



'First-order thinking' in second-order contests: A comparison of local, regional and European elections in Spain

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1. Introduction

The transfer of responsibilities from the national government to both supra-national and sub-national authorities has given rise to the proliferation of directly-elected institutions at different tiers of government in many countries. As a result, citizens have the chance to elect not just their national representatives, but also local, regional or, in the case of EU citizens, European ones.

For some, voters in multilevel electoral settings correctly attribute political responsibilities between levels of government: they evaluate the performance of politicians in each level and reward or punish them accordingly, no matter what happens in the other electoral arenas. From this perspective, local, regional and/or European elections are rather independent from first-order national elections, they should be explored 'on their own terms', and few top-down spillovers or contamination effects should be expected (Abedi and Siaroff, 1999; Pallarés and Keating, 2003; Schakel and Jeffery, 2013).

For many, however, multilevel governance paves the way for the contamination between electoral arenas. A complex institutional setting where the competences for major public policies are split between different layers of government would increase the difficulty for citizens to get relevant information about policies and government performance in each level. In the face of such difficulties, citizens would simply take their cues from the national level to vote in sub-national and supra-national elections. According to this view, local, regional and European elections are second-order contests subordinated to – or contaminated by – the first-order national arena (Anderson, 2006; Gélinau and Remmer, 2006; Marsh, 1998; Reif and Schmitt, 1980; Rodden and Wibbels, 2011).

What is more likely is that the truth lies somewhere in-between these two extremes. 'Second-orderness' of sub-national and supra-national arenas is a matter of degree (Dandoy and Schakel, 2013; Van der Eijk, Franklin & Marsh, 1996). It varies between elections, over time, from place to place, and, as claimed here, also among individuals.

This article develops and tests a micro-level approach to the study of second-order effects in sub-national and supra-national elections analysing 'issue contamination'. It is argued that in every election there are individuals that decide their vote – or whether to vote or not – on the basis of level-specific considerations ('first-order thinking') and

individuals that make their decisions based on what is going on in a different arena, often the national level. Using data from a set of election surveys in Spain conducted between 1999 and 2015, this article first compares the proportion of citizens that consider level-specific issues in local, regional and European elections, and then analyses which individual characteristics are associated with 'first-order thinking' in each of these elections. Individuals' resources and territorial political orientations are examined and are found to be relevant.

While several empirical studies have analysed the second-order character of local, regional and European elections separately, there are no studies comparing the three of them. Only comparisons between local and European elections have been made so far in this regard (Heath et al., 1999; Rallings and Thrasher, 2005; Skrinis and Teperoglou, 2008). In addition, and more importantly, most of the previous research on the role of national factors in sub-national and supra-national elections is based on aggregate-level data (namely, election results), which makes impossible to test the individual-level assumptions on which the second-order election model is based. This article provides a simultaneous comparison of three sorts of the so-called second-order elections and relies on individual survey data.

The rest of this article is structured as follows. The next section presents a brief overview of previous research on the second-order character of European, regional and local elections, respectively. Section 3 develops the theoretical argument for this study. Section 4 formulates two basic propositions about micro-level determinants affecting the probability of considering level-specific issues in second-order elections. Data source and methods are introduced in section 5. After the presentation of the descriptive findings and regression results in section 6, the final section concludes.

2. The second-order election model, here and there

2.1. European elections, or the origins of the second-order election model

The concept of second-order elections was originally coined by Reif and Schmitt (1980) to refer to those elections in which there is 'less at stake' compared with the decisive presidential or parliamentary national elections. These scholars observed some regularities after analysing the first European elections (lower levels of voter turnout,

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2018.03.004>

Received 19 April 2017; Received in revised form 14 February 2018; Accepted 22 March 2018

Available online 26 March 2018

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electoral losses of the national government party, and electoral gains of smaller parties), concluding that the results of these elections held in 1979 in nine countries were not determined by factors belonging to the European political arena but by domestic political cleavages. Since then, numerous analyses of the successive European elections have shown similar results: in general, voters use elections to the European Parliament to reward or punish national governments in their respective countries rather than to express their preferences on European issues (Freire and Santana-Pereira, 2015; Hix and Marsh, 2007, 2011; Marsh, 1998; Reif, 1984; Schmitt, 2005; Van der Eijk, Franklin & Marsh, 1996).

However, the second-order nature of European elections has also been called into question. The second-order election model does not work in an enlarged Europe (Central and Eastern former communist countries) so well as it does in western European member states (Koepke and Ringe, 2006). Furthermore, previous research has shown that citizens' attitudes towards the European Union matter for explaining both voter defection from governing parties (Hobolt et al., 2009) and voter turnout in elections to the European Parliament (Stockemer, 2012). There are at least two factors that can lead to an increase in 'first-order thinking' in European elections. First, the European Parliament has gained more legislative powers and responsibilities over the years, specially after the novelties brought by the Treaty of Lisbon in 2009. Second, European integration has become a prominent political issue. The 2008 economic crisis in the eurozone, and the austerity measures taken in response to it, have resulted in a growing public contestation over the European project (Armingeon et al., 2016), often reflected in the electoral success of Eurosceptic political parties in many member states. Researchers have begun to raise the question whether European elections were less second-order in 2014 than before (Brug et al., 2016; Nielsen and Franklin, 2017; Schmitt and Toygür, 2016).

