

Meaningful Choices

Under which conditions do general elections provide a meaningful choice set,
and what happens if they don't?

Hermann Schmitt

MZES, University of Mannheim, Germany

Bernhard Wessels

Social Science Research Center (WZB), Berlin, Germany

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1. Introduction

This paper outlines how Module III of the CSES will focus on the ‘meaningfulness’ of electoral choices.¹ Why do we think this is more relevant than ever? The reason is that the problem of an absence of choice has become more salient in many political systems. There are three arguments to support this claim.

The first argument is that traditional social cleavages no longer structure electoral choices as strongly as they used to, a finding that is common to almost all electoral systems. And new social divisions (or old divisions in new democracies) are not sufficiently salient to be able to add meaning to electoral choices. As social cleavages weaken, the parties that traditionally represented them become less clearly differentiated (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000).

Second, because many advanced societies are becoming more homogenous, the differences between parties have declined. As parties have become more responsive to voters’ demands, meaningful choices are more difficult for them to provide, as voters move to the centre and parties follow them. However, it is not obvious that centripetal competition is the characteristic pattern everywhere. In a broader perspective, there is probably as much reason to anticipate an alienated median voter as there is reason to predict dissatisfied voters at the border of some ideological or policy continuum due to centripetal competition.

And a third reason for declining electoral choices is the “professionalisation” of political campaigns (Farrell and Schmitt-Beck, 2002). Because of the central role assigned to the electronic media and political marketing techniques, modern political campaigning tends to

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downgrade the choice set offered to the electorate, away from distinct issues and policies stances that may polarize the electorate, and towards less divisive sentiments and images .

The evaluation of political choice sets can provide a handle for the analysis of these questions. They can be defined both in terms of voter's perceptions and evaluations, and in terms of the macro-characteristics of parties and party systems. By focusing on these choice sets, we hope to contribute to a better understanding of the causes and consequences of a possible mismatch between political demand and supply for electoral behaviour both with regard to the "why-" and the "how-question".

2. The CSES Approach

The Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) differs from other projects devoted to comparative electoral research in two main respects. First, it applies an *integrated* design to the analysis of electoral behaviour in different contexts, a fact that distinguishes it from electoral research comparing national election studies' findings. Secondly, the CSES is essentially a multi-level study relating macro- and micro-characteristics to one another. On a general level, CSES deals with the quality and performance of democracy (Shugart and Carey 1992, Cox 2002). On a more specific level, CSES deals with the questions of whether and to what degree elections serve the purpose of popular control of the elite and under which circumstances elections serve this purpose best.

CSES asks one basic question: Do system and macro context characteristics matter for electoral behaviour? Obviously, answers to this question are relevant for normative and empirical democratic theory. It is, however, a matter of dispute what a good democracy looks like. Some prefer consensus democracies over competitive ones (Lijphart 1999) while others do not. Some like presidential systems better than parliamentary ones, but others feel exactly the other way around (Linz and Valenzuela 1994). Controversies on the normative implications and empirical performance of these models of democracy fill libraries. While normative questions cannot be decided empirically, the CSES offers a rare opportunity to investigate whether elections work as intended by combining comparative micro and macro perspectives.

In conventional electoral research, the dependent variable is either vote choice or the election result. Independent variables usually are individual-level variables selected and analytically arranged according to the taste of different models of vote choice (like, e.g., Michigan, Columbia, or some variant of rational choice). CSES goes beyond this. Whole models of vote choice – that is, their relative fit with particular institutional and social

contexts – can become “dependent” here. This is possible because CSES adds characteristics of the institutional and social context to the traditional individual level variables. By this design, the vote function itself and its performance becomes a prime focus of research (see e.g. Kroh 2003).

It is well known that different types of electoral systems conform to different models of democracy. The functionalist school of democracy emphasizes governability and alternation in power. The other school, more inspired by theories of justice, emphasizes equality. The former favours a majoritarian electoral system while the latter goes together with proportional representation (e.g. Powell 2000). Shepsle (1988) calls this characteristic difference the trade-off between governance and representation.

Majority rule was at first a decision principle. It goes back to the principle of unanimity, and to the necessity of avoiding legislative impasses if unanimity can not be reached. Only Rousseau’s proposal of a *volonté général* normatively rendered “majority rule” into a representation principle, which was then refined by requests for minority protection and alternation in government by Locke, Adams, and Tocqueville. “PR”, on the other hand, was conceived as a representation principle from the beginning, mirroring society.

