

Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES)
Plenary Session
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Opening Session

What have we learned so far and where should we go?

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1 What have we learned so far?

The answer to this question can profit from looking back to the general theoretical debate of the profession in the early Nineties. In the early Nineties neo-institutionalism had brought back the big questions about the impact of political structures on politics. This focus had triggered a lively debate on fundamental problems of our discipline. And there is no doubt that the profession has profited much from asking how institutional engineering could improve the efficiency and the quality of democracy. One aspect, however, was missing in this discussion. Very few contributions dealt with the empirical study of the effects of institutions on the behavior of individual or collective actors. Research into elections and electoral behavior was no exception. Normative assumptions prevailed.

Do institutions that are meant to channel electoral behavior really do what they are supposed to do? Empirical answers to this question are not easy to find. They depend on the availability of individual-level data on voting behavior observed in different institutional contexts. Despite of many similarities in theoretical approaches by those following the approaches developed by the Columbia or the Ann Arbor schools of electoral research, national election studies did only produce a very small number of exactly comparable individual-level measures that would have allowed systematic research of effects of institutions on voting behavior. Thus, considering the general debate about the impact of institutions on politics, it did not come as a surprise that a decisive move to improve the situation in our field came from a group of scholars engaged in national election studies (ICORE). In the early 1990s they organized cooperation and launched the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES)

to generate the data needed for the study of the effects of electoral institutions on individual voting behavior.

Jacques Thomassen has highlighted the unique organizational features of the CSES enterprise. Thus, there is no need for repetition. What cannot be over-estimated, however, are the positive consequences of the initial decision of those responsible to link CSES to the professional networks of national election studies. The intimate knowledge of theories and methods in the field of voting and elections very much eased decisions about CSES's specific research agendas.

Four *Planning Committees* have suggested, discussed and finally selected the general research questions the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems has tackled so far.

In February 1996 the *first Planning Committee* had finished its Final Report. It suggested to study:

- the impact of electoral institutions on citizens' political cognition and behavior,
- the nature of political and social cleavages and alignments,
- and
- the evaluation of democratic institutions and processes.

Planning Committee number two decided to focus on:

accountability and representation.

Are elections perceived as mechanisms to hold governments accountable or are they perceived to ensure that the political preferences of voters are proportionally represented in the democratic process?

The *third Planning Committee* proposed to study:

voter perceptions of the quality of political choices in an election.

How do voters distinguish between parties, which contextual conditions influence the making of such distinctions, and how does all this condition voting behavior.

Planning Committee number four wanted to improve what we know about:

voter preferences for policies that affect income and wealth distribution, in a period of constrained growth, deficit reduction, and expenditure constraint.

As of today the data about the topics proposed by *Planning Committees 1 to 3* have been collected and made freely available to the academic community. They cover elections in more than 30 to 40 countries respectively. Data quality is high and thoroughly controlled. Access to the data files is easy thanks to the CSES coordination centers that have been established in Ann Arbor (ISR) and Cologne (GESIS).

A multitude of analyses have been carried out using CSES data and I have to admit that I have not read them all. Indeed, it would take a special project to systematically evaluate and summarize all the findings.

I know, of course, that you don't really expect me to seriously engage in a systematic evaluation and summary all these findings. This you have made explicit by restricting my talk to 20 minutes. As far as I am concerned, this actually comes as a relief because it gives me the liberty to make my own selection.

I have decided to base my remarks on three of the four volumes of our CSES - OUP book series. After all, these books are meant to document the major findings of the various modules (1).

My remarks are not meant as systematic and coherent synthesis of these volumes. They will simply reflect what I think I have learned by reading these volumes. In my talk I will cite many of the authors without always marking that I do. It would cost too much of my time. The volumes I rely on are the following:

Citizens, Context, and Choice, edited by Russell J. Dalton and Christopher J. Anderson (2011)

Political Parties and Democratic Linkage, co-authored by Russell J. Dalton, David M. Farrell, and Ian McAllister (2011)

and

Elections and Democracy, edited by Jacques Thomassen (2014).

1.1 Let me start with the volume edited by Dalton and Anderson.

The authors want to understand how context shapes the electoral choices of citizens. They rightly stress that two types of theories are needed to generate expectations:

First, a theory of institutions and how they work.

Second, a theory of the psychological effects of institutions that determine why individual voters behave as they do.

