

Book Review: More Sex, Lies and the Ballot Box: Another 50 Things You Need To Know About Elections edited by Philip Cowley and Robert Ford

blogs.lse.ac.uk/lseviewofbooks/2016/09/05/book-review-more-sex-lies-and-the-ballot-box-another-50-things-you-need-to-know-a

9/5/2016

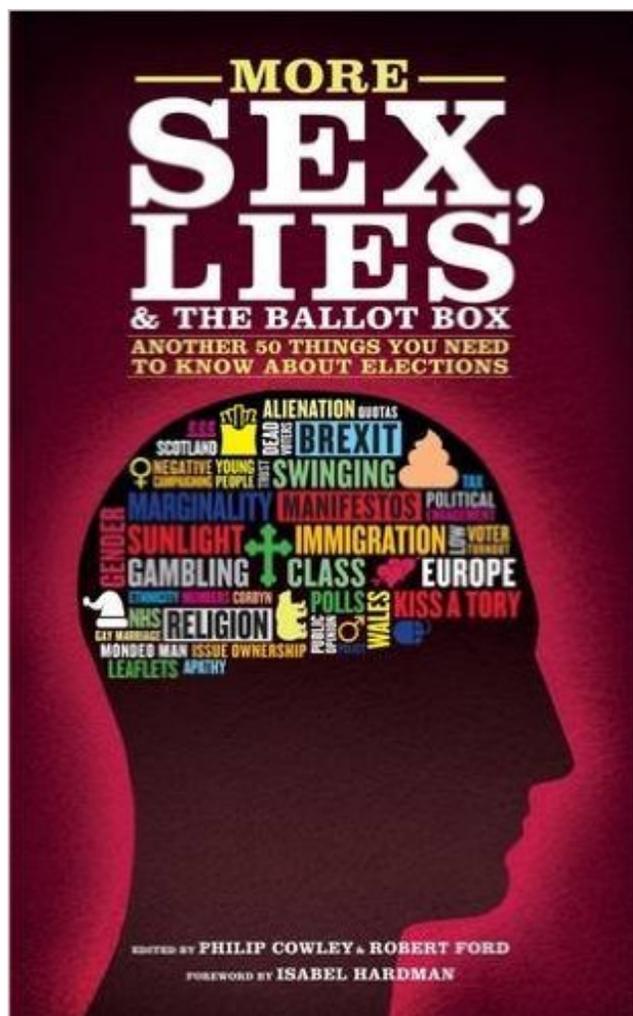
Following the highly successful [first volume](#), *More Sex, Lies and the Ballot Box: Another 50 Things You Need to Know About Elections*, edited by Philip Cowley and Robert Ford, offers fifty short chapters delving into UK electoral politics, covering topics including opinion polls, negative campaigning and the recent Brexit result. This is a refreshingly accessible book of nuanced, witty insights that will be a welcome salve for those grappling with the current state of British politics, writes Luke Temple.

More Sex, Lies and the Ballot Box: Another 50 Things You Need To Know About Elections. Philip Cowley and Robert Ford (eds). Biteback Publishing. 2016.

Find this book: 

Two years on from its successful predecessor – the blink of an eye in academic terms – *More Sex, Lies and the Ballot Box: Another 50 Things You Need To Know About Elections* again brings together fifty succinct chapters on elections, edited by Philip Cowley and Robert Ford. Each chapter is very short, is allowed only one graph or figure and, rather than being ram-packed with distracting asides and references, has only a quick final note on further reading.

This premise, following the first instalment, remains refreshing. Sure, such a description is clichéd, but it really is an uplifting thing to see swathes of research condensed and presented in such an accessible way. As an editor at [LSE British Politics & Policy blog](#), I would say this, but it's a bit like blogging on paper; and whilst it might sound like it, this isn't meant as a snotty putdown. The move to getting academic research 'out there' involves serious engagement across all mediums. When it comes to books there will always be 'popular' breakthroughs, but in all honesty, has anyone ever read *Nudge* all the way through? Or *Freakonomics*? Or *Capital in the 21st Century*? Frequently, these tomes over-explain graspable ideas through increasingly repetitive examples, exhausting even the most interested reader. Not a problem here: each chapter presents a strong idea, talks through the evidence and outlines the subtleties, all in four pages. Plus you can't buy that annoying political-know-it-all friend a blog for Christmas.