Whatever is implied by (normative) theory must translate, in order to become effective, into individual electoral behaviour on the one hand, and the political supply structure on the other. On the *supply-side*, many classical studies (e.g. Duverger 1955; Rae 1967; Lijphart 1994; Cox 1997; and Taagepera 1999) have demonstrated that the electoral system affects the macro-structure of a polity, in particular its party system. However, much less is known with regard to the *demand-side*, i.e. the calculus of the vote. Rational-choice inspired approaches have investigated the phenomenon of avoidance of wasted votes and of ticket-splitting (Cox 1997). But this kind of research is mostly concerned - at least implicitly – with the effective use of the vote and thus with the mechanical effects of electoral systems. Whether and to what degree the representation principles that are associated with an electoral system have an impact on the calculus of voting is less well investigated. This is where CSES-based research can contribute.

We propose that electoral research has two central questions to ask. The first is, *why voters vote*. Do they use their vote as a measure of punishment and reward, i.e. do they use their vote to hold the incumbents accountable? Or do they use their vote to make sure the right kind of people are in place to make decisions?

The second central question of election research is, *how voters vote*. This is obviously a question which can not be totally disentangled from the previous. Electoral research has provided a variety of explanatory models. However, there is one almost totally neglected perspective. That is: How *can* voters vote? This leads us again to the supply-side of politics. In this domain, macro analytical studies have provided deep insights. Much less

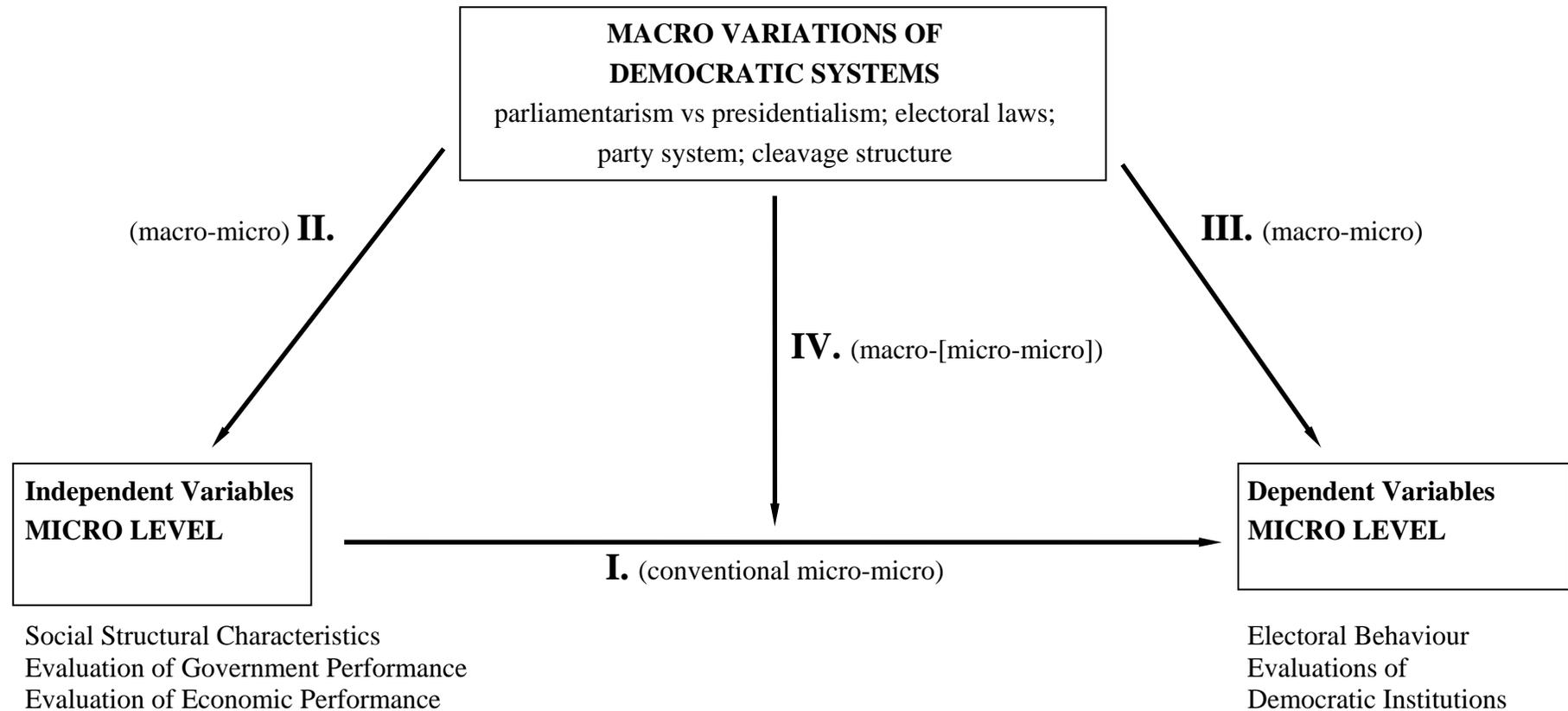
has been done so far when it comes to electoral behaviour. Robert Dahl has emphasized the choice aspect as a precondition for democracy and democratic participation (Dahl 1971). If there is no choice, elections cannot function democratically. Choice sets vary strongly between polities depending on the format of the party system, the policies offered by political competitors, and the way voters are able (or allowed) to cast their vote.

