Digital Politics in Western Democracies: A Comparative Study

Jonathan Bright

Published online: 22 Oct 2014.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 108

View related articles

View Crossmark data

globalisation and the European Union's Single Market pose to social democracy, which is, in a word, marketisation. On this point many of the authors are pessimistic regarding recent trends, both in EU jurisprudence legitimising EU neo-liberal policy and in the privatisation of segments of the state welfare structure, even in Scandinavia (where the 'Swedish model' continued without social democrats in power, at least for a while). The book also pays attention to a policy area where I have not seen much work (at least in comparative perspective), and this is the chapter by Walker on social democracy and crime. Overall, the editors have assembled a high-quality team of contributors, and their searching analyses of the challenges that social democracy faces today have lessons for these parties across Europe.

<div style="text-align: right">

Robert Ladrech
Keele University
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2014.962829

</div>

Digital Politics in Western Democracies: A Comparative Study
By Cristian Vaccari
The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2013, 304 pp., $60.00, ISBN 978-1-4214-1117-0 (hbk)

Studies of the internet and politics have, it appears, entered a new phase, one which is starting to eschew grand predictions about how democracy as a whole may be altered in favour of more nuanced studies which seek explanation for variation in changes already observed. Cristian Vaccari's *Digital Politics in Western Democracies* can be located at the forefront of such attempts. In it we find a multi-year comparative study of seven Western democracies which addresses two central questions: the factors which explain the quality and scope of a political party's engagement with the internet, focussed especially on the qualities of their websites; and the factors which explain when and why citizens access such websites. The study is rich in detail, showcasing Vaccari's impressive knowledge of a wide variety of political contexts, and puncturing a number of conventional assumptions about how digital politics works.

The book is divided into three sections. In the first Vaccari offers us the theoretical basis of his work, which is distinguished by a strong and convincing critique of the Americanisation of the field, making the case for the importance of national context. For example, conclusions about the role of electoral loss in driving innovation may result from studying winner-takes-all systems, with less application in countries employing proportional representation. From here, a comparative study is a natural next step.

In the next section, Vaccari surveys over 600 websites belonging to political parties and candidates, seeking to explain variation in the development and complexity of the site itself, especially through a regression model in Chapter 8. In terms of positive explanation, the results, as Vaccari highlights, are somewhat modest: the economic resources of a party is the only variable which offers major explanatory power, but even then a difference of $20 million is required between parties to explain the addition of one extra feature to the website. In the end, this model is more interesting for the variables which are not significant: despite a strong assumption that periods out of office drive innovation, Vaccari finds no incumbency effect; while levels of technological development in the country at large are equally insignificant.

Finally, Vaccari explores variation in what he calls the 'demand' side of digital politics: that is, the extent to which citizens seek information online, which he measures through a combination of a variety of national polls. In this context, demographic characteristics such as gender and education have the most consistent explanatory power, with Vaccari raising the worry that 'political equality is thus threatened by patterns of

internet adoption and use', though interestingly income disparities are only important in the UK and the US. Overall however, in line with the main theme of the work, Vaccari insists that valid cross-national explanations for political engagement are rare, and different variables will rather produce different effects in different contexts (with, for example, 'reformist' type voters more represented online in Anglo Saxon countries and 'protest' type voters more represented in the Mediterranean).

In summary, Vaccari's work is an impressive contribution to the literature on the internet and politics, which injects a much-needed comparative perspective into a body of work which has been overwhelmingly dominated by perspectives from Anglo-American academia. The approach is not perfect: as Vaccari admits, the party-centric focus ignores a range of other less official forums where innovation may occur; and we are also left wondering about the impact of social media whose massification falls slightly outside the timescale of Vaccari's study. But the narrow focus also simplifies and strengthens the comparative aspect of the work. He combines a great deal of information into a single comprehensible whole, and tackles differences between countries with a skilled and nuanced understanding of a range of political systems. The work is recommended to anyone with an interest in how development in digital technology is driving changes in the political process.

<div style="text-align: right">

Jonathan Bright
University of Oxford
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2014.962825

</div>

The Nordic Voter: Myths of Exceptionalism
By Åsa Bengtsson, Kasper Hansen, Ólafur Þ. Harðarson, Hanne Marthe Narud and Henrik Oscarsson
ECPR Press, Colchester, 2013, 264 pp., £19.99, ISBN 978-1-9073-0150-6 (pbk)

This is a dual-purpose book. On the one hand the authors wish to position the Nordic[1] voters in a wider comparative perspective and to find out whether these nations are exceptional as a group. On the other hand they also wish to 'present a more refined a nuanced picture of political behaviour and opinions found among Nordic voters'. The answer to the first question is given away already in the sub-title: if they ever were exceptional as a group, they are certainly no longer exceptional. The second question is thoroughly answered in seven chapters covering party systems, satisfaction with democracy and turnout, party identification, preferential voting, time of vote decision, evaluation of government performance and finally party choice. Each chapter – barring Chapter 3 on the party systems – uses the same set of independent variables structured in a classic 'funnel of causality'. This clear structure in combination with the wealth of data creates a very convincing and richly detailed book.

An overview of the Nordic voting behaviour has been missing for many years and the authors of this volume are quite well placed to close this gap since they are or have been involved in the respective national voting study programmes. As for studying the Nordic states as a group, while they might not be exceptional as a group, they do share many traits. But exactly how similar or dissimilar these countries are depends on perspective. For example, the differences in population, history, geographical position and party system between Iceland and the self-ruling Danish dependencies of the Faroe Islands and Greenland are smaller or at least not greater than the differences between Iceland and the four larger countries. This is not to say that Iceland cannot be studied as a Nordic country compared with the other four independent countries, but it is not self-evident.