

Sarah Birch, *Electoral Systems and Political Transformation in Post-Communist Europe*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, ISBN 0-333-98765-9, (hbk) £55.00, xii + 212pp.

Electoral Systems and Political Transformation in Post-Communist Europe is the second of two volumes dealing with electoral systems in post-communist states produced within the framework of the *One Europe or Several?* However, whilst the first, *Embodying Democracy* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), which Birch co-authored with Millard, Popescu and Williams, dealt with the *choice* of new electoral systems in the region after the fall of communism, her current single-authored work analyses their possible *effects*. Such effects, it is suggested, may concern levels of turnout, the quality of democratic accountability and inclusiveness as well as patterns of party competition and party system format.

Electoral systems, Birch argues must be conceived as more than simply a seats-votes formulas generating varying degrees of proportionality. The size of electoral districts must also be taken into account, as must the legal framework governing party finances and election spending. Factors such as market success, general levels socio-economic development and the broader institutional framework (presence or absence of a strong presidential executive) must also be taken into account. However, rather than focusing on the traditional 'effectiveness versus inclusiveness' dichotomy, in which many debates on electoral systems in new democracies have been framed, Birch focuses instead on their implications for party politics. Electoral systems, she argues, must be analysed in terms of 'politician enabling' features, which allow office-holder to build up individual political machines and a personal votes, and 'party enabling' features, which constrain them into working through tightly knit party organisations.

As well as offering an excellent synthesis of the literature on electoral systems, the book presents a wealth of data on elections and electoral systems in twenty post-communist states. Tables within the body of the text are further supplemented by extensive and clearly set out appendices. To test the hypothesised relationships, the author uses quantitative analysis based on multiple regression analysis. However, statistical exposition is kept to a minimum in favour of discursive analysis. In all these respects, *Electoral Systems and Political Transformation* is a model of high quality comparative political analysis, which, as the author rightly suggests, goes beyond the weakly grounded case study approaches found in more traditional area studies literature.

However, its findings are, in some respects, disappointingly thin. Many of the variables examined (finance regimes, presidentialism, levels of economic development, availability of a personal vote, levels of democratisation) have little impact across the range of possible effects examined. Other findings simply confirm long established relationships. Proportional representation, for example, is found to promote higher turnout and greater inclusiveness. However, *Electoral Systems and Political Transformation* does make several interesting and counter-intuitive findings. Firstly, it emerges, 'mixed' electoral systems combining majoritarian (first-past-the-post) elements and PR promote greater

inclusion than purer PR models. Secondly, it seems clear in certain, post-communist contexts majoritarian voting in single member districts creates not stable two-party politics, as Maurice Duverger famously asserted, but a plethora of ‘parties’, which are essentially personal vehicles for oligarchs and clientelistic local leaders. This applies primarily in Russia and Ukraine, whose party systems are highly fragmented and regionalised, and where the more patrimonial nature of Soviet communism may have created a pre-disposition towards client-patron relations. In East Central Europe, where Hungary has a comparable ‘mixed’ system, alongside strong parties and integrated national politics, Duverger’s predicted effects apply.

Regrettably, these findings are not examined in more detail. Overall, however, *Electoral Systems and Political Transformation* is an admirably concise and wide-ranging work, written in a crisp and clear academic style, which breaks genuinely new ground in both its empirical findings and its efforts to integrate party and electoral studies.

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