

## **Assessing the inter-relation of elections at different levels (sub-national, national and supra-national)**

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Should countries employ different electoral systems at elections at different levels? If they do, what consequences can we expect?

### **The emergence and growth of multi-level elections**

The design of electoral systems is central to the construction of a functioning democracy, and the focus by this conference on electoral systems is testimony to that. Much of the literature on electoral systems has tended to concentrate on the systems used to elect national parliaments – quite understandably, given that these parliaments, and the executives that (in parliamentary systems) they elect, are particularly important political actors.

Systematic study of the electoral systems used for other levels of government is relatively lacking as yet. In part this is because, until recently, the only other elections to take place in most countries were local elections, and while there is variation between countries, and while local government can of course make an impact on citizens' lives, in virtually all countries these elections are perceived as being less important than national parliamentary elections.

Recently, however, in some countries at least, one or even two additional types of election have made an appearance. Both are connected with the so-called 'hollowing out of the state'. First, some national governments have ceded power 'downwards' to regional or provincial assemblies and governments; examples include France, Spain, and the UK, while German Land elections have always been seen as important. Second, some power has drifted 'upwards' to supra-national entities, most notably (for its 27 members) to the European Union, which since 1979 has brought about 5-yearly elections to the European Parliament. Thus, while all countries have at least two levels of election (national parliament and local government), many have three levels and some have four, each of which, at least when it occurs, is routinely described by political elites as being highly salient if not indeed 'crucial'.

## **Uniformity and variation in electoral systems at different levels**

Empirically, the study of the impact of electoral systems is hampered by a shortage of empirical data. While it is not too difficult to glean information on each country's national parliamentary electoral system, information on the systems used to elect MEPs or members of regional assemblies is harder to come by, and information on the systems used to elect local government is still more difficult to obtain. In countries where devolution of power is strong, indeed, each regional assembly or local government unit may have the power to determine its own electoral arrangements, making the task of compiling a database very laborious and time-consuming.

We do know, though, as Farrell and Scully have shown, that few EU member countries employ exactly the same electoral system to elect MEPs as they use to elect their national parliaments. At the very least, they usually elect all their MPs from one national constituency whereas most countries elect their national deputies from sub-national constituencies. In some cases there is a difference in formula, and, in particular, the 2002 decision of the EU to stipulate that all future EP elections must be based on some form of proportional representation (PR), meant that both France and the UK, the only EU member states to employ majoritarian electoral systems to elect their national parliaments, would inevitably be using fundamentally different methods to elect their MPs and their MEPs henceforth.

## **Should countries use the same electoral system at different levels?**

Should countries use different systems at different levels? While we should not be overly prescriptive, the arguments in favour seem to outweigh those against. There are three main arguments in favour: that the criteria by which we judge electoral systems are different for different types of election; that voting under different electoral systems is educative for voters; and that evidence from elections conducted under different electoral systems increases our understanding of the extent (and limitations) of the political consequences of electoral systems. The main argument against is the risk of voter confusion.

First, then, using different electoral systems at different levels may facilitate voters who have different preferences, or wish to give weight to different criteria, at different levels. For example, it is perfectly plausible that voters might prioritise government formation when deciding how to vote at a general election but be more concerned about the merits of individual candidates at a local election. Elections at different levels are about electing different kinds of representative and hence these different kinds of representatives should perhaps be given different behavioural incentives – regarding the solidity of party bloc voting, for example – by the electoral system. Thus, the kind of arguments in favour of non-PR systems at national level (principally that whatever their disadvantages in terms of proportionality, at least they increase the likelihood of single-party majority government) do not have much relevance at local elections or indeed at supra-national level such as EP elections. The same arguments are made re national-level electoral systems in favour of those PR formulae that tend to favour larger parties, notably the D'Hondt method, as against the more even-handed Sainte-Laguë method.