CSES allows us to investigate whether motivations and choices vary according to the constraints imposed by different institutional contexts. It makes it possible to compare the power of different explanatory models of vote choice, and of different parameters within these models, between different institutional arrangements. This is possible because of the particular CSES study design which assesses variations in individual level characteristics, variations in macro level characteristics, and individual level variations in relation to macro level variations (see Figure 1). Comparative electoral research already has demonstrated that there is considerable variation in the impact of different factors on the calculus of the vote. The general impression is that the institutional context matters more than individual characteristics for the vote function. By this design, three different kinds of co-variation can be investigated:

- a. The co-variation of micro characteristics (micro-micro relationships; arrow I). This is the domain of conventional models of voting behaviour, e.g. the Ann Arbor model, the Columbia approach, or rational choice-inspired models.
- b. The co-variation of macro institutional and macro social context variables with (aggregated) individual level information (arrows II and III). Examples are:
 - the co-variation of media coverage and aggregate political information and
 - the co-variation of electoral systems, demographic composition, and turnout.
- c. The co-variation of macro institutional and macro social context variables with micro-micro relationships (arrow IV). Examples are:
 - the co-variation of party system differentiation and the explanatory power of spatial voting models and
 - the co-variation of electoral system characteristics and the strength of personalized vote patterns.

In combination, the CSES design allows for testing differences in vote functions and for assessing the explanatory power of different theories of voting behaviour in different macro contextual setting.

Figure 1
The Macro-Micro and Macro-Micro-Micro Research Design



Notes: Arrow “I” symbolises conventional micro-micro interdependencies; arrow “II” symbolises macro-correlates of cross country variation in the distribution of independent micro level variables; arrow “III” symbolises macro-correlates of cross country variation in the distribution of dependent micro level variables; and arrow “IV” symbolises macro-correlates of cross country variation in the strength of micro-micro interrelationships.

3. The Choice Set: The Analytical Focus For CSES III

The principal idea behind the consecutive CSES modules is to change periodically the main analytical focus of the project without losing comparability in central indicators over time. Thus, the longer CSES exists the more diachronic analyses become feasible. This implies that a basic set of questions and variables in the micro-questionnaire should remain the same in every module, while another part should vary according to the particular analytic focus (see appendix for a comparison of micro-level variables of the CSES III proposal with the questionnaires of CSES I and II).

The first two waves of the CSES have concentrated on the performance of democracy and on accountability and representation, respectively. We propose to focus CSES III on the electoral choice set that voters are confronted with in an election. While we know a lot about why and how citizens vote, we know less about how both dimensions of voting are affected by the kind of choices that are available to the electorate. How electoral motivations and decisions vary with the choice set is a basis for module III of CSES. While the idea behind this proposal is simple, the relevance of the question is obvious - both from a normative and from a theoretical perspective.

From a normative perspective, it deals with the central concern whether and to what degree different supply patterns allow meaningful choices to be made in an election, and thereby make democracy work. Since CSES confines itself to competitive electoral systems, the answer to this question is obviously not a matter of Yes or No but a matter of More or Less. Using Dahl's distinction between inclusiveness and contestation, we can rephrase our question and ask to what degree political systems provide contest and how integrative their electoral competition structure is. An answer to these questions informs the evaluation of a democracy. More importantly, for electoral research the question is to which degree this affects motivations and choices.