2.2. Regional elections as second-order elections, contradictory findings

The second-order election model developed by Reif and Schmitt to explain the results of the European elections has been profusely applied to the analysis of regional elections. Previous research in both Europe and America has often led to divergent findings. On the one hand, empirical studies have shown that regional election results are influenced by national rather than regional economic or political conditions (Anderson, 2006; Gélineau and Remmer, 2006; Rodden and Wibbels, 2011). On the other hand, a growing body of evidence indicates that many regional elections do not conform to the expectations of the second-order elections approach (see, for example, Schakel and Jeffery, 2013).

Institutional and contextual factors that raise the stakes of regional elections are considered to weaken second-order election effects, decreasing the degree of subordination of regional politics to national dynamics (Dandoy and Schakel, 2013; Jeffery and Hough, 2003; León, 2014; Schakel and Jeffery, 2013). Thus, higher levels of decentralization, the saliency of territorial cleavages, the presence of regionalist parties or non-simultaneity with other electoral contests would contribute to reduce the influence of national politics on regional elections.

2.3. Local elections, between first and second-order

In comparison to national, regional or European elections, there is not as much research out there about local elections, even when there are multiple reasons to care about local politics (Miller, 1988). The local council is the level of administration that is closest to the people and for this reason can meet more easily local needs, theoretically

enhancing participation and accountability (Blair, 2000). The powers of local governments vary greatly between countries, but commonly they are responsible for providing a wide range of local services and facilities in areas such as culture, social services, local roads, public transport or the environment.

In most countries local elections are considered to be just a 'national referendum' on the popularity of the government (Curtice and Payne, 1991) or a 'barometer' to predict the results of the subsequent national elections (Jérôme and Lewis-Beck, 1999). Nevertheless, as with the regional elections, the empirical evidence is mixed. Studies on UK, Spain, Belgium and the Netherlands suggest that local elections are not as second-order in nature as previously assumed. According to these studies, local elections are in a middle position between first and second-order elections (Delgado, 2010; Heath et al., 1999; Lefevre and Van Aelst, 2014; Marien et al., 2015; Rallings and Thrasher, 2005). They are still considered second-order elections but to a lesser extent than European elections because level-specific considerations seem to play a major role in determining vote choices in local elections. Heath and his co-authors (1999) put it like this: 'If the elections to the European Parliament are regarded as second-order, then we might think of elections to local councils as "one and three-quarters order".' (p.391).

3. Turning to the micro-level

The literature on second-order elections makes important assumptions about (individual) voting behaviour in order to explain (aggregate) election results. However, these assumptions tend to remain in a black box. Despite the progress that has been made in the analysis of the micro-foundations of the second-order election model (Carrubba and Timpone, 2005; Clark and Rohrschneider, 2009; Hobolt and Wittrock, 2011; Schmitt et al., 2008), there has been little research explicitly aimed at analysing the fundamental question of which individual-level factors affect people's propensity to vote on the basis of election-specific issues in multilevel electoral settings.

This article argues that, at the micro-level, in a given election there are individuals that decide their vote – or whether to vote or not – on the basis of level-specific issues (what here is called 'first-order thinking') and individuals that make their vote choices based on exogenous considerations. For example, voter A may cast a ballot in a specific regional election after evaluating the performance of the regional incumbent in regional-level issues, while voter B may vote in the same regional election keeping his eyes on the national government and its responsibilities. Voters that 'think nationally' in sub-national and supra-national elections, like voter B does, are in fact treating these contests as second-order elections, secondary in relevance with respect to the first order national political arena. By contrast, individuals making their choices as a result of level-specific factors, like voter A does, are treating sub-national and supra-national elections as first-order arenas, considering what is really at stake. The individual propensity to look at level-specific issues might depend on individual-level factors. This is precisely what this article aims to examine.

At the macro-level, each election will show a different distribution of voters depending on the amount of citizens thinking in level-specific issues, that is: local issues in local elections, regional issues in regional elections, and European issues in elections to the European Parliament. A high degree of polarization around a national issue can make that more citizens take into account national factors to vote in sub-national or supra-national election. For example, if a given local election is held just after the revelation of a big corruption scandal affecting the national incumbent, the proportion of citizens voting on the basis of level-specific issues (i.e.: local issues) will probably decrease in favour of those who are driven by national-level considerations.

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