

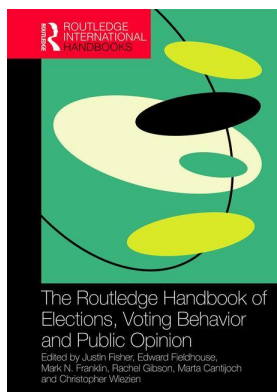
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### Voting behavior in multi-level electoral systems

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## VOTING BEHAVIOR IN MULTI-LEVEL ELECTORAL SYSTEMS

*Hermann Schmitt and Eftichia Teperoglou*

Across many countries a central element of political competition is arising from the multi-level dynamics of electoral politics. The evolution of this sub-field of electoral research has been especially relevant in electoral studies of federal states (e.g., Belgium, Canada, Germany, the US or Spain). Moreover, it is also related to a shift of authority from the national to the subnational or supranational level. This increased relocation of authority to govern is generally challenging the role of the democratic nation-state (Hooghe et al. 2010). This is all the more the case in the European Union (EU), which has become one of the most characteristic examples of multi-level politics, with supranational, national and subnational levels of jurisdiction cooperating and to some degree competing with one another. Under these circumstances, one research question for this chapter is about the relationship (or “interdependency”) between elections at these different levels of government. Another question is whether “electoral actors” exhibit different motivations and behaviors depending on the level of jurisdiction at which an election is held (van der Eijk and Schmitt 2008). In order to explore these questions, many scholars have put forward two groups of contextual variables – one being the character and importance of the electoral contest, and the other being the political climate in the “main” political arena at the time of the election under study. The first group of contextual variables includes the perceived political importance (or salience) of the office(s) to be filled. National parliamentary elections or those for a president with executive powers are contests of “high salience” (or “high stimulus” elections), while all other types of elections are of “low salience” (or “low stimulus” elections) (see Campbell 1960 for this distinction). The political climate includes various short-term aspects related to the timing of the “low stimulus” election within the electoral cycle of the main political arena (such as the popularity of the government (see, for example, Stimson 1976); or the state of the economy (see, for example, Tufte 1975).

Indeed, the roots of a systematic study of the interdependence of political behavior in different types of elections were first proposed in the literature on US mid-term election results. The three main streams of that literature are the “surge and decline” theory of the Michigan school (Campbell 1960); the “referendum” theory (Tufte 1975); and the “balancing” theory (Alesina and Rosenthal 1989, 1995). These approaches have set out to explain one of the most regular trends in the electoral behavior of US politics. Compared with previous and subsequent “high stimulus” presidential elections, mid-term elections are characterized by lower levels of electoral

participation as well as lower support for the presidential party. We will briefly come back to these approaches in the next section.

Nevertheless, the study which first tried to generalize the different findings in electoral behavior regarding “low stimulus” elections was one which analyzed a new “type” of elections which was introduced in the member countries of the European Community back in 1979. Writing in the aftermath of the first European Parliament (EP) elections, Reif and Schmitt distinguished between first-order and second-order national elections (FOE and SOE accordingly) with the ultimate goal to understand the characteristic difference in the results of these elections compared to those of the preceding national first-order contest.

This study, based on previous research on subnational elections, focused on the supranational elections to the EP. Many subsequent contributions which were testing and revising the original SOE model with an eye on EP elections did the same. Some continued to study subnational elections in that framework and have also contributed to the study of the multi-level electoral systems both analytically and systematically.

The aim of this chapter is threefold. The first is to introduce different kinds of “low stimulus” elections by giving emphasis on the SOE model. The second main aim is to discuss how the vote in SOE is affected by and in turn affects the political process in the main electoral arena. Here, the different voting patterns in SOE are elaborated. The third aim is to identify possible repercussions of SOE on national electoral systems. In other words, the main question here is whether and how European or subnational elections affect national ones. Despite the fact that systematic comparative research on this last question is scarce, our aim is to provide some evidence and to try to gauge some possible future research paths.

The structure of the chapter is as follows. In the next section the SOE model is presented together with a short overview of its roots. In the second main section the two main amendments of the original SOE model are elaborated, namely a typology of voting patterns in EP elections and the micro-level foundations of the model. Finally, the third section of the chapter deals with the consequences of the second-order contests for the first-order electoral arena.

