

# Introduction

## Multi-level electoral systems of the European Union: elaborating existing approaches and defining the research agenda for the future

Cees van der Eijk and Hermann Schmitt

*University of Nottingham, United Kingdom and University of Mannheim, Germany*

This volume contains the proceedings of a CONNEX-sponsored conference of the European Election Studies research group, which took place in March 2007 at Cadenabbia in Lake Como (Italy). The conference sought to explore the agenda for future research into a theme that has been of central concern to the group since its inception three decades ago: the study of multi-level elections. Since then, the European Election Studies research group has contributed tremendously to this field, and it has generated an impressive number of publications, many of which are listed on <http://www.europeanelectionstudies.net> in the “publications” sidebar. Moreover, the data collected as part of this programme – data about voters, candidates, parties, media and election results – have been deposited in the public domain, and keep generating – via secondary analyses – additional publications. In view of the intellectual preparations for studies of the European Parliament elections of 2009, the questions of what further research should be developed within the various strands of multi-level electoral

research (which are outlined below) and whether and how they can be integrated into more-encompassing theories of the quality of electoral processes have to be addressed. These questions motivated the papers and discussion during the conference.

## **Multi-level election research – theoretical and conceptual background**

Democracy, representation, accountability – all of these “good things” in politics require well-functioning elections. In order to understand the conditions under which elections are more or less likely to yield these desired effects (or other, conceivably unintended consequences) comparative studies (cross-system as well as over-time) are invaluable as they make it possible to explicitly link differences in these conditions – contextual variables, in the jargon of comparativists – with variations in the functioning of electoral processes. The latter, in turn, is often defined in terms of the linkages and interactions between the behaviour, motivations and aspirations of the different actors involved in the electoral process: voters, parties, politicians, and media.

Contextual variables that have so far been studied most intensively relate to institutional characteristics of political systems, and to economic conditions. Institutional factors include the constitutional system and the electoral system. The constitutional system defines the offices to be populated by elections as well as the political relationships between the various elected and non-elected institutions. The electoral system defines the rules with respect to enfranchisement and electoral participation, with respect to the conversion of votes into election results, and with respect to the actual conduct of the electoral process (cf. Lijphart 1990; Farrell 2001; Blais and Massicotte 2002; Norris 2004). Economic contextual factors relate to

variations in important macro-economic parameters, such as growth in GDP, unemployment and inflation (cf. Lewis-Beck 1988; Anderson 1995; van der Brug, van der Eijk and Franklin 2007).

More recently, two additional groups of contextual variables have received considerable attention in comparative analyses, which bring us into the realm of multi-level electoral research: the character of elections, and transient aspects of the political context<sup>1</sup>. The character of the election is largely defined by the perceived political importance of the office(s) to be filled. By-elections and elections for regional or local assemblies are of a different nature to those for the politically most important institutions such as the national parliament or the president with executive powers. Reif and Schmitt (1980) introduced the concept of second-order national elections to indicate the difference between the former and the first-order national elections embodied in the latter. The concept was used not only to distinguish local and regional elections from national ones but, primarily, to characterise European Parliament elections as second-order. These concepts have been invaluable in systematising and integrating otherwise disparate findings with respect to all kinds of different elections, and have spawned a tremendous amount of subsequent conceptual elaboration (e.g. Anderson and Ward 1996; Marsh 2007; Hix and Marsh 2007) and applied usage (Marsh 1998, Koepke and Ringe 2006; Carrubba and Timpone 2005). The second group of contextual variables of more recent vintage is political in nature – not in the relatively static institutional form of constitutional and electoral systems, but rather in its short-term forms that are collectively often – and vaguely – referred to as the ‘political climate’. More specifically this group of factors includes such matters as the closeness of an election (Schmitt 2007; van Egmond 2003), the extent and structure of electoral competition between parties (van der Eijk and Oppenhuis 1991; van der Eijk and Franklin 1996; Kroh et al. 2007; van der Brug et al. 2007), the strength of a particular (kind of) party (Peter 2003, 2007), and so on.