From a theoretical perspective, answers to the question to which degree (the limit of) the choice sets affect electoral motivations and decisions will help to refine our models of electoral choice. How does the rationality of voters change when the choice set does not allow for a choice that is compatible with preferences? Should our models of voting behaviour and the resulting vote functions be regarded as conditional upon the available choice set in the wider institutional and social context?

In order to clarify the underlying research question, we need to think about how a meaningful choice set can be defined; what the institutional and social preconditions for meaningful choice sets are; and what consequences follow from different qualities of the choice sets. These are the questions which we will address in the following.

4. Meaningful Choices

Liberal democracy requires elections which provide voters with meaningful choices. What a meaningful choice set is depends upon the match between demand and supply in a specific society and a particular election. It depends on the character and strength of social divisions and their translation into the party system. And it depends on the responsiveness of political parties² facing changing popular demands. Only if there is sufficient correspondence between demand and supply can general elections remain the prime linkage mechanism between society and politics. Only then, moreover, can electoral research be successful. If the voter does not perceive a choice to be meaningful, and the act of choosing a party or candidate is like flipping a coin, then the analysis of his or her choice behaviour is bound to produce null findings. Even the most sophisticated analysis of electoral behaviour will be unable to find much structure in such choices.

A meaningful choice set presupposes a plurality of choice options from which to choose. In addition, those options need to differ on dimensions that are relevant to the purpose of elections. The purpose of a general election³ is to collectively decide about which political agenda⁴ should be pursued and which policies⁵ should be

² With an eye on the variability of “party” in the different political systems under study, we follow Giovanni Sartori’s (1976: 63) minimal definition: “A political party is any political group identified by an official label that presents at elections, and is capable of placing through elections [...], candidates for public office.”

³ The election of the members of the European Parliament is one of very few exceptions. Others are elections of heads of state with little more than ceremonial functions, like that of the presidents of Ireland and Austria.

⁴ Whether, e.g., the problem of unemployment, questions of peace and war, or those of economic development are at the top of the agenda and should be pursued first of all. Note that mass media have a significant impact on political agendas, in addition to political parties and other political actors and events. Issue priorities translate into vote choices by way of competence attributions: those options are chosen who are perceived to be most likely to solve the central political problems (e.g. Schmitt 2001). Models of agenda and competence voting require less sophisticated voters than policy models do.

⁵ Whether, e.g., the problem of unemployment can best be fought by radical tax reforms or by generous employment programmes. Note that models of policy voting are commonly based on spatial models of vote choice (e.g. Downs 1956).

enacted, and about who should do it.⁶ Based upon this, we can identify three relevant dimensions for electoral choices to be meaningful.

4.1 Relevant Dimensions for Electoral Choices to be Meaningful

Democratic elections ought to provide a substantive choice between competing policy proposals and/or political agendas.⁷ In normative terms, this is the most relevant dimension of elections. In order for a choice set to be meaningful, the available choice options need to differ with regard to the policies they would pursue if they won office after the election.

From the voters' perspective, there are two ways to establish a view on the likely policies of each of the available choice options, one retrospective and the other prospective. Retrospectively, voters establish a sense of the course of future policies on the basis of their experience of the course of past policies (Key 1966, Fiorina 1977).⁸ It is obvious that retrospective voter evaluations are easier for political actors who were in charge of governmental policies over the last legislature, i.e. the incumbent government, than they are for the parties or candidates of the opposition. Prospective evaluations of the likely policies of different choice options must rely on statements of intention as they are laid down in election manifestos and other campaign material. On the other hand, prospective evaluations of policy differences between the choice options – parties or candidates – are much harder for the voter because they call for a considerable amount of knowledge and information.

A more general measure of policy differences between choice options is ideology. As the term is used here, ideology is a coherent set of beliefs that characterises the thinking of a group – e.g. the programmatic statements and the policies of a political party. This suggests that ideological differences between choice options imply policy differences. Ideological differences between choice options are less difficult for the voter to determine because ideologies – the core content of them at least – are not

⁶ Note that there is a growing body of empirical literature on the impact of political leaders on vote choices, most recently e.g. King (2002) and Aarts, Blais and Schmitt (forthcoming 2004). These studies concentrate on countries with a long tradition of empirical research into electoral behaviour, consolidated democracies all of them. In these environments, they find little evidence for a secular increase in leader effects on vote choices.

