# QOE IJES

## Quaderni dell'Osservatorio elettorale
## Italian Journal of Electoral Studies

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# Editorial.
# New year, new phase for QOE-IJES

With the current issue, the first of 2020, *Quaderni dell'Osservatorio Elettorale – Italian Journal of Electoral Studies* enters a new stage of its long life as a journal devoted to publishing high-quality articles in the field of election studies. This forty-third birthday signals many changes: with its new Italian-English name and acronym, QOE-IJEL becomes the official journal of the Italian Society for Electoral Studies (SISE – Società Italiana di Studi Elettorali), appoints new editors and editorial team, and migrates to a new publisher.

QOE was born in October 1977, when the first issue appeared as a bi-annual journal edited on the initiative of the Study Group on Electoral Behavior set up at the Council of the Region Tuscany.

In 1980 Mario Caciagli, since the very beginning in the founding Study Group and the Editorial Staff, took the lead of the journal and passionately edited it for four long decades. In the early times, QOE primarily spoke to the Italian social science community interested in electoral issues; over the years, Caciagli has expanded the journal both in the variety of high-quality papers published and intending to reach a global readership. Under his editorship, the journal achieved high standards, a multi-disciplinary vision, and a consolidated international reputation.

A second phase in the life of the journal began in 2015, always under Mario Caciagli's firm wrist: the journal renewed its Editorial Staff and faced the challenge of the contemporary international standards.

With this issue, a third phase begins. It is therefore with great privilege that we are taking over as Editors. The SISE supports our editorial efforts to broaden our international audience, in terms of both readers and contributors. To achieve this, the journal is published in English - although articles in Italian are most welcome - at Firenze University Press, a young and dynamic publishing house, which allows wide dissemination of our articles. Moreover, to support the international scope of the journal, we have been so fortunate to have many distinguished international scholars to sit in our advisory board. The new editorial board will be in charge for the next four years. This editorial transition will be regular in the future to ensure that QOE-IJES can reinvent itself and thereby adjust to the changing times.

Our aim as editors is to continue publishing high-quality original papers from both Italian and international scholars to further becoming a major outlet of elections and voting, public opinion, political behavior, and party studies in Italy and beyond.

QOE-IJES embraces all approaches to electoral research, without restriction to any particular theory, method, topic or geographical scope. Articles will seek to engage with current debates and disciplinary developments, whether theoretical or empirical. Within broad topics concerning democracy and its new challenges - like e-voting, big and open (electoral) data, citizenship and elections - contributions are welcome from all perspectives. These may cover aspects such as turnout, voting behavior, public opinion, campaigns, political parties, and electoral systems, amongst many others. The journal is a political science review, but it is traditionally open to scholars working in any of the major social science disciplines such as political economy, sociology, contemporary history, social policy, social anthropology, socio-legal studies.

Our first 2020 issue is an excellent example of the blend of research we aim to publish. The reader is offered analyses of the politics of electoral reform in Italy (Alessandro Chiaramonte), of political participation at the local level in Europe (João Cancela), of the predictive power of polls in the US (Jackson, Lewis-Beck and Tien), of the representative deficit in different EU countries (Bright, Garzia, Lacey, and Trechsel), and of the impact of media on political (dis)trust in Europe (Vincenzo Memoli).

It remains then for us to thank those others who have had made all the successes of the last decades possible: along with our founding editor Mario Caciagli,

who promoted these many changes and supported our renewed mission, we wish to thank the long-serving Managing Editor, Carlo Baccetti; the Editorial staff (Lorenzo De Sio, Stefano Rombi, and Antonio Floridia); the *Osservatorio della Regione Toscana*, which hosted the journal on its website; the Giunta regionale, which produced and disseminated the journal thus far. We gratefully acknowledge the still present support of the Regione Toscana, whose financial contribution makes our open-access journal possible. We also want to thank the authors and reviewers of the political and social sciences scientific community, without whom the QOE would not exist.

Last but of course not least, our thank goes to the SISE President, Fulvio Venturino, who enthusiastically supported this renewal, and to the SISE Scientific Committee for having selected us as the new editors. We hope to be able to meet the expectations that Mario and SISE share for the future of the journal.

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# An italic obsession: electoral reforms

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**Abstract**. The history of Italy is plenty of reforms of the electoral system. Many are those implemented since the country's unification: from the majority system to the limited vote, from proportional representation to the majority premium in the liberal era; and, again, in the Republican era, the return to proportional representation and then the use of mixed systems, combining PR with plurality or majority premium. And many other are the reforms which, discussed and sometimes even approved, as in the case of the italicum, have remained dead letter or never saw the light. What explains this Italic obsession with the electoral systems? Why have their reforms been on the parties' and governments' political agenda for so long? The goal of this article is to answer these questions. In the end, electoral reforms have played as instruments of coordination and adaptation in the political strategies pursued by the parties in specific time periods and also as substitute instruments of institutional engineering in the absence of broader agreements on major constitutional reforms.

**Keywords**. Electoral reforms, electoral engineering, Second Republic, Italy.

INTRODUZIONE:
LE RIFORME ELETTORALI ITALIANE IN PROSPETTIVA STORICA

Dall'unità ad oggi, la storia d'Italia è costellata di numerose riforme elettorali, molte più di quelle che hanno avuto luogo nello stesso arco di tempo in altri paesi dell'Europa occidentale, la Gran Bretagna su tutti, ma non solo. In estrema sintesi, in epoca liberale si è passati dal maggioritario di collegio allo scrutinio di lista, e poi alla proporzionale e, con l'avvento del fascismo, al premio di maggioranza; e, ancora, in epoca repubblicana, si è assistito al ritorno alla proporzionale e poi al ricorso a vari sistemi misti, in cui alla proporzionale si sono aggiunti nuovamente prima i collegi uninominali, poi il premio di maggioranza, e poi, di nuovo, i collegi uninominali. Oltre alle tante – grandi e piccole – riforme elettorali attuate, non pochi sono stati poi i tentativi di riforma di cui si è ampiamente discusso ma che infine non sono andati in porto; in taluni casi, come per il cosiddetto *italicum*, essi hanno persino superato l'approvazione parlamentare ma non il vaglio (complessivo) della Corte costituzionale.

La riforma del sistema elettorale non è dunque mai del tutto scomparsa dall'agenda politica italiana. Tuttavia, ci sono state fasi storiche diver-

se tra loro quanto a intensità e frequenza del dibattito. E la fase che più di ogni altra è stata caratterizzata da una sequenza relativamente ravvicinata di riforme elettorali attuate (ben sei, come vedremo) e tentate (almeno altrettante) è quella degli ultimi trent'anni, coincidente con la crisi della (cosiddetta) Prima Repubblica e con la transizione alla e affermazione della (cosiddetta) Seconda Repubblica. Su questa fase ci concentreremo qui, per cercare di spiegare questa ossessione italiana per i sistemi elettorali. Nel farlo circoscriveremo l'analisi ai sistemi di elezione del parlamento nazionale, sebbene in taluni casi faremo comunque riferimento anche alle riforme che hanno avuto luogo ai livelli di governo sub-statale. L'obbiettivo è di mettere in luce le motivazioni di questa continua rincorsa ad un sistema elettorale «migliore» – o, forse, più semplicemente, più «adatto» alle mutate condizioni – a scapito della loro stabilità, che – ricordiamolo – è a sua volta necessaria a fornire stabilità al sistema politico nel suo complesso. Una rincorsa caratterizzata, oltretutto, dalla compresenza di attori (quali gli elettori che si sono espressi per via referendaria e i giudici della Corte costituzionale che si sono espressi con le loro sentenze) che hanno seriamente sfidato il primato del parlamento (e in esso dei partiti) su questa materia.

## DAL PROPORZIONALE AL «MAGGIORITARIO»: LA RIFORMA DEL 1993

La Prima Repubblica è stata la «Repubblica della proporzionale». Dato il contesto politico-ideologico non avrebbe potuto essere diversamente, anche se ai tempi dell'Assemblea costituente c'era chi sosteneva l'adozione di un sistema maggioritario e ancora nel 1953 De Gasperi tentò la via di una correzione «forte» al sistema proporzionale grazie al premio di maggioranza (Piretti 2003; Quagliarello 2003). Alla lunga, però, il sistema proporzionale «puro» comincia ad essere ritenuto corresponsabile degli evidenti problemi di inefficacia del governo e di mancanza di ricambio della classe politica. Non sorprende dunque che negli anni '80 vengano avanzate e discusse alcune proposte di riforma elettorale (Pasquino 1982; 1985; Ruffilli 1987), anche se si trattava per lo più di correttivi al sistema proporzionale in vigore, che sembrava ancora inattaccabile nelle sue fondamenta. Di lì a poco, però, tutto sarebbe cambiato, grazie soprattutto allo strumento del referendum abrogativo (Giannetti e Grofman 2011; Renwick 2010; Uleri 2003). La prima riforma attuata fu ancora interna al vecchio sistema elettorale. Nel 1991 il numero dei voti di preferenza fu ridotto a uno[1].

