

# Comparative government according to Herbert Tingsten

Olof Petersson

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Herbert Tingsten had the privilege of living three different lives (Westerståhl 1992, 204). His first life included a brief encounter with the diplomatic world but he soon devoted himself to an academic career. Herbert Tingsten became the first holder of the Lars Johan Hierta chair in political science at Stockholms högskola, now Stockholm University. At the age of 50 Tingsten accepted an offer to become the editor-in-chief of Dagens Nyheter, the leading newspaper in Sweden at the time. In this second life, lasting from 1946 to 1959, he was a strong voice in the public debate, a staunch supporter of NATO and an unforgiving anti-communist. Tingsten's third life began with the writing of his memoirs in the early 1960's, followed by a series of books based on personal reflections. This gave the reading public an intimate view of Herbert Tingsten's inner life, his feelings of insecurity, his struggle against blindness and his fear of death.

In one sense Herbert Tingsten remained a political scientist all of his life. He never stopped monitoring current events and analyzing, questioning and criticizing false or incoherent statements. His last major work, a study of school book propaganda, was published only four years before his death in 1973 (Tingsten 1969). A prolific author, his research covered many different fields, such as political ideology, constitutional

law, political behavior and parliamentary government, not to mention his innovative dissertation on referendums.<sup>1</sup>

Herbert Tingsten's methodology does not fit into one particular category.

Nevertheless, a recurrent theme is his comparative approach to political life. Herbert Tingsten's study of referendums is a comparative analysis of American states (Tingsten 1923). His huge volume about democracy's victory and crisis is based on information from a large number of countries between 1880 and 1930 (Tingsten 1933). His book on fascist ideology compares Italy, Germany and Austria (Tingsten 1936) and his study of federalism is focused on the United States, Switzerland, Canada, Australia and South Africa (Tingsten 1942). Even his project on school book propaganda combines comparative and historical approaches (Tingsten 1969). Tingsten often used information about Scandinavian neighbors to shed light on the intricacies of Swedish politics.

Although the subject matters varied through the years, the comparative method applied by Herbert Tingsten has some distinctive traits. In certain respects Herbert Tingsten's approach differs from some of the methods commonly utilized today. He was, for instance, very cautious when it came to drawing causal conclusions from comparative observations, and he rejected quantitative data analysis as a tool in comparative research.

This might seem less surprising taking into account that Herbert Tingsten was born in the 19th century and received his academic training in an intellectual environment dominated by old, historically oriented professors. He was 25 years old when James

Bryce published a monumental study of modern democracies (Bryce 1921). In his preface Bryce pointed out that he had written the book chiefly “from personal observations made in the countries visited” and that the book was “not meant to propound theories”. Completely void of tables, charts, statistics and other types of analytical devices the text is written in a historical narrative style.

It would be wrong, however, to place Herbert Tingsten in this old-style research tradition. While he certainly had the necessary broad knowledge and linguistic skills required to write in this essayistic style, he also grasped the modern research techniques such as systematic data collection and statistical inference from quantitative data. In fact, it was Herbert Tingsten who in Sweden introduced the seminal study of quantitative methods in political science written by Stuart Rice (1928). Tingsten complained that political scientists had too long neglected the use of statistical and quantitative methods. He recommended Rice’s book as an introduction to the rapidly growing, primarily American, research tradition based on quantitative analysis with source material mainly from electoral statistics and experiments among university students. Tingsten agreed with Rice that quantitative methods could shed new light on phenomena such as political attitudes and voting behavior (Tingsten 1934).

Herbert Tingsten was not late to explore the research avenues which were opened up by the quantitative method. His path-breaking book *Political Behavior* contained studies of electoral participation, the political attitudes of women, age groups in politics, compulsory voting and the role of occupation and social status in elections (Tingsten 1937). He did not hesitate to generalize from his findings. In fact, he even

dared to formulate his conclusion in law-like terms. For example, he found that socio-economic differences in regard to electoral participation were smaller the higher the level of general participation. This pattern indicated the existence of a rule which he termed “the law of dispersion” (Tingsten 1937, 230). The expression “political behavior” had certainly been in use for some time but according to Robert Dahl it was Herbert Tingsten who rescued the term for political science. This is why Herbert Tingsten is considered as one of the founding fathers of the scientific study of political behavior (Dahl 1961, 763).

