



Eduardo Posada-Carbo. *Elections Before Democracy: The History of Elections in Europe and Latin America.* New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996. x + 285 pp. \$69.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-312-15885-9.

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The Pre-History of Democracy in Western Europe and Latin America

By the second half of the 1980s a new, or third, wave of democracy (which began in Southern Europe in the mid-1970s, and then spread to the Americas in the first half of the 1980s) was seen to be sweeping authoritarianism aside in much of Latin America.[1] The (re)turn to democracy in Latin America in the 1980s was paralleled by democratic transitions in the Philippines, South Korea and Taiwan, and then in much of Eastern Europe. This ostensibly global trend fueled a growing interest in the study of democratisation and helped to foster an increased optimism about the universalization of democratic forms of government.[2] Although the optimism of the early post-Cold War era has faded somewhat, many commentators continue to hope, if not expect, that the end of the twentieth century will coincide with the dawning of a global era of democracy. For example, in a survey article in *The Economist* in late 1996, Brian Beedham took the view that the twenty-first century "could see, at last, the full flowering of the idea of democracy" insofar as a variety of obstacles have passed into history and "democracy can set about completing its growth." [3] Against this backdrop, political scientists, sociologists and historians have now produced a substantial body of work which attempts to conceptualize and engage critically or supportively (or both) with the apparent turn to democracy which has emerged as the new millennium approaches.

Elections Before Democracy can be seen as a contribution to the reinvigorated debates about democratization which have emerged in the last ten or fifteen years. Under the editorship of Eduardo Posada-Carbo, a historian at the Institute of Latin American Studies at the Uni-

versity of London, it brings together a number of essays which examine the electoral history of a range of European and Latin American countries. Apart from the editor's introductory essay on electoral and comparative history, there is a chapter on elections in England from 1688-1914 by Frank O'Gorman, and a chapter on the emergence of "modern forms" of political representation in Spain and Spanish America between 1808 and 1810 by M.D. Demelas-Bohy and F.X. Guerra. These are followed by Antonio Annino's essay on elections and local government in New Spain (Mexico) on the eve of independence. Juan Maiguashca's chapter focuses on the importance of the Ecuadorian electoral reforms of 1861 in paving the way for a new national political order, while K. Theodore Hoppen looks at the role of the priesthood and the Catholic Church in elections in Ireland in the nineteenth century. The influence of Catholic clerics on the electoral process in Germany from 1871-1914 is the subject of Margaret Lavinia Anderson's essay. Malcolm Deas focuses on the role of the Church as well, in a chapter which also takes up the role of the Police and the Military in elections in Colombia from the mid-nineteenth century to 1930. Voting behaviour and the electoral process in Buenos Aires prior to 1912 comes under scrutiny by Paula Alonso, while Carlos Darde's chapter deals with the question of electoral fraud and the ostensible passivity of voters in Spain between 1875 and 1923. In a final essay, J. Samuel Valenzuela, examines the electoral history of Chile in the nineteenth century.

The editor argues at the outset that the book's "purpose" is to put forward the view "that electoral prac-

tices and behaviour ought to be properly considered in the context of comparative history.” At the same time, the relative lack of research, especially on Latin America, has meant that the majority of the chapters focus on the history of particular nation-states. Posada-Carbo notes that the contributions deal with elections in what sociologists and political scientists might regard as “pre-democratic societies”, arguing that a key theme of the book is “the historical significance of elections” to the overall development of democracy (p. 12). With reference to England, for example, Frank O’Gorman argues that the election campaigns were “inclusive and popular” public events. He emphasizes that regardless of how “powerful the elements of persuasion, control and even intimidation may have been” in the English electoral system prior to 1832, the campaign process rested on the “assumption that electoral choices were there to be made” and “political support might legitimately be sought in any part of the community” (p. 22). From this, he argues more generally that the purpose of “electoral culture” is to restrain “the influence and political power of the elite.” On this basis, he concludes “that the widespread diffusion of traditions and practices of electoral culture may be taken to be one of the most indispensable prerequisites for representative government” (pp. 29-30).