⁷ Not each election is held under ideal circumstances. Some are at the very beginning of a new democratic start, terminating an era of dictatorship of whatever sort. Trust in the democratic credentials of the contenders is probably the most important choice criterion under those circumstances. But this can only underscore that the ideal of a democratic election provides a substantive choice between competing policy proposals or political agendas.

⁸ Note that retrospective voting requires some stability of at least the central electoral competitors (parties and candidates). If the party system is in total flux, credit and blame for past achievements and failures are hard to attribute.

very volatile.⁹ This is why ideology is understood to serve as a proxy for policy in many theories of the voting decision. However, choices are possible in which policy and ideology suggest different options to choose (well-off left-wingers, for example, might prefer the conservatives on their tax policy while they prefer labour on their ideology of social equality). Ideology is therefore neither a substitute nor is it a super-criterion: it is an equivalent criterion to establish relevant differences in electoral choice sets, next to policy and – as we shall argue – performance and competence.

In contrast to policies, which are the substance of political decision making, performance is a more formal or procedural measure. Performance evaluations are about “the job” a future government (or party) is expected to do. One dimension of performance is trust in the actors, the other is judgements on their competence. Does one trust a particular party or coalition of parties to run the country? Are they likely to realise what they promise? Relevant here are, among other things, the images voters have of the candidates standing for central political office, be that head of government, cabinet minister, or similar.

Performance evaluations and competence attributions are directly related to policy and may constrain choices on the basis of policy positions or problem priorities. Thus, they do not only come into play in cases where policy differences between the different choice options are hard to discern, but also in cases where voters doubt that parties or candidates will be able to carry a particular policy course through. In other words: voters might prefer one choice option on policy grounds, and a second option on performance, and vote for the second.¹⁰

In summary, then, in order for a choice set to be meaningful, the available choice options need to differ on the policies they promote, with regard to the ideology they stand for, or with regard to the performance expected from them and the competence attributed to them. If none of these three criteria apply, an electoral choice set can not be called meaningful.

⁹ It may be though that parties are becoming more and more “Downsian” – more volatile ideologically – in that they more frequently adjust their relative positions to the perceived voter distribution in order to maximize their electoral utility.

¹⁰ Note that policy, ideology and performance choices are not necessarily based on complete information. Voters simplify political complexity through heuristics that allow them to choose among the available choice options at considerable lower cost.

4.2 What are the Preconditions of a Meaningful Choice Set ?

Having discussed the notion of a meaningful choice set and the three dimensions which separately and together underpin it, we move to the question of the likely preconditions of a meaningful choice set. This is the major research question of the third module of the CSES: What are the preconditions under which electorates in general elections are provided with meaningful choice-sets?

In the present paper, we will only briefly discuss two sets of factors that could possibly affect the meaning of electoral choice sets, one social and one institutional. We start with the latter: What kind of institutional arrangements could possibly affect the meaningfulness of electoral choices?

Institutional arrangements

One of the usual suspects in the institutional domain is the electoral system; it shapes the party system (Duverger 1955, Lijphart 1994) and thereby the nature and direction of party competition (Sartori 1976). Party competition, in turn, is likely to impact on the policy and ideological differences between the available choice options, and thus affect the meaningfulness of an electoral choice set (Webb, Farrell and Holiday, 2002). But there is way in which the electoral system can impinge on the meaningfulness of electoral choices: through candidate selection and thus the kind of political personnel that is recruited to political office. In this way, the electoral system could have an impact on evaluations of performance and competency.

In addition to political personnel, the rules that regulate election campaigns are important. Very open finance rules may open the door to non partisan candidates. Similarly, rules about political advertising can affect the way parties and candidates articulate the choices offered to the electorate.

But there is more than the electoral system involved in shaping these patterns. The relative openness of the party system is an important variable that goes beyond the institutions of the electoral system. The less defensive the behaviour of the established party system in permitting new parties to enter, the more open a party system is considered to be. Indicators here are the number of signatures required for a new list to be allowed to run, how long in advance a new party's candidature needs to be notified, and the like.¹¹

¹¹ The openness of the media system is a crucial context factor. Modern mass media are setting the agenda upon which voters evaluate the performance of and assign responsibility to political actors.

