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Ed Turner, political parties and public policy in the German Länder

When parties matter

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the co-authors' chapters and the solicited contributions – but these are slight and understandable.

With such a quality product, created at speed but with very little evidence of the problems of haste, it is not only difficult but also potentially unfair to indulge in extensive or detailed criticism. I would have liked to see a little more on local government, not only because electoral activity there – especially by the Liberal Democrats – is often key to some of the details of the electoral geography of the general election but also because the various local coalitions and other working arrangements provided cues to the electorate about how the parties can collaborate when they have to share power. And the timing of the book's publication means that the analysis of the results (little of what is presented in the book can be termed 'statistical' as the term is normally deployed, although it is underpinned by such work) was based on aggregate data only. Although the British Election Study data were released in September 2010 this was too late for individual-level analyses to be incorporated, and the campaign spending data only became available in the following year. As such, some of the conclusions – which also inform Kavanagh and Cowley's, such as the impact of the Conservatives' 'target seats' campaign masterminded by Lord Ashcroft (pp. 338, 397–398) (Cutts et al., 2012) – are necessarily premature, and may be modified and extended by later research. Nevertheless, the discussion provides valuable insights into where and why the parties performed relatively well or badly, and the vagaries of the British electoral system.

Perhaps the acid test of a piece of instant history is whether its value depreciates substantially and quickly. In this case, the response must be a clear 'no'. The judgements

Ed Turner, *Political parties and public policy in the German Länder – When parties matter* (2011) Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan. £ 57.50 (hbk); vii + 263 pp. ISBN 9 780 230 284 425.

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Notwithstanding the many reforms Germany's federal system has undergone since 1949, some issues seem to recur without ever being resolved. How to strengthen the German federal states (Länder) and their parliaments is one of those issues. Scholars and politicians regularly criticize the unitarian and cooperative nature of federal policymaking in Germany. It is seen as one of the main reasons for a steady loss of competencies by the Länder over recent decades. Despite two major federalism reforms of the recent past (Federalism Reform I [from 2003 to 2006] and Federalism Reform II [from 2006 to 2009]), this predicament persists:

expressed in the authors' concluding chapter, 'A landmark election: The campaign in retrospect', have not been superseded in the two years since they were written, and later research is mainly filling in the gaps. Their reading of the context, the campaign and the outcome will remain the basis of our understanding of that election, and the detail in the earlier chapters that underpins their conclusions – based on insider yet non-partisan appreciation of the events and individuals involved – will be an excellent resource for later readers seeking illumination of this major event in the UK's electoral history.

The British General Election of 2010 is a more than worthy successor to the previous 17 volumes in the series: superbly informed, carefully analysed, and highly readable. It most certainly must not be the last. Furthermore, it illustrates the value of 'instant history' undertaken by scholars willing to dedicate the time to painstaking, continued research over the full inter-election period and write not only accessible but also entertaining and convincing accounts of a complex story. The rules for what counts as 'impact' in the UK Research Excellence Framework undoubtedly exclude such exercises, but excellent books like this, of value to a wide audience well beyond academia, illustrate one of the major rationales for universities – scholarship for all.

References

Cutts D, Johnston RJ, Pattie CJ and Fisher J (2012) Laying the foundations for electoral success: Conservative pre-campaign canvassing before the 2010 UK general election. *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* 22: 359–375.

the legal competencies of the Länder are – compared with constituent units of other federations – still limited and they are quite restricted in implementing their own innovative policies. This argument exemplifies the bias in the German academic debate about federalism: it emphasizes, first and foremost, the legal framework, set up in the Basic Law ('Grundgesetz') and the constitutions of the Länder. By contrast, the question of to what extent the Länder use their current jurisdiction *politically* is often neglected. Against this background it seems to be pertinent that Ed Turner asks, in his 2011 book *Political Parties and Public Policy in the German Länder*, whether parties matter at the level of the German Länder. The meaning and consequences of this question are consequential: the existence and functioning of federations depends decisively on the autonomous policymaking rights of the different jurisdictional levels.