The two more recent contextual factors can to some extent be combined. This has been done already in those analyses that use as a contextual variable the temporal location of an election – usually a second-order national election – between other (first-order) elections (van der Eijk and Franklin 1996; Marsh 2007; Reif 1984; Schmitt and Reif 2003; Schmitt 2006). Such analyses invariably demonstrate that second-order elections have somewhat different characteristics depending on whether they occur at the beginning, in the middle, or close to the end of the domestic electoral cycle of first-order elections. In most member states of the EU this temporal location differs from one European Parliament election to the next. This is the consequence of the different lengths of terms of the European Parliament and national parliaments, of the absence of a fixed electoral calendar for first-order elections, and of the possibility that parliamentary elections are sometimes called before the end of Parliament's full term. We think that the logic of these types of analysis can be extended and generalised by focusing not so much on a single, particular election, but rather on the ongoing processes of electoral democracy which are determined by series of interconnected elections at different levels. Such a continuous multi-level perspective has a number of advantages. It avoids the implicit – but unrealistic – portrayal of all kinds of phenomena that occur before a particular election as exogenous. It stimulates research into habituation and learning processes that impact on the behaviour of citizens, political elites and journalists. Moreover, it promotes a perspective on the electoral process that calls attention to the ways in which different elections (taking place at different moments in time, at different levels of government, and possibly even in different political systems) influence each other by being a component of the context that affects the behaviour, and the strategic and tactical considerations of relevant actors.

Multi-level electoral research is thus a particular kind of comparative electoral research. Whereas traditional comparative research in electoral

studies is usually cross-sectional – focusing on the comparison of elections that are implicitly regarded as independent events – multi-level electoral studies are inherently of a dynamic nature –focusing on elections as interconnected events. In their full panoply, multi-level electoral studies apply this dynamic perspective not to a single case (i.e., to a political system or country) but to a larger number of cases, thus analysing variation simultaneously across space and time.

## **Elements of a research agenda for multi-level electoral research**

Multi-level electoral systems are characterized by the fact that different elections are not independent but are related to one another, and, therefore, that such interdependencies also exist with respect to the motivations and behaviours of ‘electoral actors’ at different levels (e.g., national, sub-national, European). As a consequence, the way in which electoral democracy performs in the context of a particular election is partly determined by what happens in a set of elections<sup>2</sup>. One of the most studied multi-level electoral systems is, of course, the European Union.

When we consider how multi-level election studies can be advanced, some strands of future research appear to us to be likely to be particularly fruitful, and, moreover, to be particularly suited to be tackled with the help of the collective and varied knowledge and experience of the group of scholars involved in the European Election Studies. These include:

- The interdependencies between previous elections and later ones
- The interdependencies between elections at different levels of government
- The interdependencies between elections in independent, but closely related systems

Each of these strands will be elaborated in slightly more detail below.

## Interdependencies between previous elections and later ones

We all know that – at least in established, consolidated democracies – elections are not single and isolated events, but rather form a kind of repetitive game. Each election is fought on the basis of parameters determined by previous elections while, at the same time, setting the stage for subsequent elections. This has important implications that should not be ignored. How a party, a politician, a voter or a journalist perceives a particular election is to some extent influenced by how they experienced previous ones. As in all repetitive events, recurring exposure (in this case to the conduct of elections) leads to various kinds of spill-over from one to the next. This may involve changes in the intensity of party preferences (on the part of the voters), or of preferred ideological or issue positions (on the part of both voters and parties), the improvement of skills (e.g., in campaign organization), etc. Sometimes this accumulation of experiences may result in attempts to change the parameters within which elections take place: attempts to change the rules of the game – the electoral system – or to change the field of competitors by mergers, splits or new offerings. Such kinds of ‘learning’ are not limited to parties and politicians, but are also present – although in different forms – among voters, journalists, etc. The reason why we put the word learning in quotation marks is that we use it in a broad sense that also incorporates processes sometimes known by different words, such as habituation, socialisation, and so on.

