



WILEY

Review: The Transformative Power of Deliberation: When Ethnic Protests Lead to Democratization

Reviewed Work(s): Ethnic Struggle, Coexistence, and Democratization in Eastern Europe by Sherrill Stroschein

Review by: Mariya Y. Omelicheva

Source: *International Studies Review*, December 2013, Vol. 15, No. 4 (December 2013), pp. 631-633

Published by: Wiley on behalf of The International Studies Association

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24032998>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



The International Studies Association and Wiley are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *International Studies Review*

JSTOR

The Transformative Power of Deliberation: When Ethnic Protests Lead to Democratization

REVIEW BY MARIYA Y. OMELICHEVA

Department of Political Science, University of Kansas

Ethnic Struggle, Coexistence, and Democratization in Eastern Europe. By Sherrill Stroschein. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012. 312 pp., \$99.00 hardcover (ISBN-13: 978-0-521-19140-1).

No other form of government finds greater support around the world than democracy. Yet, a democratic voting system based on the majority rule can be a real handicap for minorities. The potentially explosive differences in the minority and majority views combined with the systematic underrepresentation of minorities in the institutions of governance are magnified in democratizing states. Strident debates over policy- and governance-related issues characterizing divided societies can quickly escalate into interethnic violence. *Ethnic Struggle, Coexistence, and Democratization in Eastern Europe* challenges these axioms, offering conclusions that are both counterintuitive and reassuring.

First, by analyzing a sequence of protests and contestation by ethnic Hungarian minorities in three East European states in the 1990s, Sherrill Stroschein shows how these informal political processes facilitated gradual democratization in Romania and Slovakia. The meticulously examined contentious processes demonstrate an alternative means of decision making known as “deliberative democracy” or “deliberative argumentation” that developed simultaneously with the formal institutions of electoral democracy (p. 13). Second, the book reassesses the consequences of contentious politics by depicting how grassroots ethnic mobilization and protest can function as democratizing mechanisms. Not only did ethnic mobilization evade violent aftermath (violent riots that took place in a Romanian city Târgu Mures in 1990 were the only exception to the largely peaceful trajectory of protests), but it also helped the Hungarian minorities and titular majorities learn about the nature and limits of each other’s claims. The book points out several conditions under which protests can foster violence. State-led repression, military interventions, and economic hardships are mentioned in this regard (p. 25). The primary focus of the book, however, is on illuminating causal mechanisms that allow ethnic contestation to moderate groups’ demands and invest greater quality in public policy and democratic life.

The argument developed throughout the book reads as follows: minorities in divided societies mobilize in response to the initiatives that scale back benefits or policies serving their interests. Driven primarily by the policy concerns of ordinary citizens, rather than the manipulative actions of political elites, minorities seize the opportunity in which they see a chance to push for friendly policies through protests and contestation. Majority masses, on the other hand, mobilize when policies change to grant extensive privileges to minorities or as a result of emulation of minorities’ mobilization (p. 69). The repeated contention by minority and titular groups makes them aware of each other’s positions as well as the limits within which they could possibly push for their claims. The contestation between

Omeličeva, Mariya Y. (2013) The Transformative Power of Deliberation: When Ethnic Protests Lead to Democratization.

International Studies Review, doi: 10.1111/misr.12076

© 2013 International Studies Association

masses is accompanied by negotiations between elites of different groups serving as “brokers” between masses and policymakers. Over time, the contentious processes that become routinized slowly moderate each group’s stances, leading the masses away from violent confrontation and contributing to democratic consolidation. Sherrill Stroschein demonstrates the interaction patterns between minorities, majorities, and their elites, and the two-way causal relationship between protest and policy in methodically researched cases of ethnic mobilization at the local level in two Romanian cities over issues of education (Târgu Mures, chapter 4) and historical symbols (Cluj, chapter 5), as well as at the national level over language policy (chapter 6) and local autonomy (chapter 7).