It is puzzling that Herbert Tingsten, one of the pioneers in quantitative political science, refrained from using these methods in comparative government research. It turns out that Tingsten, who actively advocated the use of statistical methods in political research, was also acutely aware their limitations. He could have used quantitative techniques on several occasions but he decided not to. For example, he never counted the frequencies of certain words or expressions in his study of political ideas. His analysis of the Swedish foreign policy debate between the two world wars is also completely non-quantitative. His explanation for not giving “a quantitative estimate of opinion” appears in the introduction of the book and is worth quoting in full:

“I have not said, for example, that 32 Conservative newspapers took one line and 19 another. For one thing, such an estimate would have to be absolutely complete, which would necessitate a disproportionate amount of labor. For another, the result would be uncertain and misleading: the shades of transition from one view to another are difficult to determine, some newspapers are far more important than others, one

may conduct a vigorous campaign on a certain question while another will refer to it only in a few minor leading articles. In practice, the figures arrived at would not have the same definite statistical value as an election or vote.” (Tingsten 1949, 6).<sup>2</sup>

Herbert Tingsten obviously thought that quantitative methods were useful only in certain areas of study, such as elections and political behavior. In many other cases, he believed that the problems of validity, reliability and the weighting of cases were insurmountable. Therefore, the researcher had to find other methods to grasp the nuances and subtle “shades of transition”. But such non-quantitative methods also had pitfalls. For instance, although Tingsten used newspaper editorials as a source for his study of the foreign policy debate, he maintained that it was not possible to quote several dozens of newspaper in support and that the only viable alternative was to give some typical examples rather than a complete documentation. “I am fully aware that this method encourages distortion,” he admitted and added that the reader “can only accept my assurances that every care has been taken to prevent such errors of judgment” (Tingsten 1949, 6).

Herbert Tingsten abstained from the obvious benefits of quantitative analysis and chose other methods with their own drawbacks. He had to struggle with problems such as selection bias, subjectivity, distortion and errors of judgment. However, what he gained was an in-depth understanding of the political process. The central concept of his comparative studies was *författningsspolitik*, which he gave a slightly broader definition than the German equivalent *Verfassungspolitik* or the English “constitutional politics.” The term *författningsspolitik* referred not only to constitutional rules, legal statutes and judicial practice, but also the power struggle

around the central government of the state, such as these forms actually took place. Tingsten particularly stressed that political science should be devoted to current affairs and should be concrete. This type of realistic study of politics ought to be typifying and hence comparative (Tingsten 1933, vii; Tingsten 1935, 45).

Herbert Tingsten had already applied these principles in his doctoral dissertation. When he arrived in the United States in 1921 he could observe the results of the attempts to fight corruption through institutional reforms. Many state legislatures had been captured by big corporations and powerful lobbyists. Bribes and mutual favors had become integral part of the legislative process. Democracy itself was at peril as money, not popular will, determined politics. The reform movement tried to limit the power of legislatures by strengthening the executive and judicial branches of government, such as governors and courts. One important reform strategy was to introduce referendums as a way to assure better correspondence between citizen opinions and policy decisions. Herbert Tingsten decided to study what the referendums meant for practical political life and for the democratic system itself.

He found that there were different types of referendums. An older form of referendum was used in many states to ratify constitutional amendments. Inspired by Switzerland two new forms of referendum had been introduced. The “facultative referendum” gave the people the right to vote on a law passed by the legislature. The “popular initiative” made it possible for a certain number of voters to propose a law for popular vote. Almost all of the American referendums were decisive.

At that time referendums had been introduced in half of the American states, most of them in the Western part of the union. Tingsten tried to explain this geographical pattern, not by using his data for statistical analysis, but by reasoning about possible conditions. He stressed that the legislatures had been particularly corrupt in the Western states and that politics in California was in fact dominated by one powerful company, the Southern Pacific railroad. Tingsten added another explanation: popular psychology. The population in the new states out West had a pioneering spirit and was more prone to accept new ideas and reforms. He also asked why referendums were less frequent in the Southern states and answered that the white population feared that they would give political influence to African Americans (Tingsten 1923, 76, 84). But however plausible these factors might seem, the reader is still left wondering exactly how they were selected and which alternative explanations were omitted.