It would, of course, be incorrect to say that the impact of previous elections on later ones is entirely ignored in electoral research. Traditions that deal with such matters involve work such as ‘surge and decline’ and second-order election research (Campbell 1966; Stimson 1976; Reif & Schmitt 1980, Schmitt & Reif 2003), some of the research about non-voting (e.g., Franklin 2004), and research about voters’ acquisition of party preferences (Converse 1969, 1976; McKuen et al. 1989; Cassel 1999; Schmitt 2002). This can be

expressed in various ways, such as ‘history matters’, ‘path dependency’, etc. Yet, in spite of this, most electoral research does not explicitly incorporate in its design or conceptualisation the notion that a particular election is just one in a series, and that preceding elections are of great importance for understanding what happens at the ones that follow. What we need to do is to take stock, as systematically as possible, of what we can learn from previous research in this respect, and to systematically speculate about all those aspects of the electoral process for which we cannot rely on previous studies.

### Interdependencies between elections for different levels of government

It cannot be said that no attention is paid to the way in which different elections impact upon one another and, indeed, the awareness needed to do this is particularly developed amongst those who investigate second-order national elections, such as elections to the European Parliament. For justifiable reasons that are inherently tied to the conceptual difference between first- and second-order national elections, much of this research is about the way in which national politics constrains European or sub-national (“less important”) elections. Only rarely is the question raised as to how European or sub-national elections affect national ones, and this is unfortunate. The greater (perceived) importance of national elections compared to second-order ones cannot be taken to imply that the interrelations between them are entirely asymmetric. Reif and Schmitt (1980) acknowledged that European Parliament elections also affect the national electoral arena, but we seen little systematic follow-up of this notion. Anecdotal information in this regard is quite plentiful, deriving particularly from analyses of single countries (Blumler 1983; Reif 1984; van der Eijk and Franklin 1996; Schmitt and Wüst 2006). Systematic comparative analyses are still largely lacking, however, although Van der Brug et al. (2007) attempt to contribute to this by counterfactual analysis.

Similar questions about mutual impact can, of course, be raised with respect to other kinds of elections, leading to the more general question of how various elections – for national parliaments, for a presidency (if applicable), for local and regional assemblies, for the European Parliament – all impact on one another. It seems logical to hypothesise that such impacts will vary in strength with the temporal distance between elections, and with the degree of similarity of the respective slates of choice options.

When thinking about the ways in which elections can affect one another, one should remember that such influence does not necessarily have to follow the normal logic of causation, in which earlier events are causes and later ones embody consequences. It is not uncommon, for example, to see actors anticipate future events (such as elections), leading the later to influence the earlier. Moreover, indications are that the specific impact of one election on another differs according to which election happens first. Oppenhuis et al. 1996, for example, demonstrate that the effect of a first-order national election on a European Parliament election that precedes it is different in character from the effect of a first-order election on a European parliament election that follows it.

### Interdependencies between elections in independent, but closely related systems

When considering the ways in which different elections affect each other we should not examine only those elections that take place within a single country. Elections in different countries also influence each other. Parties and politicians, journalists – and therefore citizens too – are aware of what occurs in other countries, and use this information in counterfactual reasoning that tells them about the opportunities and dangers, costs and benefits of particular courses of action. Examples of this are plentiful. One can think of the evolution of green parties, or more recently of anti-immigrant parties and

issues in European countries. The electorally successful example of the Danish anti-European integration movements has stimulated the emergence of their Swedish counterpart – Junilistan – which even named itself after its Danish inspiration. Indeed, recent history provides a multitude of examples that demonstrate that parties and politicians, as well as voters and journalists ‘learn’ not only from their experiences of previous elections in their own country, but also from the (second-hand) experiences drawn from elections and election outcomes in other countries.

