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Malcolm Crook, *How the French Learned to Vote: A History of Electoral Practice in France*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. xviii + 262 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, appendices, bibliography, and index. \$100.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9780192894786.

Review by Geoff Read, Huron University College.

Malcolm Crook's recent book, *How the French Learned to Vote: A History of Electoral Practice in France*, is a very useful text for those studying French political history. It offers some unique insights into its subject matter as it moves through its introduction, eight thematically-organized chapters, and conclusion, and makes a significant contribution to the field accordingly.

Every book has to start somewhere and *How the French Learned to Vote* begins chronologically by and large with the French Revolution, a logical choice given it initiated mass electoral politics in France. That said, the author clearly sees one of his contributions as being an emphasis on the origins of many French electoral practices in the pre-1789 period and indeed, some of the book's most interesting moments, at least for this historian of the Third Republic, come in the sometimes extensive background Crook provides into the Ancien Régime period. In the first chapter, for example, entitled, "One Man, One Vote: The Long March Towards Universal Male Suffrage," the author reveals that municipal elections under the Bourbons, at least in some towns such as Nantes, were livelier affairs than one might have assumed involving thousands of male electors. Crook also nicely captures the lack of uniformity under the monarchy from town to town and region to region, emphasizing that in Normandy, the Franche Comté, and Gascony among other areas, a relatively high number of "*chefs de famille*" helped to select municipal officials while in other regions the electorate could be much more restricted (pp. 20-21).

Having started, with some justified variance, with 1789, Crook chooses to bring his readers right up to the very recent past, offering some commentary on the 2017 presidential election for example in chapter seven, "Voting as a Subversive Activity: The Ballot Paper as Protest." In this chapter the author points out that the record number of spoiled ballots in the 2017 contest, which eventually saw Emmanuel Macron triumph over Marine Le Pen in the second round, in fact had many historical precedents as under Napoleon III when spoiled ballots spiked from just 40,000 in 1851 to 100,000 by 1870 (p. 170). Furthermore, while many close observers of French politics have long viewed spoiled ballots as symptomatic of a democratic malaise, he recasts them instead as evidence of robust participation in the democratic process, as, in other words, an intentional expression of discontent or political dissent. This chapter also gifts the reader one of the book's more colorful sections when it examines the messages many voters have chosen to write on their ballots to express their frustrations including sometimes denouncing the Republic itself (pp. 188-

190). In short, just as Crook's forays into the Ancien Régime prove fruitful, by bringing his text up to the recent past, he is able to illustrate his material's contemporary relevance. Perhaps the only finicky point one might make here is that he could have done this more frequently as the book's coverage of the post-World War Two era is relatively brief in comparison to its treatment of the 1789-1940 period.

The book's periodization thus makes sense, as does, with something of a caveat below, its organization. The subjects the author chooses to cover are entirely logical. His chapters are devoted to the following subjects, in order: the development of universal manhood suffrage, the delayed development of women's suffrage, the evolution of the means by which candidates are brought or come forward to stand as candidates for election, the growth of increasingly complex political campaigns, polling, electoral mobilization or voter turnout, protest voting, and non-voting and abstentions. These subjects are all natural inclusions in a book about how the French learned to vote. Students of French political history will appreciate having a book they can turn to in order to answer their questions about how, for example, it came to be that the political system allowed General Georges Boulanger to stand as a candidate in multiple elections around the country in 1888-1889 or, indeed, how it was possible that he received tens of thousands of write-in votes for elections he did not stand in and in constituencies in which he did not reside. The book, in other words, is an excellent repository of information about the evolution of French electoral processes and explains how and why things came to be as they are or were.

Scholarly books undergo rigorous scholarly review, a subjective process where authors often receive conflicting advice about their work. Offering too much criticism in a review always feels, therefore, a little unfair, at least potentially, since the feature one is criticizing may well have been suggested by a peer reviewer. That said, one downside of the book's structure I would note is that the chapters sometimes feel both a little disjointed and somewhat repetitive. On the latter point, for example, it might have been better to cover abstentions and spoiled ballots in one rather than two chapters. Choosing to separate them allows them, admittedly, to be given their due and distinct attention but it also means repeating a largely similar chronology in back-to-back chapters and dealing with at least overlapping voter motivations and scholarly commentary.

