

**Bowler, Shaun and Donovan, Todd:**

## **THE LIMITS OF ELECTORAL REFORM.**

Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2013. 164 pages.

DOI: 10.5817/PC2016-1-83

Electoral systems studies are now experiencing a new level of evolutionary development. This area of political science has only recently moved from the narrow focus on the consequences of their mechanical arrangements towards a much more heterogeneous perspective in which the components of electoral systems are only one of the variables within a huge array of others, more or less closely surrounding the voters, which jointly affect the electoral outcomes. This is precisely the theoretical perspective in which Shaun Bowler and Todd Donovan evaluate the ability of electoral system manipulations to meet the theoretical expectations based on implemented changes in electoral mechanisms in their distinctively titled book *The Limits of Electoral Reform*.

Bowler and Donovan admit from the very beginning that electoral arrangements fall into the category of zero sum redistributive rules that divide competitors into winners and losers. Since the border between these two groups is very dependent on the exact procedure of transforming votes into mandates, there is nothing substantially wrong with the self-interested interpretation of policy clashes over a particular formula, even if we see no selfish defense of someone's own political interests included in the public debates. The authors put particular emphasis on the claim that this approach is insufficient. An incumbent's self-interest may be necessary but it is not sufficient to produce reform. That is the reason why the

sole consideration of hypothetical benefits for proponents of the electoral reform is deficient, while the plausibility of gaining the approval and support manifested in public opinion is much more important. According to Bowler and Donovan, all of the achievable ideas about changing the electoral rules rely on sustainable fostering on the part of the electorate and, moreover, sometimes public pressure can be so strong that even proposals opposing the self-interest of political actors could be adopted.

The weakest part of this argumentation lies in the assumption that voters are not only interested, but they also deeply understand the consequences of electoral reforms. The authors consider the self-interested perception of individual rationality as well as social psychology focused on the role of institutional and social structures surrounding the actors and, through the empirical data, they reliably conclude that members of the public could back the selfish orientation when choosing whether to support or oppose the change, or at least fully consciously follow the position of the elites to which they are attached for some reason.

This way of considering social phenomena is rather new among the thoughts about electoral reforms. This is why Bowler and Donovan are very precise while developing the theoretical framework from the beginning of the book. During the first three chapters, they develop a precise definition of electoral reform, analyzing the position of elites as well as citizens during the process, and the means of connection of these two groups through public discourse. They place a large amount of attention not only on the proper development of theoretical reasoning but also on the empirical defense of the assumptions of their argumentation. Nevertheless, their thoughts are analogous to the other areas of social science research that is increasingly incorporating all sorts of context variables surrounding the tendencies and trends they try to explain.

After the presentation of the theoretical framework, the authors go through a few examples of major as well as minor electoral reforms throughout the rest of the book. Specifically, they analyze electoral system change, campaign finance reform, term limitations, and implementation or strengthening of direct democracy features of political systems. We would not be far from the truth if we say that the vast majority of the analyses conducted at the system-wide level generate null results and none of the electoral reforms even marginally meet the theoretical expectations. Bowler and Donovan defend the reliability of their results by explaining that they applied a longitudinal approach while the majority of the previously published studies are mostly cross-sectional. Explicitly said, there are no substantial or significant differences in the behavior of the electorate that would seem to be caused by, or at least specifically correlate with, the implementation of any kind of electoral reform.

Do not worry. Bowler and Donovan do not conclude that all kinds of reformation of the electoral systems are useless. What they argue is that the way we are thinking about electoral reform and the way we are formulating our expectations may simply be wrong, because the isolated application of a rational choice approach is in this case implausible within the social reality. The incentives generated by the electoral reforms may just be too weak or pushed into the background by much stronger economic, political, or social attachments to the other actors or elements playing a role in our electoral decision making. Simply, there is a legitimate rational conviction about the reforms, but our expectations are excessively exaggerated most of the time.