Another institutional factor is the relative clarity in distinguishing between government and opposition. No matter what kind of criterion we apply to establish the meaningfulness of electoral choices – policy, ideology, or performance and competence – in cases where the distinction between government and opposition becomes blurred, an electoral choice set can not be meaningful because there is little or no choice left. Examples are all situations that come close to a “grand coalition” – i.e. when major actors of the two opposite political camps are (more or less peacefully) co-operating rather than (more or less furiously) opposing one another. An open example was the “grosse Koalition” in Germany at the end of the 1960s. More concealed are constellations in which the two chambers of parliament are dominated by opposite majorities and still need to cooperate and legislate together. A example is again Germany where over a extended period the opposition of the Bundestag (the federal parliament) was mastering a majority in the Bundesrat (the state assembly). Also in this “grand coalition” category belongs a “petit coalition” where the coalition partners are the leading representatives of opposite ideological camps. An example for this is the “purple” PvdA-VVD coalition in the Netherlands which ended in the rise and fall of Pim Fortuyn.

Related to this is the question whether a political system is led by single-party governments or by coalition governments. Single-party governments leave no room of manoeuvre – the party in government is the government and responsible for achievements and failures over the past legislature. It is easy to hold it accountable – to punish or reward it at an election. This clearly adds to the meaning of an electoral choice. The situation is less clear-cut if more than one party is responsible for public policy. Ordinary coalition governments are a case in point. But this is also the case in situations and periods of divided government when different majorities in two houses of parliament need to compromise. Another dimension is provided by the multi-tiered system of government in the European Union. In every EU member state, about one in two legislative acts is decided “one level up” – by the EU decision-making system. In these circumstances, how far is a national electoral choice “meaningful”?

Social divisions

The second set of factors that might impinge on the meaningfulness of an electoral choice set are social divisions. In the traditional macro-sociological perspective, electoral choice sets, that is: party systems, are political representations of social cleavages (Rokkan 1982). The deeper these cleavages are, the farther apart are the different choice options both in terms of ideology and policy. In this way, the gradual

The less open and competitive the media system is, the less clear will the “real” choices appear to the voters.

erosion of traditional cleavages (e.g. Dalton, Flanagan and Beck 1984, Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000, Franklin, Mackie and Valen 1992, but compare Evans 1999) has a negative influence on the meaningfulness of electoral choice sets.

However, two qualifications need to be made in this regard. One has to do with elite strategies as a response to social and cultural divisions. Political elites are capable of moderating the translation process of social divisions into the political decision making apparatus. A well known example of this is “the politics of accommodation” as an elite response to the polarisation (“verzuiling”) of the Dutch society in much of the 20th century (Lijphart 1975). What is less well known is the dynamic element in Lijphart’s model which requires political elites to become more competitive if the social structure and political culture of a society turns more homogenous – just because of the fact that otherwise elections would not provide a meaningful choice set anymore (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Social Divisions and Elite Responses

	homogenous society/culture	plural society/culture
elites are coalescent	no meaningful choice options	e.g. the Netherlands in most of the 20 th century
elites are adversarial	e.g. the US	danger of violent conflict resolution

Source: Lijphart 1977 as adapted by Thomassen 2002.

The second qualification concerns the time required to transform social divisions into meaningful electoral choice options. As Bartolini and Mair (1990: 216) put it: “Social divisions become cleavages when they are organised as such”. Organisation, however, requires time, resources and opportunities, all of which might not have been sufficiently available in newer democracies. This is why in these electoral systems social divisions are expected to add less to the meaning of electoral choices than in the longer established democratic systems.

4.3 What if elections do not provide a meaningful choice set?

What happens if elections do not provide a meaningful choice set? Obviously, this question implies that the choice set and the calculus of voting are closely related. In the simplest form, very limited choice sets (e.g., such as electoral systems based on majority rule) skew voters' choices toward the big parties. In more complex settings, the calculus of voting may be constrained by the trade-off between governance and representation; or the different emphasis on candidates versus parties. This also includes the question whether choice is possible at all or a worthwhile endeavour to invest in.

What if elections do not provide a meaningful choice set? This is the second major research question which this module will tackle. Of course, we will not be able to provide a satisfactory answer to this question before the work is done. But we can try to specify dimensions on which we expect possible consequences to emerge; and in all likelihood, the consequences will depend on the institutional arrangements and on the nature of social conflict.

Turnout might decline.

