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Book review: Parties, gender quotas and candidate selection in France

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by the expenses scandal, the leadership debates, the effects of local campaigns and non-uniform swing, and the formation of the coalition. The two most original chapters are on the background and implications of the financial crisis and an application of the US-developed concept of 'policy mood' to the UK.

According to this book, three well-publicized events had little discernible impact on the outcome. These were: (1) the parliamentary expenses scandal; (2) 'bigotgate', Gordon Brown's recorded outburst over being questioned on immigration by a Labour supporter; and, most surprisingly, (3) Liberal leader Nick Clegg's high popular ratings for his performance in the first debate, although it may have helped maintain Liberal support in some critical marginal constituencies against the Conservatives.

While there is a considerable amount of policy analysis for the Labour government, there is relatively little on the coalition's distinctive response to the fiscal crisis. The origins of the 'economically neo-liberal turn' in the Liberal party, especially within the new leadership group, are well delineated. But one wonders which conflicting tendency in Conservative leader David Cameron's attempt at 'Thatcherism with a human face' will dominate, as encapsulated by the fact that his calls for a 'Big Society' were considered vague and confusing both before and after the election.

The campaign, results and implications of the election for the Celtic periphery are almost completely ignored. But if the analysis in the chapter on the decline of the British economic model is correct, then the coalition's public expenditure cuts will fall disproportionately on the heavily state and para-state-dependent regions of Northern England and the Celtic fringe, with predictable political results. This may presage a return to 1980s patterns of party competition.

With a few notable exceptions, the authors are from the younger generation of scholars, often affiliated with the University of Essex. The book is compellingly written and generally well edited, with the exception of one repetitive chapter. Because of its clear presentation and occasional use of comparisons to other democratic governments, the book is highly suitable for use with undergraduates in other countries, especially in the USA.

But one comparison is not made: Single-member district electoral systems no longer reliably deliver one-party majority governments. Not in Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, nor necessarily in sub-central jurisdictions. While the electoral system may be the linchpin of the Westminster system, its effects have been eroding, irrespective of attempts to change the process. The British election of 2015 will prove to be an important milestone, even if not a final verdict, on the impact of its extraordinary immediate predecessor.

Rainbow Murray

Parties, gender quotas and candidate selection in France. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. (2010) £55.00 (hbk), xi + 187 pp. ISBN 9780230242531.

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With the 2000 'parity' law, France became the first country in the world to introduce a compulsory 50–50 gender quota for the majority of elections, including legislative ones.

Yet the percentage of women in the French national assembly has remained stubbornly low. This puzzle lies at the core of Rainbow Murray's book, in which she explores the central role played by political parties in the implementation of gender quotas and develops a theoretical model to explain differences in the degree to which political parties observe parity.

The key research questions address the impact of gender quotas on French political parties with regard to candidate selection, party renewal, internal democracy, unity, electoral appeal and financial stability. France offers a rich case study not only because it is a pioneer in parity legislation but also because its relatively large party system makes it possible to compare the impact of gender quotas on a number of different types of party in the same country. In addition, France uses different electoral systems depending on the kind of election, and this, too, has an impact on the way in which parity is applied. It is therefore possible to observe whether and how parties adjust their strategy under different circumstances and to explore the causes and consequences of variations in quota implementation from one party to another and from one type of election to another, although the primary focus in this work is on legislative elections.

The book draws on both quantitative data, including analysis of election results, and qualitative data from interviews with party officials responsible for candidate selection and with senior women in the main political parties. It presents useful empirical background on the introduction and implementation of the parity law in France, together with a comprehensive overview of the contemporary French party system, the attitudes of the main political parties towards gender quotas and their procedures for candidate selection. Parties are considered as rational actors who incorporate the demands of gender quotas into broader organizational, ideological and electoral imperatives. These different imperatives are explored using gendered approaches to candidate selection practices along with three mainstream theories of party organization: the electoral competition approach, the institutional approach and the ideological approach.

First, the party competition approach is explored to assess whether electoral competition between parties is the prime motivation in explaining party behaviour. The institutional approach is then addressed to consider the influence of the institutional environment (the electoral system, the party system, the relative importance of the election, the detail of the parity law, and the relative size, strength and wealth of the party) in shaping and framing the range of choices available to political parties. Finally, the ideological approach is set out and the role of party ideology as a motivating factor for supporting parity is examined. The core question here is: how much parties' ideology can explain their attitude to candidate selection?

These three theoretical approaches are then applied to the French case to evaluate how useful each is in explaining party responses to gender quotas and in determining whether or not parties will incorporate parity into their candidate selection procedures. Murray concludes that while each of the three main theories is useful, individually they provide only an incomplete explanation of party behaviour. Indeed, it is a central hypothesis of her book that the reasons why parties do not select more female candidates for legislative elections are numerous, complex and diverse.

Murray therefore introduces a new theoretical approach which she calls the 'party priorities model'. This overarching model incorporates the insights of the three

theoretical approaches to account both for the priorities of parties and the particular demands (normative, electoral and organizational) presented by gender quotas. It provides a comprehensive illustration of how parties incorporate gender quotas into their broader strategies and demonstrates how different parties will choose different paths of decision-making depending on their overall motivations and priorities. These priorities are then used to predict the path that each party will take when navigating the competing choices available. The range of choices combined with the order in which they are prioritised will determine the degree to which the parity law is implemented.

Parties, Gender Quotas and Candidate Selection in France makes an original and significant contribution to the literature on gender and politics, engaging with and building on recent scholarship in this field. It will also be of relevance to those with an interest in contemporary French politics and in political parties more generally. The work deals with a major political development in an accessible but rigorous way, presenting a comprehensive analysis of the way in which parity works in France, providing a clearer understanding of the reasons why the law has not yet achieved its objective and pointing to ways in which it might be more successfully implemented. It offers valuable insights into the response of French political parties to parity which will be pertinent to the introduction of similar legislation in other countries. Gender quotas are likely to remain a topic of high salience in the coming years and the case of France will continue to be observed with close interest both for its own sake and for comparative purposes.