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INTRODUCTION:
INNOVATIVE METHODS AND CHALLENGING RESULTS

Anne Jadot* and Anthony Heath**

This special issue gathers proceedings of a seminar we jointly organised for the Maison Française d'Oxford and the Department of Sociology of the University of Oxford. The former hosted the series in 2001 during Trinity Term (*i.e.* from April to June) on a weekly basis. We are very grateful to both these institutions for their support towards the organisation of the seminar, and we also wish to acknowledge the help received by several speakers for their travel to Oxford.¹ To better explore "Political attitudes and voting behaviour in Europe", we were glad to welcome colleagues from several countries, including both established academics as well as students about to complete their doctorate. Most were (like us) members of the European network "Party choice and political representation in Europe", and the intellectual exchanges we enjoyed within this scheme for several years also inspired the programme.

The fourteen papers presented were innovative and challenging. The criterion of selection for this publication was to include only works that were not already (or about to be) published elsewhere.² Thanks to the strong

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² So the reader is referred to the following publications for those of the seminar papers not included in this issue (with our speakers in bold): R. ANDERSEN and A. HEATH, "Class matters: the persisting effects of contextual social class on individual voting in Britain, 1964-1997", *European Sociological Review*, vol. 18, n° 2, June 2002; B. CAUTRES et B. DENNI, "Les attitudes des Français à l'égard de l'Union européenne : les logiques du refus", in P. BRECHON, A. LAURENT et P. PERRINEAU (dir.), *Les cultures politiques des Français*, Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2000; G. GRUNBERG, "Le soutien à la démocratie représentative", in G. GRUNBERG, N. MAYER et P. SNIDERMAN (dir.), *La démocratie à*

emphasis within each piece on methods and/or – more substantively – on the impact of attitudes on voting behaviour, the themes have been rearranged here so as to form a coherent issue, similar to a short book.

The issue first covers what we consider to be the preconditions necessary for the representation process to function well through elections: the attitudes that citizens hold towards the democratic system and the level of knowledge possessed by the electorate. We then move on to analyses of voting behaviour in national elections, taking into account either a comparison between European countries or dynamics of change across time within a single country. Next, these topics (*i.e.* attitudes towards the political system and voting behaviour) are explored within another polity: the European Union. Finally, a research note presents a new method, which integrates individual and contextual determinants into explanatory models of voting behaviour, with turnout in national and European elections as an example.

THE IMPORTANCE OF ATTITUDES

A strong belief underlies the design of this issue: when analysing voting behaviour, it is crucial for researchers to accurately assess the attitudes held by citizens towards the political system and their socio-political values, as well as their partisan preferences and positions on specific issues. This emphasis does not imply, however, that voting is entirely driven by autonomous political opinions formed in a sociological vacuum. Obviously, the ‘usual suspects’, *i.e.* the classic socio-demographic indicators capturing the background of voters, are also incorporated into the models tested by our authors.

Our emphasis on the importance of political attitudes is not just a formal statement. Instead of being taken for granted and entered as inputs into equations, attitudes are given a special attention in their own right, from the way they are measured to their use in a comparative design, via the exploration of their structure. For instance, Nonna Mayer reports on experiments that were implemented by a Franco-American team in a 2000

l'épreuve. Une nouvelle approche de l'opinion des Français, Paris : Presses de Sciences Po, 2002; D. HUANG, “Theorizing Anti-government Tactical Voting: some Evidence from the 1987, 1992 and 1997 British General Elections”, in J. TONGE *et al.* (eds), *British Elections and Parties Review*, vol. 11, 2001; A. JADOT, “The Electoral Disconnection? Partisan Offer, Types of Elections and Volatility”, in H. SCHMITT and A. ROEMMELE (eds), *The Electoral Connection*, forthcoming; A. JADOT, “(Ne pas) être un électeur européen. Une analyse multiniveaux des déterminants individuels et contextuels de l’abstention en 1999”, *Revue Internationale de Politique Comparée*, vol. 9, n° 1, printemps 2002.

survey, in order to better capture French citizens' attitudes towards sensitive topics such as support for democracy or views on civil liberties, justice and tolerance. This original dataset enables her to show that – contrary to the claims of the 'minimalist' and 'constructionist' schools of thought – opinions in these matters are held more strongly than usually assumed, even by citizens who score relatively low on the classic indicators of political interest, civic knowledge and education. Furthermore, the variations that are found to exist (based on interactive experiments designed to test the solidity of respondents' views) can help disentangle the political and cognitive logics that preside over the formation of opinions. So this article provides us both with substantive results on attitudes towards democracy in France and with new results in survey methodology and attitudinal research.