La modifica fu considerata un successo del movimento referendario che l'aveva promossa, ma le sue conseguenze non furono del tutto positive (Pasquino 1993). Di ben altra portata la riforma che scaturì dal referendum sulla legge elettorale del Senato che si svolse il 18 Aprile 1993 e che fu approvato a larghissima maggioranza (82,7% di sì) con una affluenza alle urne pari al 77,1% degli aventi diritto. L'esito sbloccò l'impasse sulla riforma elettorale e demolì le resistenze dei difensori della proporzionale. Dopo un passaggio parlamentare comunque contrastato (Pappalardo 1995), fu approvata la legge 276/1993 che venne battezzata «legge Mattarella». Pur con alcune modifiche di una certa importanza, essa ricalcava il mix di maggioritario e proporzionale uscito dal referendum e prevedeva dunque un sistema elettorale misto in cui il 75% di seggi veniva assegnato in collegi uninominali a turno unico e il restante 25% con formula proporzionale.

A parte questa caratteristica comune, i sistemi elettorali di Camera e Senato differivano tra loro per alcuni aspetti non del tutto secondari, forieri – e in effetti così sarebbe avvenuto[2] – di esiti diversi: 1) alla Camera gli elettori disponevano di due schede distinte e dunque potevano votare separatamente per i candidati di collegio e per le liste concorrenti nella parte proporzionale, al Senato vi era invece un'unica scheda e il voto valeva contestualmente per candidati e liste (qui chiamate gruppi di candidati); 2) la formula per la ripartizione dei seggi proporzionali era il quoziente naturale e i più alti resti applicato in un'unica circoscrizione nazionale alla Camera, era invece il d'Hondt applicato in circoscrizioni coincidenti con le regioni al Senato; 3) la soglia di sbarramento era fissata al 4% a livello nazionale alla Camera, mentre non c'era al Senato, dove però la combinazione di metodo d'Hondt e circoscrizioni con un numero relativamente basso di seggi proporzionali da attribuire determinava una soglia di fatto variabile ma generalmente piuttosto alta, superiore a quella della Camera; 4) lo *scorporo*, ossia la quota di voti sottratta alle liste concorrenti

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[1] In precedenza l'elettore poteva esprimere, a seconda dell'ampiezza della circoscrizione di residenza, fino ad un massimo di 2 (piccole circoscrizioni), ovvero di 3 (medie), ovvero di 4 (grandi) voti di preferenza. All'epoca del referendum, e sulla base di un filone consolidato di studi (Cazzola 1972; D'Amico 1987; Katz e Bardi 1979; Pasquino 1972), il voto di preferenza multiplo era considerato un fattore in grado di alimentare il frazionismo interno ai partiti (attraverso le cosiddette «cordate») e il voto clientelare.

[2] Nelle elezioni del 1994 le forze di centro-destra – a prescindere dalle diverse soluzioni coalizionali adottate nelle varie aree territoriali del paese – ottennero la maggioranza assoluta dei seggi alla Camera ma non al Senato. A parti invertite, nel 1996 l'Ulivo conseguì una maggioranza autosufficiente al Senato, ma non alla Camera. Del resto, un sistema prevalentemente maggioritario come quello della legge Mattarella, a causa dell'effetto leva del collegio uninominale (combinato alle differenze sopra descritte tra le due camere, oltre che a quella dei rispettivi corpi elettorali), ben poteva amplificare anche piccole differenze di risultati tra Camera e Senato, con il rischio di esiti diversi.

nella parte proporzionale per ogni candidato di collegio ad esse collegato e risultato vincente, era «totale» (sottrazione di tutti i voti ottenuti dai candidati di collegio vittoriosi) al Senato e «parziale» alla Camera (sottrazione dei soli voti sufficienti a consentire la vittoria dei candidati di collegio, pari ai voti dei candidati secondi arrivati aumentati di una unità) (D'Alimonte e Chiaramonte 1995).

La riforma elettorale del 1993 non fu dunque il prodotto di un processo di ingegneria istituzionale avviato dalle forze politiche (Donovan 1995). Al contrario, fu imposta dall'esito del referendum sulla legge elettorale del Senato che fu promosso contro la volontà di gran parte della classe politica di allora. Il successo dell'iniziativa referendaria, determinato dall'insoddisfazione dell'elettorato nei confronti del sistema politico ma anche dalla volontà di dare una scossa al processo di mutamento istituzionale, rappresentò un vincolo per la classe politica che approvò la nuova complessiva legislazione elettorale. In altri termini, la riforma elettorale del 1993 fu il prodotto di una decisione combinata tra elettori e classe politica (Renwick 2010).

Sorretta dalla retorica del «maggioritario», che avrebbe accompagnato costantemente la transizione dalla Prima alla Seconda Repubblica e che si sarebbe prolungata ben oltre, la riforma del 1993 fu concepita da molti come il «grimaldello» per scardinare l'assetto istituzionale fino ad allora esistente, così da creare le condizioni di una democrazia che, per usare i termini di Lijphart (2012), fosse meno «consensuale» e, appunto, più «maggioritaria», quantomeno con riferimento alla «dimensione esecutivo-partiti». Una democrazia competitiva e decidente che non poteva essere lasciata però all'azione del solo sistema elettorale, ma che andava invece assecondata con opportune riforme costituzionali.

Le aspettative di molti erano che i nuovi sistemi elettorali di Camera e Senato avrebbero ridotto il numero dei partiti e attenuato la rispettiva distanza ideologica, favorendo così l'affermazione di un sistema partitico più competitivo. Gli elettori avrebbero potuto scegliere tra differenti alternative partitiche candidate al governo del paese e finalmente – considerata la storia della Prima Repubblica – ci sarebbe stata un'effettiva possibilità di alternanza di governo.

Solo alcune di queste aspettative si sono realizzate. Da un lato, i nuovi sistemi elettorali quasi-maggioritari hanno certamente contribuito all'affermarsi di una competizione bipolare, ossia caratterizzata (tendenzialmente) dalla presenza di due coalizioni ampie percepite dagli elettori come effettivi sfidanti per la conquista della maggioranza assoluta dei seggi. In questo contesto gli elettori hanno avuto un ruolo molto più importante che

in passato, potendo non solo votare per il partito preferito ma scegliendo, di fatto, anche il governo (o, meglio, la coalizione al governo) e finanche il capo di governo (il leader della coalizione vincente). Ciò ha reso possibile anche l'alternanza al governo tra schieramenti politici opposti, favorendo al contempo un rapporto di maggiore responsabilità (*accountability*) degli eletti nei confronti degli elettori. Dall'altro lato, l'attesa riduzione del numero dei partiti non solo non si è avverata, ma si è registrato addirittura un significativo aumento. Non a caso il sistema partitico italiano emerso dalla riforma elettorale del 1993 – e dalle ceneri del vecchio sistema di pluralismo polarizzato (Sartori 1976) – è stato definito come un «bipolarismo frammentato» (D'Alimonte 2005).

La mancata riduzione, ed anzi l'esplosione, della frammentazione partitica trova le sue radici nella destrutturazione del sistema partitico italiano in coincidenza con la fase in cui le nuove regole elettorali vennero introdotte. Molti dei partiti della Prima Repubblica erano stati ridimensionati, o si erano divisi, o erano addirittura scomparsi. Nuovi partiti si erano costituiti ed erano alla ricerca di quella visibilità che avrebbe consentito loro la sopravvivenza e, possibilmente, l'affermazione nelle mutate condizioni. In ogni caso era chiaro che nessuno di loro, nuovo o vecchio che fosse, sarebbe stato sufficientemente forte da poter presentare da solo i propri candidati nei collegi uninominali potendo ambire a vincerli. Al contrario, dato il contesto competitivo che si stava sviluppando in virtù dei nuovi sistemi elettorali quasi-maggioritari e l'intento generalizzato di perseguire benefici elettorali *nel breve periodo*, era chiaro che le speranze di vittoria nei collegi uninominali sarebbero dipese dalla definizione di alleanze tra partiti, possibilmente (ma non necessariamente) affini dal punto di vista ideologico e/o programmatico, a sostegno di candidati comuni. È così, sulla base degli incentivi posti dal collegio e nel quadro di un sistema partitico destrutturato, che nacquero le coalizioni (pre-elettorali) che sarebbero divenute i protagonisti della sfida del voto. Tuttavia, le condizioni affinché l'alleanza tra partiti prendesse forma furono particolarmente complesse, poiché dovevano tener conto che ciascuno dei partner pretendeva per i propri affiliati una quota dei candidati di collegio comuni – una quota commisurata al contributo in voti che il partito si presupponeva portasse in dote alla coalizione, secondo una logica di «proporzionalizzazione» del maggioritario (D'Alimonte 2001) – oltre che la collocazione almeno di una parte di costoro in collegi ove la coalizione avesse possibilità se non certezza di vittoria (Di Virgilio 2002). Insomma, il processo di *coalition-building* risultava davvero complicato e in ogni caso si concludeva con ampie concessioni nei confronti dei partiti mino-

ri (in termini di candidature di collegio, ma anche di promesse di cariche di governo e di sotto-governo), dei quali i partiti maggiori temevano le minacce di defezione e il relativo costo (che poteva ben essere la sconfitta della coalizione nella corsa al governo). In tal modo la frammentazione nata dal processo di destrutturazione del sistema partitico della Prima Repubblica trovava linfa vitale per perpetuarsi e, persino, per proliferare.

