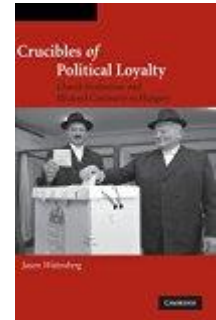


Jason Wittenberg. *Crucibles of Political Loyalty: Church Institutions and Electoral Continuity in Hungary.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006. 314 pp. \$88.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-521-84912-8.



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Published on HABSBURG (January, 2010)

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Passing It On: Religious Community and Partisan Continuity

Jason Wittenberg's study of the relationship between religiosity and voting practices in Hungary since the Second World War is an impressive attempt to bridge the methodological divide in the social sciences between number-crunching and narration. The book starts with a puzzle familiar to students of electoral history across many national contexts: the persistence of local voting preferences (for right- or left-wing party "families," if not for particular parties) over many years, even over many generations. In Hungary, as elsewhere in post-Communist eastern Europe, the emergence of such patterns in the 1990s was even more striking because direct forms of institutional and behavioral continuity were absent: there had been no independent right-wing parties and no free multiparty elections for over forty years. So how, Wittenberg asks, was the tendency to vote conservative sustained? The connective tissue, he concludes, was provided by the Christian churches, especially the more ritually demanding

Roman Catholic Church, which had considerable--albeit limited--success in maintaining contact with its core constituency through the Communist period.

The argument is based in part on statistical analysis, laid out systematically in the final chapter but with key findings foreshadowed earlier. Using a series of multivariate regressions, the author demonstrates that both levels of support for right-wing parties in the mid-1940s (before the Communist seizure of power) and levels of enrollment in school-based religious instruction in the late 1950s and 1960s (used here as an index of "church community") provide good predictors of support for right-leaning political parties in the 1990s. But if these statistical correlations form the skeleton of Wittenberg's argument, he tries to put flesh on the bone with a narrative account of the struggles between the churches and the regime during the Communist era. This constitutes about half of the book and draws on both a survey of

secondary (sociological and anthropological) literature and extensive research in state and (to a lesser extent) church archives. These sections show that the requirements of statistical modeling can sometimes dovetail with keen ethnographic observation. Constructing a “large N” database, consisting of religious education enrollment figures from 3000 villages and municipalities, revealed both considerable fluctuation and extraordinary local variation in levels of enrollment in religious instruction: in one village, registration doubled between 1958 and 1959, while within a single district, the percentage of children enrolled in religious education in 1958 varied from 0 to 92 (p. 189). Wittenberg rightly sees this as a crucial piece of the puzzle, and he plausibly suggests that fluctuation and variation demonstrate the importance of efforts by local actors—parish priests and local party cadres—in determining who would win the battle over religious education in any particular place at any particular moment.

It is important to keep such descriptions of on-the-ground contestation in mind when evaluating the author’s overarching claim that “institutions” and “structures” were more important than “ideas” and “cultures” in shaping continuities in behavior (p. 239). For Wittenberg, “institutions” are connected to contingent, embodied action by human actors, while “culture” easily dissolves into mystifying assertions about timeless collectivities. This interest in concrete human activity—buttressed by citations of James Scott and Michel de Certeau—is commendable. But while Wittenberg’s institutional account does effectively rescue the agency of local elites, it comes close to eviscerating the agency of local laypeople, reducing popular religiosity to a product of the relative mobilizing skills of priests and cadres. Consider the book’s discussion of the correlation between rates of enrollment in religious education and the enrollment of children of party or local council members. Wittenberg suggests that elite behavior helped determine mass behavior, as the churches accrued advantages from “turning” a party func-

tionary (p. 190). But is it not at least as plausible that the causal arrow points the other way—that the registration for religious instruction of party or council members’ children reflected pressure from below, an effort to comply with perceived local norms? This alternative story is not really considered, even though, as the author notes, many game theorists assume that it is individual calculations about the behavior of the many, not signaling by an allegedly influential few, that produce “tipping points” and result in cascades toward local conformity (p. 46).