Turner's point of departure is Manfred G. Schmidt's 1980 quantitative comparison of policies among German Länder. Schmidt distinguishes between a 'political hypothesis' and a 'political null hypothesis'. The first one suggests 'that

different political parties advance sharply differing views in a range of areas of public policy' while the second one implies that policies either do not differ or the reason for divergence 'is not attributable to the partisan composition of the government' (p.18). Reasons for the second case could include the path-dependent nature of single policies and institutions, financial restrictions or the inter-locking character of German federalism.

Turner strives 'to fill two major gaps' with his study: 'the dearth of qualitative research into the influence of parties upon public policy, and the shortage of consideration of the sub-national level in assessing partisan influence' (p.2). These objectives are valuable in two ways. First, it is difficult to distinguish clearly between the 'federal-state' and 'partisan' interests of the Länder governments, both in the Bundesrat as well as in internal Länder policymaking processes. This perspective warrants analyzing programmatic differences and similarities of party policies among the Länder in greater detail. By also considering concrete policy outcomes, including a particular view on different constraints within these processes, Turner is in a position to assess partisan influence at the level of the Länder. Second, quantitative research designs in this field are often confined to measuring policy outcomes solely in budgetary terms. But even in these cases it is not easy to isolate independent variables such as 'party influence' and 'federal-state' interests in an adequate way. Turner's qualitative approach avoids these constraints.

His research design consists of nine case studies for which he compares three specific policies across three German Länder. He wants to know how conservative Länder governments led by a Christian Democratic Union (CDU)-dominated coalition organized policy change under the condition of a federal government that was led by an Social-democratic Party of Germany (SPD)/Green-coalition. Turner opted to examine Hesse, Saarland and Saxony-Anhalt. It would be easy to criticize the choice of cases. One could argue that the size of the sample is too small and the partisan orientation of the cases is biased. It would also be interesting to control for other conceivable arrangements, namely: policy change organized by SPD-dominated Länder governments under a federal government led by a CDU/

Free-democratic Party (FDP)-coalition. That would have the advantage of being more timely since Turner is focusing only on the period between 1999 and 2006 (with some variation from Land to Land). But this critique should be discarded in the light of his approach: the qualitative and highly detailed analysis – based on the 'Method of Difference' and a comparison of ideal partisan 'paradigms' – shows how well acquainted the author is with his cases. A further reason for this might be the interviews that Turner conducted with politicians in the three Länder. The policy fields included education, family and childcare, and labour market policy. It is worth noting that not all of these three policy fields fall under the exclusive jurisdiction of the Länder.

The results and conclusions of Turner's comparative study are hardly groundbreaking. But the contribution of his qualitative approach is nevertheless important and sets new standards – especially with regard to future comparative research into sub-national policymaking in federations. Since education policy is dominated by the Länder, each Land vies to implement its own ideas. That asymmetry has resulted in a federal landscape of 16 different education systems. Turner delivers broad empirical evidence demonstrating that this situation is rooted in differences among party platforms. He also concludes that the Länder parliaments – the original places of institutionalized party competition – impose no real constraint 'in developing the substance of policies pursued' (p.225).

In sum, the conclusion of Turner's study is that party politics at the sub-national level matters, although it differs from Land to Land and from policy to policy. Turner's study also demonstrates that it is necessary to account for the specific histories of given policies, joint decision-making arrangements between the federal jurisdictions and fiscal restrictions. The last point especially could emerge as a real threat to the autonomy of sub-national units and the lively functioning of their party systems since the budgetary situation of whole countries deteriorated in the course of the global financial and economic crisis in 2008/2009. Ergo, it will be interesting to see what impacts the current financial and economic circumstances will have on parties and their role in public policymaking in Germany's Länder.