

## **Electoral Competitiveness in Cross-National Research: Challenges and New Directions**

ECPR Workshop

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One of the most important variables in electoral research is competitiveness. It is assumed to be a necessary precondition for a healthy democracy. Electoral competitiveness is linked to various aspects of electoral democracy: it connects to the nature and dynamics of campaigns, media coverage, party systems and strategies, voter efficacy, political engagement and turnout, general voting behaviour and eventually political legitimacy.

There are a number of theoretical expectations associated with electoral competition. For instance, candidates and political parties are assumed to respond strategically to the electoral context and here in particular to the electoral system. Whereas the margin of victory is intuitively appealing in plurality or first past the post systems (FPP), such a measure has a different meaning in PR systems where parties receive seats more or less in proportion to their vote (Selb 2009). For this reason some scholars such as Franklin (2004) assume that PR systems have perfect competition. However, others find that PR systems have substantially lower levels of party mobilization than FPP systems which calls this assumption into question (Karp, Banducci and Bowler 2008).

Candidates' and parties' responses, in turn, are assumed to influence individual perceptions of the electoral environment (see for example Donovan and Tolbert 2008). As the expected benefits (seats or votes) will be greater when elections are competitive this is likely to translate into greater party mobilization efforts, greater media attention and greater voter engagement. Already in the early years of electoral research, the decisiveness of electoral result was linked to mobilization levels and, in consequence, to competition (Campbell 1960). A more modern, individual level interpretation of these effects can, for example, be found in the literature on strategic electoral behaviour. Individuals are assumed to vote to a lesser degree "with their hearts" (Oppenhuis et al. 1996) if the election is (perceived to be) of higher importance. In other words, the degree of strategic voting behaviour should be linked to electoral competition.

Bartolini's (1999, 2000) work on political competition, although using a somewhat broader term, very much highlights aspects related to elections beyond mere election results. Most importantly, Bartolini's approach stresses the relevance of political parties and party systems. Hence, party systems characteristics, forms of political communication, the tone and magnitude of electoral campaigns are closely linked to a more 'elitist perspective' on electoral competition. Authors like Duverger (1963) or Boix (1999) argue that electoral competition is a multi-stage process and that the behaviour of political elites not only has an effect on the rules of the electoral game but also a structuring effect on the supply side of politics. Accordingly, competitiveness can be increased or decreased by elite behaviour but, at the same time, the degree of electoral competition can constrain or augment the elite's possible course of action.

Thus, as electoral behaviour, both of voters as well as parties, is structured by the respective context (e.g. electoral system, party system, campaigns, media, etc.), research on electoral competition has to follow a comprehensive approach to elections.

Although there is a long tradition of studying electoral competition in political science, most have approached the question from a single case study. Less attention has been paid to examining how electoral competition affects individual level behaviour across electoral systems and in different contexts. In part, the reason why competition is rarely considered in a cross-national perspective is that there is little agreement over how to measure the concept in different institutional settings. Fortunately, there have been many advances in the study of cross-national electoral data. Not only are there more and more studies all over the world, there are also coordinated efforts of harmonization (for example, CSES) and an increasing number of multi-component election studies (for example, PIREDEU). Both developments can help to make substantive progress in the measurement and analysis of electoral competition. While harmonization eases the process of comparing political systems, multi-component electoral studies collect information on different elements of the electoral process. As a result, scholars, for example, are provided

with more advanced possibilities to measure mobilization levels by using data from media content analyses and candidate surveys.

However, we think there are several challenges that need further study, namely, case selection, data quality, how to link different kinds of data, and adequate strategies of (computational) analysis. There are certain doubts concerning the quality of comparative survey projects in contrast to national surveys (Jowell et al. 2007). Furthermore, there is a lively debate about the universality of concepts and general definitions which is of great concern for comparative survey research (e.g., van Deth 1998, Zeglovits and Kritzing 2011). But it is not just cultural issues; many of the cross-national surveys that include questions about political attitudes and behaviour are administered (and used) without regard to the timing of elections. For example, Arceneaux (2005) finds that responses in Eurobarometer surveys vary by their proximity to an election. Last but not least, the above mentioned and unsolved question of the proper level of analysis and the fact that appropriate techniques like multi-level modelling are still less well understood and often insufficiently implemented in software packages than more traditional approaches complete the picture of incompleteness.

