Dominant Political Parties and Democracy

Concepts, measures, cases and comparisons

Edited by

Matthijs Bogaards and

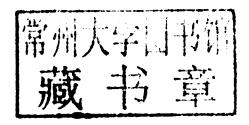
Françoise Boucek



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Dominant Political Parties and **Democracy**

This book examines dominant parties in both established democracies and new democracies and explores the relationship between dominant parties and the democratic process.

Bridging existing literatures, the authors analyse dominant parties at national and sub-national, district and intra-party levels and take a fresh look at some of the classic cases of one-party dominance. The book also features methodological advances in the study of dominant parties through contributions that develop new ways of conceptualizing and measuring one-party dominance. Combining theoretical and empirical research and bringing together leading experts in the field – including Hermann Giliomee and Kenneth Greene – this book features comparisons and case studies on Japan, Canada, Germany, Mexico, Italy, France and South Africa.

This book will be of interest to students and scholars of political science, democracy studies, comparative politics, party politics and international studies specialists.

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Series editor's preface

Democrats don't like dominant parties. They block the essential mechanism of democratic accountability, namely alternation in government. Inevitably, this entails serious risks for the quality of democracy. If an incumbent party runs a very low risk of losing power after the next election it will be more tempted to abuse its power. Also, its main office holders have little to fear and may be more susceptible to the temptations of power such as nepotism, corruption, and clientelism. Arguably even more consequential may be the lack of innovation that is likely to be the ugly sister of party dominance. Since, to paraphrase Kenneth Janda, defeat is the mother of invention, a party that is not seriously threatened may stop thinking about programmatic innovation, and it will have fewer incentives to care about the quality of its leadership personnel. After all, leadership turnover is frequently the results of election defeat.

Irrespective of such reasoning grounded in democratic theory and theories of party competition, most party leaders dislike dominant parties for the very simple reason that most parties are not dominant. Hence, there is considerable political energy in most political systems working against one-party dominance. This can materialize in otherwise rather unlikely political alliances which are mainly united by the desire to undermine the dominance of the main opponent. Furthermore, there is considerable pressure in most political systems to make sure that the rules of the game guarantee an equal playing field in order to either prevent one-party dominance, or to make it at least more feasible to work against it.

Yet, the history of democratic party systems is also a history of dominant parties, and even though the arguments sketched out above seem intuitively convincing, they do not always stand the test of reality. In other words, democracy has also thrived in countries where one party has dominated for a considerable period of time, as in Sweden, where Social Democracy ruled for many decades. Similarly, dominant parties can pave the way towards a more balanced party system as was exemplified by post-war Germany where some twenty years of Christian Democratic dominance were superseded by a functioning "two-and-a-half-party system". However, there are less favourable examples, like the Italian Christian Democracy, whose long lasting

dominance ended in the complete collapse of the Italian party system, and after almost two decades of the so-called 2nd republic it still seems doubtful that a more balanced party system is in the making. Similarly, the record of the Japanese LDP is also mixed and there other, even more questionable, examples where dominant parties have played an ambivalent role.

However, party dominance on one level of the political system may coexist with a more balanced party system on other levels, and this may be one important factor in explaining that the empirical evidence for the hypothesized negative effect of one-party dominance on the quality of democracy is somewhat mixed. To some degree, this is also not unrelated to the difficulty in determining what exactly defines a dominant party. In other words, the conceptual problems of clearly defining party dominance are not trivial, and it is one of the strengths of the current volume to assemble a range of approaches. While relative size and duration of dominance remain core criteria, more refined power indices open up new perspectives for comparative research.

On the other hand, one-party dominance may have a more elusive component that is hard to capture with such formal indicators. A party that has dominated a country's politics for a considerable period of time may have succeeded in shifting the parameters of political discourse to a degree that allows her to remain dominant beyond her numerical ascendancy. Clearly, Scandinavian Social Democracy comes to mind here, but the lasting effects of Margret Thatcher's reign could also be interpreted from this angle.

Still, these are examples from consolidated democracies. Clearly, one-party dominance raises more serious questions in transition countries where a dominant party remains in power for a considerable period of time after democratization. Parties like the South African ANC have yet to pass the ultimate test, that is, defeat at the polls. This example highlights the fact that research on dominant parties is not just an exercise in the splendid isolation of the academic ivory tower. Knowledge on the dynamics of one-party dominance also has political relevance, and this book provides important new insights.

Thomas Poguntke, Series Editor Bochum, March 2010

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