### **The second-order election model**

As we said before, the roots of the systematic study of the electoral behavior in “low stimulus” elections are in the early analyses of US mid-term contests. The first theoretical approach – the so-called “surge and decline” theory – was proposed by A. Campbell (1960). According to that, the main factors explaining the mid-term loss of the presidential party are the level of political stimulation, political interest and party identification. The motivation to cast a vote in the “high stimulus” presidential election is higher than it is in the “low stimulus” mid-term election because presidential elections determine who is running the country. This is of particular importance for those voters whose party identification is rather weak and whose level of political interest and information is rather low. These voters are much less likely to go to the polls in a mid-term election given the fact that the authorities elected in this contest are “of minor importance” compared with the presidential election. The characteristic difference regarding the results of these two “types” of elections is explained by the voters’ party identification. Weak identifiers and leaners might vote for the candidate who is advantaged by the circumstances at the time of the election, just in order to return to their habitual behavior (regarding participation and party choice) in the next “low stimulus” mid-term election (Campbell 1960). It is important to note here that mid-term elections are the place of the “normal vote,” while “high stimulus” elections are seen as some sort of deviation from it.

Moving to the second main theoretical paradigm for the mid-term losses, the main assumption here is that these elections are serving the purpose of referendums. Two main explanatory variables are introduced. The first one is the electorate's evaluation of the performance of the president at the time of the election, while the second one is the performance of the economy (often measured in the year prior to the mid-term election). Mid-term elections are characterized as "referendum on the government's performance, in which voters express their approval or disapproval through voting for or against the presidential party" (Marsh 2008: 77). The president's popularity tends to be relatively low at the time of the mid-term contest (Stimson 1976), and the state of the economy also tends to be worse at that time.

A final approach to the explanation of mid-term losses so far is the balancing theory. The main argument here is that voters split their ticket between elections by supporting one party for the presidency and another one for the Congress. They vote differently in presidential and mid-term elections because they aim at a "divided" government: a balance between those who are dominating each of the two institutions in order to promote policy moderation (Erikson 1988; Alesina and Rosenthal 1989, 1995; for a more detailed discussion of these approaches, see Schmitt and Teperoglou 2017).

These conceptions of "low stimulus" elections as developed for the US context have been generalized by Reif and Schmitt (1980) at the occasion of the first EP election in 1979. But their theoretical perspective was also influenced by studies of voting behavior in "low stimulus" elections in the European multi-party environment. Not only do European party systems comprise more than two relevant parties, but another characteristic difference from the US is that "low stimulus" elections in Europe are not always held at the mid-term of the national electoral cycle. European research had to deal with these characteristic differences. Dinkel (1977, 1978), for example, analyzed the performance of the parties in federal government in German state elections (Landtagswahlen) by paying particular attention to the timing of such elections within the federal electoral cycle.<sup>1</sup> Dinkel concluded that the losses of government parties will be greater, the more distant a state election was situated from the preceding and the following federal election. As a result, he found an increased probability for the incumbent party/parties of winning a state election when it is held shortly after the beginning or toward the end of this national electoral cycle (Dinkel 1977, 1978; see also Jeffery and Hough 2001).

In any case, the main insight from the pioneer study of 1980 was that the first EP elections are seen as "nine simultaneous national second-order elections" in the then nine EC member states and not as one single European election (Reif and Schmitt 1980). Over time, the theoretical paradigm proposed by Reif and Schmitt (1980) has been considered as the main point of reference for the study of "less important" elections. This might have been due to different reasons. First of all, it further elaborates Campbell's distinction of two "types" or "classes" of elections based on the importance of the contest and the motivation of the voters. FOEs are the parliamentary or the presidential elections which offer the voter the critical choice of who should govern the country. SOEs, on the other hand, are elections of minor political importance. In addition to EP elections, other examples of SOEs are local, municipal and regional elections, by-elections in Britain and Ireland (e.g., Mughan 1986; Sinnott 1995: 253) as well as mid-term elections in the US and in many presidential systems of Latin America. However, their classification does not lead to a simple dichotomy because not all FOEs are equally important and not all SOEs are equally unimportant (van der Eijk et al. 1996). The distinction between first-order and second-order national elections also reflects two different political arenas. In particular, it allows us to include in the analysis the importance of the political situation of the first-order political arena at the moment when the second-order election is being held (Reif 1985: 8). This again is more appropriate for some SOEs than for others. Local and

municipal elections, for instance, often serve less as a barometer of national government popularity simply because there are other issues and personalities at stake at the local level than at the national one (e.g., Sinnott 1995: 256; but see Curtice and Payne 1991).<sup>2</sup>