One question relating to such cross-border spill-overs relates particularly to the conditions under which such influences are more or less likely to occur. It seems logical that such effects will be stronger the more countries are alike. Likeness however, can take different forms, such as geographical or linguistic proximity, similarity of cleavage structures and party systems, intensity of economic or migratory connections, ideological like-mindedness of incumbent governments, and so on. In view of the homogenising consequences of ongoing European integration it is likely that such cross-border impacts of elections will become increasingly important (for a more elaborate discussion, see van der Brug et al. 2007). Other questions about these cross-border effects relate to their locus of origin: under what circumstances are they triggered by parties and political entrepreneurs, or by media and journalists or by opinion leaders and social elites? And, how are voters (and which kinds of voters) affected by what they know about elections in other countries?

### **What follows in this volume**

The papers given at the conference all address the interrelationship of elections at different levels of government. Effects of previous elections on later ones, and of elections in independent but closely related systems were taken up only in passing. Two of the eight papers compare national legislative

elections to regional elections, two address regional, national and European elections, one compares local and European elections, one national and European and one focuses on legislative and presidential elections at the national level. A final paper is of a more conceptual nature and does not engage in data analysis. The following table summarises which level of government elections is analysed in each of the papers.

Level of Government analysed	Local	Regional	National Legislative	National Presidential	European	None
Lago & Montero		X	X			
Perez-Nievas & Bonet		X	X			
Segatti		X	X		X	
Sanz		X	X		X	
Rohrschneider & Clark			X		X	
Skrinis & Teperoglou	X				X	
Magalhaes			X	X		
Gschwend						X

The paper by Lago and Montero addresses a general dilemma of electoral coordination which presents itself when multiple elections are held within a country, each for a different (territorially defined) level of government. How does the national party system evolve when voters participate in a variety of elections under a diversity of rules? The paper argues that, especially in multi-level countries, interaction or contamination effects exist between national

and sub-national electoral arenas that generate – like most mixed-member electoral systems – a centrifugal force that increases the number of parties in national elections. In these cases, electoral coordination is not limited to a single election at a specific point of time, nor does it require the homogeneity of its incentives structure. By dwelling on the Spanish case, the authors identify a coordination dilemma that appears in those multi-level democracies in which institutional features – in particular decentralization – create multiple opportunities for voters to pass judgments on parties. When parties can win seats in sub-national elections, but not in national elections, they face a dilemma: should they enter the race in elections in which they are unlikely to be viable anyway, or should they enhance their chances or resources through coordination with a larger party at the price of losing their distinctive identity? The main finding is that Duvergerian equilibriums are unlikely outcomes in democracies where state parliaments are elected according to significantly different rules to those, that apply in federal or regional elections. Moreover, the authors delineate the main causal mechanisms that explain how this dilemma is solved and test their empirical implications.

Perez-Nievas and Bonet's paper deals with differential voting patterns between general elections and regional elections in six European regions, the regional party systems of each of which contain at least one ethno-regionalist party. In the six regions under study one or two ethno-regionalist parties acquired more than 15% of the votes in the most recent regional election. These regions are Catalonia, the Basque Country and Galicia in Spain; Scotland and Wales in the UK; and Flanders in Belgium. The relationship between elections to regional parliaments (RE) and general elections (GE) within each region shows a number of similarities across cases, although important differences also exist. A first similarity is that turnout rates tend to be lower in RE's than in GE's (although the magnitude of the gap varies greatly from region to region). The second similarity across cases is that while state-wide parties (particularly big parties) fare better in GE's and do worse in

RE's, the opposite happens with the ethno-regionalist vote which grows in RE's and declines again in GE's. At first sight the second-order elections model suggests an explanation of these differential voting patterns. The authors' hypotheses for the differential voting between general and regional elections are: first, citizens regard regional elections as being less relevant than general elections because they feel that less is at stake; second, national government parties do better in general elections than in regional ones, because of protest votes against them which are expressed when less is at stake; third, larger parties do better in general elections while small parties do better in regional elections due to institutional features (proportionality). The paper subsequently describes the contrast between general elections and regional elections in the six regions. In the third part the paper reviews the hypotheses from the second-order model by using individual-level data. Alternatives to the second-order model are also assessed.