At both local and EP levels the case for PR is stronger than at national level (and, of course, in most countries this case is accepted as being strong even at national level). In addition, at local level in particular the case for allowing voters to express preferences for individual candidates may be seen to be stronger than at other levels, given that the relevance of party platforms to policy outputs is less and the importance of individual representatives is greater. Although a number of countries have preferential voting at national level (Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Ireland, Malta, Poland, Sweden and Switzerland are examples), something that allows voters to indicate a preference for individual candidates and hence generates intra-party electoral competition, in other countries there is concern within the dominant parties that this could lead to unhealthy division and factionalism within parties.

Second, the use of different electoral systems at different levels contributes to the education of voters, who in many countries may simply be unaware of the different ways in which a parliament or a council could be elected (as emerged during experience with UK focus groups). Thus any future debate on electoral system reform takes place in a more informed context; voters have had experience of more than one system and are in a much better position to make a more informed choice between them.

And, third, it is good for political scientists as it provides us with more cases to study. The benefit of this for the wider society is that it increases our ability to assess the effect of the electoral system on the party system and on other aspects of a country's politics. If exactly the same party system exists at each level, despite different electoral systems, this would suggest that other aspects of a country (such as its social structure or established patterns of political competition) have a greater effect than the electoral system; if there are different outputs even though social structure is (obviously) common across all levels of election, this implies that the electoral system does have an independent effect. Non-national levels of election can be used as laboratories, and the elections can be envisaged almost as 'natural experiments'. Of course, when doing this we need to take into account the impact of an election's being 'second-order', as Hermann Schmitt observes in his paper, something that is likely to lead to a greater vote for small non-government parties than we see at national elections regardless of the electoral system.

A potential disadvantage of using different electoral systems at different levels is that it runs the risk of leading to voter confusion, especially if every level uses a distinct system. For example, in Scotland voters use single-member plurality (SMP) to elect their Westminster MPs, a mixed system to elect members of the Scottish Parliament, closed list PR to elect their MEPs, and PR-STV to elect members of local councils. But in practice they seem to cope well enough with this situation.

### **The consequences of using different electoral systems**

Given the capacity of different electoral systems to lead to, or at least to be associated with, different party systems, what should we expect from situations where countries have different electoral systems at different levels? For example, if a country uses PR at one level and a non-PR system at another, would we expect to find quite different party systems at the two levels, or will one type of electoral system prove sufficiently 'strong' to have a decisive impact on the party system at both levels?

Research here is in its infancy. The obvious cases for analysis are France and the UK, given that these are the two countries where a non-PR system is used to elect the national parliament while a form of PR is used at most other levels. In France, the logic of the two-round system used at parliamentary elections works strongly against parties on the far left and far right, and these, especially the far-right FN, do indeed win very few seats. Yet they do not disappear, the FN being given (until its recent decline) regular boosts by PR elections for the European Parliament and for regional parliaments. Here the implication is that the 'permissive' nature of the PR electoral system used at some levels has an impact on the behaviour of political elites and of voters – though not on seat allocation – at parliamentary elections.

In the UK, in contrast, we see what looks more like the emergence of somewhat different party systems at different levels. Examining the three most recent elections in Scotland and Wales (1999–2007) and in the UK as a whole (1997–2005), we find that votes are distributed among more parties at regional elections than at national elections. Using the widely-employed 'effective number of parties' measure of Laakso and Taagepera, we find that the average figure for the distribution of votes is 4.9 in Scotland, 4.4 in Wales, and just 3.4 in the UK (at the level of seat distribution the differences are similar, the respective figures being 3.7, 3.1 and 2.3). Of course, we must bear in mind that the Scottish and Welsh elections may be perceived by voters as 'second-order', and a somewhat distinct pattern of voting might emerge regardless of the electoral system.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, there is a strong case for the employment of different electoral systems at different levels of election. This acknowledges the dominance of different criteria at different levels of election; increases voters' information about the nature and effects of different electoral systems; and increases our ability to identify and isolate the effects of electoral systems upon political systems. Even in our present state of limited information on the extent of intra-national divergence in electoral systems, there is scope for significant research.

## **References and further reading**

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