Oltretutto, la frammentazione partitica si trasferiva dal livello elettorale a quello parlamentare e infine a quello governativo, con inevitabili conseguenze negative sulla coesione programmatica e sulla stabilità degli esecutivi. In altri termini, l'affermazione di un sistema partitico bipolare fondato su coalizioni *catch-all* si accompagnava ad un vero e proprio paradosso: una coalizione quanto più ampia e inclusiva possibile (così da sommare i voti dei partiti componenti) era necessaria per vincere le elezioni, ma, una volta vinte le elezioni, si rivelava un ostacolo quasi insormontabile per fornire un indirizzo politico unitario e, dunque, per governare con efficacia il paese[3].

È su quest'ultimo aspetto che si sono appuntate gran parte delle critiche alla riforma elettorale del 1993. Sartori ne parlò in termini dispregiativi etichettando il nuovo sistema come *mattarellum* e mantenendo questo giudizio sino in fondo (Sartori 2001), in linea con il suo giudizio negativo sul genere dei sistemi elettorali misti, definiti dei «bastardi» rispetto ai sistemi proporzionali e maggioritari (Sartori 1995). Coloro che ritenevano la componente proporzionale del sistema la causa dell'enorme frammentazione partitica si spinsero fino al punto di richiederne l'abolizione per via referendaria. Furono fatti due tentativi nel 1999 e nel 2000. Entrambi fallirono per il mancato raggiungimento del quorum di votanti. Sta di fatto che, dopo tre elezioni, e senza particolari resistenze, la legge Mattarella fu superata. Ma paradossalmente nel nuovo sistema a rimanere, ed anzi ad espandersi, fu la parte proporzionale, mentre la parte dei collegi uninominali sparì a favore dell'introduzione del premio di maggioranza.

A dispetto delle tante critiche subite, vale la pena ricordare però che la legge Matterella aveva comunque contribuito in maniera decisiva alla trasformazione

della meccanica del sistema partitico in senso bipolare, rendendo gli elettori arbitri della scelta dei governi e favorendo l'alternanza al potere – risultati conformi alle aspettative del movimento referendario della prima metà degli anni '90. E se non tutto era andato per il verso atteso, lo si doveva alla circostanza che il sistema elettorale aveva agito in un contesto istituzionale che era lo stesso della Repubblica del proporzionale (con i relativi incentivi alla frammentazione partitica) e che la riforma costituzionale alla quale si doveva accompagnare era rimasta solo un'intenzione.

## IL PREMIO DI MAGGIORANZA: LA RIFORMA DEL 2005

Nel dicembre 2005, a pochi mesi dalla fine della legislatura, la coalizione di centro-destra allora maggioritaria in parlamento approvò una nuova riforma elettorale (legge Calderoli, 270/2005) con l'intento di prevenire ovvero di minimizzare la sconfitta che i sondaggi gli pronosticavano nelle future elezioni politiche (Chiaramonte and Di Virgilio 2006; Pasquino 2007). Diversamente da quella del 1993, la riforma del 2005 fu imposta dunque dall'élite politica (Renwick 2010; Baldini 2011), anche se in modo non consensuale.

Specificamente, l'obbiettivo della riforma era l'eliminazione del collegio uninominale, con il quale il centro-destra si trovava in una situazione di svantaggio competitivo nei confronti del centro-sinistra (ossia i candidati di collegio del centro-destra ottenevano sistematicamente meno voti delle liste proporzionali che li appoggiavano, mentre per i candidati di collegio di centro-sinistra avveniva esattamente l'opposto) (Chiaramonte e D'Alimonte 2006; Chiaramonte e Di Virgilio 2006) ed era costretto a passare attraverso estenuanti negoziazioni intra-coalizionali per definire le candidature comuni (Renwick, Hanretty e Hine 2009). Ne scaturì l'adozione di un sistema elettorale ancora una volta misto, ma del tipo proporzionale a premio di maggioranza.

Le legge Calderoli prevedeva alla Camera dei deputati una prima distribuzione proporzionale dei seggi a livello nazionale tra le liste e le coalizioni di liste – identificate da un «capo» e da un programma comuni – che avevano superato le soglie di sbarramento (rispettivamente 4% e 10%). Qualora la lista o coalizione di liste con il maggior numero di voti non avesse ottenuto almeno 340 seggi (pari a circa il 54% per cento di quelli totali), allora sarebbe scattato il premio di maggioranza, così da consentire il raggiungimento dei 340 seggi. In questo caso le liste e le coalizioni perdenti si sarebbero ripartiti proporzionalmente i seggi rimanenti. Le modalità di

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[3] Il giudizio negativo sull'efficacia di governo in epoca «maggioritaria» va comunque commisurato alle aspettative che al tempo della riforma elettorale del 1993 erano addirittura di governi in grado di durare per l'intera legislatura. Da una diversa prospettiva, limitandosi a considerare la stabilità dei governi nei termini della loro durata in confronto a quelli della prima Repubblica, allora le cose cambiano. Se nel periodo 1948-1994 la durata media dei governi è stata di 322 giorni, nel periodo 1994-2006 (quello corrispondente alle legislature inaugurate con elezioni in cui era vigente la legge Mattarella) la durata media dei governi è stata di 523 giorni. In seguito, dopo la riforma elettorale del 2005, e fino alle elezioni del 2013, tale durata sarebbe ulteriormente aumentata.

assegnazione del premio di maggioranza rendevano questo sistema elettorale *majority-assuring*, ossia in grado di determinare in ogni caso l'esito di una lista o coalizione destinataria della maggioranza assoluta dei seggi.

Il sistema elettorale del Senato seguiva l'impianto di quello della Camera, ma ancora una volta con significative differenze. In ossequio ad una certa interpretazione (allora prevalente) dell'art. 57 della Costituzione[4], il premio di maggioranza non veniva assegnato a livello nazionale, bensì a livello regionale in 17 regioni su 20[5]. In queste 17 regioni la lista o la coalizione di liste che avesse ottenuto un voto più degli altri avrebbero incassato un premio pari al 55% dei seggi spettanti a quella regione. Le liste e le coalizioni perdenti si sarebbero ripartiti proporzionalmente i seggi rimanenti, purché avessero superato le soglie di sbarramento (rispettivamente 8% e 20% dei voti regionali). Diversamente dalla Camera dei deputati, al Senato il premio di maggioranza (che, a questo, punto non si può neppure chiamare tale) non garantiva la determinazione di un vincitore con la maggioranza assoluta dei seggi[6] (Chiaramonte e D'Alimonte 2006).

Il premio di maggioranza non era una novità per l'Italia. Non solo perché, come abbiamo già accennato,

aveva trovato applicazione anche nel passato, nel 1953 (legge De Gasperi) e, precedentemente, nelle elezioni del 1924 (legge Acerbo). Ma soprattutto perché già da prima del 2005 era vigente a livello comunale e provinciale (specificamente dal 1993) e regionale (dal 1995), dove si associava all'elezione diretta del capo dell'esecutivo (che dunque godeva di una maggioranza consiliare fabbricata dal sistema elettorale)[7] (Chiaramonte e Tarli Barbieri 2011). Va rilevato come, dal punto di vista della coerenza dei sistemi elettorali tra i vari livelli di governo, per oltre un decennio la legge Mattarella aveva costituito un'anomalia, mentre la legge Calderoli ne rappresentava il compimento. Oltretutto, la riforma elettorale del 2005 – con la sua quasi-investitura diretta del governo – assecondava di fatto il disegno di rafforzamento dell'esecutivo nazionale previsto dalla legge di revisione costituzionale approvata nello stesso anno dal parlamento (e che sarebbe stata poi rigettata per via referendaria).

Sin dalla sua prima applicazione, la legge Calderoli è stata aspramente criticata (Di Virgilio 2007a; 2007b; Pasquino 2007), anche se non da tutti (Feltrin e Fabrizio 2007; 2008). Sartori l'avrebbe ribattezzata *porcellum*, a sottolinearne i difetti. Tuttavia, nelle elezioni del 2006 essa non modificò la tendenza al bipolarismo frammentato avviata dalla legge Mattarella. Nel 2008 sembrò addirittura che il formato del sistema partitico potesse finalmente ridursi, grazie all'affermazione di due grandi partiti come il Pdl e il Pd. Ma si trattò di un fuoco di paglia. Nel 2013 però – ed è storia recente – sono emersi in tutta evidenza i limiti di due sistemi elettorali mal congegnati.

