

EMPIRICAL AND NORMATIVE MODELS OF VOTERS, PARTIES, AND GOVERNMENTS

Subject Area

Political representation, Voter behaviour, Voting choice, Democratic support, Political institutions

Abstract

This workshop invites scholars working on the empirical implications of normative models of political representation, broadly defined. It seeks to create a dialogue between scholars working on different aspects of the processes of democratic representation and who do so based on different theoretical models. To achieve this dialogue across empirical and theoretical boundaries, we invite participants to take advantage of new comparative data on voters', parties', and candidates' preferences, and of new methodologies for measuring and comparing political preferences. We particularly welcome papers that aim to connect different aspects of the representational chain (such as the determinants of voting choices, objective or subjective indicators of the quality of representation, or citizens' satisfaction with democracy). The research questions that could be addressed by the proposed workshop include: Is there a relationship between the determinants of voters' choices and their satisfaction with the outcome of elections? Does a country's quality of representation affect citizens' levels of democratic support? What are the relationships between ideological congruence between voters and governors on one hand and determinants of voting choices on the other? What is the impact of the political, institutional, or socio-economic context on the determinants of voting choices? What explains the variation across elections in the citizens' level of democratic support and in their evaluation of the quality of representation?

This workshop proposal is officially endorsed by the ECPR Standing Group on *Voting Behaviour and Public Opinion in a Comparative Perspective*.

Workshop Directors

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Workshop Proposal

This workshop invites scholars working on the empirical implications of normative models of voting choice and political representation through political parties, candidates, and governments. It seeks to create a dialogue between scholars working on different aspects of the processes of democratic representation and who do so based on different theoretical models. To achieve this dialogue, we invite participants to take advantage of new comparative data on voters', parties', and candidates' preferences, and of new methodologies for measuring and comparing political preferences. We particularly welcome papers that aim to connect different aspects of the representational chain (such as the determinants of voting choices, objective or subjective indicators of the quality of representation, or citizens' satisfaction with democracy).

Normative models of political representation are models of the role of elections and of the mutual relations between citizens and their representatives. These models specify expectations about the behaviour of citizens, parties (or MPs), and governments. They also raise several important questions. Who and what should parties/MPs represent? Is representation by candidates and parties different from representation by parliaments and governments? On which basis should citizens select their representatives? What is a 'good' or 'accurate' representation of the electorate's preferences? Do different kinds of representation engender systematically different levels of democratic satisfaction and legitimacy?

Several models have been suggested to answer these questions. The 'responsible party model', for instance, emphasizes the role of *policy preferences* and thus substantive representation. Following this model, the efficient representation of voters' preferences requires that parties present distinct policy programmes, that citizens have clear preferences on these policy dimensions, and that citizens base their voting choice on such preferences (Thomassen 1994; Thomassen & Schmitt 1997; Mair 2008). When these conditions are met, the ideological preferences of the electorate should be better represented by the winning party/coalition. In turn, this should lead citizens to evaluate positively the functioning of democracy. Other normative models of representation, emphasizing for example *descriptive representation* and social group membership, also involve sets of expectations about the behaviour of citizens and parties/MPs as well as criteria to assess the quality of representation (e.g., Pitkin 1967; Norris & Franklin 1997; Mansbridge 2003).

Such models of political representation are a central component of the empirical analysis of electoral competition. They guide the empirical research on several aspects of democratic representation: Research on the *determinants of voting choices* focuses on citizens' input to the representation process (among many others, Knutsen 2004; Thomassen 2005); research on the *quality of political representation* investigates to which extent the expectations of normative models are met (e.g., Powell 2004; Wängnerud 2009); research on *democratic support* considers citizens' subjective assessment of the working of electoral democracy in producing desirable outcomes (e.g., Anderson et al. 2005; Listhaug et al. 2009).