We seek a set of papers that addresses substantive questions in comparative electoral research with a direct focus on electoral competition, its measurement and its impact. Beyond that, we are also interested in more technical and methodological papers on the promises and pitfalls of comparative surveys and multi-component election studies. We are convinced that research on electoral competition is at the core of research on democracy. Nevertheless, only an innovative debate linked to a better understanding of data quality and methodological constraints enables progress in this field of research. It is the aim of this workshop to provide the grounds for such a prolific scientific exchange. The intended output of the workshop is an edited volume of inter-linked papers that address the core themes of the workshop. In that the volume would address both substantive and methodological issues, we feel that it would make a valuable contribution to the literature on comparative electoral behaviour and electoral research methods.

Papers will be empirically grounded and theoretically informed with both single country and cross-national studies welcome. We are very happy that the ECPR Standing Group 'Public Opinion and Electoral Behaviour in a Comparative Perspective' is endorsing our workshop proposal. A respective letter/email written by the Standing Group will be sent to the ECPR to support our application.

#### **Funding:**

The workshop will mainly be funded by an ESRC grant to the co-coordinator Susan Banducci for the project Comparative Cross-national Electoral Research ([www.ccner.org](http://www.ccner.org)). This will fund the travel and accommodation of Banducci, other participants from Exeter and up to 6 additional participants (to include early stage researchers). Heiko Giebler will apply for funding either at the 'Volkswagen Stiftung', the 'Thyssen Stiftung', or the 'Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft'. At this stage, it is not yet clear which agency might be more inclined to grant funding. Moreover, he will apply for money at his home institution as well. Sylvia Kritzing will apply for funding at the Austrian National Science Fund (FWF) and at her home institution.

#### **CVs of coordinators:**

**Susan Banducci** is Professor in Politics and Associate Dean of Education for the College of Social Sciences and International Studies. She has directed (or co-directed) many large scale election survey and media content analysis including the 2009 European Election Study funded by the EU's 7<sup>th</sup> Framework Programme. The major innovation in the 2009 European Election Study EES ([www.piredeu.eu](http://www.piredeu.eu)) is the development of an infrastructure for the linking and harmonisation of 5 major types of data. She directed the media study and served as Deputy Chair of the Data Committee with responsibility for data integrity. She coordinates the EU funded Marie Curie Initial Training Network in Electoral Democracy ELECDDEM ([www.elecdem.eu](http://www.elecdem.eu)) training 18 researchers in advanced methods for the comparative study of elections and supporting the development and application of innovative methods to address issues involved in cross-national, multi-level

data. She is also co-investigator on the ESRC funded CCNER – Comparative Cross National Electoral Research.

Recent publications:

- Stevens, Daniel, **Susan Banducci**, Jeffrey Karp, Jack Vowles (2011) Priming time for Blair? Media priming, Iraq, and leadership evaluations in Britain, *Electoral Studies* 30(3), 546-560.
- Schuck, Andreas, Georgios Xezonakis, Matthijs Elenbaas, **Susan Banducci** and Claes de Vreese (2011) Party contestation and Europe on the news agenda: The 2009 European Parliamentary Elections, *Electoral Studies* 30(1), 41-52.
- **Banducci, Susan A.**, Jeffrey A. Karp, and Peter H. Loedel (2009) Economic Interests and Public Support for the Euro, *Journal of European Public Policy* 16(4), 564-581.

**Heiko Giebler** is a research fellow at the Social Science Research Center Berlin in the Department 'Democracy'. He was a visiting scholar at the University of Sydney. Heiko Giebler is working in the official German election study (GLES) and he is board member of the European Election Study Association. He was part of the 2009 European Election Study research team conducting a candidate survey in all 27 member-states. His main research interests are electoral behaviour and the impact of contextual factors on this behaviour as well as quantitative methods.