To be sure, in their volume they do not develop and present an integrated and comprehensive theory of institutions and their psychological effects. However, they give it a good start, limiting attention to three important characteristics of political contexts that they assume to influence voting behavior. These characteristics are:

the number of options voters have,

the clarity of such options,

and the stability of those options.

They propose that these characteristics can cause three types of contextual effects on voting behavior: direct, indirect, and contingent effects:

Direct contextual effects result when formal rules directly act on citizen decisions to vote or how to vote.

Indirect contextual effects imply that institutions affect some intervening variable, which is the proximate cause of the ultimate outcome.

Contingent contextual effects occur as an interaction effect when the effect depends on the presence of some third variable.

These distinctions open up a window for theory formation of contextual or institutional effects over and beyond the discussion of direct effects.

The substantive results presented in the 11 chapters of their edited volume can be summarized as follows:

Results indicate that institutions and macro-contextual conditions often shape the ways in which individual-level factors like ideology relate to voter choices. This is particularly true for clarity of choice as a characteristic of the political context. At the same time they find that context cannot compete with individual-level variables in a race to predict the vote.

Instead, the analyses reveal that context and individual differences jointly paint a fuller and more vibrant picture of how voters come to make their decisions.

1.2 Let me now turn to Russell J. Dalton, David M. Farrell, and Ian McAllister: Political Parties and Democratic Linkage

This book deals with the much disputed role of political parties and party government. The authors want to contribute to this debate and test the hypothesis of a decline of the importance of parties and party government for the democratic process.

Dalton, Farrell and McAllister develop a model of party government that focuses on the five most important linkages between parties and voters. The chain of democratic linkages starts with the:

campaign linkage,

followed by

the participatory linkage,

the ideological linkage,

the representative linkage,

and the policy linkage.

Their analysis shows that the prospect for parties and party government is far less worrisome as assumed in the public debate. In a large number of areas, political parties continue to forge

the important linkages between citizens and government. And where these linkages are under stress, parties seek to address the problem. Parties constantly evolve and adapt in order to survive. The authors claim that they will be with us for the long haul.

This is an important finding. It not only confirms what I always wanted to believe. In addition, it flatly contradicts the evaluations of prominent political pundits and of prophets of the crisis of representative democracy.

Let me add that Dalton, Farrell, and McAllister have developed an interesting index measuring the degree to which the electoral process is party centered. While there is some variation between countries the authors state that the overarching pattern is one showing a continuing centrality of parties in the electoral process of most contemporary democracies.

1.3 Finally. What have I learned from the volume edited by Thomassen on Elections and Democracy: Representation and Accountability?

The authors look at the electoral consequences of majoritarian and consensus democracies. They want to find out whether these different institutional set-ups really achieve the goals they are expected to achieve?

More specifically, they ask the following four questions:

1 How well do majoritarian systems serve the function of electoral accountability and do they serve this function better than consensual systems?

2 How well do consensual systems serve the function of representativeness, and do they serve this function better than majoritarian systems?

3 Does consensus democracy lead to a higher satisfaction with how well citizens are being represented and a higher satisfaction with democracy?

4 To what extent does consensus democracy subdue the political effects of social and political conflicts?

What did the authors find?

First, they hardly found any evidence for the widely shared assumption that retrospective voting is typical for majoritarian democracies and policy-oriented voting for consensus democracies.

Second, consensus democracy as such does not seem to have a positive effect on people's decision to cast a vote as Lijphart's theory would predict.

Third, they found no relationship between institutional design and people's evaluation of political representation and democracy in general. There is also no difference between the two systems in how people feel represented by parliament, political parties, and political leaders.

Fourth, contrary to their initial expectation the authors find that social and political conflicts are not subdued by the institutions of consensus democracy.

Thus, there is little in support of Lijphart's basic assumptions about the differences of the impact of majoritarian and consensus institutions on democracy.

In general, Thomassen comes to the conclusion that institutions are less relevant for people's attitudes and behavior than is often presumed.

Let me also cite his warning to the institutional engineer:

“If institutional differences have as little effect as this volume suggests, or if their effects cancel out each other, institutional reforms based on the presumption that a change in institutions will improve the functioning of democracy are doomed to lead to frustration among both reformers and the citizenry at large.”