It is a rare chance to be able to gather original survey data like this. Most quantitative analysis is secondary in so far as it relies on existing datasets designed by others, with attitudes measured by questions written and (back)translated in very different contexts, both temporally and geographically. Hence researchers should not take these items at face value but should first check empirically the validity of the measurement of the attitudes explored. This has not always been carried out systematically, even in comparative research where equivalence between countries is of prime concern. By contrast, two papers in this volume are good examples of what can be done in this respect. Angelika Scheuer first explores the structure of people's cognitive, affective and evaluative attitudes towards the European Union, with a special concern for the reliability and validity of the measures in the twelve countries included. Once the common structure of attitudes has been established, she tests the "cognitive mobilisation hypothesis", *i.e.* the hypothesis that an increased awareness of the integration process automatically leads to stronger support for the European Union. Her somewhat mixed results have theoretical as well as practical implications for the legitimacy of the EU.

Such a check on the functional equivalence of attitude constructs in different countries is also an important step in Astrid Depickere's article. She too studies the structure of attitudes (*e.g.* how different questions on authority and law and order relate to each other, and how this 'authoritarianism' dimension relates to the economic left/right scale) before building common scales in France and Flanders. She then analyses the consequences for extreme right-wing voting of the position of respondents on these scales of socio-economic and cultural attitudes. This enables her to test in these two countries Herbert Kitschelt's theory of the 'winning

formula' that extreme right-wing parties should implement in order to attract voters (*i.e.* a combination of economic market liberal and right authoritarian dispositions). Her results do not bring very persuasive support for this hypothesis in either country, even though Kitschelt's assumption of two competitive dimensions in the overall space of party preferences seems more plausible in France. This article, based on data from the European Values Study of 1999, comes very timely for those who wish to better understand the electoral success of the National Front in the 2002 presidential election – during which campaign Jean-Marie Le Pen stressed a motto of being “*economically from the right, socially from the left, and nationally from France*”.

In her assessment of the various determinants of the vote, Astrid Depickere explicitly seeks to test the direct as well as the indirect effects of socio-demographic characteristics, conceptualising the latter effects as operating via the mediation of attitudes. This concern about the mechanisms at play when evaluating the impact of attitudes is the second strong point we hope this issue will make. One should indeed not merely aim at finding regularities (*i.e.* correlations) between certain characteristics of the potential voters and their actual behaviour, but instead should try to get a grip on the processes involved. This leads us to the question of how to model causal links, and thus of which method(s) is most appropriate, given the available data. In this respect, we believe some of the papers of the seminar series to be important contributions to the field of electoral research, since their innovative methods shed new light on classic (and sometimes highly debated) issues, with challenging results for some established theories.³

INNOVATIVE METHODS TO RENEW CLASSIC DEBATES

Innovative research is clearly not limited *per se* to sophisticated quantitative analysis: unfortunately, however, circumstances prevented all three speakers who were invited to present papers based on qualitative data,⁴ from attending. This left us with quantitative contributions only, in the seminar series as well as in this volume. And a reader unfamiliar with statistics might be puzzled – to cite but a few of the techniques used, log-linear modelling with latent variables, graphical chain models and Mokken

³ As some of them have just been referred to in the section on attitudes, we will not mention them again; equally innovative papers about the heterogeneity of the electorate are referred to later.