Il primo limite riguardava le differenze tra i sistemi elettorali di Camera e Senato e, dunque, i rischi di esiti diversi tra i due rami del parlamento. In particolare, il sistema elettorale del Senato, combinando 17 premi regionali, si configurava come una vera e propria «lotteria» (D'Alimonte 2007; 2014) e poteva fornire esiti diversi rispetto alla Camera, dove un vincitore chiaro c'era sempre e comunque, pur in presenza di minime differenze di voto. Così fu nel 2006, quando l'Unione di Prodi ottenne una solida maggioranza alla Camera e una maggioranza invece risicatissima al Senato. E così è

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[4] L'art. 57 della Costituzione recita che il «Senato della Repubblica è eletto a base regionale». Ciò è stato a lungo – e ancora al tempo della riforma del 2005 – inteso come un limite invalicabile all'adozione nella legge elettorale di qualsiasi meccanismo (ad esempio il premio di maggioranza o una soglia di sbarramento, se applicati nazionalmente) che agisse ad un livello sovraordinato a quello regionale. Questa interpretazione dell'art. 57 è stata peraltro successivamente superata, a favore di una interpretazione meno estesa che ritiene inderogabile esclusivamente l'integrità numerica della rappresentanza di ciascuna regione, ossia il numero di seggi spettanti a ciascuna di esse in base alle norme vigenti. È alla luce di questi sviluppi dottrinari che, nella legge Rosato del 2017, si è potuto introdurre anche per l'elezione del Senato una soglia di sbarramento nazionale. Sul punto si veda Tarli Barbieri (2018, 33-35).

[5] Le tre regioni nelle quali non si assegnava alcun premio erano il Molise, la Valle d'Aosta e il Trentino-Alto Adige. In Molise i due seggi in palio erano ripartiti con formula proporzionale. La Valle d'Aosta era costituita in collegio uninominale per l'attribuzione al candidato più votato dell'unico seggio ad essa spettante. Il Trentino-Alto Adige consisteva di sei collegi uninominali assegnati con il maggioritario e di un settimo seggio attribuito proporzionalmente e con scorporo totale (come nella vecchia legge Mattarella). Infine, i seggi della circoscrizione estero venivano suddivisi proporzionalmente nell'ambito di quattro distinte ripartizioni geografiche.

[6] Anche nel caso della legge Calderoli – come e ancor più che nel caso della legge Mattarella – le differenze tra i sistemi elettorali di Camera e Senato erano foriere di esiti diversificati. A questo proposito basti pensare al risultato delle elezioni del 2013, quando la coalizione di centro-sinistra ottenne circa il 55% dei seggi alla Camera e meno del 40% dei seggi al Senato (dove peraltro aveva ricevuto una più alta percentuale di voti). Meno eclatante, ma pur sempre indicativo, anche l'esito delle elezioni del 2006 che vide l'Unione di Prodi conquistare una maggioranza di seggi ampia alla Camera (55%) e risicatissima al Senato (appena sopra il 50%).

[7] Nel 1993 aveva fatto la sua prima riapparizione dal 1953 il meccanismo del premio di maggioranza, previsto dalla legge 81/1993, meglio nota come legge Ciaffi, che riguardava l'elezione degli organi comunali e provinciali. Ad essa seguì due anni dopo la legge 43/1995, nota come legge Tatarella, che estendeva l'applicazione del premio di maggioranza (seppure all'interno di un sistema diverso da quelli comunale e provinciale) alle elezioni regionali. Con la legge costituzionale 1/1999 fu introdotta l'elezione diretta del presidente della giunta regionale e fu concesso alle regioni italiane il potere di scegliersi la propria legge elettorale: da allora abbiamo assistito a numerose riforme, ma il premio di maggioranza è rimasto pressoché ovunque (Chiaramonte 2007).

stato, ancor più, nel 2013 quando la coalizione di centro-sinistra vincitrice alla Camera è rimasta ben al di sotto della maggioranza assoluta di seggi al Senato.

Il secondo limite era connaturato alle modalità di attribuzione del premio di maggioranza. Quest'ultimo era assegnato alla lista o coalizione con più voti a prescindere dai voti da essa conseguiti, anche pochi. Qualcosa di simile è successo nel 2013, quando alla Camera la coalizione di centro-sinistra ottenne il 55% dei seggi con meno del 30% dei voti. E se non ne è derivata una maggioranza parlamentare in grado a sé stante di formare un governo e persino di eleggere il presidente della Repubblica è proprio perché al Senato non c'è stato vincitore. Sia chiaro, livelli di sovra-rappresentazione analoghi sono presenti anche in altri contesti democratici con altri sistemi elettorali, ma in Italia, dato il nostro modello costituzionale, una distorsione troppo forte tra voti e seggi rischia di alterare gli equilibri del sistema istituzionale, modificando il ruolo del presidente della Repubblica e quindi il rapporto tra i poteri dello Stato.

Il terzo limite era connesso al modello di competizione compatibile con il sistema di soglie e di incentivi all'aggregazione. Con la legge Mattarella, grazie al collegio uninominale, lo spazio di rappresentanza dei «terzi poli» era alquanto limitato, se non nel caso di formazioni con un insediamento territoriale concentrato (come la Lega Nord nel 1996); con la legge Calderoli, invece, i «terzi poli» – anche molto piccoli – potevano contare su un trattamento analogo al «secondo polo», dal momento che i seggi residui rispetto alla quota-premio erano tutti distribuiti proporzionalmente. In altri termini, rispetto alla legge Mattarella la legge Calderoli riduceva i costi della defezione dalle due grandi coalizioni e i costi di entrata nella competizione di nuove «terze» forze, con ciò indebolendo la cogenza degli incentivi istituzionali al bipolarismo. In un primo tempo, sorretto dal consenso popolare, l'assetto bipolare non ne ha risentito – ed anzi, nel 2006, ha raggiunto l'apogeo – ma in un secondo tempo, anche grazie proprio a quel sistema elettorale, le «terze forze» politiche hanno potuto godere di uno spazio di azione sempre maggiore fino a scardinarlo del tutto.

Il quarto limite concerneva le modalità di individuazione degli eletti al parlamento. Nel clima di crescente insofferenza nei confronti della classe politica era prevedibile che la lista bloccata (dunque l'impossibilità per gli elettori di esprimere una indicazione di preferenza sui candidati) divenisse il simbolo dell'autoreferenzialità dei partiti. Alla legge Calderoli si rimproverava cioè di essere strumento delle oligarchie partitiche e di perpetuare le rispettive rendite di posizione, consentendo loro un forte controllo nella selezione dei rappresentanti in parlamento.

I limiti della legge Calderoli sin qui descritti, e se ne sono menzionati solo i principali, erano noti già da tempo e comunque ben prima delle elezioni del 2013 quando si sono manifestati nella loro pienezza. A dirla tutta, non sono mancati i tentativi di modificare questo sistema elettorale già dopo la sua prima applicazione (a cavallo tra la fine del 2007 e l'inizio del 2008) e poi anche successivamente (ad esempio nell'autunno del 2012). A più riprese sono state elaborate varie ipotesi di riforma che però non hanno fatto molta strada. Né ha avuto migliore fortuna un tentativo di modifica per via referendaria volto ad abrogare la possibilità di collegamento tra liste. L'intento era quello di attribuire il premio alla sola lista più votata, così da prevenire o attenuare il potere di ricatto dei piccoli partiti. In ogni caso, il referendum, che si svolse nel giugno 2009, non risultò valido, ancora una volta per il mancato raggiungimento del quorum di votanti. Così, l'eliminazione della legge Calderoli come fino ad allora applicata non è passata né dai partiti (via parlamento), né dagli elettori (via referendum), ma ha avuto luogo per via giudiziaria in seguito a una sentenza della Corte costituzionale nel 2014.

## LA VIA GIUDIZIARIA ALLE RIFORME ELETTORALI: LE SENTENZE DELLA CORTE COSTITUZIONALE (E L'*ITALICUM*)

Con la sentenza 1/2014 la Corte costituzionale ha dichiarato illegittima la legge Calderoli in alcuni suoi elementi caratterizzanti, quali il premio di maggioranza e la lista bloccata. Più specificamente, il premio di maggioranza è stato dichiarato incostituzionale non in sé, ma come applicato dalla legge Calderoli, sia alla Camera sia al Senato, ossia senza previsione di una soglia minima di voti o di seggi ai fini della sua attribuzione, configurandosi così come un meccanismo premiale «foriero di una eccessiva sovra-rappresentazione della lista di maggioranza relativa, in quanto consente ad una lista che abbia ottenuto un numero di voti, anche relativamente esiguo, di acquistare la maggioranza assoluta dei voti». In modo analogo, la lista bloccata è stata dichiarata incostituzionale non in sé, ma in quanto associata (come in effetti era nella legge Calderoli) ad un elenco di candidati molto ampio che rende impossibile la loro «conoscibilità» da parte degli elettori.

