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Voting for Hitler and Stalin

Elections Under 20th Century Dictatorships

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Contents

II Discipline

III Dissent and Loyalty

Non-Competitive Elections in 20th Century Dictatorships: Some Questions and General Considerations

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Elections make the difference between a democracy and a dictatorship. Not the only difference, of course, but nevertheless a decisive one. Any acceptable definition of a democratic order includes the following: universal suffrage, a secret ballot, and competing candidates. These are the essential prerequisites for the legitimization of a political regime. Regardless of all critical considerations concerning limits of representation which could hamper democracy, the elitist isolation of the political class, or the socially, economically or culturally biased structure of the electoral system, elections are considered to be a cornerstone of popular sovereignty.

However, despite this, elections were and are not limited to liberal democracies. In fact most of the 20th century dictatorships put a great deal of effort into arranging general elections and referenda. For example, the Soviet government along with other governments in the Eastern Bloc countries regularly called their populations out to vote in general, equal, direct and secret elections. No effort was spared in enticing the voters to the ballot box. During the 1960s millions of Soviet citizens came together in hundreds of thousands of election meetings to take part in the elections for the Supreme Soviet. In Moscow thousands of shows, dance performances and concerts were put on in order to entertain the voters. In the polling stations play areas and buffets were set up. Around 15 per cent of the total population took part in the Soviet election campaigns as agitators and canvassers (see Tsipursky, Bohn, Smith, Heumos in this volume; Jacobs 1970, 62–68). Of course, with regard to influencing the composition of the parliament, or even the government, all of this remained quite meaningless. Yet, why did dictatorships stage these "elections without choice" (Hermet et al., 1978) if their function as "institutionalized procedures for the choosing of office holders by some or all of the recognized members of an organization" was not being fulfilled in the slightest (Rokkan 1968, 6; see also Lipset and Rokkan 1967)?

Why did political regimes, which were radically opposed to liberal democracy, imitate one of the crucial features of that antagonistic system? This is the main question which this volume of essays seeks to answer, and it is based on the assumption that fake democratic elections cannot simply be dismissed as trivial propaganda phenomena, but rather are a source of valuable insights into the functioning of dictatorships in the 20th century.

20th Century Dictatorships

Juan Linz distinguishes between democratic, authoritarian and totalitarian regimes (Linz 1975, 2000). This typology has been adopted by many political scientists and historians—despite the fact that the different types of *authoritarian* regime make it difficult to bring them all under one common term, and also despite the criticism of different aspects of the theory of totalitarianism. For as much as one might regard the term totalitarianism as problematic given its normative connotations, its fixation on the structures of a regime, and its relative blindness to social and cultural practices, a typological classification of the main different types of dictatorship is essential (Jessen 1995; Bessel and Jessen 1996). This is even more so the case in respect to elections.

Political scientists dealing with this topic have quite rightly highlighted the close relationship between the form and function of the elections, and the type of political regime. In this respect the determining classification criteria are institutionalization and the practice of political competition. Thus, Dieter Nohlen distinguishes between competitive elections in democratic systems, semi-competitive elections in authoritarian systems, and non-competitive elections in totalitarian systems (Nohlen 2009, 26 f). Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way have also arrived at a similar trichotomy in their differentiation between democracy, competitive authoritarian regimes and closed authoritarianism (Levitsky and Way 2002, 2010). Others have put forward even more strongly differentiated typologies (Howard and Roessler 2006; Smith 2006).

For political scientists, an interest in elections which take place within non-democratic frameworks has mainly been directed at *authoritarian* regimes. These regimes were the focus of the pioneering 1978 study "Elections Without Choice" by Guy Hermet et al. Furthermore, the develop-

ments following the downfall of Communism in Europe have led to an even greater focus on this area. The "Third Wave of Democratization" (Huntington 1991) after 1989 resulted in stable democracies in only a few Central and Eastern European countries. In most of the post-communist states, different types of authoritarian regimes have established themselves—regimes which attempt to legitimize themselves by means of elections without there being any hope of fair competition (Wilson 2005). This links the neo-authoritarian regimes of the post-communist world with many states in Africa and Asia. Whether the latest upheavals in the North African and Arabian areas will result in a fourth wave of democratization, as some commentators have been quick to hope for, remains to be seen (Olimat 2008; Grand 2011). However, skepticism would seem to be advisable.

Andreas Schedler has drawn the conclusion that the counter-movements to the Third Wave of democratization have not produced different forms of "defective democracies", but rather a new type of regime, namely that of "electoral authoritarianism". Moreover, the relative stability of this new type of regime is not due to the suppression of elections, but rather the effective manipulation of the electoral system (Schedler 2002, 2006 a, b). Although elections in this type of regime feature a minimum level of inclusion, pluralism, competition, and openness, the rules of free and fair elections are breached so systematically that they become instruments wielded by the authoritarian elite to control and direct power (Schedler 2006 b, 2–6).

While political scientists are mainly interested in current phenomena of "electoral authoritarianism", this volume follows a different course. While it does take inspiration from current problems, the essays mainly focus on issues arising from historical research. Furthermore, the volume focuses on the *totalitarian dictatorships*—in particular those in fascist Italy, National Socialist Germany, and the communist states between 1917 and 1991.[1] Despite significant differences, these dictatorships had some common features: they presented themselves radically modern, anti-traditional, and

1 Due to the lack of a better alternative, here the term *totalitarian dictatorships* will be used in order to distinguish these regimes from the *authoritarian* dictatorships of the inter-war and post-war periods, as well as from the *neo-authoritarian* regimes of the present. The more open and normatively less loaded term "modern dictatorship" (Kocka 1999) is not appropriate here since the *neo-authoritarian* regimes of recent times cannot be labeled as either pre-modern or post-modern, but in fact also belong to *modernity*.

oriented towards a utopian concept of a *new society*. They were based on a strictly anti-liberal and anti-pluralist model of politics and society. This model was connected to an ideal of homogeneity and purity, based on the collective exclusion of *objective enemies*, as Hannah Arendt put it (Arendt 1951). Those included in the *Volksgemeinschaft* or *socialist society* would be integrated into a kind of *dictatorship of consent*. Under these regimes elections corresponded to the category of "zero-competition election" (Smith 2006). While elections in authoritarian and neo-authoritarian regimes served as an instrument of "non-democratic access to power" as Andreas Schedler aptly defines it, in *totalitarian* dictatorships their primary function was as a means for the "non-democratic exercise of power" (Schedler 2006 b, 6). Whether their function extended beyond this, still remains to be considered.

State of Research

Elections in the *totalitarian* dictatorships of the 20th century are not a prominent theme in historical research. Since they so clearly break the rules of fair competition, it seems obvious that they should be discounted as insignificant propaganda events. Secret police, violence, and terror as the instruments used in the safeguarding of power appeared to be much more worthy of attention. Moreover, the fact that elections and plebiscites took place under Fascism and National Socialism only in the 1920s and 1930s, while in the communist European regimes they were of significance up until 1989, has led to an asymmetric division of academic interest. While the elections in the right-wing dictatorships of the first half of the 20th century have been a focus of *historical* research, the elections which took place under Communism usually were the subject of research conducted by *political scientists*. Both disciplines use different approaches, methods and sources. Whereas after 1945 historians were able to analyze the surviving documents from the fascist era, until 1989/91 political scientists and historians had only a few sources at their disposal relating to elections in the communist sphere. The situation only began to improve after the collapse of Communism in Europe—however, still today there are significant differences among the post-communist states.

With regard to the significance of elections for the Nazi dictatorship in Germany, there are two factors which have been of particular interest for