Tingsten collected data on all 850 referendums held so far in the United States. He was particularly interested in the participation rates. Even though the exact calculations are not reported in his book, he offers the conclusion that participation was lowest in the old form of constitutional referendums and highest in popular initiatives and that the turnout level also varied with the type of issue, the number of referendums at stake and the existence of simultaneous elections (Tingsten 1923, 194, 206).

The American referendum reforms were accompanied by a lively debate in newspapers, debates, speeches and pamphlets. Tingsten used these documents for a systematic analysis of ideas and found that the argument for the referendum reforms

followed two different lines, one practical and one principled. It was the practical reasons, namely the need to find new instruments as the cure for corruption and other ills, which dominated the public debate. But there was also a principled and radical argument to the effect that the direct popular government was superior to representative democracy. Opponents of referendums, however, argued that the representative system was a better form of politics than direct democracy. Tingsten added that the opposition to referendums also stemmed from a fear that the people's direct legislative power would lead to radical reforms.

Tingsten used these arguments to formulate hypotheses for his investigation of the actual results of referendums. He concentrated his analysis on "certain typical states". One was Oregon, a state with many referendums, and another was Ohio, which represented states with relatively few referendums. Tingsten reached the conclusion that both expectations and fears regarding the consequences for politics had been exaggerated. The proponents' hope that referendums would lead to a complete political regeneration process had no more been realized than the opponents' fear that referendums would result in a revolutionary socialist experiment. Certainly one could find some examples of how popular initiatives had led to minority domination, class selfishness and technically flawed laws, but the same could be said about the legislative branch of government. It is important to note that Tingsten did not choose an ideal norm as his basis for the evaluation of the effects of referendums. Instead he compared referendums to the only realistic alternative, which was the existing kind of representative system (Tingsten 1923, 258 ff).

The American referendum study became an introduction to the problems of federal government. Herbert Tingsten later returned to the problems of federalism and wrote an entire book on the subject (Tingsten 1943). This volume shows how he applied a comparative perspective on democratic government. Before he drew his general conclusions he studied half a dozen federal countries. Each country was analyzed in detail and Tingsten demonstrates his skills in summarizing a vast material in a succinct way. The reader learns about the background and origins of the federal system, ideological conflicts, historical development, legal bases, the division of powers between the federal and state government and their methods of conflict resolution. These country-by-country chapters cover almost the entire book. Only the last nine pages are devoted to concluding observations.

In the conclusion, Herbert Tingsten first concentrated on the similarities between the federal states. He noted that, in contrast to the top-down structure of unitary states, the federal states were organized from a bottom-up perspective. They had been formed by a number of independent states which decided to form a larger political union. But the birth of the federation had rarely been harmonious. The federal unions had been formed only after long conflicts and hard negotiations. It had taken quite some time before the new federation became generally accepted. Tingsten developed this observation into more a general discussion of the conditions for fundamental change in political institutions. Before the federation was formed, the special interests favored status quo because they viewed the benefits of a merger as vague and difficult to estimate. Tingsten found that opinion formation and individual efforts were essential in the creation of a federation. However, he also recognized that

conditions such as natural boundaries, foreign policy and economic interests had to be taken into account.

Then Tingsten turned to the differences among federations. In some cases the federation had been initiated by the government, in other countries popular movements were vital. Some federations had been approved by special elections or referendums but there were also examples of federal constitutions drafted by ad hoc assemblies or closed conventions. He found, moreover, that the federative principle proved to be compatible with the widest range of government form. A federation could be a republic or a monarchy, a parliamentary system or a presidential system and might be combined with either strong or weak separation of powers. Even a dictatorship, the Soviet Union, had accepted the federalist principle, but Tingsten added that the vertical separation of powers in this particular case had become more fiction than reality (Tingsten 1943, 174 ff).