Bowler and Donovan are developing a very important notion for the area of electoral systems research. All scientists should be fully aware that there is a particularly huge gap between internal and external validity when

studying the consequences and outcomes of all sorts of electoral arrangements on voter decision making. The particular causalities that are being continually verified could become barely noticeable when an abundance of incentives attacks the voter and leaves us, at the end of the day, completely incapable of achieving any sort of goals via electoral engineering.

The pity is that such a controversial position is, according to Bowler and Donovan, empirically supported only to a very limited extent. The most frequent cases are found in a few of the US states, Canada, United Kingdom, New Zealand, and Australia. Very rarely and marginally are cases like Germany, Japan, or Italy mentioned, which still does not ensure the reader that analyses are not conducted on outlying cases. The authors explain that electoral reforms are very rare processes what significantly reduces the number of cases that could be analyzed. They still mention countries like Italy, Slovakia, or France (p. 46) however, that went through the changes of electoral institutions, but the text lacks any further analysis. The majority of the arguments are developed on a very limited number of cases which, together with the above-mentioned controversies, force us to ask whether truly relevant cases have been chosen. We can do nothing but agree that electoral reforms are very rare and that this significantly lowers the amount of accessible data. However, there still remain occasions outside the above mentioned English-speaking countries that could boost our confidence in the internal validity of the presented results. In addition, not only other contextual voting incentives but also the political contexts of the countries determine the electoral outcomes (see e.g. Moser, Scheiner 2012). That is why the lack of variability among the cases is suspect.

Moreover, the theoretical framework could be seen, with a tiny bit of interpretative flexibility, as contradictory to the conclusions. On one hand, the authors concentrate all their

effort on the believable position that citizens are fully capable of understanding the consequences of electoral reforms, but at the end of the book concludes that all the considered changes have basically no effect on the behavior of the voters. This simply brings us back to the question of whether we can really be sure that voters simply ignore the strategic incentives generated by the freshly developed electoral arrangements because there are stronger ones, or whether there is a chance that their behavioral consistency and persistent dissatisfaction with the functioning of the political system are caused by a lack of awareness about the options and consequences resulting from the new rules.

Nevertheless, *The Limits of Electoral Reform* is still an important contribution to electoral studies which, forces us to evaluate our perception of electoral outcomes from a much more complex perspective. It emphasizes the necessity to take into account also a huge range of contextual variables that significantly affect the empirical consequences of electoral reforms inconsistent with the expectations based on current state of theoretical reasoning. If we want to be able to predict the effects of electoral systems, we need to think broadly about the generated incentives that are only a part of the complex system of factors which surrounds voters and affect not only their decision-making processes, but also the electoral outcomes.

## References:

- Bowler, Shaun and Donovan, Todd. 2013. *The Limits of Electoral Reform*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Moser, Robert G. and Scheiner, Ethan. 2012. *Electoral Systems and Political Context: How the Effects of Rules Vary Across New and Established Democracies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Miroslav Nemčok  
Faculty of Social Studies  
Masaryk University

**Baun, Michael and Marek, Dan:**

## **COHESION POLICY IN THE EUROPEAN UNION.**

New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 2014.  
272 pages.

DOI: 10.5817/PC2016-1-85

*Cohesion Policy in the European Union* is a publication from Michael Baun and Dan Marek. The author duo focused their attention on the up-to-date and often mentioned topic that is the cohesion policy of the European Union.

Both cohesion policy – the policy of economic, social and territorial cohesion – and common agricultural policy belong among the most important policies of the European Union. According to Article no. 174 of the Treaty of Lisbon (the consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union and the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union), the Union shall aim at reducing disparities between the levels of development of various regions and the backwardness of the least favored regions. In order to promote its overall harmonious development, the Union shall develop and pursue its actions to strengthen its economic, social and territorial cohesion. European structural and investment funds (hereafter ESI funds) which allow applicants to fund their projects from the EU budget are key instruments of the cohesion policy.

The programming 2014–2020 period suffered from an initial delay caused by factors that appeared at two levels. The first was a disagreement at the EU level about the future state of the 2014–2020 Multiannual Financial Framework. This disagreement postponed all the necessary preparations on both the community programs and subsequently the ESI funds. The second issue occurred at the individual EU