A second reason is related to the main assumption of the SOE model. The EP elections are “less important” contests because there is “less at stake”<sup>3</sup> than in FOEs. SOE results do not determine the composition of the executive in the main political arena (Reif and Schmitt 1980: 9). Based on this observation, some aggregate predictions about the outcome of SOEs are spelled out. A first regards electoral participation, following in this case mainly the theoretical argument by the “surge and decline” theory. The prediction is that participation is lower in a SOE compared both to the previous and the subsequent FOE. Moreover, and somehow related to that, the number of invalid and blank votes is expected to be higher in a SOE. But expectations are also specified regarding vote choices. Here we can find another point of innovation of the SOE model compared to the paradigm of mid-term losses. It is the inclusion of party properties beyond the government-opposition status. Irrelevant in the US two-party context, “party size” is of particular importance in the analysis of “low stimulus” elections in multi-party systems. Reif and Schmitt (1980) specify the following predictions: government parties are likely to lose support in a SOE compared with the previous and subsequent FOE, but big parties more generally are expected to perform worse. On the other hand, smaller parties are expected to perform better in a “low stimulus” election. A final main addition of the SOE model to the literature on “low stimulus” election is the analytical consideration of the position of the SOE in the national electoral cycle. As we have seen, Reif and Schmitt were not the first to observe an interaction of SOE results with their position in the national electoral cycle. However, their model along with some more recent studies (e.g., van der Eijk and Franklin 1996) introduced the analysis of voting patterns in EP elections based on the timing of this election within the first-order electoral cycle of the respective country.

The aggregate hypotheses of the SOE model repeatedly received empirical support (for European elections see, for example, Hix and Marsh 2011; Norris 1997; Reif 1985, 1997; Schmitt 2005, 2009; Teperoglou 2010; Teperoglou et al. 2015; Schmitt and Teperoglou 2015; van der Brug and van der Eijk 2007; van der Eijk and Franklin 1996; for regional elections see, for example, Pallarés and Keating 2003; Schakel and Jeffery 2013; Schakel 2014). Nevertheless, important exceptions are also documented which proved to be useful for identifying the theoretical limits of the SOE model. Some of the most striking evidence toward a shift in the second-order nature of the EP elections is observed at the occasion of the 2014 EP elections. Both the socio-political circumstances and the economic turmoil at the time of the 2014 EP election, as well as the fact that for the first time the results of the elections have been considered for the appointment of the president of the European Commission, had the potential to change the second-order character of the contest. In many EU countries, European governance appeared as a polarizing issue with indications of becoming significant in determining voting choices (Schmitt and Teperoglou 2015; Schmitt and Toygür 2016). In other words, there were signs that the 2014 EP elections could be considered as “critical” contests in the sense of the pioneering study by V. O. Key (1955).<sup>4</sup> Overall, it turned out that these developments could not profoundly change the second-order nature of the EP elections across all 28 EU member states. However, for the first time in the history of EP elections we can also identify some signs toward a critical realignment in European party systems on EU issues (Schmitt and Teperoglou 2015).

Having said that, however, it must be added that the most significant failure of the SOE model in predicting EP election results was observed in the EP election of 2004. Analyses of the European Election Study (EES) 2004 revealed that in the new post-communist member countries the losses of government parties did not follow the FOE cycle and in some of these

countries, smaller parties did not perform better compared to the previous FOE (see Schmitt 2005; Marsh 2005; Koepke and Ringe 2006). The main explanation offered for these deviations is that the SOE model was built upon the assumption of stable and consolidated electoral and party systems, while in the East European member countries such a party system had and to some degree still has to develop (Schmitt 2005: 666).