Questa sentenza ha costituito di fatto una nuova riforma elettorale – la terza dopo quelle del 1993 e del 2005 – poiché il sistema di voto risultante dalla «mannaia» della Consulta era comunque applicabile (e non poteva essere diversamente). Nasceva così il *consultellum*, un sistema elettorale a quel punto divenuto «solo»

proporzionale (ossia senza premio di maggioranza), che peraltro manteneva alcuni caratteri del vecchio sistema per quanto ora non più funzionali: ad esempio la possibilità di formare coalizioni (a che pro, tenuto conto della eliminazione del premio di maggioranza?) e soglie di sbarramento differenziate tra le liste unite in coalizione e le liste concorrenti da sole (che, in regime proporzionale, diventava norma a sua volta di dubbia costituzionalità)[8]. Non altrettanto per quanto riguardava le modalità di individuazione degli eletti, poiché la sentenza 1/2014 introduceva – attraverso un intervento a dir poco creativo – il voto di preferenza (unico) in sostituzione della lista bloccata.

La riforma elettorale per via giudiziaria, per quanto discutibile, per un po' sembrò essere un elemento di sprone per una nuova riforma elettorale «politica» e dunque un fatto temporaneo e senza effetti duraturi. Originata, non formalmente ma sostanzialmente sì, dall'inazione di un parlamento incapace di trovare un accordo su modifiche o alternative alla legge Calderoli, tale riforma sarebbe stata superata – si pensava – da una nuova iniziativa politica, che avrebbe preso forma in virtù della pressione esercitata dai presidenti Napolitano prima e Mattarella dopo, oltre che della verve del nuovo presidente del consiglio Renzi.

In effetti, il governo Renzi dette un impulso forte alla prospettiva delle riforme istituzionali, promuovendo un disegno ampio di revisione costituzionale e di nuovo sistema elettorale ad essa organicamente collegato. In accordo con la sua base parlamentare, inizialmente allargata a Forza Italia di Berlusconi, Renzi decise di procedere alla riforma elettorale prima che quella costituzionale completasse il suo percorso (del resto molto più lungo e, prevedibilmente, anche più contrastato) e di farla con riferimento alla sola Camera dei deputati, dal momento che il progetto di revisione costituzionale prevedeva un Senato non elettivo. Al termine di una fase di intensa discussione e di progressivo affinamento, il parlamento approvò dunque la legge 52/2015, prontamente ribattezzata *italicum*. Si trattava della quarta riforma elettorale nazionale nel giro di poco più di venti anni.

L'*italicum* era ancora una volta un sistema elettorale misto, del tipo proporzionale a premio di maggioranza. Come la legge Calderoli della Camera era un sistema *majority-assuring*, ma diversamente da quella prevedeva

una soglia del 40% dei voti ai fini dell'attribuzione del premio e il divieto di coalizione. Qualora nessuna lista avesse raggiunto tale soglia, si sarebbe svolto un secondo turno di votazione – un ballottaggio – tra le due liste con più voti al primo turno e quella vincente avrebbe ottenuto il premio di maggioranza (340 seggi). Le altre liste, purché sopra lo sbarramento del 3% dei voti, si sarebbero poi suddivise proporzionalmente i seggi restanti.

Il destino dell'*italicum* è stato lo stesso della riforma costituzionale. Quest'ultima, completato il percorso di approvazione parlamentare nell'aprile 2016, è stata respinta nel referendum confermativo svoltosi nel dicembre di quello stesso anno. Analogamente, l'*italicum* è caduto sotto la scure della Corte costituzionale, che con la sentenza 35/2017 ha dichiarato illegittime le disposizioni ivi previste relative al turno di ballottaggio per l'attribuzione del premio di maggioranza. Tuttavia, come nel caso della sentenza 1/2014 sulla legge Calderoli, anche la sentenza 35/2017 sull'*italicum* ha fatto in modo che le norme residuali, rispetto a quelle censurate, fossero autoapplicative. Ne è scaturito pertanto un nuovo sistema elettorale – il *consultellum II* – valido per la sola Camera dei deputati, che si configura ancora come un sistema proporzionale a premio di maggioranza ma che non è più *majority-assuring* (come era invece l'*italicum*). Il premio di maggioranza, infatti, è «eventuale», in quanto attribuito alla lista più votata solo nel caso in cui questa ottenga il 40% dei voti nell'unico turno di votazione[9].

Con il *consultellum II* si è arrivati alla quinta riforma elettorale dal 1993, la terza nel giro di poco più di tre anni, la seconda per via «giudiziaria» dopo quella del 2014. Ma già una sesta riforma andava profilandosi, richiesta da più parti – in primis dal presidente della Repubblica Mattarella – e volta come minimo ad armonizzare due sistemi elettorali alquanto diversi (*consultellum II* per la Camera e *consultellum I* per il Senato, entrambi dunque derivanti da pronunce della Corte) che, se applicati nelle successive elezioni, avrebbero potuto generare esiti elettorali profondamente incoerenti tra i due rami del parlamento[10].

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[8] Il sistema elettorale del Senato derivante dalla sentenza 1/2014 presenta un elemento di contraddizione nella misura in cui da un lato si configura «in entrata» come un sistema elettorale esclusivamente proporzionale e dall'altro è, «in uscita», in grado di generare livelli di sovra- e sotto-rappresentazione dei partiti paragonabili a quelli dei sistemi maggioritari, per via della ripartizione regionale dei seggi, ma soprattutto di soglie di sbarramento alquanto elevate particolarmente per le liste «solitarie».

[9] Il sistema elettorale della Camera derivante dalla sentenza 35/2017 si configura «in entrata» come un sistema elettorale misto, ma, «in uscita», nella sua concreta applicazione, può produrre due esiti profondamente diversi e per così dire opposti: un esito decisamente «maggioritario» qualora scatti il premio di maggioranza, ovvero un esito sostanzialmente «proporzionale» qualora il premio non scatti. Se la ratio di questo sistema può apparire comprensibile alla luce della sentenza 1/2014 della Corte costituzionale, che ha espressamente condizionato l'attribuzione di un premio di maggioranza al raggiungimento di una soglia «ragionevole», nondimeno vi è un notevole scarto tra i possibili esiti che dalla sua applicazione possono derivare.

[10] Le differenze tra questi due sistemi elettorali appena descritti sono numerose e profonde. Eccole in sintesi: a) la presenza del premio di

## IL RITORNO AL COLLEGIO UNINOMINALE:
## LA RIFORMA DEL 2017

Nell'ottobre 2017, appena quattro mesi prima della fine della legislatura, il Parlamento ha approvato, con il concorso di tutti i principali partiti italiani ad eccezione del M5s, l'ennesima riforma elettorale, la sesta dal 1993. La nuova legge, n. 165/2017, è stata subito ribattezzata *rosatellum*, dal nome di Ettore Rosato, esponente del Pd e primo firmatario. I nuovi sistemi elettorali di Camera e Senato sono di tipo misto, ma la loro componente maggioritaria non consiste più nel premio di maggioranza – come era stato con la legge Calderoli e con l'*italicum* – bensì nei collegi uninominali – che dunque fanno il loro ritorno dopo essere stati cancellati con l'abolizione della legge Mattarella nel 2005 (Chiaramonte, D'Alimonte e Paparo 2019; Pinto, Pedrazzani e Baldini 2018).

Dopo la sostanziale proporzionalizzazione apportata dalle sentenze della Corte, la riforma elettorale del 2017 è stata dunque funzionale a restituire ai sistemi elettorali di Camera e Senato una «dose» di maggioritario, peraltro molto minore di quanto non fosse con la legge Mattarella.

La legge Rosato prevede l'assegnazione di poco più di un terzo dei seggi totali (232 su 630, pari al 36,8% alla Camera; 116 su 315 al Senato) in collegi uninominali con formula *plurality*. I restanti seggi sono ripartiti, a livello nazionale alla Camera e a livello regionale al Senato, tra le coalizioni e le liste individuali (non coalizzate) in base al metodo del quoziente naturale e dei più alti resti. Sono previste delle soglie di sbarramento, del 10% e del 3% su base nazionale rispettivamente per le coalizioni di liste e le liste individuali. Al Senato, partecipano alla ripartizione dei seggi anche le liste che nella rispettiva regione abbiano ottenuto almeno il 20% dei voti. Inoltre, al totale nazionale o regionale di voti delle coalizio-

ni non contribuiscono le liste che ne fanno parte ma che hanno ottenuto meno dell'1%[11].

Le componenti maggioritaria e proporzionale del sistema elettorale non sono del tutto indipendenti l'una dall'altra. Infatti, i candidati nei collegi uninominali sono sostenuti da una o più liste concorrenti nel proporzionale. Gli elettori esprimono un voto «congiunto»: il voto per una lista si trasferisce automaticamente al candidato di collegio cui essa è collegata e viceversa. Nel caso di coalizioni partitiche a supporto del candidato di collegio, il voto espresso solo nei confronti di quest'ultimo è ripartito *pro-quota* tra tutte le liste della coalizione, in proporzione ai voti che tali liste ricevono nel collegio. In ogni caso, gli elettori non possono «disgiungere» il loro voto, assegnandolo ad un candidato di collegio e ad una lista non collegati tra loro.