⁴ These were Neil Gavin (on class voting, with data from open-ended survey questions), Clarissa White (on electoral volatility, using semi-directive interviews) and Jocelyn Benson (on the values of youth involved in extreme right-wing movements, with in-depth interviews).

scaling are not that widespread in the literature. But we do hope that our repeated editorial demands⁵ for “further but not too technical” explanations of what is done and especially why it is implemented will help the reader, especially those who have less background in statistical training. In this section, we begin by recalling a few research principles that we strongly believe in, and which guided the production of this issue. Next we give two examples of how a research that uses innovative methods can bring interesting new substantive results, and finally we explain the inclusion in this issue of a research note on multilevel modelling.

So, even though most contributions do use modelling techniques rather than simpler descriptive statistics, it is not a deliberate attempt to pursue sophistication as such and for itself. For instance, Anthony Heath, Robert Andersen and Richard Sinnott, in their piece on the impact of knowledge on the vote, first describe the distribution of information (about civics and the positions of the main parties on three issues) within the British electorate via straightforward frequency distributions. They then assess the level of congruence between the respondents’ own position and the position of the party they voted for, comparing the different issues and the knowledge of the voters. But since the voting decision is a very complex one, there is a real need to go further and to take account of these issues simultaneously. Hence the application of a regression technique, which is a multivariate analysis testing the impact of an independent variable while controlling for all the others.⁶

Granted, when applying such quantitative analysis, there are – at a certain level of mastery and refinement – aesthetic considerations at play, as Michael Marsh hints in his article on voting behaviour in the European Parliament elections. In a footnote, he indeed compares the “elegance” of various alternative indicators measuring the location of the European elections within the respective national electoral cycles. But this comes second after the choice of a modelling technique that is the most appropriate to answer a specific research question. So theory and the hypotheses that are derived from it guided the following contributions, whose authors selected among all the methods they master those that were the most adequate. For instance, in her paper Astrid Depickere conceives the vote for an extreme right-wing party as depending on the whole political spectrum of a country,

⁵ And we sincerely thank those of the contributors that accepted gracefully the back-and-forth work on revised drafts.

⁶ So as to assess the impact of a given variable *ceteris paribus*, and to establish the hierarchy between the independent variables that have significant effects on the dependent variable.

e.g. depending on the presence or absence of a Christian party. Thus, the dependent variable she seeks to explain is not binary (*i.e.* [in France] “intending to vote for the National Front” vs “for all the other parties”) but categorical, including all the choice options separately – which implies the use of a multinomial logit model. The reverse reasoning applies for Robert Johns, who explores in his paper voters’ knowledge about elite positions and their own personal preferences, both with respect to left/right positions and to policy issues, with Belgium as a case study. Because the theory advocated for it, he dichotomised the original indicators into binary variables opposing voters who are “enough equipped to vote according to the representation theory” to those who are not. And since he wants to assign respondents to subgroups defined by their level of knowledge – which is conceived as a latent variable – he uses latent class analysis rather than structural equation modelling (which also treats the latent structure within the data but does not produce the classification of people into groups).

One further major point is that the choice of method needs to be based also on the available data – be it a classic cross-sectional survey of voters undertaken after one election, or panel data which follow the same respondents across an electoral cycle. In this respect, a good example of what can be done is Geoffrey Evans and Robert Andersen’s article on perceptions of the economy and vote choice. It is usually assumed in economic theories of voting that voters’ assessment of how the economy as a whole is faring (socio-tropic evaluations) and how their household is faring (ego-tropic evaluations) does influence the vote, with the incumbent government punished or rewarded given their perceived performance. In this article, the very exogenous character of those economic evaluations is questioned, since it is hypothesized that they are in fact influenced by the political belief systems of voters, among which are included their partisan preferences. Thus an apparent contemporary relation between economic assessment and the vote could be spurious, if the former is actually influenced by prior political preferences. Clearly, there is a need here to disentangle complex temporal relations between these variables, and the authors use panel data covering the 1992-1997 British electoral cycle, with repeated measures of economic evaluations, ratings of the parties and vote choice. To treat these, they chose graphical chain models, which cannot prove causal relations among variables but can uncover relations consistent with causal hypotheses. This technique is especially suited for the treatment of panel data, since it can evaluate time-lags between variables. Their results are actually quite challenging for conventional theories of economic voting, reversing the causal arrow to some extent.