### ***Subnational elections as second-order contests***

The application of the aggregate hypotheses of the SOE model is more questionable in the case of some municipal and local elections. Local politics often have their own dynamics. The local political arena, the candidates and their personality and local policy orientations are among the factors that could contribute toward a departure from the second-order voting mechanism (Magone 2004; Marien et al. 2015; Sinnott 1995). Moreover, studies focusing mainly on regional elections posit the question of a kind of “hierarchy” among the different types of SOE (e.g., see Heath et al. 1999; Lefevere and van Aelst 2014; Skrinis and Teperoglou 2008).

Various studies have tested the SOE model on regional elections across Europe and the Americas (among others, see Erikson and Filippov 2001; Jeffery and Hough 2003; Pallarés and Keating 2003; Schakel and Jeffery 2013; Dandoy and Schakel 2013; Thorlakson 2015; Remmer and Gélinau 2003). Most of these confirm that government parties tend to lose in regional elections, while opposition and small parties tend to gain. Participation is lower compared with the national election. Nevertheless, there is one important deviation from the SOE model hypotheses. The losses for the incumbent parties do not always follow the electoral cycle of the FOE arena (Schakel 2014: 4; Johnston 1999 for Canada; Schmitt and Reif 2003 for Germany). The provincial elections in Canada represent an important outlier, since the results clearly do not fit the SOE model (Jeffery and Hough 2009). Jeffery and Hough (2003) analyzed the losses for the governmental parties in relation to regional power and strong territorial cleavages. The greater variation in the institutional arrangements of regional elections calls for less uniformity and more deviations. Moreover, Schakel and Jeffery (2013) conclude that the SOE model is not confirmed in the case of regional elections which take place in powerful regions where strong regionalist parties instead of nation-wide parties stand for election.

### **Voting patterns in second-order elections**

The first main amendment of the original SOE model regards a typology of voting in SOE (see mainly van der Eijk and Franklin 1996). The different forms of vote switching between SOE and FOE are partly linked to the timing of the SOE within the national electoral cycle. One important voting pattern in SOE is a protest vote against the incumbent government. The “low stimulus” elections offer voters the opportunity to express their current dissatisfaction with the party they usually vote for; and this dissatisfaction manifests itself in defection (i.e., votes for another party) or abstentions. Using a term from the lexicon of football hooliganism, protest voting has been characterized as “voting with the boot” (see, for example, Oppenhuis et al. 1996: 301–304; Franklin 2005). Some scholars (van der Eijk and Franklin 1996) argue that protest vote is mainly observed in EP elections that take place in the later-term of the electoral cycle. According to them, citizens are more likely to vote “with the boot” (or defect “strategically,” see Schmitt et al. 2008, 2009) the closer an EP election comes to the next FOE. On the other hand, there is also the observation that the electorate treats later-term EP elections as quasi national elections and thus, government parties on average do not suffer severe losses (Reif and Schmitt 1980).



The other main voting pattern in SOE, actually the predominant one, is linked to the fact that there is less at stake in this type of election. Voters therefore can afford to cast a “sincere” vote for the party they prefer most. Voters are free to abandon strategic considerations (or “voting with the head,” see Oppenhuis et al. 1996: 301–304, Marsh and Franklin 1996: 16–21; Franklin 2005) and cast a vote “with the heart.” Van der Eijk and Franklin (1996) argue that this voting pattern is mainly observed during the “honeymoon” period of the electoral cycle. On the contrary, Reif and Schmitt (1980) suggest that a SOE shortly after a FOE is mainly characterized by a post-electoral euphoria and, therefore, government parties will receive near identical support in the EP election. Finally, at around mid-term of the electoral cycle strategic voting against the government is probably most widespread (“cyclical signaling,” see Schmitt et al. 2008, 2009). Then, losses for the incumbent parties will be greater than either early or late in the electoral cycle (see, for example, Reif 1985; van der Eijk and Franklin 1996), following mainly the arguments of the original studies back in the US context. Overall, we can conclude that the electorate behaves differently when these elections are held early in the first-order election cycle or during the run-up to the next national election.