Further, in organizing the chapters thematically, while also aiming to provide a *longue durée* history of voting in France, Crook is trying to blend two approaches that fit somewhat awkwardly together. Ambitious Braudelian histories work best when there is a clear narrative structure to them, but Crook has largely chosen to avoid such a structure in his text. This choice allows for a clear focus on each issue the author wants his readers to consider in the chapters, but at the price of sacrificing a clear narrative thread that ties his material together. This helps to explain why the chapters sometimes read like distinct essays on voting in France rather than as parts of a single monograph.

This does not, however, detract from the book's considerable value. While they may feel a little disconnected from each other at times, his chapters are largely successful in making their key points. The author grounds his arguments in the source material and avoids over-reaching. By looking at the *longue durée* of French political history, for instance, he is able to see that there has been something of an ebb and flow to political participation; this, in turn, gives him license to observe that while the current dip in rates of participation should be closely watched, it is truthfully of greater significance that so many French voters continue to turn up to the polls to exercise their right to the franchise. Even in the 2017 presidential election, often, at least until

its 2022 successor, viewed as a sort of nadir for presidential elections in the Fifth Republic, 74.6% of French voters cast a ballot in the second round. As the author correctly notes, such a rate of voter turnout makes France the envy of many democracies where there is much less hand-wringing over voter apathy.

A How the French Learned to Vote is also a meticulously researched book. The author has worked with fonds from the National Archives, the Paris Police Prefecture, and some departmental archives. Likewise, the book draws on papers and publications from the French National Library, the British National Library, newspapers, memoirs, and official publications. This careful research produces a text that speaks with reserved authority about its subjects as the author draws from his sources in making his various arguments.

Such is the case, for example, with the chapter in the book dealing with material that most overlapped with my own past research. This is chapter two, “Women Had to Wait: A Stubbornly Resisted Female Franchise.” Crook is not a women’s historian and I wondered, accordingly, how well-versed he would be in the literature on the women’s suffrage movement in France. I am pleased to report that the author’s judicious approach served him well here as elsewhere. He builds carefully on the work of historians in the field, supplementing their research and arguments with his own reading of parliamentary and press debates of women’s suffrage, the family vote, and related issues. Not surprisingly, given this caution and conscientiousness, his conclusions are well-founded and largely echo those of experts in the field. These include that advocates of women’s suffrage faced open as well as more camouflaged opposition to their goal on both the political left and right. As Crook quite rightly observes, never was the cynicism of French politicians of many stripes more obvious than during the 1919 debate on women’s suffrage in the Chamber of Deputies when many including Victor Augagneur voted for the measure despite their own opposition to it because they were confident it would be defeated in the Senate. This confidence was, sadly, proven justified. It could be said that this chapter misses an opportunity to emphasize the agency of French women in the struggle for women’s suffrage; indeed, agency would have provided a nice link to Crook’s comments on the enactment of “*parité*” (pp. 67, 91). There was also an explanation given for the “delay” in French women’s being able to vote (France lagged roughly 20–25 years behind most of the Anglophone world in particular in enacting women’s suffrage)—that France’s relatively early and tumultuous embrace of universal manhood suffrage made it to be expected that women would face additional obstacles to voting in France—which begged further explanation (p. 12). But Crook acquits himself well in this chapter as elsewhere in the book. I would consider assigning this to a senior seminar as an overview of the history of the women’s suffrage movement in France.

There is a concluding feature of the book that deserves praise. Crook has included four very useful appendices: “A Chronology of Significant Electoral Legislation and Changes of Regime, 1789–2014”; a table that breaks down the “Size of the Registered, ‘Metropolitan’ Electorate, 1790–2017,” under each constitutional regime and at key moments in French political history; a breakdown of the “Location of Voting Assemblies and Polling Stations since 1789”; and a list of all the “Constitutional Votes, Plebiscites, and Referendums” held in France from 1793 to 2005. Students studying French political history will be very grateful for these addenda to the text. Indeed, I greatly wish I had had access to these appendices when I was in graduate school.

In sum, Malcolm Crook’s *How the French Learned to Vote: A History of Electoral Practice in France* is an excellent addition to the field of French political history. Its scope is ambitious, and its

challenges reflect the scale of that ambition, but it is carefully researched, well-argued, thought-provoking, and of contemporary relevance. Moreover, the book will prove exceedingly helpful to researchers of French political history, whether they be students or established scholars. It has the potential to become the go-to resource for answers to questions about the evolution of French political and electoral processes and traditions.

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