

Book Review

Havva Karakas Keles, Maxwell School of Syracuse University

ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK OF EUROPEAN ELECTIONS

Editor: Donatella M. Viola

Abstract

This timely Handbook offers a balanced and sound analysis of European Parliamentary (EP) elections in each European Union member state since the first direct elections in 1979 with an emphasis on the ever-widening gap between the European Union and its citizens.

Keywords

European Union; European elections; European Parliament; European Integration; Political Parties; Elections

After Croatia joined the EU as the 28th member state in 2013, all of the 28 members voted in elections to the European Parliament for the first time in 2014. With the new powers that Lisbon Treaty granted the European Parliament, the 2014 European elections also aimed to select the President of the European Commission, thus empowering European citizens to shape European institutions (p. 703). Against the backdrop of this development there was a steady decrease in the turnout at European elections. The Routledge Handbook of European Elections provides a thorough analysis of European elections and maps the ever-growing distance between the European institutions, elites, and the people.

As the thrust of this Handbook suggests, the steady trend towards lower voter turnout in European elections coincided with European Parliament's gaining of more powers. This trend suggests the need for a close re-examination of the European project at the citizen, member state and the EU levels. Edited by Donatella M. Viola and with EU member state chapters written by country experts, the Handbook takes on the herculean task of bringing the importance of 'European demos' and its choice to the forefront in order to draw our attention to, and to the lack thereof, 'accountability' and 'representation' at the EU level.

The Handbook, comprehensive both in scope and depth, is organized around two parts: general framework (Part I); and country reviews, and theoretical analysis (Part II). The Handbook's geographic

coverage includes 27 EU member states (excluding Croatia in most parts of the Handbook but in the last chapter). Its theoretical scope provides a comparative analysis of the utility of theoretical models in explaining European election behaviour in old versus new EU member states. The first two chapters in Part I set the stage by focusing on European Parliament's trajectory from a consultative assembly to a directly elected co-legislative body (Chapter 1) and on the European Parliament's internal organization (Chapter 2). This rich and in-depth thematic coverage of the birth, organization, and electoral dynamics of the European Parliament in the first two chapters provides a strong background for the third chapter which lays out the methodological and theoretical basis of the Handbook. Chapter 3 includes a clear-cut case study research design and a robust theoretical framework with an overview of the European Parliament election literature, and offers hypotheses based on two major theories on European elections (the second-order election model, and Europe salience theory).

Part II, building on the empirical, theoretical and methodological framework outlined in Part I, is the empirical and theoretical heart of the Handbook. Part II comprises the 27 country chapters (excluding Croatia), in addition to a chapter on the comparative analysis of European elections (Chapter 31), and also the epilogue (Chapter 32). The Routledge Handbook of European Elections goes far beyond tracing a linear relationship between voting behaviour in European elections in member countries and party composition in the European Parliament. Throughout chapters 4-30, every country chapter provides the reader with information on political landscape, historical background, geopolitical profile, main political parties and parties' attitudes toward the EU, public opinion on European integration, a brief account of national and European election systems, a brief look at the national and EP elections, a closer examination of the 2009 European election, and theoretical analysis of European elections in the light of election theories (mainly second-order election theory, and Europe salience theory). The theoretical analysis at the end of each country chapter tries to answer the following questions: Which theoretical model can explain the nature of the European elections? Which factors -national issues or public attitudes towards the European Union - have more explanatory power in shaping the European election behaviour?

Chapter 31 (Comparative analysis of European elections) deserves a special mention. It lays out the main findings of the Handbook's research agenda in a comparative manner. The analytical section of this chapter reveals that neither of the two theoretical models could explain all aspects of European elections. Overall, second-order election model (which argues that European election behaviour is based on domestic political concerns and European elections are secondary to national elections, etc.) has considerable explanatory power. The findings of this longitudinal and comparative research indicate that voters expressed their dissatisfaction with governing parties by voting for opposition and small parties at European elections. What came as a surprise to the editor of the Handbook was the fact that domestic political concerns were affecting European elections even after the European Parliament gained more and more powers with the treaty changes. However, research results in the Handbook also indicate that Europe salience theory and its relative power in explaining the voting behaviour in European elections cannot be disregarded, either. Based on the research findings of this Handbook, examples of strong indicators of the salience of Europe factor in European elections are the rise of the extreme right, Green and Eurosceptic parties (pp. 684-692).

The last chapter of Part II, Epilogue, is an analysis of the 2014 European election. The 2014 election is the first one after the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty. And the Epilogue written by the editor compares and contrasts the 2014 election with previous European elections. One striking similarity between this election and the previous ones that the analysis reveals is the low voter turnout. The question asked is

whether the public apathy towards and lower turnout at European elections put the democratic legitimacy of the European project in peril.

The Handbook's editor refers several times to the symbolic meaning of the image of the Tower of Babel on the cover of the Handbook and how this image inspired the design of the European Parliament's building in Strasbourg (p. xxxv, 732). She mainly highlights the parallels between the thrust of the story of the Tower of Babel and how European Parliament's Strasbourg building design represents European integration in progress (p. xxxv) and in a more precautionary note "vulnerability of the European unification process" (p. 732). The recent Brexit vote has reminded European people, European countries, and scholars that they can reinterpret the abovementioned parallel as 'reverse integration' or alternatively, 'removing a brick from the already incomplete European project'. This brings the question of the future prospects of the European project to the forefront.

This Routledge Handbook is an essential source not only for scholars and researchers, but also for practitioners and students of political science in general and of European politics, European Union studies, and electoral studies. Anyone studying, reading, or writing on the European parliament, European integration, and European elections could use it as a thorough reference book. The fact that the cases analysed and the theoretical models for the European elections are well supported by relevant tables and figures makes this colossal work a valuable reference book of European elections.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

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Editor: Donatella M. Viola

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