Electoral participation is one such dimension. When general elections do not provide a meaningful choice set, turnout must be expected to drop (Wattenberg, 2002, but cf Norris, 2002). The reason is straightforward. When all available choice options in an election differ little on the three pertinent dimensions of policy, ideology, and performance and competence, why then should people care about taking part in such an election? The magnitude of the decline might depend to some degree on the electoral system, with PR based systems perhaps experiencing greater difficulties than others because the likelihood of a local counter-balance to the overall absence of choice is smaller there.

New parties might alter the choice set.

A second dimension is a possible change in the pre-existing choice-less choice set. Electoral choice sets in democratic systems with free and fair elections are vulnerable. When general elections cease to provide a meaningful choice, new

parties and/or candidates might emerge to offer electoral alternatives that differ on policy, ideology, or in terms of performance and competence.

The likelihood of anti-system parties appearing on the political scene is again moderated by the electoral system. FPP systems make it hard for small and new political forces to gain representation if their support is not concentrated geographically. PR systems, on the other hand, are more sensitive to new political forces, so much so that many incorporate some threshold of representation precisely to halt transient political forces and splinter parties from gaining representation in parliament. Further provisions of the electoral law which determine the relative openness of the party system (like the rules that govern the financing and conduct of election campaigns) are also moderating the likelihood of new parties being able to alter the choice set.

Political support might drop in the long run.

The ultimate consequence of electoral systems that fail to provide meaningful choices might be a weakening of electoral representation as the standard form of interest intermediation, and – depending on circumstances – even a decline in regime support more generally. The weakening of electoral representation is evidenced by the rise of support for non-partisan “new social movements” and their efforts to articulate their interests through non-electoral channels (e.g. lobbying and public protest activities like blocking transports of nuclear material). In addition, more pressure for direct-democratic elements of collective decision-making is likely to result if elections fail to provide meaningful choices ; an obvious example of this is the rising frequency and importance of citizen initiatives and referendums.

Assume this de-legitimation of voting and general elections is taking place, could this lead to a decline in political support more generally – and if so, under what conditions? This, once again, is a question to be answered at the end of the project. But it would be reasonable to hypothesize that this could happen if systems of electoral representation were unable to regain their ability to provide meaningful choices (e.g., by granting parliamentary representation to new parties) and if at the same time alternative mechanisms of interest intermediation and collective decision-making were less effective.

4.4. Are there limits to the benefits of meaningful choices?

Yes, there are limits. Some measure of elite accommodation seems to be inevitable, because “too meaningful” elections might instead lead to public disorder and civil war. As Horowitz (1985, 2002) points out, in deeply divided societies like that of Nigeria or Northern Ireland, holding elections may be tantamount to taking the census. Each group has its party, and everyone in that group votes for that party, so the election may not really be about choices at all. The political elites that result from this process have then to conduct the whole political process by bargaining among themselves.

4.5. Indicators of a Meaningful Choice Set

One class of possible indicators of a meaningful choice set are perceptual measures. The reason for this is straightforward: people can only work with them and base their decisions on them if they are in their minds. The dimensions which need to be covered are those that we have discussed before:

- a) policy and ideological differences between the different choice options:
 - perceptions and evaluations of differences in issue positions and/or issue emphasis of parties and/or candidates
 - perceptions and evaluations of ideological distances between parties and/or candidates

In operational terms, this will certainly be one of the most difficult tasks of the whole endeavour: to ensure that relevant policy and ideological differences between the available choice options are adequately covered by a limited number of survey questions.

- b) performance and competence differences between the different choice options:
 - measures of competence of parties and/or candidates in order to discount policies or ideologies

Performance and competence measures should cover the same dimensions as in a).

- c) perceived actor constellations:
 - identifiability of alternative governments (or government coalitions)

This aspect is not meant to measure preferences but perceptions of possible government constellations - even if disliked.

Perceptions are one thing, reality may be another. In order to identify the conditions under which perceptions of the electoral choice set coincide with “objectively” available choice options, macro measures on policy positions of parties and their general ideological positions must also be obtained. One established and reliable way of doing this is the content analysis of party manifestos (e.g. Klingemann et al. 1994). Another is expert judgements (e.g. Laver and Hunt 1992). Expert judgements are cheaper and easier to secure, although there is a clear preference for the content analysis of election manifestos of the available choice options from a methodological point of view. A third possible source are the legislative activities of political parties, starting from roll-call behaviour over legislative initiatives to co-sponsorships of legislative initiatives. Furthermore, information about publicly stated coalition intentions – if applicable – should be documented. This could be secured by a pertinent question in the macro questionnaire which each local study director provides. Given the importance of political communication for the choice perceptions, CSES III should also collect basic information on national campaign regulations and the structure of the national media system.