Using panel data and reversing the logic of classic studies of volatility is also the starting point of Steve Fisher and Marc Swyngedouw's article on vote change and party positions in Flanders between 1991 and 1995. They indeed work 'backwards', *i.e.* from the individual voters' routes between these two elections to the mapping of the Flemish parties. Mapping of party positions has relied in the past on various methods – expert surveys, coding of parties' manifestos, studies of candidates, and voters' placement of the parties – but the results of these different methods have not converged. So, assuming the “proximity rule of electoral change” to be true (*i.e.* the idea, inspired by spatial theories of voting, that voters are more likely to switch to a party that is closer to their previous choice than to one that is more distant) they use the vote transition matrix to assess the parties' positions. Transitions are used to calculate distances between pairs of parties (calculating symmetrical log-odds ratios of defection and fidelity). These distances are then the input data for multidimensional scaling, which gives a mapping of the partisan space. Special care is given to crosschecking the results with a second method, where the transition matrix is taken as a contingency table with ordered categories, on which an association model is run. Since it acknowledges the fact that there is a high level of consistency (*i.e.* many voters are found in the diagonal), this is called a quasi-independence or 'mover-stayer' model. One striking result is the position that both techniques find for the extreme right-wing *Vlaams Blok*: it mimics a central party in so far as it does attract voters from both the left and right, probably due to its position on a policy dimension that cross-cuts the main one. And this is all the more interesting to interpret in the light of Astrid Depickere's study about the values of its voters.

One major improvement in the explanation of voting behaviour is the new application in political science of a method that enables researchers to incorporate both individual and contextual determinants within models: the multilevel design. Two papers presented in the seminar applied this framework. The first renewed the long-standing controversy about class voting in Britain, reassessing data stretching from 1964 to 1997 thanks to the multilevel design of the research. Robert Andersen and Anthony Heath were thus able to show that, net of individual social class effects, the social class composition of the constituency where a voter lives still has a significant – and fairly constant – effect. This suggests that there has been no growth in the individualism of voters. This method is particularly suited to test the impact of social cleavages not only at the individual level but also at the level of the community or 'milieu'. The second studied the determinants of participation in the European elections of 1999, with a

design meant to disentangle the respective influences of individual voters' characteristics and of the institutional and political setting of the countries where they live. Anne Jadot's results have practical as well as normative implications for the legitimacy 'from below' of the European Parliament.

Since these two seminar papers were already committed to publication elsewhere,⁷ and because we believe this avenue of research to be a potentially fruitful development for our discipline, we decided to include nonetheless in this volume a research note which presents the multilevel method. In order not to be too technical without substance and to fit well within the whole issue, Anne Jadot and Marcel van Egmond selected the topic of turnout in national and European elections as an example of the theoretical and practical advantages of a multilevel design, with illustration of the various steps in one piece of research. The main conclusion is the value of this framework for accounting for the differential impact of the context, differential in so far as it depends on the characteristics of the individual voters. And this points us toward the heterogeneity of the electorate, something that is not sufficiently incorporated into explanatory models of voting behaviour.

ACCOUNTING FOR THE HETEROGENEITY OF VOTERS

One substantive point we hope this volume will make is the need for researchers to explore the diversity of the electorate, and above all to better account for it when modelling the voting decision. Usually, a general explanation of what drives citizens to vote (*i.e.* whether to vote and for which candidate or party) is conceptualised and translated into the appropriate equation, given the method chosen to test it. The model is then assessed through various statistics which evaluate the quality of its 'fit' with reality. That is to say, how good is the match between the hypothetical voting behaviour of the sampled population as the model 'predicts' it on the one hand, and its real behaviour as known from the data on the other hand. So it might very well happen that a hypothesis is falsely rejected because it does not apply to the electorate as a whole, whereas it could in fact account reasonably well for the behaviour of one fraction of the electorate.