In his paper Paolo Segatti demonstrates the emergence of an electoral cycle in Italy. He argues that the engines generating this cycle are "asymmetric" producing differential levels of turnout in different elections. Asymmetric abstentions are likely to be connected to dissatisfaction with the previously chosen government parties, which leads him to ask why dissatisfied voters do not switch to other parties. The conclusion is that asymmetric abstentions may be indicative of a still deeply divided political system, and may be associated with cynicism and political disaffection. The second aspect of the electoral cycle he identifies is still more complicated. Differences in the institutional context, even seemingly innocuous differences in the format of the ballot, apparently affect electoral choices. The data suggest that such differences in institutions and political supply affect persistence and change in political preferences.

Alberto Sanz analyses the interrelationship between regional, national and European elections in Spain. He investigates the causes of split-ticket voting in concurrent multi-level elections. Previously, differences in the

electoral outcomes of concurrent elections in Spain have been understood as being a product of higher levels of tactical voting associated with second-order elections. Evidence against this interpretation is presented, and alternative explanations from the international literature are tested. Preliminary evidence shows that Spanish ticket-splitters weight motivational factors differently in their European, regional and local electoral choices. While they base their local vote on personal interests (egotropic vote), they use regional interests as criteria for casting their vote in the regional electoral arena. Finally, in European Parliament elections – in the absence of real executive power – ticket-splitters tend to base their votes on their general ideological preferences more often than do the rest of the electorate. As a whole, the evidence reviewed in this paper suggests the possible existence of a gradient in the impact that ideology can play in concurrent electoral choices. Understanding ideology as a heuristic, the closer the particular level of government is to the voter, the less relevant ideological shortcuts appear to be; whereas their relevance increases with the distance between the voter and the object of the election.

In their contribution to the conference Rohrschneider and Clark analyse the assumptions about individual-level motivations that are typically implied in second-order election models. Based on EES 1999 data, they confront a transfer hypothesis (individuals apply their evaluations of national-level phenomena to the EU-level when voting in EU elections) with a 1st-order hypothesis (voters evaluate the EU on its own performance terms). The paper tests these competing hypotheses and finds considerable support for both models. In contexts where national institutions – political parties – dominate the representation process, the transfer hypothesis receives considerable support. However, surprisingly strong support is also found for the 1st-order hypothesis: electoral choice in EU election is to a considerable extent influenced by EU-level factors. Furthermore, when voters evaluate the mechanisms of representation more broadly without a focus on elections per

se, we find much more support for the 1st-order than for the transfer hypothesis – voters clearly separate the national and EU levels and are able to evaluate each level on its own terms. These results have important implications, both for how voters' decisions in European elections are analysed and how the sophistication of voters has to be judged more broadly in the context of multi-layered institutions.

Skrinis and Teperoglou compare the results of different sorts of second-order elections (SOE's) in three Southern European nations: Greece, Portugal and Spain. Since the formulation of the second-order election model there have been many studies comparing first and second-order contests, in particular national and European elections; while only few analyses have looked at the relationship between different types of SOE's. The paper uses an Index of Dissimilarity to compare the results of different elections. Election results compared pertain to the capitals of Greek prefectures (51), the capitals of Portuguese districts (18 in mainland Portugal, plus the capitals of Azores and Madeira) and the capitals of Spanish provinces (50). Each of the last three municipal elections in each country is compared with the closest European (and parliamentary) contests. The findings suggest that in spite of the fact that local and European contests can both be seen as second-order national elections, they are nevertheless quite independent of each other and each evokes different factors motivating voting choices.