Voting patterns in “low stimulus” elections are further analyzed in another main amendment to the SOE model. This revision concerns the so-called “micro-foundations” of the SOE model (see, for example, Carrubba and Timpono 2005; Hobolt and Wittrock 2011; Hobolt and Spoon 2012; Schmitt et al. 2008, 2009; Weber 2011; Schmitt and Teperoglou 2015). Both the motivations of individual citizens and their political behaviors are at the core of the analysis. Three different processes are likely to affect inter-election vote patterns according to the SOE model: mobilization, sincere voting and strategic voting (Schmitt et al. 2008, 2009). Mobilization likely has an impact on SOE abstentions, while sincere and strategic motivations are affecting both SOE abstainers and SOE defectors (for a comprehensive analysis of the micro-level hypotheses, see mainly Schmitt et al. 2008, 2009 and also Schmitt and Teperoglou 2017).

It is important to stress that everything happens at once – probably due in part to the different loci of EP elections in the respective national electoral cycle. There are clear mobilization effects with regard to turnout; and there are both sincere and strategic effects on vote switching, with sincere motivations having a somewhat stronger impact.

### **The consequences of second-order elections for the first-order political arena**

The SOE model entails that it is more likely that the first-order political arena affect electoral behavior in EP elections than vice versa. If we want to understand the results of EP elections, we first have to appreciate the decisive role of the political situation in the first-order political arena at the time when second-order elections are being held (Reif and Schmitt 1980: 8). Therefore, the model focuses mainly on the way in which national politics are influencing “less important” elections. However, the reverse outcome is also considered possible, and there is an emerging literature which tries to substantiate this claim. As noted by van der Brug and de Vreese (2016), EP elections might have unintended consequences for national politics. In the following, we attempt to identify such spillover effects from a SOE to a FOE. We can distinguish between three main groups of consequences, some of them more overt and direct while others more covert or even “hidden.” At a first glance, we identify some very practical or procedural changes in the domain of EU decision-making. Over the years from the first EP election of 1979, the powers of the European Parliament have been amplified, a process which culminated in the co-decision procedure promoting the EP to an equal co-legislator next to the European Council. After the 2014 EP election, based on stipulations of the Lisbon Treaty, the

European Parliament even had a decisive say in the selection of the president of the European Commission when the lead candidate of the victorious European People's Party was appointed. In addition, we are witnessing an increasing politicization of EU politics. In many EU member states (in particular those directly affected by the economic crisis) a European dimension of political competition ranging from outright opposition to full support of EU integration has emerged as a relevant structure of party competition (Kriesi et al. 2008; Hooghe and Marks 2009; Teperoglou and Tsatsanis 2011; Hutter et al. 2016). Under these circumstances, the composition of the European Parliament and its balance of power is affecting the direction of EU policy making, which in turn might have an impact on domestic political decisions.

The direct election of the members of the European Parliament, from 1979 on, was expected to increase citizens' awareness of EU institutions and strengthen EU democracy as perceived by its citizens. Many politicians hoped that the elections of the members of the European Parliament would add legitimacy to the EU level of European multi-level governance. Such consequences of EP elections were considered as normatively positive and desirable (Marsh and Franklin 1996: 30). Thirty-seven years later, we cannot find any clear evidence pointing in this direction. While affecting the level of turnout somewhat, the nomination and campaign of lead candidates or Spitzenkandidaten in the EP elections of 2014 could not alter the "low stimulus" character of the election and change it in the direction of a more "genuine European contest" (Schmitt et al. 2015).

There are two other sets of potential consequences to which we will briefly turn to below: the impact of a second-order election on national party systems, and on the levels of electoral participation in national elections.

### ***The impact of a SOE on national party systems***

One of the main hypotheses of the SOE model is that "low stimulus" elections provide opportunities for small parties to perform better compared to the environment provided by national first-order elections. In particular, new small parties that enter the political arena first at the time of an EP election can profit from the fact that there is less at stake. EP elections have indeed been described as the "midwife assisting in the birth of new parties" (van der Eijk and Franklin 1996: 53). Different electoral systems being applied in national and EP elections may further facilitate the electoral performance of small and new parties. The question is whether these new parties will survive in the subsequent national election. The history of EP elections provides some prominent examples of a breakthrough of newcomers. In France, the performance of the Front National (Ysmal and Cayrol 1996) is one of them, and Die Republikaner in Germany (Schmitt 1996) and more recently UKIP in the UK (Ford and Goodwin 2014) are further examples from the far right. However, this mechanism does not only apply on the far-right of national party systems but also in the left-green spectrum: the rise of many new Green and ecological parties in different EU member-countries – like Die Grünen in Germany – is another example of the spillover of EP election successes into the arena of national electoral politics (Curtice 1989). Moreover, Dinas and Riera (2017) are able to show that the likelihood of voting for a small party in subsequent FOEs increases when the individual's first vote ever was cast in an EP election in which voting for a small party is easier.

