

Bardovič, J. (2022): Vol'by 2020: Volebná podpora a jej premeny
(In English: Elections 2020: Electoral support and its dynamics).
Trnava: FSV UCM, 2022. 155 pp. ISBN 978-80-572-0230-1.

There has been a plethora of books dedicated to elections, electoral participation, and electoral engineering over the decades, also authored by scientists from Central Europe. Apparently, political scientists do not dominate these topics only; there are also publications in law and sociology. This review is dedicated to the very recent scientific output from a member of Department of Political Sciences at Faculty of Social Sciences UCM in Trnava.

First of all, let's admit the structure of the book entitled *Elections 2020: Electoral support and its dynamics* are basically twofold. On the one hand, it maps and analyzes elections and electoral behaviour in its theoretical perspective and placement within science and research. Second, it gives attention to a systematic review of Slovak parliamentary elections since 1990 with a specific and major focus on the 2020 and 2016 parliamentary elections in Slovakia. From this reason, it is not another theoretical review of electoral systems but it brings more sociological, political and behavioural aspects upfront.

Therefore, the book covers a relatively large area of research from theoretical perspectives to practical dimensions. To put this briefly, the book is an excursion to theory and practice of elections in Slovakia over the last three decades, adding the comprehensive analysis of the 2020 elections while using the 2016 results as a comparative source. Thus said, these facts could also be incorporated into the title of the publication itself, which could ultimately increase the interest of the academic audience in the publication.

Political scientists, sociologists, as well as other academic audiences, used to follow the tradition of regular electoral analyses coproduced by research institutes and think tanks in Slovakia. Currently, as it seems, this tradition no longer continues, thus the gap is being filled by scholars who their research dedicated to electoral behaviour, electoral engineering, and electoral studies. This is also the case of the author Jakub Bardovič, while his major research domains include the latter.

His 2022 scientific monograph is structured into 4 main chapters covering more than 130 pages of academic writing. Already in the Introduction part,

the author states that 2020 parliamentary elections were long awaited after a turbulent period of governments led by SMER-SD and points out some controversies related to 2016 cabinet formation. The author formulates the idea that a major critical juncture occurred in 2018, prior to elections, the murder of an investigative journalist and his fiancée. This statement supports the research ground for the author as he argues that: „*compared to with the previous elections, the 2020 elections took place in a different social climate, and therefore it is of great importance to monitor short-term differences*“ (p. 6). On the other hand, the author also claims that these elections were the last held before the COVID-19 pandemic and less than one year after the presidential elections, which he considers as important turning points in the social and political environment in Slovakia.

The academic and research goals of the publication are multidimensional. First, the author aims to characterize the 2022 election results to reflect the relation between the votes distribution using the specifics of the electoral system and to identify the regional discrepancies of the electoral behaviour. Second, the formulated research questions aim to capture the dynamics of change between 2016 and 2020 parliamentary elections. These goals and aims ultimately reflect the title of the book.

Besides the aims and motivation in the introduction part, the author specifies the case selection as the well as *modus operandi*, which is constructed as a methodological narrative which practically substitutes a separate methodological chapter in the publication. The relevance and validity of the data used is confirmed by using official sources from the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic.

Throughout the book, the author follows his research plan in all four chapters. In the first one, he explores the electoral paradigm itself – he places the elections in the context of democratic government and representative democracy with an ambition to define the phenomenon of participation in elections, as well as electoral behaviour interlinked with political and/or civic engagement. Here, the author tries to provide the basic framework of electoral research while stating that such book cannot have an ambition to be exhaustive given the large portfolio of electoral studies. On a contrary, the author’s intention is to show that despite a robust database of academic studies in international journal related to electoral studies, elections and political parties, these research categories still remain alive in the academic community and retain their place not only among Slovak political scientists. This is demonstrated by the ever-changing nature and dynamics of elections at each level, whether it is local, regional, national, or supranational level.

The second chapter is devoted to systematic overview and reflection of three-decade development of elections to the National Council of the Slovak Republic (formerly known as Slovak National Council). Here, the author captures the major dynamics, including the instability of, according to him, two key features, electoral behaviour and party system. It would also be necessary to add other features such as economic and social development, international integration, and global changes.

Within the last two chapters, the author addresses the identified issues as practical research and graphical post-processing. While in the third chapter, he offers a look at a voters' distribution and representation as derived from the electoral legislation setup, the last, and the largest fourth chapter captures regionally divided specifics of electoral behaviour related to electoral turnout and the support of individual political parties as selected in the methodology.

All parts of the book, with the exemption of the fourth one, are constituted as single parts without any subdivisions. I expect the first three chapters divided into subtitles, given the logical and rigorous literature review of the election subjects. It would increase readability and could also serve as a textbook for students since electoral studies belong to key features of political science knowledge.

A strong part of the book is its graphical processing. In addition to the tables and schemes of the previous chapters, the fourth chapter contains exclusive graphic elements – maps in full colour spectrum covering the electoral turnout in Slovakia, shortages in turnout from comparative perspective, comparison of governments' successfulness based on electoral results, and electoral results of major political parties in Slovakia. This adds to the complexity of studied aspects, as it presents interesting topics of electoral engineering as a scientific sound and valid observation. I must admit that the author works dominantly with the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic and does a great job with reading and processing data. Since the idea behind the book is to capture the electoral deficits, trends and challenges, author puts emphasis to monitor and compare those relevant political subjects that participated and were successful (or at least partially) during the last two elections in Slovakia (obtaining 5% electoral support in 2016 or 2020). Thus, the author could observe following trends: the influence of electoral settings on the electoral success, overrepresentation of political parties in the elections, deformation index of political parties, mandates' value, regional representation of results, and the aspects of the preferential votes system. The author ends his third chapter with the position of the party leaders' position on the ballot.

The benefit of the publication is not just a simple observation based on the theoretical narrative but what is most important is the author's contribution to the themes, resulting in objective analyses and discussions of relevant phenomena. It is precisely that a publication of this type should aim at – to provide basis for critical thinking based on processed data supplemented by the commentaries and argumentation of the author.

However, the publication contains some limitations due to its nature. First, there is no particular chapter dedicated to the methodological framework. Although the author claims his research objectives in the introductory part and decomposes the research problem, it would be beneficial to give more insights on the methods, research problem, objectives, and research questions in a dedicated place in the book.

Second, the publication limits itself into two latest parliamentary elections in Slovakia, which gives some space for comparative assessment, but lacks the deeper investigation in the modern history of political parties, party system and electoral trends in a longer period. Third, given the nature of a Slovak party system as an extremely volatile, unstable, and fragmented one, it is almost impossible to follow a trend, pattern, or a line in the electoral studies in Slovakia. Nevertheless, this is not something the author can change. On a contrary, author is aware of this particular problem, as he states in his conclusion: *“The 2020 parliamentary elections are associated with a social atmosphere significantly different from that of 2016 and 2015. Also as a result it is possible to talk about (elections), which on the one hand brought an important change, but on the other hand also simultaneously confirmed existing trends from the past”* (p. 130). These trends include the changing role of the major political subject SMER-SD and the electoral turnabout: the opposition parties took the ground of the political arena and opened a new political framework and space for political scientists to observe these trends.

Based on the above-mentioned, ignoring the minor limits of the book, I truly recommend the publication to become a pillar in political science education as a helpful tool for electoral and political party systems studies.

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