Herbert Tingsten devoted considerable attention to the question of how to solve conflicts between the federation and the states. He noted that most federal countries relied on judicial procedures to resolve such disputes. The courts not only had the right to invalidate state laws that violated the powers of the federal government but could also stop federal laws that violated states' rights. Tingsten believed that this kind of legal arrangement was of crucial importance and maintained that the problems of separating the federal and state government in Switzerland was due to the lack of judicial review of federal legislation. Conversely, he attributed the relative stability of the United States, Canada and Australia to the role of the courts. His book on federalism ended with a recognition of the importance of constitutional

rules. Thus, despite his scholarly interest in political ideas and the social preconditions of politics, Herbert Tingsten was also keenly aware of the constitutional basis of democratic governance.

The concepts of constitution and democracy were central for his survey of government between 1880 and 1930, summarized in the 700 pages long book on democracy's victory and crisis (1933). This is another example of Tingsten primarily relying on a country-by-country account. Long chapters are devoted to France, England, the United States, and Germany. Other nations, such as Italy, Russia, the Nordic countries and a dozen of other cases, are also treated separately. The book does not even have a concluding chapter but ends abruptly with a brief remark on the Chinese constitution of 1931. Nevertheless, this book should be regarded as a genuinely comparative study. The research hypothesis is spelled out already in the title of the book: "Democracy's victory and crisis". The reader is taken on a journey through all relevant nations with the informed and pedagogic guide constantly asking one fundamental question: "Can democracy survive?".

Crucial to Tingsten's way of presenting his research results on the different countries was his long introductory section on democracy and dictatorship. In these pages he discussed the meaning of democracy, the forms of democracy, political parties, socialism and the crisis of democracy. Then he presented an analytical overview of current political thinking with particularly emphasis on anti-intellectualism, corporatism, monarchism and the theory of political integration. Also important for the subsequent story is an introduction to the ideologies of dictatorship. Already in 1933 he saw parallels between communism, fascism, and national socialism. Some

years later he would elaborate this theme and he was one of the first commentators to use the term “totalitarian” to characterize the similarities between these modern forms of dictatorships (Tingsten 1933, 1939).

The strength of Tingsten’s book on democracy’s victory and crisis is his ability to combine different types of approaches. This book is not only a study of contemporary political ideas, a historical narrative of political power struggles over a period of half a century, a series of incisive portraits of leading thinkers and politicians or a study of constitutional law. It is a combination of all of them, integrated into one single analysis written in a clear and crisp prose. But Tingsten also formulated some limitations about his work. In the preface he declared that he could have written more about the social, economic, and cultural background to the political conflicts but abstained from doing so because these topics would be dealt with by other authors in accompanying volumes. More importantly, he stated that he wanted to avoid normative evaluations and theoretical constructions. He also abstained from vague generalizations about “national characters” and “the spirit of the times”. General historical perspectives were also to be left out. He was, moreover, careful about formulating causal statements. He said clearly that he limited himself to comparatively tangible causal connections (Tingsten 1933, vii f).

At the time of writing this monumental volume, Herbert Tingsten had already published a book on the rise of fascism in Italy (Tingsten 1930). A few years later he would compare Italy, Germany and Austria in a book about the modern forms of national dictatorship (Tingsten 1936). The reader is fully informed about the

peculiarities of each of these countries but the concluding chapter on fascist ideology stressed their similarities.

What united the fascist movements was national unity. While in Austria religious and cultural affinity was discerned as important, German national socialism emphasized race and people, and Italian fascism referred to the state as superior to the individual. According to Tingsten it was obvious that the existing state was seen as the essential bond holding society together. The exaltation of the state in fascism was, therefore, coupled with a demand for obedience to the group that dominated the state. Thus, in practice national unity meant submission to fascism (Tingsten 1936, 251 ff).

This book is one of Herbert Tingsten's important and lasting contributions to the field of comparative government. He early discovered the totalitarian threats to contemporary democracy and he devoted much of his career as a political scientist to exploring and explaining the rise of communism, fascism, and national socialism. In this sense he not only contributed to the understanding the problems of democracy but also the meaning of dictatorship. This is the message that has been carried to younger generations of political scientists. To understand freedom one must understand the lack of freedom (Karvonen 2008).

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## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Herbert Tingsten as a political scientist is the subject of my forthcoming book.
- <sup>2</sup> This quotation is cited from the English translation of Tingsten (1944).