Pedro Magalhães compares vote choices in parliamentary and subsequent presidential elections in Portugal. The empirical data that are used derive from a panel survey conducted in two waves, following the 2005 legislative and 2006 presidential elections. The paper focuses on the empirical evaluation of four alternative theoretical interpretations of voters' choices and of shifts in vote share from legislative to presidential elections. The paper shows that, "candidate effects" are of predictable importance, yet are insufficient to override the dominant effects of partisan and ideological considerations. The dynamics of voter defection away from government

parties appears to be quite similar to what is often found in other “less important elections”. The paper argues that the extent to which similar findings are likely to be found in other semi-presidential regimes depends on particular institutional and political conditions.

Finally, the conceptual paper by Thomas Gschwend asks under what conditions the impact of the national arena on the sub-national arena will vary. More particularly, he is interested in different degrees of contamination. His argument is that the size of a contamination effect depends on the ease or difficulty of correctly attributing policy responsibility to particular political actors in the policy-making process. The assignment of responsibility is a necessary condition for electoral accountability, but more often than not voters misattribute responsibilities for governmental actions and thus hold an actor accountable for something that they are not responsible for. In multi-level systems of government policy-making responsibility is often shared across or even within levels of governance through mechanisms such as coalition governments and split executives (cohabitation or divided government). Multi-level systems of governance undermine the potential for citizens to hold policy makers accountable (retrospectively) or to provide (pre-electoral) coalitions with a clear mandate (prospectively) to govern. The diffusion of responsibility in multi-level systems of governance imposes, therefore, high informational demands on the voters. Moreover, in order to form relevant prospective or retrospective evaluations citizens’ need to be able to distinguish the track record of executives at different levels. Finally, multi-level systems imply multiple elections; if these elections are not held at the same time the likelihood of voter fatigue among satisfied voters and of the mobilisation of dissatisfied voters is high, jointly causing unpredictable election results.

The papers presented at the conference demonstrated impressive accomplishment of comparative research into multi-level electoral systems, as well as future potential. With regard to the latter, we believe it is high time

that a series of interconnected national comparative panel surveys be organised, with the ability to track the evolution of respondents' party preferences, political evaluations and actual choices over a period that spans at least two first-order and multiple second-order national elections for different levels of governance. Only then will we be able to analyse adequately the micro-processes that underlie macro-level regularities that are so far only partly understood. Moreover, such a set of studies should cover a range of electoral contests for levels of government differing as much as possible in terms of clarity of responsibility for policy. We hope – and expect – that some part of this agenda will be included in the design of the European Elections Study 2009. Additional comparative projects focusing on national and regional legislative elections are currently being prepared. The combination of these initiatives on the one hand and of the academic rigour and creativity of comparative election researchers on the other – clearly exemplified by the participants in the conference of which these are the proceedings – make us look forward eagerly to the next generation of comparative studies and publications on multi-level elections.

## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> To avoid confusion, we have to point out that the term 'multi-level electoral research' is used here to refer to studies of elections occurring at different levels of government, e.g., local, national and European elections. Unfortunately, the multi-level designation is also used in the literature to refer to something entirely different, but also of particular relevance to the kind of comparative electoral studies that we describe: methods of statistical analysis that simultaneously analyse information with respect to different levels of aggregation, e.g., individual voters, electoral districts and countries. Where necessary we will refer to the latter by the roughly synonymous designation of HL-models (hierarchical linear models).

<sup>2</sup> What the boundaries of such a set are cannot be stated in the abstract, but has to be determined empirically. As is common in situations where systems have to be demarcated, the criterion for inclusion and exclusion of elements in the system is determined by a loss-function in clustering procedures (or, conversely by a gain-function in reverse clustering): elements are considered to belong to the system as long as the number or the strength of their ties with other system-elements is sufficiently large or strong.

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