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*E lecting the Pope* is an expansive study of the seemingly narrow topic of how popes were elected. Traversing 350 years and the reigns of forty-odd popes, the monograph investigates multiple facets of a complex and continually shifting process that lay shrouded in the mystery of the locked conclave. How did cardinals reach their unanimous decision said to be brought about by the Holy Spirit? Pattenden’s answer concerns clerical elites and political decision-making: the nature of papal authority, consensus-building, and the manner in which papal elections conditioned the city that contained them.

*E lecting the Pope* is perhaps most distinct for its attempt to discern the mechanisms of papal election, adducing concepts from rational choice and game theory (flows, costs, inputs, externalities, equilibrium, "zero-sum game," "moral hazard") to see if structure animated ostensible cacophony. Rather than unseating prior historiography, the work digests a vast volume of it, making it of potentially great utility as a reference source. Throughout are capsule summaries of key concepts and structuring paradoxes—for example, how popes were not beholden to their predecessor’s decisions; how papal identity straddled the secular and divine; tensions between *plentitude potestatis* on one hand and the office’s elective nature and strictures on papal influence on the other. Chapters are larded with interesting observations: papal reigns were cyclical; a pope’s powers were expected to decline by the end of their tenure. Most popes who ascended the *sede papale* possessed legal training. In the fifteenth century, cardinals and their large “families” colonized the papacy and elections were more ad hoc. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, decentralized knowledge and financialization of office eroded papal authority. The complexity of papal elections explains why no one party dominated the papacy for any appreciably long period. And so on. Throughout, the monograph sketches decisive events and personalities.

Its prose clear and assured, *E lecting the Pope* ranges easily from brass tacks to theoretical concerns. In its incorporation of material from thirteen archives, the work is perhaps notable for its economy. Copious figures and tables present useful synopses: the percentage of Italians in the conclave 1431-75, outcomes of specific scrutinies, numbers of cardinals voting. The book’s drawbacks are connected to its strengths. Though tightly argued and well organized, the welter of detail can leave the reader searching for overarching themes or a clear sense of change over time. The monograph aims at parsing structure, not weaving a narrative.
Chapter 2 describes cardinals, the elite oligarchy of mostly middle-aged Italian men who, appointed for life and embedded in dense networks of dynasty and clientage, advised and elected the pope. Part courtier and frequently influenced by secular national rulers, cardinals were unable to ensure election outcomes but could achieve influence via secret ballot, ritual, intrigue, and sometimes ineptitude. Conservative and risk-averse, cardinals tended to elect popes who were older and who would not rock the boat over more dynamic candidates who possessed the potential to change the status quo. Chapter 3 enters the conclave, considering compromise, time constraints, deadlock, life within lockup, abuses, and election legitimation. Chapter 4 outlines how papal death engendered violence and anarchy in the Eternal City. Chapter 5, the book’s effective heart, traces elections from a cardinal’s-eye-view as a series of probabilities. After “intelligence gathering,” cardinals bargained and sussed out the thinking of their colleagues, then deployed a welter of ballot- ing methods (secret, by approval, by adoration, the *accessus*) (p. 169). Chapter 6 argues that despite their manipulation of display, force, and patronage, a pope’s power was neither arbitrary nor absolute. Chapter 7 analyzes wider developments of papal elections: increased bureaucracy, public debt, venality, a “fiscal-military state” (p. 218).

His search for structure notwithstanding, Pat- tenden closes by affirming papal rule and elections as chaotic; even random: “All papal reigns ultimately ended in failure because their authority did not remain constant” (p. 186); “No two popes started from the same place or achieved the same results” (p. 179); “In many cases popes were elected as much through luck as political wiles” (p. 182). Ultimately, papal monarchy was “dysfunctional” (pp. 265-266). As noted, the book is well structured, argued, and written; its utility is most evident in its historiographical syntheses.
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