5. Summary

Questions surrounding the meaningfulness of electoral choices will form the basis for the third round of the CSES. This project will broaden the scope of prior CSES modules by making the opportunity structure for electoral choices the central concern. As innovative as this (hopefully) may sound, it does not require the instrumentation of the micro-questionnaire being totally new and unique. Many survey questions which are familiar to the CSES community will be utilized, and the longitudinal strategy of the CSES could be further pursued.

In putting the relationship between (perceived) choice options and actual choice behaviour - including the choice of non-voting – at the centre of the study, one major aspect of electoral research as part of the research into democracy would be dealt with: the contingency of decisions on available choices. This promises to allow for the evaluation of the democratic effectiveness of elections, and the refinement of explanatory models of electoral choice.

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Appendix: Variables in Three Successive CSES Modules

Module I (1996-2002)	Module II (2002-2006)	proposed Module III (2006-2010) *
		<i>competence and performance of actors</i>
	most important problem (MIP)	most important problem (MIP)
		party/candidate competency MIP
		second most important problem (SMIP)
		party/candidate competency SMIP
		third most important problem (TMIP)
		party/candidate competency TMIP
	government performance in general	government performance in general
		<i>distinctiveness of choice options and inclusiveness of choice set</i>
		difference between parties in campaign
		hypothetical choice if voting compulsory
		alternative choice
		negative choice
who is in power makes a difference	who is in power makes a difference	who is in power makes a difference
whom to vote for makes a difference	whom to vote for makes a difference	whom to vote for makes a difference
	does any party represent views well/which	does any party represent views well/which
	does any leader represent views well/who	does any leader represent views well/who
		<i>evaluation of individual choice options</i>
party like/dislike scales	party like/dislike scales	party like/dislike scales
leaders like/dislike scales		leaders like/dislike scales
left/right self placement	left/right self placement	left/right self placement

left/right party placement	left/right party placement	left/right party placement
party identification/closeness to party	party identification/closeness to party	party identification/closeness to party
		<i>legitimacy</i>
satisfaction with democracy	satisfaction with democracy	satisfaction with democracy
	democracy best form of government	democracy best form of government
fair elections		fair elections
		<i>campaign and media</i>
		campaign involvement
		?? media impact on perception of inter-party differences??
		<i>voting</i>
participation and vote last election	participation and vote last election	participation and vote last election
	participation and vote previous election	participation and vote previous election
	<i>previous variables not proposed to be repeated</i>	
candidate recognition		
contact with parliamentarians/politicians	being contacted by a candidate	
	activity: contacted politician	
necessity of political parties		
responsiveness of representatives		
actual and past economic performance		
openness of political articulation		
	activity: persuasion of others	
	activity: candidate support	

	being contacted by a candidate	
	government performance on MIP	
	performance of party voted for in previous election	
	do elections guarantee representation	
	activity: taken part in demonstrations	
	activity: worked together with other people	
	respect of human rights in COUNTRY	
	frequency of corruption	
	<i>demography (under review)</i>	
political information measures	political information measures	
electoral district	electoral district	
age	age	
sex	sex	
education	education	
marital status	marital status	
union membership respondent	union membership respondent	
union membership household	union membership household	
	membership business association	
	membership farmer's association	
	membership professional association	
current employment status	current employment status	
main occupation respondent	main occupation respondent	
socioeconomic status respondent	socioeconomic status respondent	
private or public employment	private or public employment	
industrial sector of employment	industrial sector of employment	
main occupation partner	main occupation partner	
socioeconomic status partner	socioeconomic status partner	
private or public employment	private or public employment	

industrial sector of employment	industrial sector of employment	
household income	household income	
no. of people in household	no. of people in household	
no. of children < 18	no. of children < 18	
church attendance	church attendance	
religiosity	religiosity	
religious denomination	religious denomination	
language spoken at home	language spoken at home	
race of respondent	race of respondent	
ethnicity of respondent	ethnicity of respondent	
rural/urban residence	rural/urban residence	

* Yellow marked variables are new to the CSES.