkozy have felt the hot breath of the law, and yet the democracy of the French Republic has survived. More powerfully, worldwide social and economic forces—economic globalisation, mass movements of refugees and other migrants notably into Europe, the policies of right-wing austerity which most European governments and the EU itself have adopted—have fuelled widespread discontent with parliamentary institutions and politicians as a class. Their powerlessness has been repeatedly unveiled. They have led to massive disillusion with the operations of politics, with populist, usually right-wing protest movements emerging in countries like Germany, the nations of the former Yugoslavia and, most ominously, with the rise of the Front National in France where Marine Le Pen will mount a powerful challenge for the presidency in the elections of 2017. Euro-scepticism has been fanned in many countries and has driven down the already low levels of enthusiasm for voting in European elections.

More subtly, normal constitutional relationships have helped to undermine the standing of many parliaments and the idea of national sovereignty. This book shows how in Germany and Denmark, for instance, the constitutional roles of the courts, championing doctrines of human rights and endorsed by the European Court in this area, have provided awkward challenges to parliaments. There has been popular resentment at elected parliamentarians being rebuffed by unelected judges. Especially

when these judges have been overseas and invisible, this has also spurred on suspicion of the European idea, as seen in the rise of UKIP in Great Britain. Within Switzerland, something more complicated still has happened, the challenge to democratic ideas in a country where direct democracy by ordinary citizens in the various cantons is a proud and valued tradition. In Switzerland as in Wisconsin democracy has sometimes been turned in anti-democratic directions, as in the long exclusion of women from the franchise until 1971 and the current pressure to control Muslim religious practices and perhaps expel political and religious immigrants.

This book frankly and honestly lays out the difficulties and challenges that confront Europe's democracies now. But it also rightly emphasises the new vitality and hope that current pressures have released. The chapter on Spain shows the new impact of Podemos, a left-wing anti-austerity people's party which has also been effective in turning itself into something far more than simply a parade of public demonstrators and protestors. It is now a serious political party on the cusp of forming a government, in a country where the centrifugal forces of separatism have always been powerful, not only in Catalonia. Podemos has encouraged party membership and party discipline, and made good use, not only for publicity purposes, of the notion of democratic leadership. Iglesias, its leader, has become a political figure of real authority. There is a sense of vitality, too, in the nations of the western Balkans, notably Croatia, where being admitted to membership of the EU has been exciting and inspirational for many young voters in a land where the very notion of representative democracy is new and unfamiliar and which in the 1930s lay under the cruel dictatorship of a neo-Nazi regime, that of the Ustasha. The rise of European sub-nationalities in recent times has also had a liberating and educative effect in many ways. The reform of regional government in France has had a positive civic impact, while devolution for Scotland and Wales in the UK has given a new dynamism for democracy and inspired much enthusiasm, even if the problems of reconciling Celtic democracy in Scotland with the traditional Union-state of the four nations continue to increase and multiply. There is evidence too of the transformation of old political parties, founded in very different circumstances, helping to give new life to ancient democracies. The new mass membership in the British Labour Party, which helped in the unexpected election of the veteran Marxist, Jeremy Corbyn, as leader in September 2015, could provide some kind of a basis for a wider public participation in political life even here.

This book vividly shows, therefore, that there are grounds for hope and renewal as well as pessimism and decline. Democracy is not the most secure defence in meeting the social, economic and humanitarian challenges of our age. But, as Winston Churchill famously said, it is at least better than all the others. His own staunch commitment to the democratic system, and his making it visible in the heart of a blitzed London during the Second World War, perhaps even the plain grave in a small Oxfordshire village of ‘Winston Churchill, Englishman’ in marked contrast to the worship of the reactionary nationalist, his contemporary Petain, remain an inspiration to many of us who are not Conservatives or even English. What is vital at this sensitive moment in our history is that these forces of renewal should not only be encouraged (and made known through public education) but also directed to the heart of Europe itself. It is difficult to create the notion of ‘a European mind’ especially in an insular people like the British. It needs symbols, perhaps heroes. An important chapter in this book shows the potentiality of reform through electoral and other technical changes. It is also vital to make the idea of Europe and its legislative processes more accessible, immediate—simply more human. The EU does enormous damage to itself by yoking itself to traditional pre-Keynesian economic dogmas, despite the fierce criticism from leading economists like the Nobel prize-winner, Paul Krugman, and Thomas Piketty. Trying to impose its blanket edicts, whatever the cost in economic bankruptcy, human suffering and public disillusion amongst the citizens, draws attention to the still alarming democratic deficit that endures at the very heart of Europe.

The spectacle of unelected bureaucrats, Eurocrats and bankers, within the invisible recesses of the European Commissions, forcing their judgements upon the elected government of Syriza in Greece was disillusioning, even tragic. Yanis Varoufakis, the Syriza finance minister, has written of his shock at hearing Wolfgang Schauble, the federal German finance minister, tell him ‘Elections cannot be allowed to change an economic programme of a member state.’ Another EU finance minister added that this principle applied even more to ‘a small and bankrupt country like yours’. The EU’s ‘rules’, not the views of the citizens of Greece, were what mattered. If democracy in Europe is to be revived, the process of fundamental change must begin right here. Even the terrible atrocities recently carried out in Brussels, near the epicentre of the EU, might have some salutary effect in showing the

wider international repercussions of insensitive, anti-democratic economic policies. Neo-liberal dogmas in Brussels mean more suffering for Muslim refugees and potentially more terrorism. So the global bureaucratic oligarchy might do well to read, and inwardly digest, the judgements of this excellent volume. They might end up with a more buoyant view, with ideas of human potential that have inspired the western world since the French Enlightenment philosophers. Or, to put it more simply, in the language of Podemos, Yes we can.

Kenneth O. Morgan
Westminster
March 2016

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