For instance, given the widespread evidence on the level of knowledge in Western democracies, "*one might expect that the literature on voting (and representation) would highlight the need to allow for scanty*

⁷ Please see footnote 2 for complete references.

knowledge when modelling”, as Robert Johns states. Yet, at least until recently and with few exceptions, “*much voting research makes implausible assumptions about some voters’ political knowledge, and remarkably little research has suggested that electorates with huge differentials in knowledge might require a variety of models of voting.*” He thus explicitly hopes that beyond its substantive results, his paper will bring the attention of researchers in the field back to the problems of the assumptions of standard theories of representative democracies.

The following article by Anthony Heath, Robert Andersen and Richard Sinnott picks up where he finishes: they investigate in Britain the impact of political knowledge (defined as the capacity to locate the main parties on selected issues) on issue voting. As they acknowledge, issue voting is just one among many possible motivations of the vote. So, without supporting nor rejecting this theory, they test it in the light of the level of knowledge of voters. The idea is to check whether least knowledgeable voters make “mistakes” – here not understood pejoratively, but in the narrow sense of not voting for the party which is closest to one’s issue position. That is why they first need to exclude those of the respondents who claim they voted ‘tactically’, *i.e.* who did not vote for their preferred party – because it did not stand a good chance of winning and/or reducing the electoral chances of a strongly disliked party. “Almost by definition”, these voters are indeed voting for a party which is not their closest one, as measured by congruence on issue positions.

Their research design is thus a good example of considering first whether a segment of the electorate might be immune to the process hypothesized in the model, and of taking it out of the analysis precisely in order to allow the maximum chance for the model to be confirmed. One could easily think of the reciprocal design, *i.e.* the definition of the part of the electorate for which the model might be applicable, and a resulting focus on those voters (if the size of this segment within the sample permits it). Still another way of carrying out research would be to systematically compare categories of voters, defined ahead by a relevant (given the theory) criterion.⁸ Of course, this procedure of establishing first a typology of voters

⁸ For example, in a book applying rational choice theory to turnout, André Blais concluded that it is worth sorting respondents according to whether they perceive voting as a (strong) citizen’s duty or not. Because a rational calculus of the costs and benefits of voting might be only relevant for those who rather conceive the vote as a right they can choose whether to use. Cf. *To Vote or Not to Vote. The Merits and Limits of Rational Choice theory*, Pittsburgh: The University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000, pp. 92-114.

does not mean researchers should always apply separate models for defined segments, which would preclude any ambition of producing results valid for the whole electorate, and thus precluding any progress towards a unified theory of voting. Our advice would be to consider at some point of any electoral research whether the heterogeneity of the electorate might be a problem for the hypotheses under test.

This is perhaps more intuitive a reasoning when studying voters in a comparative way, either geographically (between countries) or longitudinally (considering successive elections within a single country), as several contributions to this volume do. The variation in the nature of the voting decision, given the type of election, is also a good way to rethink what influences various voters in their choices whether to vote and whom to vote for. In this respect, the article by Michael Marsh on theories of the vote in “less important elections” is fruitful. He first reviews and discusses the competing explanations of American midterm elections and European Parliament elections, such as the “surge and decline”, “referendum” and “second-order elections” theories. He then systematically tests (on European elections) specific hypotheses derived from these theories, first at the aggregate then at the individual level. And the latter analysis especially benefits both from his explicit specification of the processes hypothesised, and from his checking them for different types of voters. Types of voter are defined according to what the respondents did both at the (respective) last national first-order election and at the European election of 1999. This leads him to find more support for the second-order elections theory than for the other theories. Moreover, he advocates that we should refine the way these “low stimulus elections” are usually interpreted, given that their European character does matter, at least, it does for some voters. So there are different mechanisms and different interpretations of why people vote as they do which, according to him, prevents the integration of all the theories into “a new super theory”. This conclusion thus gives some weight to our arguments about the heterogeneity of the electorate, to our emphasis on the importance of correctly modelling the voting act, while taking into account attitudes carefully measured – especially so in a comparative design. We hope the whole volume to be a strong case for this contention.