Perhaps the most unsatisfying feature of the book is the persistent conflation of one very specific activity—registration of children for school-based religious instruction—with the far more complex and multifaceted phenomenon of creating and sustaining “church community.” Wittenberg concedes that religious instruction is “only one of the many possible indicators of religiosity,” but it is nonetheless the only one that he scrutinizes (p. 198). Other practices (baptisms, weddings, funerals, church attendance) and survey data on religious belief are only mentioned in passing, with the longest treatment a one-and-a-half-page subsection titled “Beyond Religious Instruction” (pp. 198-199). Disappointingly, measurements that have served as standard indicators of religiosity across Catholic Europe for more than a century, such as rates of Easter communion, annual communions per parishioner, or clerical vocations, are not mentioned at all—a lamentable absence for any scholars interested in using a familiar yardstick to compare the Hungarian case to others. Even statistics on church-based religious instruction, which apparently was much more resilient than school-based religious instruction and had largely replaced it after the mid-1970s, are only referenced fleetingly (p. 185). Pushing to the side all of these other potentially rich clues to the many dimensions of “church community” seems a high price to pay for focusing on the production of impeccably precise mathematical correlations, correlations that (as Wittenberg concedes in his

concluding paragraphs) correspond to well-known patterns across Europe and are thus “less than puzzling” (p. 244).

The author rightly goes on to emphasize that the real trick is in “specifying the mechanism of partisan reproduction over time” (p. 244). But here again, conflating school-based religious education with “religious community” tends to obscure rather than clarify the “mechanisms” involved. Indeed, in treating school-based religious education simply as a proxy for some broader and more abstract phenomenon, Wittenberg ironically fails to unpack the *specific* dynamics of religious education and how it might have worked as a means of ideological transmission. He implicitly treats registration figures as a kind of rolling plebiscite on allegiance to church vs. party, a snapshot indicator of parents’ relationship to the church at that particular moment. This is entirely plausible as far as it goes. But surely one reason that religious education was a particularly fierce arena of contestation is its presumed formative impact on the *children* involved. Priests hoped and party officials feared that those who received religious instruction would internalize a worldview that would shape their thinking and behavior (potentially including voting behavior) many decades later. This understanding of the function of religious instruction would seem to fit rather nicely into Wittenberg’s overall findings and argument. He is, after all, trying to explain the link between the education of schoolchildren in the 1960s and the behavior of voters in the 1990s; would it not be worth noting that many middle-aged voters in the 1990s had been schoolchildren precisely in the 1960s? Yet Wittenberg seems oddly resistant to considering such generational analyses, even when they might seem the most economical way to explain certain patterns. He notes, for example, that baptisms and church weddings declined sharply between 1951 and 1984, while religious burials declined much more modestly (p. 199). Might this not be further *prima facie* evidence that Hungarians who did not receive religious education in schools (most of

those getting married and having children by 1984) were less attached to the church than those who had received such education (the vast majority of those getting buried in 1984)?

Such missed opportunities to connect the dots make it difficult to accept Wittenberg’s concluding claim to “have transformed the empirical relationship between religiosity and rightist attachments from the realm of association into that of causation” (p. 244). Too much of the human story here—about what school-based religious instruction was transmitting and how it was being transmitted, let alone how “church community” as a whole was constituted and sustained—remains stubbornly elusive here. But this book is, nonetheless, a formidable piece of scholarship and a highly stimulating spur to further research. It asks probing questions and includes keen observations, and it is to be hoped that political scientists as well as other scholars will continue to deploy a broad methodological arsenal to follow up on them.

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Citation: James Bjork. Review of Wittenberg, Jason, *Crucibles of Political Loyalty: Church Institutions and Electoral Continuity in Hungary*. HABSBURG, H-Net Reviews. January, 2010.

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