

NOMINATIONS AND REFLECTIONS

Nine second-order national elections

Nine second-order national elections: A conceptual framework for the analysis of European election results by Karlheinz Reif and Hermann Schmitt, *EJPR* 8 (1980): 3-44.

Abstract. The composition of the directly elected European Parliament does not precisely reflect the “real” balance of political forces in the European Community. As long as the national political systems decide most of what there is to be decided politically, and everything really important, European elections are additional national second-order elections. They are determined more by the domestic political cleavages than by alternatives originating in the EC, but in a different way than if nine first-order national elections took place simultaneously. This is the case because European elections occur at different stages of the national political systems’ respective “electoral cycles”. Such a relationship between a second-order arena and the chief arena of a political system is not at all unusual. What is new here, is that one second-order political arena is related to nine different first-order arenas. A first analysis of European election results satisfactorily justifies the assumption that European Parliament direct elections should be treated as nine simultaneous national second-order elections.

Nomination: Arguments in favour of ‘Nine second-order national elections’

FABIO FRANCHINO

University of Milan, Italy

Dashed expectations - this is the key message of Reif and Schmitt’s seminal study of the only truly international direct elections that are held in the world today: those of the members of the European Parliament. Since June 1979, citizens of initially nine, but in May 2014 twenty-eight, European countries have been called to the polls to select the members of an increasingly powerful pan-European legislative assembly. This is no small feat. One does not need to be a scholar of European history to realize how the peaceful selection of men and women, which are elected simultaneously by direct and universal suffrage every five years in each country and then meet in a town on the Franco-German border to deliberate on pan-European laws, is such a monumental break from the history of the continent. One can only wonder what great political philosophers from the past would have thought, had they witnessed such an event.

And it has not been an easy process, by no means. Already in 1951, the European Coal and Steel Community gave member states the option to elect the members of the

Assembly by direct universal suffrage - an option which became a requirement in the Treaty of the European Economic Community.

But it took almost twenty years - and the departure of Charles de Gaulle - before the Council eventually agreed in 1976 on the provisions for a directly elected Parliament. It was probably such a long wait that raised expectations, both in academic and political cycles (e.g. Marquand 1978; Pridham & Pridham 1979). Once he left the presidency of the European Commission, Walter Hallstein indeed wrote that these elections would give representatives 'a truly European mandate from their electors; and it would encourage the emergence of truly European political parties' (1973, p.74). After all, as Robert Schuman asserted thirty years earlier, "a European public opinion is already being created" (1948). The work of Reif and Schmitt poured buckets of cold water on these expectations. "European Parliament direct elections should be treated as nine simultaneous *national second-order* elections" (p.3) (emphasis added). These elections are heavily influenced by national issues, national parties, and incumbent governments; and they are characterized by lower turnout and by more sincere and more protest voting. Because less is at stake compared to the election of a country's most important political office - a prime ministership or a presidency -, participation is lower. Because elections are not associated with the selection of an executive, voters are more likely to vote for the party they feel closer to, *regardless* of its chances of joining a governing coalition. Smaller parties tend therefore to perform better. Because of the pre-eminence of the first-order electoral arena, voters are more likely to use these elections to display their dissatisfaction with the incumbent government if they are held halfway through the national election cycle. The share of invalid ballots is higher and government parties perform worse. Even though Reif and Schmitt had at their disposal the data from a single election, these core features have withstood remarkably well against the test of time (e.g. Marsh 1998; Reif 1984; Van der Eijk & Franklin 1996; Hix & Marsh 2007; cf. Hix & Marsh 2011; Koepke & Ringe 2006).

Yet, as Reif and Schmitt put it, "there is less at stake [in these elections] to be sure, but there is still something at stake, nevertheless" (p.10). So the European dimension does not fall entirely from stage. Their preliminary results remain remarkably resilient even on this issue. These scholars show that individuals that view positively their country's membership of the European Union (EU) and the role of political parties in EU politics, declare stronger intentions to participate. These claims have been broadened and the core findings have been corroborated in later surveys (Blondel et al. 1998). They also show that parties with an ambiguous position on European integration perform worse; and this result as well has found support over time (Ferrara & Weishaupt 2004). Probably the most notable European trait has been the emergence of different party systems in some countries, such as in Denmark, France and the United Kingdom.

So much for the existence of a European public opinion and a truly European mandate - despite the increased legislative and appointment powers of the Parliament, proposed tinkering with electoral rules to influence campaigning (Farrell & Scully 2007; Hix & Hagemann 2009), and plans to put up rival candidates for the Commission presidency at the upcoming 2014 elections, Reif and Schmitt's framework for the analysis of European election results is likely to remain relevant for the foreseeable future. It is a lasting contribution to the study of European politics.

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