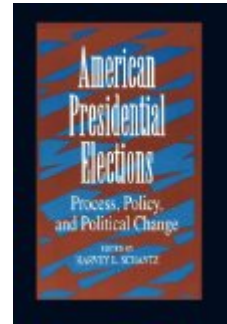


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Harvey L. Schantz, ed. *American Presidential Elections: Process, Policy, and Political Change*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996. xiii+258pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7914-2864-1.

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The Presidency, Politics, and What We Know

On its face, this anthology boasts a great deal. Edited by Harvey L. Schantz, he and four other distinguished political scientists attempt to answer several questions about American presidential elections. Do these contests display any set pattern? What impact do these events have on public policy & society? Are any of them are more crucial than others? Owing to the nature of these questions, it is fairly obvious that Schantz and the book's other four contributors: Milton C. Cummings, Jr., Everett C. Ladd, David R. Mayhew, and Gerald M. Pomper, have been influenced in one way or another by the work of V. O. Key, Jr. Unfortunately, what has been produced is a volume that promises more than what it delivers.

On the positive side, this book is very readable in general, and even engaging in some places. This is no minor accomplishment. Much of the literature involving election theory has either been so dry, or so laden with academic jargon, that it is unreadable. In addition, Schantz, and the other contributors, offer clear and concise explanations of some fairly complex matters. A good example is Schantz's treatment of how a presidential candidate can win in popular vote, but lose in the electoral college.

Despite these strengths, however, this book is very disappointing in a number of respects. To begin, the authors place a great deal of emphasis on the election of 1992, making it the prism through which all other previous contests are judged. This is understandable to some extent since this was the last presidential election held prior to the book's publication. But, that election, and

the election of 1994 to a lesser degree, is given such a prominent role as to leave the book with a journalistic flavor.

This problem also appears when the authors make assertions which are dubious at best. For example, in chapter one, Schantz claims that the election of 1960, marked by a voter turn-out of 68.2 percent, witnessed "the highest percentage of voting age population to ever vote in a presidential election" (p. 30). Yet, in chapter seven, Schantz reverses himself by pointing out that between 1840 and 1900, voter turn-out "was never less than 69.5 percent" (p. 213). No explanation for this apparent contradiction is offered.

In a similar vein, Schantz writes about the first party system as if the Federalists and the Democratic-Republicans were modern political organizations. While it is true that both groups attempted to create a mass voter base, as well as mechanisms to get voters out on election day, it is equally true that these efforts had mixed results at best. viewed in this light, both the Federalists and the Democratic-Republicans appear less as true parties and more as cliques of like-minded politicians.

Similar difficulties are seen with Gerald Pomper's chapter on the current state of America's parties. On the one hand, Pomper should be congratulated for his efforts. His chapter, entitled "Alive! Political Parties After the 1980-1992 Presidential Elections" is original, and vigorously argued. Basically, Pomper maintains other commentators who have be-moaned the decline of American

parties are wrong, and that both the Democrats and Republicans have been infused with new life. In proof of this, Pomper cites such points as each party's ability to raise millions of dollars for campaign purposes, as well as the strength of each group's state-level organization. With this, Pomper dismisses the decline in voter identification with either party as unimportant. Using a business analogy, he claims that just as customers do not represent the sum total of a major company, such as Campbell's Soup, voters do not represent the sum total of a party (p. 141).

Stated simply, Pomper's analogy does not work. Whereas a business offers a tangible product for sale, parties deal in ideas. Moreover, voters are not only followers of political organizations, but are their creators as well. This is far different from what happens in the business world. Companies are not usually created by consumers, but by investors. Thus, it stands to reason that if voter identification with various political organizations is on the wane, those organizations are, by definition, in decline.

Debatable as Pomper's analysis might be, he at least offers something different and innovative. Unfortunately, the other contributors simply rehash or bear-out things which have been said before. A good case in point is Schantz's chapter "Sectionalism in Presidential Elections." All that Schantz does in the space of 30 pages is to confirm claims made earlier by V. O. Key and E. E. Schattschneider that regional variations in relation to national vote totals in presidential elections are on the de-

cline (p. 123). In much the same fashion, David Mayhew concludes his chapter on elections and policy change by saying that so-called "legislative surges" (periods when major policy changes take place) are closely linked to shifts in "the public mood" (p. 179).

With this, several important and timely political concerns are either ignored, or only given a cursory treatment. No where do the authors address the impact on the country's politics by various well-financed conservative research groups, such as the Heritage Foundation. Absent too is any discussion about the degree of variation in rural, suburban, and urban voting patterns. And, finally, for all of the attention which the authors gave to the 1992 and 1994 elections, none of them wrote one word about the possible impact radio and television commentators such as Rush Limbaugh may have had in those contests.

Yet, despite these weaknesses, I would recommend this book, primarily as an introductory text for undergraduate students and general readers. As stated above, the book is well written, and makes a number of difficult ideas readily understandable. Further, it offers an extensive bibliography. Because of these facts, this book, while not appropriate for graduate-level readers, would serve as a good starting point for the beginning student.

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