

Andrew Roberts, The Quality of Democracy in Eastern Europe: Public Preferences and Policy Reforms, Cambridge and New York, Cambridge University Press. 2009, ISBN-13: 9780521110334 (hbk), £50.00.

Notions of ‘democratic quality’ have become increasingly widespread in the study of both new and established democracies. However, Andrew Roberts notes, the concept remains fuzzy, tending to focus on tautologous and unsatisfactory definitions which conflate the attributes of high quality democracy with those of democracy in general, or confuse democratic quality with things such as social structures or policy outputs that, strictly speaking, fall outside the nature of the relationship between citizens and their elected representatives.

Democratic quality, he suggests, should instead be understood in terms citizens’ abilities to influence their rulers through three forms of linkage: 1) electoral accountability (voters’ ability to dismiss politicians, who break promises or perform unsatisfactorily); 2) mandate accountability (voters’ ability to make meaningful choices from a range of distinct programmatic party positions) – and politicians’ keeping of campaign promises; and 3) policy responsiveness (incumbent politicians’ willingness to fit policy to public opinion – and voters’ ability to monitor and pressurize them to ensure that they do).

The book then seeks to operationalise and measure democracy quality across the ten new EU member states from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), widely considered to have consolidated democracy in flawed and low quality forms burdened by legacies of the communist past, detached and alienated citizenries, and corrupt and self-serving political elites. The book uses a mix of quantitative analysis and re-analysis of existing literature to assesses electoral and mandate accountability across CEE, making comparisons with findings from both established West European democracies and the new democracies of Latin America. The book then investigates policy responsiveness through comparative case studies of the pension and housing reform in Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary.

Based on data on economic performance, Roberts finds that CEE democracies show high levels of electoral responsiveness. Despite significant general anti-incumbent

voting, voters in the region do hold governments to account for poor economic performance. However, although CEE party systems are generally programmatic, mandate accountability in the region is much weaker – and, Roberts finds, has remained consistency weak across the two decades since the fall of communism. Party positions in the region are less clear and – usually as result of a politics of populist outbidding - less varied than in either Western Europe. The relationship between winning parties' campaign promises on (economic) reform and the subsequent direction of policy weak, although they are few *volte faces* on reform commitments of the kind common in Latin America. However, contrary to the image of 'lonely reformers' by-passing popular preference through blame avoidance strategies, CEE politicians do seem relatively responsive to public opinion when making policy. Although there is little active citizen input into policy making, the qualitative case studies, Republic highlight how favourable public opinion has been a key prerequisite for housing and pensions reforms to go ahead.

Overall, Roberts argues, CEE enjoys a reasonable quality of democracy, albeit characterised by distinct patterns of accountability. Weak civil societies, constraints imposed on all parties by international institutions and the EU and CEE voters' tendency to punish incumbents at the polls, which reduce politicians' incentives to fulfil campaign promises, he suggests explains the region's depressed mandate accountability, Roberts suggests. The region's surprisingly overall good democratic quality, he finds through juxtaposition with Western Europe and Latin America, can be traced to a legacy of communism: its relatively high levels of socio-economic development and, in consequence, the relatively high educational levels and civic capacities of its citizenries.

The Quality of Democracy in Eastern Europe offers an elegant, rigorous and convincing new set of propositions about how we should view democracy in CEE, which opens up the possibility of genuinely pan-European comparison of democratic systems in the enlarged EU. The empirical basis of book's findings is clearly limited and in some instances its theoretical formulations leave some questions unaddressed. Its essential view of democracy in terms of citizen control over the state might for example, imply that forms of direct democracy (unmentioned in the book) would offer better quality democracy. Such limitations, however, arguably reflect the broad

agenda-setting aims of the book – aims in which it amply and ably succeeds. Indeed, in time it may come to be seen as a seminal work