

Book Review: Party Patronage and Party Government in European Democracies

by Blog Admin

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*The eurozone debt crisis and subsequent economic reforms have helped to expose endemic levels of corruption and party patronage in countries such as Greece. This book uses more than 600 expert interviews to explore the nature of party patronage across fifteen European democracies. For **Sofia Vasilopoulou**, one of this book's main strengths is its investigation of patronage as an organisational resource for parties that are facing falling grass root support.*



Party Patronage and Party Government in European Democracies. Edited by Petr Kopecky, Peter Mair and Maria Spirova. Oxford University Press. July 2012.

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Inspired by the Katz and Mair seminal 1995 [article](#) on the changing models of party organisation and party democracy, *Party Patronage and Party Government in European Democracies* provides a rigorous comparative analysis of party patronage in fifteen European democracies. It aims to provide a bridge between two literatures: party politics and public administration. This study has a strong empirical focus, seeking to evaluate the extent to which political parties are able to exercise direction over appointments within state institutions. It is a well-written and well-organised volume, which will undoubtedly become a very useful resource to students and academics interested in party organisational development, governance and decision-making. It will also be of great use to country experts and practitioners, who may benefit from its comparative insights into the working of party government in Europe.



The key questions guiding the empirical chapters include the nature and scope of patronage in European societies; the reasons behind party engagement in patronage practices; the role of parties and individual politicians in this process; and the degree to which patronage appointments are shared among parties. The analysis relies on 647 expert interviews conducted by country research teams, which followed a detailed questionnaire provided by the project leaders. The standardised cross-national data are openly available on the project's [webpage](#). The data allowed for the construction of quantitative measures of party patronage, including an index of party patronage, which enables country comparison in terms of both scale and depth of party patronage.

This edited volume contributes to the literature by differentiating between two different understandings of patronage, i.e. patronage as an electoral resource and patronage as an organisational resource. Party patronage as an electoral resource tends to be understood as a 'form of linkage politics' (p. 5) whereby parties and/or politicians (patrons) distribute benefits to voters (clients) in exchange for electoral support. The authors' conception of patronage as an organisational resource instead focuses on the ability of parties to build organisational networks and distribute jobs within the state, thus obtaining institutional control of the latter. This conceptual and empirical differentiation distinguishes this book from current literature on party patronage and allows the authors to evaluate party organisational development in a novel way.

The book shows that this party-state linkage increasingly compensates for (or even replaces) parties' weakening grass-roots organisation, i.e. what is traditionally referred to as the party on the ground. Party organisational development implies that parties attach greater significance to the management and governance of the polity compared to their traditional representative function. The declining relevance of ideology in party competition as well as the increasing complexity of decision-making serve as incentives for parties to employ patronage as a mechanism for ensuring policy implementation. Patronage in this sense becomes a 'mode of governing' (p. 11), which empowers parties because it provides them with the ability to improve the organisation and management of the polity.

One of the volume's key findings is that the role of parties in controlling political patronage has declined. Instead power is increasingly concentrated in the hands of individual politicians. This has significant implications on party organisation as specific party elites, such as leaders and government ministers -the party in public office- have increased their power over the party in central office, which has traditionally been in charge of political appointments. Not only is the strength of vertical linkages within parties substantively reduced, but power now tends to be 'top-heavy' (albeit with some exceptions) with elites enjoying greater autonomy, and personal loyalties proving more important than party loyalties.

Crucially, the underlying logic of political patronage has also changed over time. The increased professionalisation of the civil service combined with declining party membership, increased media scrutiny of political appointments and a trend towards the privatisation of the public sector have given prominence to *control* as the primary motivation behind patronage appointments. Parties and individual politicians engage in patronage practices in order to ensure the efficient management and implementation of decision-making. Patronage is less directed towards *reward*, which tends to be associated with electoral politics; and appointments are mostly made on the basis of professional expertise and sourced from channels outside of the party. Political parties are now understood as 'networks' lacking strong party identity and operating in complicated multi-level systems of governance. In the absence of a strong hierarchical organisation, coordination becomes the chief task for parties, and patronage evolves into a party-building mechanism, a tool for party organisational survival and success.

It is a particularly interesting time to release an edited volume on party patronage in Europe, especially one that empirically concludes that Greece – a country exceptionally hit by the economic crisis – is a clear outlier in terms of patronage practices. Not only does the country score the highest point in the patronage index, diverging from the mean by 0.28 points; it is also dominated by reward-oriented patronage, constituting an exception to the European trend. The book, however, is not concerned with explaining cross-country variation of the scale and depth of patronage; does not examine in detail the reasons behind different levels of individual politician discretion over appointments across Europe; and does not discuss the implications of the changing relationship between the parties and the state for parties' relationship with their voters and the future of party membership.

In this sense, possibly one of the greatest assets of this book is that it opens up a number of potentially fruitful avenues for future research. These may include establishing the link between levels of reward-oriented patronage and susceptibility to economic crisis; unpacking the relationship between the organisational type of patronage and government efficiency and transparency; identifying new patterns of both government accountability and accountability within parties' organisational structures; and explaining cross-European variation in terms of the changing relationships between politicians, their party and their state.

Sofia Vasilopoulou is a Lecturer in the Department of Politics at the University of York. She teaches quantitative and qualitative research methods, Comparative European Politics and EU Politics. Her research interests include political behaviour and party politics. She holds a PhD in European Studies from the London School of Economics. Prior to joining York, she was a Fellow in Comparative Political Analysis in the School of Public Policy, University College London. She is the Editor (with Daphne Halikiopoulou) of *Nationalism and Globalisation: Conflicting or Complementary?* (Routledge, 2011). [Read more reviews by Sofia.](#)