

H-France Review Vol. 3 (September 2003), No. 93

Philippe Bourdin, Jean-Claude Caron, and Mathias Bernard, Eds. *L'Incident électoral de la Révolution française à la Ve République*. Clermont-Ferrand: Presses Universitaires Blaise-Pascal, 2002. 334 pp. Maps, tables, notes, and index. 25.00 € (pb). ISBN 2-84516-208-1.

Review by Cherilyn Lacy, Hartwick College.

In a collection of essays that ranges from the Estates General to the present, *L'Incident électoral de la Révolution française à la Ve République* examines the development of French political culture through the lens of fraud, corruption, bribery, intimidation, and violence in the often-volatile environment of elections. The volume resulted from a colloquium organized by the *Centre d'Histoire "Espaces et Cultures"* at the Université Blaise Pascal and offers a timely contribution to the scholarship on political culture which has flourished since the commemorations of the bicentennial of the French Revolution in the 1980s. Although interest in the history of elections is not a recent development (Jean-René Suratteau's work on the elections of the Year IV dates back to the 1950s), the subject has acquired an acute relevance in the wake of the U.S. presidential elections in 2000 and the French presidential elections in 2002.[1] The contributors to this volume acknowledge the sense of "crisis" that has arisen from concerns about malfunctioning electoral processes, even as they re-evaluate the ideal of the smoothly functioning election as the measure of a mature democracy or a sign that democracy has been attained once and for all.

The political theory of Rousseau and the revolutionary ferment of 1789-1799 bequeathed a vision of democratic citizenship that delegitimized the influence of private interests or powerful factions over political matters, even stigmatized it as deviant. Political consensus was to be achieved by the unhindered, independent expression of each citizen's will within a formally sanctioned and inviolate context. However, the fact that actual practice often failed to live up to this ideal is not construed as evidence of imperfect institutions or a calculated assault on democracy. Rather, a central theme is the difficulty in demarcating the boundary between public and private during elections, whether it be the subtle advocacy of political candidates in religious sermons or the nebulous distinction between perception and evidence where accusations of bribery and corruption were concerned. Indeed, by focusing on the more immediate, face-to-face political environment during elections (such as confrontations in the space reserved for polling or disturbances in the streets on or around election days), the authors underscore how greatly familiarity, personality, and coercion remained a part of the political experiences of French citizens.

Drawing upon an impressive array of police records, newspapers, and departmental and national archives, the essays confront the dynamics of elections in a diverse range of political contexts: restoration and empire, as well as republics. As such, they build upon much of the excellent scholarship that has been produced on the expansion of suffrage as part of the formation of republican citizens and the consolidation of certain norms of civic democracy, notably the work of Pierre Rosanvallon, Alain Garrigou, and Michel Offerlé.[2]

Organized in chronological fashion, this edited collection uses instances of violence and corruption in elections to highlight the degree to which democracy was an ongoing process of acculturation to institutions that were themselves far from static and unchanging. The contributions of Christophe Le Digol and Bernard Gainot bring into relief the lack of consensus over political institutions in the Revolutionary era and the difficulty this poses for any assessment of electoral processes that views private (or state) influence over voters as a sign of corruption. On the other hand, Malcolm Crook cautions against using plebiscites during the Napoleonic era as a gauge of popular support for the government, given the extent to which the number of votes was inflated to manufacture a specific outcome. However, efforts to manipulate electoral outcomes were just as readily turned against the government, as Christophe Voilliot reveals in his analysis of tactics that ultraroyalist electors used to oppose official candidates during the Restoration. All of these essays illustrate the ways in which the "apprenticeship" of French electoral procedure pre-dated the advent of universal suffrage.

As Patrick Lagoueyte so eloquently demonstrates in his essay, the apprenticeship continued in 1848 with elections that, organized in haste, were riddled with procedural irregularities: voting held in private residences or churches; allegations that municipal officials in charge of monitoring elections were themselves illiterate; and a lack of standardized ballots, which often made it difficult to determine exactly for whom a voter had intended to vote. Imperfect and inconsistent though the voting was during this turbulent "republican spring," Lagoueyte concludes that it nonetheless accustomed a broad segment of the population to the practices of electoral democracy. Eric Anceau's essay notes that although the electoral climate during the Second Empire lacked the turbulence of 1848, growing scrutiny and criticism by the republican political opposition of the abuses committed in support of official candidates continued the apprenticeship in electoral strategy.