While these streams of research have made considerable progress in recent years, illuminating important aspects of each of the components of the representational chain, they have evolved in parallel rather than in tandem. As a result, important issues remain unresolved in these vibrant areas of research, while new questions have emerged. To address these, research on political representation can benefit from important new opportunities. For example,

- Comparative research projects and collaborative efforts among students of elections (e.g., *Comparative Study of Electoral Systems*, *European Election Studies*, *European Voter* project) increase our ability to examine how exactly the political context shapes citizens' behaviour.
- New data on candidates' positions (e.g., the *Comparative Candidate Survey*, data generated by Voting Advice Applications) open new possibilities for comparing the preferences of citizens and of their representatives.
- Methodological advances, such as the development of computer-coded content analyses or multilevel modelling techniques, provide new types of data and new ways of analyzing them.

Generally speaking, these developments increase our ability to test the empirical implications of normative models of political representation. For one, they allow us to assess whether and under what conditions the models' assumptions are met. Moreover, new comparative data and methodologies provide scholars with the opportunity to explore the relations between different aspects of the representation process, such as the determinants of voting choices, voter-party congruence, or citizens' attitudes towards the quality of representation and of democracy.

The research questions that could be addressed by the proposed workshop include (but are not limited to):

- (a) Is there a relationship between the determinants of voters' choices and their satisfaction with the outcome of elections? That is, are voters more supportive of democracy in elections with strong levels of issue, party, or candidate voting? Are citizens who base their voting decision on substantive criteria, such as issues, more satisfied with the outcome than citizens voting on the basis of group membership or identity factors?
- (b) Does the quality of representation affect citizens' level of democratic support? Are citizens more satisfied with democracy when the ideological congruence between voters and MPs (or government) is high or when social groups are represented proportionally in Parliament?
- (c) What are the relationships between policy congruence and determinants of voting choices? Are voters more likely to rely on issues in contexts that ensure a high level of congruence between voters' preferences and the positions of representatives or governments? Do groups of citizens that differ from one another in the degree to which their preferences are represented also differ in their decision-making strategies?
- (d) What is the impact of the political, institutional, or socio-economic context on the determinants of voting choices? In which contexts do citizens rely more strongly on parties' policy positions or on candidates' characteristics when making their voting decision?
- (e) What explains the variation across elections in the citizens' level of democratic support and in their evaluation of the quality of representation? Is this variation related to the same factors as those influencing the determinants of voting choice?
- (f) Are other aspects of the representation process (e.g., spread of preferences represented in a parliament, responsiveness of parties/MPs to changes in voters' preferences, etc.) related to the determinants of voting choices or to citizens' satisfaction with the democratic process?

Types of Papers

The workshop should mainly attract papers with a strong empirical focus and theoretical motivation – but we also wish to encourage purely theoretical contributions that focus explicitly on the relations between various elements of the representational process. Empirical papers can be based on micro or macro-level data, or a combination of the two. Most of the

research questions at the centre of this workshop require comparative analyses. These can be combined with a variety of research designs, including comparisons over time, across countries, across electoral districts, or between groups of citizens.

Participants

The workshop should attract participants working in the field of election studies, comparative politics, and political theory. Focusing on comparative analyses, this workshop is likely to interest a broad range of scholars, working on both established and new democracies. The participants will be balanced according to gender, nationality and seniority level.

Bibliographical Note

Romain Lachat is a senior research associate in political science at the University of Zurich. His work focuses on comparative electoral research and on the effects of electoral institutions. He is currently the principal investigator of a research project on context effects on the voting decision process, financed by the Swiss National Science Foundation. His recent work has been published (or is forthcoming) in *Comparative Political Studies*, *Electoral Studies*, the *European Journal of Political Research* and *West European Politics*.

Christopher J. Anderson is Professor of Government at Cornell University and Director of the Cornell Institute for European Studies. His research focuses on contextual models of politics, in particular how differences in macro-political contexts across countries shape voters' cognition and action. His work on the popularity of governments, the legitimacy of political institutions, and the link between welfare states and citizen behaviour has appeared in all of the leading journals of political science. Anderson is the recipient of a number of awards, including the American Political Science Association's Heinz Eulau Award for the best article published in the *American Political Science Review*, the Best Article Award from the *Journal of Politics*, and the Emerging Scholar Award from the APSA Section on Elections, Public Opinion, and Voting Behavior.

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