Gli effetti esercitati dal nuovo sistema elettorale alla sua prima applicazione nelle elezioni politiche del 2018 restituiscono un'immagine composita. Da un lato, se guardiamo alla disproporzionalità della rappresentanza partitica, si trae l'impressione che esso sia stato più proporzionale che maggioritario. Dall'altro lato, se guardiamo invece al comportamento di voto e, soprattutto, al modello di competizione sembra invece prevalere l'impressione opposta. Infatti, la presenza pur numericamente ridotta di collegi uninominali si è rivelata un incentivo sufficiente per spingere i partiti a fare accordi prima del voto, ossia a coordinarsi formando coalizioni pre-elettorali. Queste coalizioni hanno quindi plasmato la competizione elettorale conferendogli un'impronta maggioritaria. In altri termini, gli elettori hanno votato non solo per un partito, come avrebbero fatto in un'arena puramente proporzionale, ma anche per una compagine candidata al governo, poiché hanno percepito le due coalizioni di centro-sinistra e di centro-destra, oltre che il Movimento 5 stelle, come vere e proprie alternative per la guida del paese.

L'assenza di un chiaro vincitore, come già era stato con la legge Calderoli nel 2013, ha infine riaperto il dibattito sulla riforma elettorale, contrapponendo ancora una volta i fautori di soluzioni più maggioritarie a quelli di soluzioni più proporzionalistiche. Tra i primi si è schierata in questa circostanza la Lega, che – forte del crescente consenso nel paese – ha addirittura promosso un referendum (ritenuto poi inammissibile dalla Corte costituzionale) per l'abolizione della quota proporzionale del *rosa-*

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maggioranza alla Camera e la sua assenza al Senato; b) la possibilità di costituire coalizioni tra liste al Senato ma non alla Camera; c) la soglia di sbarramento variabile tra liste coalizzate o meno al Senato e fissa alla Camera; d) il livello di ripartizione dei seggi tra le liste/coalizioni, nazionale alla Camera e regionale al Senato; e) la presenza di capilista bloccati alla Camera ma non al Senato; f) il voto di preferenza unico al Senato e la doppia preferenza di genere alla Camera; g) la previsione di norme volte a favorire la rappresentanza di genere molto più stringenti alla Camera rispetto al Senato. Ad esse si sommano poi quelle già note, derivanti dai vincoli costituzionali, relativamente all'elettorato attivo e passivo, alle modalità di determinazione dei seggi spettanti alle circoscrizioni (in particolare per le regioni al Senato) e alla disposizione dell'art. 57 della Costituzione laddove recita che il Senato è eletto «su base regionale» e che è stata sin qui interpretata nel senso di impedire l'adozione di meccanismi che agissero a livello sovra-regionale (quali un premio di maggioranza o soglie nazionali). Che da tutte queste differenze (qualora i sistemi in questione siano applicati simultaneamente) possano scaturire esiti elettorali diversi tra i due rami del parlamento è molto probabile.

[11] I seggi assegnati alle liste a livello nazionale sono poi attribuiti alle stesse prima in circoscrizioni e poi in collegi plurinominali secondo una procedura volta far sì che a ciascun collegio plurinominale spetti in ultima istanza un numero di seggi pari a quello determinato ex-ante in base alla popolazione. Per ciascuna lista, i candidati sono eletti nell'ordine di presentazione, poiché le liste sono «bloccate» e non è previsto alcun voto di preferenza.

*tellum* e dunque per la sua trasformazione in un sistema integralmente maggioritario all'inglese. Tra i secondi si sono invece schierati i partiti facenti parte del governo Conte II, che non a caso hanno presentato un disegno di legge per una riforma elettorale in senso proporzionale. Come che sia, anche la legge Rosato non pare destinata a durare a lungo e un'ennesima riforma è alle viste.

### LE RIFORME ELETTORALI IN ITALIA: UNO SGUARDO D'INSIEME

Nei paragrafi precedenti abbiamo analizzato il contesto politico nel quale le varie riforme hanno avuto luogo, le principali proprietà dei sistemi elettorali di volta in volta introdotti e le criticità legate alla loro applicazione concreta o presunta. Sulla base delle considerazioni sviluppate possiamo tentare ora di caratterizzare nel loro insieme le riforme elettorali di questi ultimi anni. Lo facciamo, senza pretesa di costruire una teoria generale, seguendo lo schema suggerito da Benoit (2007) e dunque evidenziando riassuntivamente 1) chi ha deciso le riforme, ossia gli attori del cambiamento, 2) sulla base di quali preferenze e in vista di quali obbiettivi, e 3) nel contesto di quali vincoli normativi e costituzionali.

Per quanto riguarda il primo aspetto, va rilevato che le sei riforme elettorali che si sono susseguite dal 1993 ad oggi sono state il prodotto di processi diversi che hanno coinvolto una pluralità di attori. Il parlamento e, in esso, i partiti non hanno sempre mantenuto il pieno controllo della *policy* di riforma e talvolta l'hanno persino subita, non essendo indifferente a ciò la loro stessa crisi di legittimità. Come già messo in evidenza, accanto agli attori più prettamente politici, hanno infatti giocato un ruolo fondamentale gli elettori attraverso lo strumento referendario (si pensi al 1993, ma anche ai tentativi andati a vuoto del 1999, 2000 e 2009) e i giudici di suprema istanza attraverso le sentenze della Corte costituzionale (2014 e 2017). Se da un lato questa circostanza indica una notevole vitalità della società civile e un controllo serrato della massima magistratura su una questione cruciale come quella delle regole di voto, dall'altro conferma la vulnerabilità dei sistemi elettorali quali strumenti di ingegneria istituzionale (in quanto soggetti a veti, modifiche e correzioni provenienti da una pluralità di attori).

Circa il secondo aspetto, ossia le preferenze e gli obbiettivi degli attori convolti nei processi di riforma, si evidenzia anche in questo caso una combinazione di ingredienti variabili in funzione degli specifici attori e dello specifico processo di riforma. Laddove i partiti, o alcuni tra loro, sono stati in grado di controllare il percorso della riforma – come nel caso della legge Calderoli e

dell'*italicum* – ha prevalso l'obbiettivo di massimizzazione dei seggi (per sè ma anche, e soprattutto, per la propria coalizione orientata a costituire un governo[12]). Persino in questi casi, tuttavia, il set di alternative davvero percorribili non è mai stato illimitato. Al contrario, era ristretto a quelle soluzioni che, al contempo, consentissero la possibilità di trovare un compromesso all'interno della coalizione proponente, e, poiché tale coalizione era coincidente con o includeva le forze della maggioranza parlamentare, garantissero anche la sopravvivenza del governo in carica (che poi era pre-condizione per il successo della riforma stessa)[13]. Ancora più ristretta è stata la possibilità di scelta quando i partiti non sono stati i principali attori della riforma, come ai tempi della legge Mattarella o della legge Rosato. Nel primo caso, gli spazi di manovra dei partiti erano ridottissimi per via del vincolo referendario e furono sfruttati per interventi al margine (scorporo, doppia scheda e doppio voto) sul sistema elettorale della Camera. Nel secondo caso, vi era un più ampio spazio di azione, ma dovendo comunque e innanzi tutto provvedere – su pressione del Presidente della Repubblica – a omogeneizzare i sistemi elettorali di Camera e Senato in vista delle elezioni e con un accordo ampio tra le forze politiche. Quando, infine, la riforma elettorale è scaturita da una sentenza della Corte costituzionale, i partiti hanno subito l'iniziativa altrui a correzione di riforme ritenute parzialmente illegittime, oltretutto dovendo poi, a propria volta, porre rimedio alle storture derivanti dal «taglia e cuci» di quegli interventi. Ne emerge, complessivamente, un quadro caratterizzato da frammentarietà di intenti e, soprattutto, fortemente condizionato dalla contingenza, sia quando si sono affermate circostanze esterne ai partiti sia quando i partiti sono riusciti a perseguire più chiaramente i propri obbiettivi.

Per quanto riguarda, infine, il contesto dei vincoli politici e costituzionali, vanno sottolineati due elementi. Il primo riguarda l'incertezza, e persino la contraddittorietà, dei limiti costituzionali in tema di riforme elettorali. La presunta piena discrezionalità del legislatore su questa materia, pur sancita dalla giurisprudenza

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[12] Da questo punto di vista si dovrebbe dunque più propriamente dire che le motivazioni della riforma elettorale non sono state solo di tipo *office-seeking*, ma anche di tipo *policy-seeking*, poiché la preferenza per un certo tipo di sistema elettorale ha tenuto conto anche delle probabilità di successo di governi diversi e dunque di *policy* alternative. Inoltre, incorporando aspettative circa le strategie di competizione dei partiti (specificamente: la formazione o meno di coalizioni pre-elettorali), questi processi di riforma sottintendono una funzione di scelta che combina elementi istituzionali e comportamentali (vedi Colomer 2004; 2018).