Roughly a third of the volume is devoted to the Third Republic. From Christophe Coston's examination of elections in the Puy-de-Dôme to Jacqueline Lalouette's detailed analysis of the numerous invalidations that followed the 1877 elections and Jean El Gammal's study of debates over invalidations in the Chamber of Deputies, the act of levying accusations of fraud or corruption emerges not as a sign of failed democratic institutions so much as an integral part of the process of defining legitimate political practice. As such, these essays offer compelling insights about the extent to which the republican political framework emerged through clashes of personalities and factions at the local level, rather than being imposed from above. This is further demonstrated by Bertrand Joly's fascinating and persuasive dissection of the great republican 'bugbear', clerical interference in politics. Joly's essay not only demonstrates how blurred the line could be between prayers, sermons, and outright political advocacy, but more importantly it suggests that republican perceptions of (and anxieties about) clerical abuse of influence over voters are just as revealing as any evidence (or lack thereof) of deliberate circumvention of the regulations against church intervention in electoral matters.

The essays of Olivier Dard, Mathias Bernard, and Nathalie Dompnier illustrate that the twentieth century did not necessarily see the arrival of a mature electoral democracy, purified of procedural inconsistencies and electoral fraud. More realistically, as Dompnier so convincingly argues in her analysis of the stigma of corruption associated with elections in the DOM-TOMs, the equation of stable, modern civilization with a smoothly-functioning electoral system has depended in part on a cultural construction, one in which corruption is distanced from the metropole by ascribing it to the "savage", post-colonial "other" of the DOM-TOMs.

The relative absence of any analysis of gender or race/ethnicity is offset somewhat by the overview essays by Philippe Bourdin, Yves Déloye, and Jean-Claude Caron, although greater attention to the voices of those who advocated women's suffrage might have provided an even richer context in which to consider the struggles over the legitimation of certain electoral practices and delegitimation of others. Nonetheless, *L'Incident électoral* should be of interest to scholars of French political culture, legal history, and urban and rural sociology.

LIST OF ESSAYS

- Philippe Bourdin, "Introduction."
- Yves Déloye, "Des incidents électoraux. Éléments pour une autre histoire du suffrage électoral".
- Christophe Le Digol, "Vérification des pouvoirs et incident électoral. Les enjeux de la mise en forme de l'élection (1789-1791)".
- Bernard Gainot, "Du bon usage du tumulte dans les assemblées élisantes (1795-1800)".
- Malcolm Crook, "Confiance d'en bas, manipulation d'en haut: la pratique plébiscitaire sous Napoléon (1799-1815)".
- Christophe Voilliot, "Les incidents électoraux et la contestation des pratiques de la candidature officielle en 1816".
- Patrick Lagoueyte, "Apprentissage et incidents électoraux à l'aube du suffrage universel: le scrutin d'avril".
- Eric Anceau, "Les irrégularités et les incidents lors des élections législatives de 1852-1870 ou le difficile apprentissage du suffrage universel sous le Second Empire".
- Christophe Coston, "Les incidents électoraux lors des scrutins cantonaux du Puy-de-Dôme (1871-1914)".
- Jacqueline Lalouette, "Une vague exceptionnelle d'invalidations: l'épilogue des élections législatives de 1877".
- Jean El Gammal, "Les invalidations à la Chambre des députés: incidents électoraux, politique et histoire à la fin du XIXe siècle".
- Bertrand Joly, "L'ingérence cléricale et les élections législatives de 1902".
- Olivier Dard, "L'incident électoral dans la France de l'entre-deux-guerres: le sens d'une marginalité".
- Bruno Benoît, "Incidents électoraux au moment de l'élection du Front populaire à Lyon et dans le Rhône".
- Mathias Bernard, "Inéligibilité et incidents électoraux au lendemain de la Seconde Guerre mondiale (1945-1953)".
- Nathalie Dompnier, "Les fraudes d'outre-mer: la bonne conscience française? Les élections législatives des IVe et Ve Républiques".
- Jean-Claude Caron, "En guise de conclusion provisoire: l'incident électoral, du présent au passé et vice-versa".

NOTES

[1] Jean-René Suratteau, "Les élections de l'an IV," *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*, (1951): 374-393.

[2] Pierre Rosanvallon, *Le sacre du citoyen. Histoire du suffrage universel en France* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992); Alain Garrigou, *Le vote et la vertu. Comment les Français sont devenus électeurs* (Paris: Presses de la Fondation nationale des sciences politiques, 1992); Michel Offerlé, *Un homme, une voix? Histoire du suffrage universel* (Paris: Gallimard, 2002).

Cherilyn Lacy
 Hartwick College
 lacyc@hartwick.edu

Copyright © 2003 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies. ISSN 1553-9172