Using data from the European Election Studies 2004 and 2009, Markowski (2016) identifies different factors (both at the individual and at the contextual level) that might contribute to the likelihood of a spillover of SOE electoral successes of small and new parties into the FOE electoral arena. A main finding from this study is that social cohesion is more important than ideological or political cohesion for the electoral success of the party in the subsequent FOE. The



timing of an EP election within the first-order national electoral cycle does not seem to play a role. Markowski identifies differences between old and stable democracies and the new Eastern EU member states. In the latter group of countries, the possibilities for the new party to keep its electoral success are linked to the quality of political representation and social bonds. However, the limited number of observations in this particular study has led the author to acknowledge that these findings should not lead to far-reaching generalizations.

### ***The impact of a SOE on electoral participation***

An EP election might be consequential in terms of the mobilization of the electorate. Franklin and Hobolt (2010) identify that turnout in EP elections is particularly low in that part of the electorate the electoral participation of which is not yet “habitual” (see also Dinas 2012). This is relevant for the national electoral arena as citizens who become enfranchised first at the time of a second-order EP election are not only less likely to vote in a SOE, but also in the subsequent FOE. They get used to not voting: the early experience of an EP election does not contribute to the development of the habitual voting mechanism. Their analysis has shown that given the fact EP elections are only a “pale reflection” of a national contest, for young voters who have not yet had the opportunity to develop strong ties to parties, there is a spillover effect in terms of abstention from the second-order contest to the first-order one. Therefore, EP elections, in the long run, depress turnout in the FOE arena as well.

### **Concluding remarks**

Starting from the early studies of mid-term elections in the US, a whole industry of studies into “less important” elections emerged. Upon that background, the conceptual framework developed around the SOE model was meant as an effort to broaden the earlier US centric mid-term elections perspective and include a wider variety of second-order elections into the theoretical discussion and empirical analysis. One of the major lessons from testing the SOE model not only for EP elections but also for other “low stimulus” contests is that the electoral behavior in different contexts is not restricted to one electoral and political arena, but to more than one and possibly to many. This is not a trivial observation as this simple fact has severe consequences for electoral participation and party choice. The original proposal by Reif and Schmitt concentrated on macro-level hypotheses, and on effects on second-order electoral results which originate in the first-order electoral arena. Micro-level processes were not ignored in the original statement – nor are they ignored in the mid-term election literature – but it took a while until the micro-foundations of SOE behavior became somewhat more systematized. Our literature review demonstrated that this path of research has received more attention recently, and it is expected to become more prominent in the future. Even more recent are efforts to understand the reverse flow of causation – the effects that SOE might have on FOE electoral politics – both in the aggregate with regard to party system change and at the individual one with regard to electoral participation. Again, we believe that more work has to be done in this research field. Times of economic turmoil and increasing xenophobia are marked by growing populism and Eurosceptical stances of political parties, increased de-alignment and high volatility of voters, and “earthquake” or “critical” elections in various first-order contests – including the recent referendum of British EU membership. By studying the spillover effects of SOE to the first-order electoral arena, perhaps we might detect further important pieces in the still unsolved multi-level electoral puzzle.

## Notes

- 1 For the cyclical character of government popularity, see also, for the US, Goodhart and Bhansali (1970) and Stimson (1976), and for the UK, Miller and Mackie (1973).
- 2 In addition, it is hard to generalize from the findings of the heterogeneous field of local elections because of the very different rules and contexts under which they are held in Europe and beyond.
- 3 The original study by Reif and Schmitt included some other analytical dimensions: the specific-arena, the institutional-procedural, the campaign, the main-arena political change and, finally, social and cultural change (1980: 10–15). However, most of the subsequent studies have focused on the “less at stake” dimension.
- 4 According to Key (1955), elections are critical when the traditional coalitions between social groups and their political agents are subject to profound and lasting realignment.

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