Recent publications:

- **Giebler, Heiko**, Bernhard Weßels (forthcoming) Campaign Foci in EP Elections – Determinants and Consequences, *Journal of Political Marketing*.
- **Giebler, Heiko** (2011) Bringing Methodology (Back) in: Some Remarks on Contemporary Democracy Measurements, *European Political Science*, DOI: 10.1057/eps.2011.47.
- **Giebler, Heiko** and Andreas M. Wüst (2011) Campaigning on an upper Level? Individual Campaigning in the 2009 European Parliament Elections in its Determinants, *Electoral Studies* 30(1), 53-66.

**Sylvia Kritzinger** is Professor and Head of the Department of Methods in the Social Sciences at the Faculty of Social Sciences. Sylvia Kritzinger obtained her PhD in Political Science at the University of Vienna and then held post-doc positions at Trinity College Dublin, Institute for Advanced Studies (IHS) and Vienna University. She was Visiting Professor at the Danube-University Krems, the University of Podgorica in Montenegro, the Keele University, and Trinity College Dublin. Her research focuses on Political Behaviour and Electoral Research, Democratic Representation and Political Participation and Quantitative Methods. She is one of the principle investigators of the Austrian National Election Study (AUTNES) responsible for the Demand Side, and the project leader of the project on 'Representation in Europe'. Additionally, she is involved in the 7th Framework Programmes of the European Commission PIREDEU and ELECDEM.

Recent Publications:

- Wagner, Markus and **Sylvia Kritzinger** (2012) Ideological Dimensions and vote choice: age group differences in Austria, *Electoral Studies* 31(1).
- Van der Brug, Wouter and **Sylvia Kritzinger** (2012) Generational Differences in Electoral Behaviour, *Electoral Studies* 31(1).
- Wagner, Markus, David Johann and **Sylvia Kritzinger** (forthcoming) Voting at 16: Turnout and the Quality of Vote Choice, *Electoral Studies*.
- Lefkofridi, Zoe and **Sylvia Kritzinger** (2008) Battles fought in the EP arena: Developments in National Parties' Euro-manifestos, *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft* 37(3), 273-296.

**Potential paper-givers include professor, lecturers and early stage researchers:**

- Bernhard Weßels (Social Science Research Center Berlin, Germany)
- Aiko Wagner (Social Science Research Center Berlin, Germany)
- Marcel van Egmond (University of Amsterdam, Netherlands)

- Caitlin Milazzo (University of Exeter, UK)
- Nicole Bolleyer (University of Exeter, UK)
- Mark Franklin (MIT, USA and EUI, Italy)
- John Aldrich (Duke, USA)
- Jill Wittrock (Center for Political Studies, University of Michigan, USA)
- Andre Blais (University of Montreal, Canada)
- Sara Hobolt (LSE, UK)
- Gabor Toka (CEU, Budapest)
- Pieterjan Desmet (UvA, Netherlands)
- Maarja Luhiste (PhD student, University of Exeter, UK)
- Agnieszka Walczak (UvA, Netherlands)
- Diana Burlacu (CEU, Hungary)
- Zoltan Fazekas (University of Vienna, Austria)
- Jörg Matthes (University of Vienna, Austria)

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- Karp, Jeffrey A., Susan A. Banducci and Shaun Bowler (2008) 'Getting Out the Vote: Party Mobilization in a Comparative Perspective' *British Journal of Political Science*. 38 (1): 91-112.
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- Selb, Peter (2009) 'A Deeper Look at the Proportionality—Turnout Nexus' *Comparative Political Studies*. 42 (4): 527-548.
- van Deth, Jan W. (1998) (ed.) 'Comparative Politics: The Problem of Equivalence.' London/New York: Routledge.
- Zeglovits, Eva and Sylvia Kritzinger (2011) 'Reducing Overreporting in the Voter Turnout Question.' Paper Presentation at the Fourth Conference of the European Survey Research Association, Lausanne, Switzerland, July 18-22.