But the concept wouldn't be successful unless the content was of a high quality. These writers are engaged researchers outlining the most up-to-date theories and ideas and

collating the best available data, ably steered by the editors. As Cowley and Ford unashamedly argue in their foreword, this *is* an interesting topic, so why shouldn't it be written in an interesting way? And, as they rather dryly add, academics in the past may have hidden behind jargon and claimed that the public couldn't understand their lofty ideas, but 'the good news is that these academics are mostly older and will soon be dead'. This isn't dumbing down; this is reaching out and sharing findings. With jokes.



Image Credit: March For Europe Anti-Brexit March, London, United Kingdom, 2 June 2016
([mazz_5 CC BY SA 2.0](#))

The opening chapters provide something of a welcome salve for the rash of political madness infecting the UK at the moment. Matt Singh puts the failings of the opinion polls into perspective; Christopher Wlezien shows how voters' decisions are made well in advance of election day; and Mark Pack adds that, actually, general election campaigns don't make much of a difference. Indeed, Pack offers sage advice for those of us slavishly following the minutiae of political developments: 'if you really want to know why the result of an election is going to be what it will be, turn off the rolling news, log out of Twitter and open a history book or two.' This is level-headed, balanced and important stuff.

Elsewhere, the most successful chapters are perhaps those that most challenge some of the narratives we might have gotten complacent about. For instance, Stuart Fox suggests that when we compare them to older generations, the youth of today are not necessarily any more alienated than their elders – they might actually be pretty apathetic. Caitlin Milazzo shows how negative campaigning through leafleting in the 2015 campaign was dominated by Labour, not the 'nasty' Tory party, and least frequently of all by UKIP. And Philip Cowley has bad news for MPs – that old comfort blanket for local MPs, that individually they're trusted and liked much more than MPs en masse? This is true, but barely.

The book doesn't draw out bigger issues across the chapters as such, but upon reading through the whole thing, what we can piece together is that the torrid time currently engulfing the Labour Party is unlikely to end well. In terms of regaining some political cohesion, Ford points out that those on the Left might be more socially tolerant, but they tend to be more politically intolerant. Owen Smith might be making laudable [pro-immigration announcements](#), but the chapter by Geoffrey Evans shows that immigration concerns really were crucial to the success of Vote Leave. Lynn Bennie offers a range of positive and negative interpretations for the recent boost in party membership across

all the parties, but when it comes to Labour, her negative take is the most worrying: this could be a sign of weakness, of a party transforming into a protesting social movement that cannot gain power ('[complaining whilst the Tory party governs](#)', as a recent *Guardian* piece put it). Finally, and most devastating, is [Ron Johnston](#)'s chapter explaining how the electoral maths and vanishing marginal seats across the country are a very serious problem for Labour [converting votes into seats](#). This isn't some pundit's opinion, this is electoral fact.

Against this discussion, some of the later chapters in particular highlight that perhaps the trickiest beast to understand is not the political system and the politicians, but the public. Sam Power shows how the public believe that funding the party system through public money would clearly be the fairest option ... yet they don't want to pay for it. Ailsa Henderson describes clearly the devolution paradox whereby voters in Scotland (and other devolved regions) want more control over their policies ... yet they also want countrywide policy uniformity, skimming over [the real problems](#) such a scenario presents. And Bennie suggests that of late, the big thing to really boost party membership is ... electoral *failure*. But just before we get overwhelmed by all the cognitive dissonance going on, Will Jennings, in his chapter on political polarisation, provides another rather sage observation worth keeping in mind: 'The noisiest voices in the political discussion are not necessarily the most representative, even if they are heard now more than ever.'

The book is short on solutions to these sorts of issues, but then its remit doesn't pretend to be offering any, so this isn't a weakness as such. If I had to pick a shortcoming, I would put my blogger hat back on again and say that reading this book at this current moment is at times frustrating as it can't always do justice in attaching these fascinating insights to timely and unfolding political events (even though it must have taken some stressful last-minute edits even to get the Brexit result mentioned in the manuscript). But then, that's a very good reason to start working on *Even More Sex, Lies and the Ballot Box*.

[Luke Temple](#) is Assistant Editor of the LSE British Politics and Policy blog and research assistant on the [LIVEWHAT Project](#) at the Department of Politics, University of Sheffield.

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

- Copyright 2013 LSE Review of Books