



Monocratic government. the impact of personalization on democratic regimes

by Fortunato Musella, Berlin, De Gruyter, 2022, Tables and Figures. 156 pp., \$102.99 (Hardcover), e-book \$102.99, ISBN [PDF] 9783110721386; ISBN [EPUB] 9783110721720

John Polga-Hecimovich

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more difficult to achieve this aim, as in fact the book does with some considerable success.

Note

1. This series follows a former series by Il Mulino, edited by the political scientists, Maurizio Cotta and Carlo Guarnieri, 'Le istituzioni politiche italiane'. In this series, the volume *Il governo* (The Government, by Maurizio Cotta and Francesco Marangoni) was devoted to the analysis of the executive in its entirety rather than to its head.

Michelangelo Vercesi
NOVA University Lisbon

 michelangelo.vercesi@fcs.unl.pt

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Richard Neustadt (1990) wrote that the search for personal influence is at the heart of the task of being president in the United States. He might have underestimated the universality of this ambition. In *Monocratic Government. The Impact of Personalization on Democratic Regimes*, Fortunato Musella argues that contemporary politics has experienced a trend towards increased personalization of the executive, which he calls 'monocratic government', at the expense of parties, assemblies, and even civil society. He attributes this rise in executive personalization to a combination of constitutional changes as well as the maximization of legislative tools by ambitious executives, and warns that this may have damaging consequences for democracy.

The publication makes two big contributions to the study of the executive and to democracy studies. Theoretically, it reconsiders the state of democracy amidst the third wave of autocratization and provides a framework for monocratic government: personal rule by a political representative who dictates party organization and controls government activities, at the same time that assemblies, parties, and other collective actors find it increasingly difficult to exercise oversight of or control that power (p8). In many ways, this conceptualization is a useful alternative to the myriad conflicting (and often overlapping) definitions and conceptualizations of 'executive personalization'. Empirically, Musella – along with Raffaella Fittipaldi and Luigi Rullo – provides an operationalization of the book's conceptual proposal through the 'Monocratic Government Dataset', a calculation of personalization for seven countries (France, Germany, the United Kingdom, Italy, Spain, Hungary, and the United States) between

2000 and 2020. These calculations are reproducible, and thus serve as a basis for comparison across other countries and moments in time.

Musella is motivated by what appears to be a widespread empirical phenomenon of the decline of traditional political parties and executive personalization. Specifically, he makes the case that these tendencies have had troubling implications for democracy, since the concentration of power in a single figure limits horizontal accountability, whether in a separation-of-powers or fused-powers system. Although E.E. Schattschneider famously wrote that, 'Modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of parties' (Schattschneider 1942, 1), Musella seems to think that this is an insufficient condition. Instead, it is parties' weaknesses *in combination with an ambitious executive* that are most likely to lead to democratic backsliding.

The book proceeds as follows. After developing the problematic, Musella expands on the concept of monocratic government in chapter 2. He proposes a dynamic model of political systems which allows for temporal variation in what makes up both presidential and parliamentary government. Specifically, the balance of power among presidents, legislatures, political parties and civil society is allowed to vary, with the type of government tilting more monocratic or collegial depending on the primacy of presidents or political parties, and its legitimacy hinging on the equilibrium between the legislature and civil society. The interaction of these different dimensions creates different tendencies towards personalization among a multiplicity of political systems. In chapter 3, he explains that an increase in decision-making power among top political actors is at least partially due to the crisis and decline of traditional political parties. This has spawned party-system fragmentation and polarization and resulted in an inability of parties effectively to mediate between society and the state.

Further, Musella argues that personalization of power can be observed and measured through executive primacy in the legislative arena and the use of legislative decision-making instruments. With this in mind, in chapter 4, the author uses data from seven countries over a twenty-year period to illustrate the strengthening of the executive. He focuses on three types of legislative activities: 1) use of unilateral powers (e.g. decree powers) as instruments to realize their political programme; 2) more frequent delegation of legislative powers from assemblies to governments; and 3) direct executive intervention in legislative activities. Chapter 5 then suggests that the possibility of direct, unmediated communication between leaders and their followers can increase personalization, an especially acute problem in the age of social media, while chapter 6 illustrates how emergencies like the COVID-19 pandemic empowered leaders at the expense of other political actors.

This is a timely book, which reflects the idea that the personalization of government depends on several factors such as the party system and the nature of executive-legislative relations. Beyond this, however, Musella suggests that monocratic government cannot be properly understood without taking into account the ability of the executive to use powers effectively in the context in which it operates. Subsequent scholarship can make use of *Monocratic Government* as well as Musella et al.'s, dataset to expand the calculations of personalization across countries and time to test further these propositions and relate these concepts more directly to indices of democracy and accountability, as well as of governance outcomes.

References

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John Polga-Hecimovich
United States Naval Academy

✉ polgahec@usna.edu  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0711-6255>

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Come votano le periferie. Comportamento elettorale e disagio sociale nelle città Italiane, by Marco Valbruzzi (ed.), Bologna, Il Mulino, 2021, 344 pp., €28 (paperback), ISBN: 978-88-15-29435-7

In recent years, scholars examining electoral behaviour have consistently emphasized the significance of the territorial dimension in comprehending and interpreting the outcomes of both primary and secondary elections in Italy. This territorial dimension is delineated by urban coordinates, departing from the traditional (red and white etc.) macro-zones commonly employed to divide Italy politically. Analyses of major urban centres, such as Naples, Rome and Milan, have revealed notable variations in voting patterns between peripheral and central areas. The term ‘peripheral areas’ encompasses not only geographical considerations but also socio-economic factors. This renewed focus on the urban dimension has reinvigorated the ecological analysis of voting, with numerous case studies delving into the impact of this new cleavage on electoral behaviour. Nevertheless, the research has been conducted over disparate time frames and through varied approaches, resulting in limited opportunities for comparison.

In this context, the book, *Come votano le periferie. Comportamento elettorale e disagio sociale nelle città italiane*, edited by Marco Valbruzzi, aims to achieve a dual objective. The first is to contribute to the debate on the electoral behaviour of peripheries by analysing their voting patterns in 13 of Italy’s largest urban areas. The second is to render the results comparable across individual cities using a common framework supported by shared databases. Marco Valbruzzi, professor of Political Science at the University Federico II of Naples, conceived this ambitious research project, editing the book with the support of a network of researchers who have worked on the topic in recent years and who contributed to the chapters on electoral behaviour analysis and the 13 case studies.

The book, which is well structured and follows a clear and logical structure, is divided into two parts. The first defines the conceptual and methodological approaches that guide the study of individual urban realities. It then provides a general overview of the electoral behaviour of urban peripheries in Italy. The merit of this section lies in attempting to bring clarity to the concept of periphery, initially distinguishing its geographical from its socio-economic meaning, and envisioning an analytical strategy where these aspects are considered separately but analysed jointly. The definition of the socioeconomic distress Index, mostly based on 2011 Istat census data, is interesting not only methodologically, but also