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Book Review: Party Primaries in Comparative Perspective

By Marta Regalia (<https://italianpoliticalscience.com/author/ipsmartaregalia/>), 08/01/2017

Giulia Sandri, Antonella Seddone, and Fulvio Venturino (eds.), Party Primaries in Comparative Perspective (<https://www.routledge.com/Party-Primaries-in-Comparative-Perspective/Sandri-Seddone/p/book/9781472450388>) (London: Routledge, 2015). 248 pp., £67,99 (hardback), ISBN: 9781472450388.

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This book's aim is to explore the adoption, functioning, and consequences of party primaries, an instrument quickly spreading through advanced and new democracies and used to increase intra-party democracy. The emergence of party primaries is studied in its origins and mechanics as well as in its consequences on parties' organizational strength, cohesion and electoral results. Accordingly, the volume provides a first descriptive account of the main rules (formal and practical) governing primaries elections in the selected cases, and then attempts to assess the effects of the adoption and use of primaries on party membership and electoral performance.

The need for such a research is evident from the beginning: the literature has not yet come to a commonly agreed definition of what a primary election is and what is not. So, we are still left with the doubt of what can be included under this concept. Unfortunately, although Chapter two is dedicated to differences and similarities between leadership selection and candidate selection methods, the book accepts this shortcoming and does not explore the definitional logic using the sartorian ladder of abstraction. Thus, the research focuses on open and closed primaries to select both candidates and party leaders. Some scholars may question this choice, asking if leader selection can be subsumed under the umbrella of a primary election. While the debate on the concept of primary elections is still open, a better understanding of the phenomenon cannot avoid a serious attempt to find a univocal definition of the phenomenon climbing or descending the ladder of abstraction.

The book tries to give an answer to three very fundamental research questions:

“RQ1: What are the main factors that lead parties to use inclusive procedures to select their leaders and candidates?

RQ2: What are the main features of the primary election process, particularly in terms of formal rules, degree of participation in internal elections and competitiveness?

RQ3: What effect, if any, do primaries have on parties in terms of electoral performance and membership appeal?” (p. 16)

The editors admit that the research framework, while offering a great amount of new data and information on party primaries, does not allow them to give a conclusive answer regarding the consequences of primaries on membership and electoral performances. Actually, a pre-and-post study suffers from some analytical shortcomings (e.g., too many intervening variables to

be taken into account) that cannot be overcome without, for example, comparing cases of primaries with cases of non-primaries. However, future inferential studies will undoubtedly benefit from Sandri, Seddone, and Venturino's explorative study on the causes and consequences of party primaries.

The volume, unlike the average customary edited books, is really well structured as each chapter is "disciplined" in its comparative analytical framework. While Chapters 2 and 3 provide the basis for data collection and the framework for the comparative analysis, subsequent chapters adopt the following structure. In the introduction, they analyze the political context showing the main explanatory factors at political and party system level for the adoption of primary elections (political culture, electoral system, party system format, etc.). In the second part, the context and rationale for adopting primaries is explored (degree of decision-making centralization, role of the leader and of the dominant coalition, etc.). The third part provides a detailed description of the process of primary elections (formal rules, degree of participation, and degree of competitiveness). Finally, the study of the consequences of primary elections focuses on two main variables: the evolution of overall membership figures and parties' electoral performance in general elections before and after primaries. Case selection has been developed under the method of the most similar system design. Each chapter (apart from the one on Iceland) is designed as a paired empirical comparison exploring two countries that are similar in several political system features (electoral system, party system, form of government, level of concentration of executive power, etc.) in order to control for those variables. The proposed comparisons concern three cases of leadership selection, Spain and Portugal, Belgium and Israel, Japan and Taiwan, and three cases of candidate selection, Italy and France, Romania and Slovakia, Iceland, although the former concerns cases of selection of candidates to the role of chief executive.

After a well-conceived analysis of the cases, Sandri, Seddone and Venturino offer, in the final chapter, some analytical conclusions. The aim of clarifying "*why* and *how* political parties in different countries choose to reform their methods of selecting candidates and leaders in an inclusive direction, and *what* the effects brought about by that choice are" (p. 181) is pursued at three levels: political system, party system and intra-party level. At the political system level, parties choose primaries as an instrument providing a new source of legitimacy for party leaders and candidates. At the party system level, parties adopt primaries after an electoral defeat or due to a sort of contagion effect. At the intra-party level, primaries can be an instrument for party elites to retain power and/or a strategy for reactivating relationships with activists and enrolling new members. "In sum, primaries have a positive effect on public opinion and therefore on the citizens' perceptions of the party. For this reason, the contagion effect at the party system level represents an effective incentive for the adoption of inclusive tools. However, [the book concludes] this does not directly correspond to a positive impact at electoral or organizational level" (p. 192).

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