I want to add that the empirical analyses testing the impact of Lijphart's models of majoritarian and consensus democracies have profited much from the thorough operationalization and measurement of the executives-parties and the federal-unitary dimensions by Julian Bernauer, Nathalie Giger, and Adrian Vatter.

This brings my small selection of research findings that have been published in the CSES – OUP series to an end. Of course, I would have loved to go on. However, before my time is over I still have to say a few words about where we should go from here.

2 Where should we go from here?

Let me start by saying that we can be proud of what has been achieved by CSES in the past twenty years. It was in February 1994 that the first Stimulus Paper was circulated and motivated about 50 social scientists from 31 countries to come to the first CSES Plenary Conference that took place in August of the same year at the Social Science Research Center here in Berlin. The progress we made in the years that followed would not have been possible without all of you and your dedication to CSES's research agenda.

This progress, however, was also dependent on the leadership of such scholars as Jacques Thomassen, Steven Rosenstone, Phil Shively, Ian McAllister, Andre Blais who headed the various Planning Committees; as well as on the efforts of Dave Howell, Ekkehard Mochmann, Stephen Quinlan and their staff, who did the decisive groundwork at the study's headquarters in Ann Arbor and Cologne.

Let me once more repeat that the research design and the organizational structure of our enterprise was a stroke of genius. To gang up with the national election studies and to work out a research agenda attractive for so many scholars of comparative election research based on micro- and macro-theories and -data – that really did the “trick”.

Now, where should we go from here? Where should we place our chips?

If the good fairy would grant me three wishes, this would be my reply:

First. Let us try to preserve what we have. We have an excellent research design. In addition, we have a research agenda that calls to solve some of the perennial problems of macro-micro relations in electoral research. We do have an institutional support structure at ISR in Ann Arbor and GESIS in Cologne (and this was no easy task to achieve). And, most important, we do have a dedicated and growing community of scholars interested in electoral research. Let us try to preserve these treasures.

Second. In the area of theory formation we now know quite a lot about the psychological effects of institutions on voting behavior. However, we need to know more about institutions and how they work. A theory of the impact of political institutions on political behavior cannot stand on one leg. Thus, we need a closer cooperation with people interested in political institutions and how they work. We have tried to establish such a co-operation early on but

failed. Gary Cox was with us in the beginning but he soon lost interest. We need to find out why and we need to convince people like him otherwise.

Third. Let us take up the opportunity to think about the time dimension. This is an exciting perspective. After all, if all applications come to a good ending in module 4 we would have more than 20 countries to start testing dynamic theories. If I were young I would go for this.

Normally, my fairy grants only three requests. However, sometimes she asks me to add one more. This time she did and here is my last wish:

Again this wish wants more cooperation. We all know that political parties are the major collective actors in the processes of representative democracy. Despite of this we have mostly failed to incorporate key characteristics of political parties in our analyses. Thus, let us try to forge ties to people who are dedicated to research into political parties and provide such data.

This is the end of my short summary of what we have learned so far and where should we go.

Ceterum censeo: CSES has achieved a lot which is worthy to preserve. Most importantly, it has built a community of scholars that shares the goal to work for a better understanding of democratic elections. I am proud to be part of that community. I am also proud of my successor at the WZB, Bernhard Wessels, professional collaborator and good friend. He has organized this Plenary Meeting and Conference and many other occasions for us to meet and discuss. He is one of those precious few who produce collective goods. Thank you: Bernhard.

As far as CSES's general future is concerned I am happy that John Aldrich had agreed to take the helm. May he always steer the right course of our CSES boat and may he have always enough water under the keel.

(1) Another strategy could have been to highlight the findings of the winners of the prize for the best CSES scholarship. In this case I would have reflected on the findings of:

Matt Golder and Jacek Stramski's "Ideological Congruence and Electoral Institutions" (AJPS 2010)

Russell J. Dalton, David M. Farrell, and Ian McAllister's "Political Parties and Democratic Linkage (2011)

Mark Andre Kayser and Michael Peress' "Benchmarking Across Borders: Electoral Accountability and the Necessity of Comparison" (APSR 2012)

Richard R. Lau, Parina Patel, Dalia Fahmy, and Robert P. Kaufman's "Correct Voting Across Thirty-Three Democracies (BJPS 2013)

CSES Book Series

The Comparative Study of Electoral Systems

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Christopher J. Anderson, Cornell University, USA

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Volume 3

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Ian McAllister, Australian National University

Authors of the volume:

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