J. Samuel Venezuela’s contribution also provides a clear adumbration of this theme. He asserts that it is not appropriate to “dismiss the electoral practices” which prevailed in Chile in the nineteenth century “as a mere manifestation of an ‘oligarchic,’ ‘aristocratic,’ or ‘patrician’ system of little relevance to the masses and to the future development of the nation’s democracy.” He argues that, contrary to the widespread perception, and as a result of “peculiar electoral practices” it was not only the wealthy who voted. Furthermore, “the elections were observed and celebrated ... by a much larger number of men, women and even children than the small numbers of actual male voters would seem to indicate.” He emphasizes that the “strength and endurance” of the Chilean party-system of the twentieth century had its origins in the nineteenth century, while the “electoral practices” of the nineteenth century, “despite their unfairness and irregularities, also had state institution-building effects.” As a result, he concludes Chile “had the essential legal-institutional and party-organisational elements of a democracy in place by the early twentieth century” (pp. 248-50).

Overall the book provides a series of tightly-focused and empirically detailed case studies. It is certainly important for the way in which it draws attention to the

fact that democracy has a pre-history, and that elections, even elections in which the electorate is as narrowly defined as was the case in most countries in the nineteenth century, are worthy of study. The research and empirical detail of many of the chapters is impressive. However, as the editor notes, the comparative issues he raises at the beginning are implied far more than they are explicated in the chapters that follow. In many ways the research in the book is preliminary. More than one author acknowledges that historians have often neglected elections and that *Elections Before Democracy* is as much about suggesting a research agenda as it is about providing the results of exhaustive research.

However, even if the book had carried this project further, I would probably remain wary of the overall approach taken. For example, although it points to greater participation by the majority than has been allowed by approaches to democracy which emphasize particular leaders, the elite or arising middle-class, this book rests on a very formal conception of democracy which focuses on elections, universal suffrage and the existence of competing political parties. The book as a whole privileges an exceedingly gradualist and evolutionary conception of political change which sees some form of representative parliamentary democracy as the final goal and as something that evolves over a fairly long period of time as the electoral process gradually expands and is regularized. A more substantive conception of democracy by contrast can be seen as encompassing parliamentary democracy as well as more thoroughgoing forms of participation by the majority and a much greater range of social and economic rights.

Following on from this it can be argued that the research agenda for the study of the pre-history of democracy is moving, or has already moved, beyond a focus on elections, an expanding electoral franchise and an emergent party-system and is engaging with important questions of a broad socio-economic, political and cultural character.[4] For example, an explicitly historical and thoroughly conceptual work by Dietrich Rueschemeyer, Evelyne Huber Stephens and John D. Stephens, raises a number of questions in relation to the book under review. On the basis of a wide range of historical cases drawn from Europe and the Americas, the authors argue that it has been the emergence of an organised working class, in the context of the wider historical configuration of political and social power, that has consistently been a key factor in democratisation.[5] This argument does not preclude the significance of ‘elections before democracy’ as important to the eventual democratization of the politi-

cal process in Europe and Latin America. However, this reviewer would like to suggest that this book could have been strengthened if both greater effort had been made to clarify its relationship to the debate about how to define democracy, and if it had engaged more directly with the conceptual and theoretical debate about the general historical dynamics of democratization in Europe and Latin America. At the same time, anyone interested in the pre-history of democracy in Europe and Latin America will find this book of interest.

Notes:

[1]. The idea of a 'third wave' was popularized by Samuel Huntington. See Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* [Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991].

[2]. This optimism was most famously expressed in 1989, when Francis Fukuyama argued that the world had arrived at the "end point of mankind's ideological evolution" and was poised on the threshold of "the univer-

salisation of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government." Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?" *The National Interest* 16:8 (1989) pp 3-4, 15. See also Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* [London: Hamish Hamilton, 1992].

[3]. Brian Beedham, "Full Democracy," *The Economist*, 21 December 1996, p. S3.

[4]. For example, a now classic study which raises important questions about the gender and racial hierarchies embedded in the history of liberal democracy is Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* [Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988].

[5]. Dietrich Rueschemeyer, Evelyne Huber Stephens and John D. Stephens, *Capitalist Development and Democracy* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992].

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