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**Matthijs Bogaards and Françoise Boucek (eds), Dominant political parties and democracy: Concepts, measures, cases and comparisons, reviewed by**

**Caroline Close**

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## Book reviews

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Matthijs Bogaards and Françoise Boucek (eds)

*Dominant political parties and democracy: Concepts, measures, cases and comparisons.* (2010)  
London: Routledge. 256 pp. ISBN 9780415485821.

**Reviewed by:** Caroline Close, Université Libre de Bruxelles, Belgium

Public opinion as much as political scientists tend to assume that party dominance produces a lack of alternation which might blur the *quality* of democracy and threaten the democratization process in emerging democracies. However, cases of long-term dominant parties in advanced industrialized democracies – Social Democracy in Sweden, Christian Democracy in Italy, Liberal Democracy in Japan – suggest that the relationship between party dominance and the *quality* of democracy is somewhat ambivalent: the negative impact of party dominance on democracy might not be as crystal clear as is commonly accepted. How and why can dominance be linked positively to the democratic process in some cases, while not in others? How could we explain the long-lasting dominance of parties in old or newly democratic systems, and what factors can account for their decline or breakdown? This is the puzzle that constitutes the starting point of Matthijs Bogaards and Françoise Boucek's edited volume *Dominant Political Parties and Democracy*.

The book examines party dominance in both established and new democracies through diverse analytical approaches and cases. Ten chapters are brought together around a common goal: re-thinking the concept of dominance in all its various aspects. In doing so, the different contributions help us look at what could explain the ambivalent relationship between dominance and democracy. First, the uncertainty revolving around this relationship might come from a conceptual vagueness: there is no single understanding of *dominance*, and the methods for measuring it are numerous. Three contributions (Chapters 2, 3 and 4) give new conceptual insights, and put into question the traditional understanding of dominance – often defined qualitatively and *retrospectively* in terms of length of incumbency and size of vote/seat-shares. Jean-François Caulier and Patrick Dumont (Chapter 3) offer one of the most promising quantitative methods that scholars could rely on in order to identify and measure cases of dominance. Building indices that measure dominance in a dynamic way, in terms of bargaining power in coalition formation, they develop methodological tools that are appropriate for assessing dominance in multiple arenas. Indeed, these tools can be applied to cases of dominance at a sub-national level (see Abedi and Schneider in Chapter 5) or at the intra-party level (Boucek in Chapter 7).

Secondly, how dominance might impact on the democratic process also depends on which dimension and aspect of dominance that scholars focus on. Actually, although dominance is a multi-dimensional and multi-faceted phenomenon (see, for example, Boucek [1998]), scholars often concentrate on a sole dimension, or on one level of inquiry. Comparing single-party dominance in *sub-national* governments in the Canadian provinces and the German *Länder*, Amir Abedi and Steffen Schneider (Chapter 5) attract attention to a neglected dimension of dominance. Then Gordon Smith (Chapter 6) observes one particular case of regional single-party dominance: the Christian Social Union (CSU) in Bavaria. In the same vein, Nicolas Sauger (Chapter 4) conceptualizes district-level dominance in the French case. Another, quite ignored level of inquiry is further explored by Françoise Boucek (Chapter 7) and Kenneth Carty (Chapter 8): the intra-party dynamics of dominant parties. In fact, the editors treat this intra-party topic in a very enthusiastic (maybe too enthusiastic?) manner; since much of Boucek's previous work has been devoted to the study of factionalism within Western dominant parties (see, for example, Boucek [2002]).

Thirdly, confusion about the relationship between dominance and democracy might arise simply because of the empirical reality of dominant parties: they are not specific characteristics of any particular type of regime, democratic or not. Should dominant parties in authoritarian regimes and dominant parties in democratic regimes be considered as distinct objects of study? Kenneth Greene (Chapter 9) argues that both types respond to a common logic: dominant parties stay in power by building a system based on an asymmetric share of resources, making resource-poor opposition parties unable to attract enough voters to win elections. According to this view, dominance might weaken democracy, whatever the type of regime. Again, Staffan Lindberg and Jonathan Jones (Chapter 11) treat them as equivalent categories, and compare their impact in terms of government effectiveness and economic growth in African democratic and non-democratic regimes. The editors' preference for contributions on African countries clearly echoes Bogaards' research interests (see, for example, Bogaards [2004, 2005]), although one could regret a lack of different perspectives from other parts of the democratizing world.

Since the volume mainly aims at re-thinking the relationship between dominance and democracy, we would expect the authors to provide at least a basic definition of what they understand as *democracy*. Though much energy is dedicated to the conceptualization and measure of dominance, democracy is rarely defined, except in Linberg and Jones's chapter. Furthermore, the book pretends to study dominance in *democratized* as well as in *democratizing* countries as if both cases relate to the same phenomenon. If both dominance in democratic regimes and dominance in non-democratic regimes truly correspond to the same concept, they should be measured with the same tools, such as with the promising power indexes. But there is no such demonstration in the book, which makes it unbalanced between the advanced methodological chapters and the empirical ones, the two having little in common.

This edited volume *Dominant Political Parties and Democracy* undoubtedly raises various questions revolving around the study of dominance, but the answers remain puzzling for many of them – probably because the book asks too many questions at the same time, and in too many directions. In fact, there is a clear lack of coherence: *dominance* is tackled at times in the electoral, legislative and executive arenas; but also at the national,

sub-national and intra-party levels. But since the book is an edited volume gathering papers from a workshop, we should not be surprised by such a lack of homogeneity.

Besides, dominant parties are studied in the same way in democratic, democratizing and authoritarian regimes in some contributions, while the rest of the book does not say a word about dominance in non-democratic regimes. In answer to the question 'How could party dominance be measured?' it seems that several scholars agree on the usefulness and the great scientific potential of voting power indices to assess dominance at the national, sub-national and intra-party levels. However, as promising as they might seem for measuring dominance at any level in democratic regimes, there is no evidence that they can be used in non-democratic regimes. And while we wonder 'What are the origins of dominance and its consequences for the democratic process?' the book fails to resolve the original 'puzzle'. More comparative and empirical work instead of case studies could provide a better understanding of these dynamics.

Finally, researchers looking for a uniform understanding of dominance could be disappointed with this edited volume. The collection of such different contributions does not offer a homogeneous theory of dominance that embraces and articulates the multiple dimensions and facets of the phenomenon, and the diverse arenas in which it occurs. But those looking for different ways of thinking about the concept, measures and dynamics of party and party system dominance will enjoy reading those chapters, and will certainly pick up recent methodological advancements on the topic.

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Joel D. Aberbach and Gillian Peele (eds)

*Crisis of conservatism? The Republican Party, the conservative movement, and American politics after Bush.* (2011) New York: Oxford University Press. 416 pp. ISBN 9780199764020.

**Reviewed by:** Richard Skinner, New College of Florida, USA

In the spring of 2008, George W. Bush had approval ratings comparable to those experienced by Richard Nixon during the Watergate scandal. Despite the success of the 'surge', the Iraq War remained deeply unpopular. The economy was sliding into a downturn that would prove to be the worst since the Great Depression. It was under these conditions that a conference on the future of the American conservative movement was held at Oxford