Analyzing and Understanding European Democracy

Anthony Costello

School of Humanities, Liverpool Hope University, Liverpool, UK.

costelt@hope.ac.uk

**Book reviewed:**

**Foundations of European Politics: A Comparative Approach**

Catherine E. De Vries, Sara B. Hobolt, Sven-Oliver Proksch, and Jonathan B. Slapin (Oxford University Press, 2021), 295 pp. ISBN: 978–0–19–883130–3

Few textbooks on European democracy offer the sheer degree of extensive detail and conceptual rigour which De Vries, Hobolt, Proksch and Slapin have afforded to the construction of this volume. Although styled and marketed as a comparative textbook it is arguably less of a comparative European Politics textbook and more akin to the style a European Politics *handbook*. Unlike notable comparative politics textbooks (see Gallagher et al*.*, 2011; Hancock et al., 2019; Orvis and Drogus, 2020), in-depth case based comparative analysis is not an obvious feature of this work. Whilst comparative analysis is identified at key points throughout its chapters, it predominantly retains a more concept-orientated and descriptive approach informed by cutting edge literature across the field. Extensively rich in detail and covering all conceptual corners of contemporary modes of liberal democracy on the European continent, it is a very useful reference book for advanced students and scholars of European democracy. However, the novice reader of comparative politics may be required to display a degree of patience when navigating its content.

Consisting of some fourteen chapters disaggregated into five parts, its topics fall broadly in line with other notable textbooks of its subject focus (see Caramani, 2020). However, it does not introduce the reader to comparative politics as a social scientific research method. Rather the reader is introduced to frameworks of European democracy by using a first-principles approach. With the concepts of *democracy* and *democratisation* understood as a ‘‘chain of democratic delegation’’ (p.4)*,* the book traces delegation from the citizen (as voter) and voter choice upwards through the structures of political parties and elections, government formation and policies creation, judiciaries and rule of law, and the future of European politics. Thinking about democratic structures and democracy-building as a bottom-up process of institutional power delegation, helps the reader to better understand where to begin in their analysis of European democracy.

An intriguing feature of the book is the authors’ promise to offer readers an exploration of models of European democracies in tandem with politics at the EU level. The authors emphasise that neither can be properly examined if explored exclusive of one another, for both have a dual and mutually informing relationship. However, trying to forge a relational link between the various models of European democracy in tandem with the complexity of EU politics is an ambitious undertaking that requires structural care. The authors did not always deliver on this in the earlier chapters, although, later chapters were markedly more successful in achieving this ambition. To remedy this, the authors may consider including a standalone chapter dedicated to EU governance and politics, in future edits of the volume.

The volume perfectly demonstrates the sheer depth of the authors’ knowledge and understanding of democracies in Europe. A core strength is particularly demonstrated in part three, chapter six - Electoral Systems and Direct Democracy *-* where the authors’ discussion of European electoral systems exceeds the quality of content often offered by alternative comparative textbooks. Additionally, the chapters within part five - Governments and Policy *-* are particularly interesting and rich in pertinent detail for scholars of national and EU governance structures.

Chapters are well-written, descriptively robust and informed by cutting-edge research. The authors introduce readers to complex concepts using well formulated and accessible examples in the form of model-buildingframeworks, as entry points to understanding. Whilst the level of detail and explanation is appreciated, at times the depth of the authors’ knowledge is arguably too well displayed which may serve to over-complicate the content of some chapters. For example, these frameworks sometimes lose resonance with the reader due to the authors’ tendency to compliment them with overly technical language, which employ economic style reasoning and mathematical formulae as demonstrations of conceptual/behavioural measurement. An example of this is in the demonstration of Laakso and Taagepera’s formula for measuring the effective number of parties (ENP), seen in Box 9.1 of chapter nine*.* One could argue that these additions enhance pedagogical accessibility, especially for those more quantitatively minded or methodologically fluent readers. However, quantitative additions can overcomplicate perfectly accessible and rather relatable qualitative explanations previously offered by the authors. As such, the novice reader of European democracy will have to exercise some patience at key points throughout their journey of the volume.

However, a very welcome component of the volume is the authors offer of information boxes which consist of case studies, key debates and methodology and measurement tools. The latter provides the reader with the opportunity to engage with the scientific methods underpinning the study of European democracies. These resources can be particularly useful for readers undertaking academic dissertations or professional research projects. At the end of each chapter readers have access to very useful interactive data sets and self-assessment exercises in the form of Multiple-Choice Questions (MCQs).

Overall, *Foundations of European Politics: A Comparative Approach* offers readers and scholars of governance and politics an extensively informed, conceptually robust and profoundly detailed account of democracy in Europe. Albeit marketed as a comparative politics textbook, it is less comparative in nature relative to competing works in the field and more secure under the label of a handbook, due to its concept orientated and descriptive nature. This makes it a useful handbook for the personal library of any reader or scholar of European politics.

**References**

Caramani D (2020) Comparative Politics. 5th ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Gallagher M et al., (2011) Representative Government in Modern Europe. 5th ed. Berkshire: McGraw-Hill

Hancock et al., (2019) Politics in Europe. 7th ed. London: Sage

Orvis, C and Drogus, S (2020) Introducing Comparative Politics: Concepts and Cases in Context. 5th ed. London: Sage

**About the Author**

Anthony Costello is a lecturer in politics and international relations in Liverpool Hope University. His research specialism lies in European integration and governance with a special focus on intergovernmental decision-making procedures. He has published work on EU Fiscal Policy, EU foreign policy and the Future of Europe.