While original in its arguments concerning the primacy of masses in ethnic mobilization, relational ontology, and methodological commitment to historical institutionalism, the book is not impeccable in its conceptual and methodological decisions. By dichotomizing relationalism and methodological individualism and privileging relations as the source of causal factors in social life (pp. 15–16), the study does not do fair justice to actors and agency. As a consequence, it treats minorities and majorities as homogeneous groups and remains silent on the question of formulation of grassroots demands and participation of “opinion-makers” and “midrange elites” (p. 20) in this process. It stresses the importance of issue “framing” in the elite–mass relationship (p. 23), but underspecifies the prevailing mass understandings of contentious topics as well as the goals of elites. It plays down the role of ethnic parties in mobilization in favor of the “power of ordinary people” despite some contrary evidence presented in the book and a critical role of “elite-masses” tandem in channeling the contestation processes away from violence.

The monograph is noteworthy for its attempt at incorporating the “key traits” of historical institutionalism—time, sequence, path dependence, and feedback effects—into empirical analysis, but it is not entirely conceptually thorough or successful at integrating conceptual framework with empirical evidence. “Feedback” that is defined as the probability that an event at a later stage is affected by an event at a prior stage (p. 32) is limited to the impact of local events or national policy changes to the exclusion of the possibility of feedback from events and processes occurring in other times or contexts (there is a brief discussion of the feedback from the European Union, but it is found irrelevant for contestation). The choice of emulation as a mechanism of feedback is underspecified—another upshot of the relational approach that shortchanges microfoundations of the individuals’ decisions—making it inconsistent with the very notions of path dependency and policy emulation. The latter are traditionally understood as decisions made by social actors that are constrained or informed by models/decisions they (or other actors) have made in the past or present. The techniques of event data collection and analysis employed in the book are original methodological decisions that allow for graphical representation of trajectories of contestation by minority and majority groups. Still, the symmetrical graphics are suggestive of the simultaneity of groups’ actions, rather than sequences of mobilization and response.

Finally, by giving preeminence to contentious politics, the book underplays the importance of other factors contributing to the moderation of groups’ stances on divisive topics, such as the nature of contentious issues themselves. In the analysis of ethnic mobilization in Ukraine’s Transcarpathia, for example, the fact that the Hungarian minority did not protest initially (due to the favorable language law regarding minorities in the early 1990s) is consistently emphasized in the book as the only factor in Ukraine’s divergent trajectory. Yet, of the multiple disputed subjects alluded to in the book, only symbolic issues, the use of minority language, and debates over local government structures are thoroughly considered in the study. In all of the East European countries, the titular majority

and the state were less likely to make any concession on the issue of autonomy than on language or historical symbols (p. 202). Hungarians' proposals for greater autonomy were rejected by all national governments in various ways. This suggests the importance of issues contested at the local and national level. The fact that religious differences played only a moderate role in framing demands of minority and titular groups might be another important factor in moderation of their positions. All in all, the argument that it was *precisely* ethnic *contention* that led the Hungarian minority to accept democratic institutions in Romania and Slovakia (and contributed to these states' democratization, while the lack of initial ethnic contestation by Hungarians in Ukraine emboldened the titular majority to pursue a nationalizing state project and, by extension, halted Ukraine's progress toward democratization) oversimplifies the very complex and multifaceted transitions to democracy in these countries. The point that contentious policies enabled the institutionalization of informal deliberative democratic processes in Romania and Slovakia is cogently and convincingly conveyed in the book. However, this evidence is not sufficient for making a broader argument about the impact of ethnic protests on the success of democratizations, which is implied in the study.

The discussed conceptual choices and arguments about contentious politics are, nonetheless, the greatest assets of the monograph, which will make for a valuable read in the courses on democratic theory, comparative democratization, and politics of ethnicity. The debated issues can be used as stimulating prompts for an insightful discussion of ontological and methodological issues in comparative politics. The skillful incorporation of event data collection into fieldwork and integration of event data analysis with ethnography makes the book a great resource for teaching qualitative methods courses.