[13] Un ulteriore vincolo era poi dato dal consenso diffuso (anche nell'opinione pubblica) verso sistemi elettorali che favorissero la governabilità. A lungo, dunque, un ritorno alla proporzionale pura non sarebbe stato accettabile.

costituzionale, deve in realtà fare i conti con una serie di limitazioni derivanti da altrettante sentenze, non solo recenti e non solo della Corte costituzionale, che talvolta poggiano su considerazioni che rendono assai confuso il quadro di riferimento. Il secondo elemento concerne la constatazione di come, in questi ultimi venticinque anni, la legge elettorale abbia perso l'aura di «legge più importante dell'ordine costituzionale, dopo la Costituzione», come diceva Sturzo. Non è più ritenuta cioè parte integrante dell'accordo-compromesso che sta alla base del regime politico, inteso sia come insieme di norme sia come comunità di valori. Ne consegue che non costituisca più un ostacolo per un partito o per uno schieramento politico porsi nella prospettiva di approvare una riforma elettorale a maggioranza ristretta, magari, come abbiamo evidenziato in precedenza, con l'obbiettivo di ottenere un vantaggio di breve periodo per la propria parte. Cosa che poi finisce per innescare un doppio circolo vizioso. Da un lato induce altre, diverse maggioranze a fare lo stesso. Dall'altro lato, ed è la conseguenza più importante, scoraggia i partiti ad adattarsi alle nuove regole, dal momento che potranno appena possibile cambiarle. In ambedue i casi, il risultato è che si vanificano i risultati attesi dalla riforma elettorale stessa, qualunque essa sia. In altri termini, il rischio che si corre è quello di entrare in una spirale di instabilità che neutralizzi gli obbiettivi incorporati da riforme istituzionali che dovrebbero avere lungo corso per poter dispiegare i propri effetti. E che, dunque, l'instabilità porti altra instabilità e nuove soluzioni istituzionali (come i sistemi elettorali) si seguono l'una dopo l'altra alla continua e vana ricerca di un punto di equilibrio.

## CONCLUSIONI

Non sono certo mancate neanche nel lungo periodo che va dall'unità d'Italia alla fine della Prima Repubblica. Ma, per numero e continuità di discussione, le riforme elettorali hanno caratterizzato soprattutto la storia degli ultimi 25-30 anni. A partire da quella del 1993, abbiamo assistito infatti a ben sei riforme elettorali, anche se non sempre i sistemi elettorali che ne sono scaturiti sono stati effettivamente applicati. E, come abbiamo visto, non è finita qua.

Certo è che, in questa girandola di riforme, che abbiamo qui esaminato nello specifico percorso che ha portato alla loro approvazione e applicazione, alcune (leggi Mattarella e Calderoli su tutte) sono state caricate di eccessive attese. A volte si è avuta l'impressione che qualcuno davvero pensasse ad esse come alla soluzione ai «mali» della politica italiana. Normale che poi tali aspettative fossero deluse, nonostante che i nuovi sistemi elettorali generassero comunque alcuni effetti (anche positivi) tra quelli realisticamente attesi. Ciò che invece è mancato e che avrebbe favorito la stabilizzazione dei nuovi sistemi elettorali sono state le tante altre riforme istituzionali che avrebbero reso il contesto della loro applicazione più favorevole e idoneo ad assecondarne gli effetti. Una di queste è la riforma del bicameralismo paritario, che avrebbe eliminato alla radice il problema delle differenze di vincoli normativi e di esiti elettorali tra Camera e Senato. Un'altra è quella della forma di governo, che sarebbe stata necessaria a sciogliere i nodi e le contraddizioni tra quanto previsto dalla lettera della Costituzione (governi a legittimazione esclusivamente parlamentare) e quanto emerso come sviluppo dell'introduzione di regole maggioritarie (governi a legittimazione anche elettorale). E poi le riforme dei regolamenti parlamentari, del finanziamento pubblico dei partiti, dell'accesso ai mezzi di comunicazione che avrebbero potuto ad esempio disinnescare l'eccesso di frammentazione partitica. Ma tutte queste riforme o non sono state fatte o sono state fatte in maniera molto parziale. Con la conseguenza che si è continuato a chiedere ad un nuovo sistema elettorale una risposta che invece doveva arrivare attraverso altri mezzi.

Forma di governo, forma di stato e sistema elettorale configurano infatti una architettura istituzionale complessa con forti legami di interdipendenza. Non si può toccarne un elemento senza tener conto degli effetti che la modifica può avere sull'equilibrio sistemico complessivo. Invece la Seconda Repubblica è nata e si è sviluppata in maniera disorganica seguendo spinte e interessi contingenti e spesso divergenti. Il risultato è un sistema squilibrato. Il rischio attuale è che invece di nuovi e più convincenti equilibri istituzionali prevalgano spinte centrifughe dirompenti. Se si vuole invertire la tendenza è quindi necessario pensare alla riforma elettorale congiuntamente ad una riforma più ampia del sistema istituzionale. Ciò richiede tuttavia un consenso di fondo su una visione condivisa di democrazia. Ed è forse la mancanza di tale consenso che, in ultima istanza, spiega, nella storia d'Italia, specialmente quella più recente, la continua ricerca, quasi ossessiva ormai, di nuove soluzioni istituzionali che troppo spesso si concentrano sulle (e si limitano alle) sole riforme elettorali.

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# Pollster problems in the 2016 US presidential election: vote intention, vote prediction

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**Abstract**. In recent US presidential elections, there has been considerable focus on how well public opinion can forecast the outcome, and 2016 proved no exception. Pollsters and poll aggregators regularly offered numbers on the horse-race, usually pointing to a Clinton victory, which failed to occur. We argue that these polling assessments of support were misleading for at least two reasons. First, Trump voters were sorely underestimated, especially at the state level of polling. Second, and more broadly, we suggest that excessive reliance on non-probability sampling was at work. Here we present evidence to support our contention, ending with a plea for consideration of other methods of election forecasting that are not based on vote intention polls.

**Keywords**. Forecasting, polling, research methods, elections, voting.

## INTRODUCTION

To understand voter choice in American presidential elections, we have come to rely heavily on public opinion surveys, whose questions help explain the electoral outcome. In recent elections, horserace polls – those which measure vote intention, the declaration that you will vote for the Democrat or the Republican, or perhaps a third party – have been explicitly used to predict the outcome of the election in advance in media forecast models, exacerbating the reliance on them for election prognostication. In 2016, national and state-level polls suggested rather strongly that Hillary Clinton would defeat Donald Trump to become the next president of the United States. When it became clear that Trump would instead win the Electoral College, a debate sparked: Why were such forecasts, based on a mountain of polls, incorrect? Was this a fundamental failure of polling, or an irresponsible over-reliance on them by forecasters and the media-punditry complex? Either way, since the media forecasts rely mostly on polls, any widespread polling error should generate considerable concern.

How serious were these apparent errors? Here we review the performance of the 2016 vote intention polls for president, looking at the national level, where polls performed reasonably well, before turning to the states,

where the 2016 errors seem particularly grave. We offer a theoretical explanation for this error rather than the commonly-cited sources of polling error, which focus on poll mode or bias. Our contention is that pre-election polls suffer from a more critical problem: they are trying to poll a population – voters in an upcoming election – which does not exist at the time of the poll. This assertion means that the polls are not representative of the population they are interpreted to measure even under the best circumstances, making it unsurprising that they sometimes fail spectacularly as prediction tools. Many pollsters have made this exact argument: Polls are a snapshot of what *could* happen at the time they are taken. We extend it further by adding the theoretical underpinnings of how polls fail to satisfy representative sample requirements.

We offer theoretical and practical support for this hypothesis and argue that because of the inability to sample from the population of actual voters, and the inability to quantify the error that stems from that problem, polls should not be relied upon as prediction tools. In fact, there is evidence that this type of prediction can be harmful to natural election processes by impacting turnout. By way of conclusion, we suggest prediction alternatives, turning the focus to modelling the Electoral College result with aggregate (national and state) structural forecasting models and survey-based citizen forecasting.

## ERROR IN THE 2016 NATIONAL PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION POLLS

In the popular mind the notion that the polls failed to accurately predict the 2016 electoral outcome seems widespread. What did the publicized polls actually show voters? Let us work through an illustration where "civic-minded Jill" follows the news – the lead stories and the polls – to arrive at her own judgment about who is ahead, who is likely to win. She checks *RealClearPolitics* aggregates daily, since the average percentages from available recent polls are readily understood. She observes, across the course of the campaign (June 16 to November 8) that nearly all the 180 observations report a Democratic lead (in the national 4-way daily poll average; the exceptional days are July 29th and July 30th). It looks like a Clinton win to Jill, but she wants more data, knowing that *RealClearPolitics* is just one aggregator, and she knows others use somewhat different aggregation methods. So, she consults a "Custom Chart" put out by Huffington Post (*HuffPost Pollster*, November 1, 2017)[1] that

**Tab. 1.** Poll Aggregator Predictions of Popular Vote.

|  | Clinton (prediction & error from 48.1% actual vote) | Trump (prediction & error from 46.2% actual vote) |
|---|---|---|
| *New York Times Upshot* | 45.4%, 2.7% | 42.3%, 3.9% |
| *FiveThirtyEight* | 48.5%, -0.4% | 44.9%, 1.3% |
| *RealClearPolitics* average | 45.4, 2.7 | 42.2%, 4.0% |
| *The Huffington Post* | 45.8%, 2.3% | 40.8%, 5.4% |

looks at the five weeks of national polls taken before election week; it shows Clinton at 46.0 percent and Trump at 42.4 percent, for a 3.6 point lead. Then, a few days before the election, she focuses on the news from other aggregators as well, as illustrated in Table 1 with estimates from *Upshot*, *FiveThirtyEight*, *The Huffington Post*, and *RealClearPolitics*. These all show Clinton ahead (from 3.1 to 5.0 percentage points) over Trump.

