

## One voter, two first-order elections?<sup>☆</sup>

Fred Cutler<sup>\*</sup>

*Department of Political Science, University of British Columbia, 1866 Main Mall, Vancouver, BC, V6T1Z1, Canada*

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### Abstract

Conventional wisdom has it that elections other than national ones are “second-order elections,” driven by political conditions in the “first-order” national arena. It has not yet been shown that a sub- or supra-national election can exhibit qualities similar to those of first-order elections. This paper uses the 2003 Ontario Election Study, from a provincial election in extremely decentralized federation, to demonstrate that a sub-national election *can be* a first-order election. Aggregate evidence shows voters’ interest and turnout is comparable to national elections. Individual-level evidence shows vote choice is determined by arena-specific factors. And dynamic evidence shows that this sub-national campaign had its own homegrown events that influenced voters, just as campaign events influence national elections.

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More than twenty-five years ago, in what could be read as a damning indictment of multi-level governance, Reif and Schmitt (1980) characterized elections as either first- or second-order. This idea had legs, with Pippa Norris nominating it 15 years later as one of the

25 *EJPR* articles to have made a special contribution to political science (Norris, 1997). According to the second order elections (SOE) thesis, voters perceive “less at stake” in all elections other than the major government-forming national general election in their country (Reif, 1985, 8). Elections at the local level, the federal unit (e.g. province, state, land, etc.), or to a supra-national body (e.g. European Parliament) are therefore second-order elections. They are characterized by relatively weak turnout and voters’ decisions are determined, to a great extent, by evaluations that properly pertain to another political “arena” (Reif and Schmitt, 1980; Reif, 1997; Norris, 1997; Van der Eijk et al., 1996). The implications are serious. Norris, for example, argues that “So long as elections to the EP remain second-order contests, the legitimacy and authority of this body remains under question, and the ghost of the ‘democratic deficit’ will continue to haunt the European Union”

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<sup>\*</sup> Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 604 822 6841; fax: +1 604 822 5540.

E-mail address: [cutler@politics.ubc.ca](mailto:cutler@politics.ubc.ca)

(Norris, 1997: 114). This begs the question: How can EP elections become first-order contests? Is multi-level governance inevitably a sham because voters cannot deal with more than one political arena? Or more generally, as this paper asks of the Canadian case: “Can any elections other than major national ones exhibit first-order qualities?”

Thus far, political scientists have no clear evidence that they can. But what makes a first-order or second-order contest? Is the subordinate status of all elections other than the main national government-forming election foreordained? Revisiting the idea in 1997, Reif suggested as much, claiming that there is one “most important election within a political system — which I named *Hauptwahlen*, ‘First Order Election’ (FOE) — and ... all ‘other’ types of elections within the system — which I named *Nebenwahlen*, ‘Second Order Elections’ (SOE)” (Reif, 1997: 116, italics in original!). Van der Eijk et al. (1996) have argued that the theory really implies a continuum from first- to second-order and that an election’s place on the continuum is “in the eyes of the voters”. Taking stock of the theory and empirical evidence, they concluded that “as soon as the first-order/second-order distinction is elaborated in this way, we will no longer have to state by definition that specific types of elections are of the one or the other kind, but instead will be able to assess empirically to what extent different elections are first-order or second-order in character” (Van der Eijk et al., 1996: 162). Reif himself suggests that “Indeed it is in general high time to look systematically into SOE in order to get a better understanding of the political process” (Reif, 1997: 119). Yet according to Jeffery and Hough (2001: 79), it is “a little surprising how few applications of the first/second-order framework have been made to the other kinds of second-order election Reif and Schmitt set out”.

The present paper contributes to the set of case studies of non-national elections by providing evidence on an uncharted area of the FOE/SOE continuum. I use survey data from the 2003 election in Ontario, Canada to show that voters in a sub-national election can exhibit the qualities usually taken to characterize voter behaviour in first-order elections. I use three distinct analytic strategies. First, aggregate indicators show that provincial elections in Canada do not manifest typical second-order qualities. Second, I go to the level of voters, estimating a model of the vote decision, including judgments about national-level politics. And third, I examine voters’ response to the campaign to demonstrate that these events were no sideshow, as is typical of second-order elections.

I conclude by linking this finding to Canada’s institutional context and argue that it strengthens the theory of second-order elections.

## 1. First- and second-order elections

Reif and Schmitt’s original formulation considers full national elections as each country’s “first-order national elections” (FOE). All other elections are “second-order” (SOE). Voters perceive “less at stake”, so they are less interested, less informed, participate less, and are less forcefully mobilized by parties (Reif and Schmitt, 1980; but see Blondel et al., 1998). If they get to the polls, voters care less about the arena in question and more about the opportunity to use their vote to communicate to their national government. They often “put the boot in” to express disapproval, creating the pattern noticed by Reif and Schmitt: parties in government in the first-order arena suffer a drop in support at subsequent second-order elections (Reif and Schmitt, 1980; Reif, 1984; van der Eijk et al., 1996; Marsh, 1998). In the extreme case the SOE is a referendum on the policies of the national government—a “barometer election” (Anderson and Ward, 1996; Remmer and Gélinau, 2003).

Most of the evidence for the SOE thesis comes from the analysis of aggregate election results across levels over time (Dinkel, 1978; Reif and Schmitt, 1980; Reif, 1984; Jeffery and Hough, 2001, 2003). Reif and others have observed variation in the degree of linkage between elections across levels. This has led them to modulate the stark, binary conceptualization of first- and second-order elections, with Reif now claiming that “the extent to which arena specific factors determine campaign and outcome of SOE varies *inter alia* with the relative importance attributed by citizens, parties and media and with the degree of “nationalisation of politics” ... in the respective country” (Reif, 1997: 117; see also Kahn and Kenney, 1997). Yet, even this elaboration defines SOE *a priori*; it relaxes the classification only by allowing some second-order elections to be less second-order than others.

Others link institutional factors with aggregate election data. For example, the country case-study chapters in the volume *Devolution and Electoral Politics* “were chosen to provide a spectrum ... running from those with high degrees of incongruence between voting behaviour and party competition at state compared to sub-state levels, to those with high degrees of congruence” (Hough and Jeffery, 2005; see also Jeffery and Hough, 2003). Each country’s particular institutions

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