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Melvin Edelstein, *The French Revolution and the Birth of Electoral Democracy*. Farnham and Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2014. xxv + 365 pp. Maps, tables, notes, bibliography, and index. \$139.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1-4094-5471-7.

Review by Peter M. Jones, University of Birmingham.

The mobilizing power of elections began to attract the attentions of French Revolution specialists about twenty years ago. It resulted in important studies by Patrice Gueniffey [1] and Malcolm Crook [2] that reconnoitred the subject and identified the issues likely to be of most interest to historians. Melvin Edelstein has spent many years patiently gathering forensic evidence of electoral behavior and participation, and as a result has developed a factual knowledge of the subject which is probably unrivalled. In this substantial monograph he lays out the fruits of his researches. As the title of the book makes clear, his focus is slightly different from that of the earlier studies. He sets out to explore the gestation and birth of “electoral democracy” as captured in the experimental practices of the French revolutionaries. His aim is not, however, simply to tell us more about how the French pioneered and shaped a particular version of electoral politics in the 1790s, but rather to contribute to the current debate on citizenship. Linking the appearance of an inclusive and above all secular concept of citizenship to the events of 1789 enables the author to argue that the French revolutionaries, together with the American Founding Fathers, more or less invented the theories and practices which we associate with modern-day notions of representative democracy.

It follows that Edelstein is not very interested in exploring developments that fall outside his key period: 1789-1799. The electoral experience of the Old Regime monarchy gets very short shrift and so, too, do the manipulative yet highly integrative consultative procedures of the Consulate and the Napoleonic Empire. Eighteenth-century electoral practice, which was developed outside France—notably in Great Britain—serves merely as a counterpoint, enabling the author to highlight the innovative and pioneering credentials of the men who launched France into a revolution and subsequently established the first Republic with a quasi-universal male franchise. If we subtract the “before” and the “after” and subtract also France’s short-lived experiment with *sans-culotte*-style “direct” [i.e., non-electoral] democracy, the analysis offered in support of this interpretation is solid and without equal in the expanding literature on elections.

The author examines, in turn, just about every electoral episode of the decade: the hustings for the Estates-General of 1789, the municipal elections of 1790, the canton-based ballots to choose the District and Department administrators, the closely fought Justice of the Peace elections, the nationwide elections for the legislatures of 1791, 1792 and 1795, the referenda validating the Constitutions of 1793 and 1795, and so on. Only the functional ballots for judges and constitutional clerics remain outside the survey. The turnout rates of voters are calculated and compared over time and over a broad spectrum of urban and rural constituencies. The impact of sociological and geographical variables on voting or non-voting is weighed, and close attention is paid to the emergence of a political “class,” legitimized now by reference to the ballot-box or the electoral urn. Figures offered previously by historians are compared and, where necessary, recalculated on the basis of fresh or adjusted data. Thus, we learn that the invidious active/passive citizen distinction introduced by the National Constituent Assembly nonetheless enfranchised between 60 and 63 per cent of the adult male population. As the author points out, this was no mean achievement in the context of the late eighteenth-century state, whatever critics may have said about the compromise at the time.

Wherever possible, Edelstein juxtaposes his findings with those of other historians. He is mainly interested in the mechanics and the down-to-earth practices of elections, and he takes particular exception to the theoretical assumptions that structure Francois Furet's and Patrice Gueniffey's approach to the subject. But he also quizzes a number of other historians who have offered generalizations about the nature of the political class that the electoral process and democratic accountability brought into being in the course of the decade. Electors did not make choices in a political vacuum, and despite the many contemporary allegations to the contrary, they rarely succumbed to manipulation by parties or activists drawn from the clubs and organs of the press. As for the political elite in the making after 1789, it did not ossify and perpetuate itself in office, but, in the early years of the Revolution at least, constantly absorbed new recruits. It was therefore more socially differentiated than historians have previously allowed. Among the massed ranks of rural power holders whom Edelstein labels variously, and rather unsatisfactorily, "*agriculteurs*" or "cultivators," but not apparently "landowners," "*rentiers*," or "*laboueurs*," Albert Cobban's "revolutionary bourgeoisie" do not stand out. The reforms of 1789-90, he reminds us, created the scope for something like 1.2 million elective public offices.

Should we accept that the French revolutionaries gave birth to modern electoral democracy? Yes, but with qualifications. Ministers of the Old Regime monarchy (Laverdy, Necker, Calonne, Brienne) experimented with forms of representative local government too, a fact that Edelstein acknowledges only in passing. Many of the themes that he identifies as key ingredients of revolutionary political culture were being discussed in the highest councils of state from the 1770s: representation, proportionality, uniformity, and even notions of undifferentiated citizenship. True, the old monarchy could never quite make up its mind to break definitively with the "society of orders." Nevertheless, some of the reforms introduced during this pre-history of electoral democracy were strikingly "modern." Take the case of the municipal assemblies established in large parts of the kingdom in the late summer of 1787. They were elective (a censitary franchise paying no attention to "order"), they were required to meet regularly (after Mass on Sundays), and also to keep a record of their deliberations. Voting by secret ballot was prescribed (unless the majority of voters were illiterate), and an elected and remunerated municipal syndic chaired the meetings unless the local seigneur invoked his right to do so instead.

The author of this study truncates the gestation period, preferring to concentrate on 1789 as the crucial year of transition which is understandable enough. Unlike the previous attempts to set up provincial, *élection* and municipal assemblies which ran into stern resistance from vested interests, Necker's electoral regulation of December 1788 applied to the whole of the kingdom without exception. "All the world here is occupied in electioneering, in chusing [sic] or being chosen" remarked Thomas Jefferson from Paris, and Edelstein provides an extremely thorough narrative account of a process that in most textbooks is overshadowed by the drama of the drawing up of the *cahiers de doléances*.<sup>[3]</sup>

Most of the author's explanatory effort is devoted to the critical post-birth years between 1790 and the inception of the Terror in August 1793, when election to public positions came to a temporary halt. Democratic practice as it evolved under the Directory, the Consulate and the Napoleonic Empire is tackled in a more summary fashion, although Edelstein notes that the franchise arrangements introduced in 1795 still constituted an advance on 1791, inasmuch as 69 per cent of adult males retained the right to vote. It is a matter for slight regret that he decided to telescope his coverage of the later 1790s, since some historians have detected the stirrings of a form of party politics at the end of the decade. This development could have been explored further with a close examination of electoral contention and the resort to the schism assembly as a political tactic under the Directory. But *The French Revolution and the Birth of Electoral Democracy* is already a long book. It is rooted in very considerable archival research, which of necessity has taken many years to complete. We should not ask for too much, therefore. Edelstein has laid down a secure foundation on which others who are interested in elections and the origins of citizenship will surely build.

## NOTE

[1] Patrice Gueniffey, *Le nombre et la raison: la Révolution française et les élections* (Paris : Editions de l'École des Hautes Etudes en Science Sociales, 1993).

[2] Malcolm Crook, *Elections in the French Revolution: an Apprenticeship in Democracy, 1789–1799* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

[3] Thomas Jefferson to Thomas Lee Shippen, Paris, 11 March 1789, [founders.archives.org](http://founders.archives.org). (accessed 29 January 2015).

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