Jill now has more confidence that it will be a Democratic win. However, she realizes that these aggregates can mask big differences, so she turns to individual, final national polls, to get a better feel for the margins. Jill considers all the available ones, eleven national "likely voter" polls administered in November, and reported in *RealClearPolitics* or *HuffPost Pollster*.[2] She observes, as in Table 2, that the Clinton share of the total vote is always estimated to be in the 40s; further, she calculates Clinton's median support registers 44 percentage points.

Jill wants to compare these numbers to those for Trump, so she examines his estimates from the same polls, as in Table 3. She notes that, except for one observation (from Reuters/Ipsos) his scores are also always in the 40s. Now she calculates the median, and finds it equals 43, which disquiets her, since that estimate falls so close to Clinton's median of 44. She seeks reassurance by looking at the margins of error (MoE) at the 95 percent confidence interval, which are reported in the surveys. These numbers tell her that each survey estimate, for Clinton or Trump, is accurate within 3 percentage points above or below the point estimate 95 percent of the time, suggesting that, after all, Clinton might not be in the lead. As an aid to her thinking, she resorts to the poll range for each candidate, finding that for Clinton it is (42 to 47), while for Trump it is (39 to 44). Over-

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[1] http://elections.huffingtonpost.com/pollster/2016-general-election-trump-vs-clinton.

[2] http://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/2016/president/us/general_election_trump_vs_clinton_vs_johnson_vs_stein-5952.html; http://elections.huffingtonpost.com/pollster/2016-general-election-trump-vs-clinton.

**Tab. 2.** Final National Polls for Clinton.

| Poll | MoE | Clinton poll estimate | Clinton poll error |
|------|------|------|------|
| ABC/Wash Post Tracking | +/-2.5 | 47 | * |
| FOX News | +/-2.5 | 48 | * |
| UPI/CVOTER | +/-2.5 | 49 | * |
| Monmouth | +/-3.6 | 50 | * |
| CBS News | +/-3.0 | 45 | 0.1 |
| Bloomberg | +/-3.5 | 44 | 0.6 |
| Rasmussen Reports | +/-2.5 | 45 | 0.6 |
| McClatchy/Marist | +/-3.2 | 44 | 0.9 |
| NBC News/Wall St. Jrnl | +/-2.7 | 44 | 1.4 |
| IBD/TIPP Tracking | +/-3.1 | 43 | 2 |
| Reuters/Ipsos | +/-2.3 | 42 | 3.8 |

\* = Actual percent of total vote as of 12/2/2016 (48.1 Clinton, 46.2 Trump) is within the poll's margin of error.

**Tab. 3.** Final Polls for Trump.

| Poll | MoE | Trump poll estimate | Trump poll error |
|------|------|------|------|
| FOX News | +/-2.5 | 44 | * |
| IBD/TIPP Tracking | +/-3.1 | 45 | * |
| McClatchy/Marist | +/-3.2 | 43 | * |
| Monmouth | +/-3.6 | 44 | * |
| UPI/CVOTER | +/-2.5 | 46 | * |
| ABC/Wash Post Tracking | +/-2.5 | 43 | 0.7 |
| Rasmussen Reports | +/-2.5 | 43 | 0.7 |
| Bloomberg | +/-3.5 | 41 | 1.7 |
| CBS News | +/-3.0 | 41 | 2.2 |
| NBC News/Wall St. Jrnl | +/-2.7 | 40 | 3.5 |
| Reuters/Ipsos | +/-2.3 | 39 | 4.9 |

\* = Actual percent of total vote as of 12/2/2016 (48.1 Clinton, 46.2 Trump) is within the poll's margin of error.

all, this assessment strengthens her belief that Clinton is ahead, but not by as much as she thought.

Jill has studied a good deal of data, but at this point still has uncertainty about which way it is going to go. If she had to bet, she would bet Clinton, but without much conviction. Also, she knows she has not yet really considered polling data from the states. And, she has avoided the sticky problem that even a majority in the national popular vote share, as estimated from the national vote intention polls, does not necessarily make for a presidential winner, since that choice must be made by the Electoral College. So now she takes a serious look at the Electoral College forecasts of the leading media poll aggregators (*NYT, 538, HuffPost, PW, PEC, DK*), as presented by *Upshot* on their *New York Times* website.[3] All these aggregators, which do look at state polls as well, give Clinton a better than 70 percent chance of a majority electoral vote. Moreover, the *Daily Kos* (92 percent), *Huffington Post* (98 percent), and the Princeton Election Consortium (99 percent) all awarded Clinton certainties of victory exceeding 90 percent.[4] As the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) sums it up: "However well-intentioned these predictions may have been, they helped crystalize the belief that Clinton was a shoo-in for president." (Kennedy *et al.* 2017, 4).

Jill takes all the foregoing information into account and concludes, like many other American voters, that Clinton will be the next president. As we now know, Clinton received 51.1 percent of the two-party popular vote, compared a 48.9 percent for Trump, for a difference of just 2.1 percentage points. By this metric, the national polls were reasonably accurate. However, she lost the Electoral College, 232 votes to 306 votes, and thus lost the race.

The foregoing pattern of errors and predictions tends to work against the conclusion that these polls, after all, functioned as they should. But, as Sean Trende (November 12, 2016, *RealClearPolitics*) put it: "The story of 2016 is not one of poll failure."[5] That is partly true: national polling error was larger in 2012 than in 2016, showing a very narrow Barack Obama win while he won by nearly four percentage points on Election Day. In 2016, national polls showed Clinton winning by 2-5 points, and she won by two points. Yet because we do not have President Hillary Clinton in office now, the 2016 polls are perceived in a worse light – whereas in 2012 pollsters were taking victory laps.

However, we suggest some qualification to that conclusion, even at the national level. As Martin *et al.* (2005) indicate, accuracy and bias are two important criteria for assessing polling quality. With respect to accuracy, even though national polls were reasonably close to the margin between Clinton and Trump, con-

[3] https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/upshot/presidential-polls-forecast.html?_r=0.
[4] http://election.princeton.edu/2016/11/08/final-mode-projections-clinton-323-ev-51-di-senate-seats-gop-house/.

[5] http://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2016/11/12/it_wasnt_the_polls_that_missed_it_was_the_pundits_132333.html.

sider the individual estimates from the final national polls (recall Tables 2 and 3), where seven (for Clinton) or six (for Trump) of the eleven poll estimates fall outside the standard margin of error. Further, with respect to bias, almost all these polls (seven for Clinton, eleven for Trump) underestimated the final vote share of the candidates, indicating that third party candidates were overestimated. To say all national polls performed well is to ignore those which came to the right conclusion but with inaccurate estimates. Additionally, final national poll aggregators' estimates all had *A* scores, which measures bias and accuracy (Martin *et al.* 2005), between -0.01 and -0.03, indicating a small but systematic underestimate for Trump – even after accounting for the polls also underestimating Clinton. These patterns, detectable in the national polls, are even more obvious in the state polls, a topic to which we now turn.

## ERROR IN THE 2016 STATE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION POLLS

Our conclusion is not that different from the AAPOR conclusion, which is that despite the 2016 national polls being more accurate than the 2012 national polls, 2016 was marked by inaccurate results at the state level, particularly in a few states that proved critical to Trump's Electoral College victory (Kennedy *et al.* 2017, 2). These state-level errors led poll-based forecasters astray in their Electoral College predictions. The final state polls appear to have had an average positive Clinton bias of about five percentage points. As Linzer (2016) put it, "The Big Question" is "How uncertain should we have been about the polls to make 5 to 10 percentage point errors seem consistent – even minimally – with the data?"

Take a closer look at polling accuracy in the states. There were five states in which Clinton held poll leads but lost on Election Day: Florida, North Carolina, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. We begin with the first two. Polls in Florida and North Carolina showed the race closing in the final week. In Florida, Trump narrowly led by 0.2% according to *RealClearPolitics,* Clinton was up 1.8 percent according to HuffPost Pollster and 0.6 percent according *to FiveThirtyEight. RealClearPolitics* also had Trump leading by 1 point in North Carolina*,* while Clinton was up 1.6 percent according to *HuffPost Pollster*, and 0.7 percent according to *FiveThirtyEight.* Trump won Florida by 1.2 points, and North Carolina by 3.7 points.

The bigger shocks were in the Rust Belt states of Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin – states that

Obama had won handily in 2008 and 2012 and which were often referred to as Clinton's "blue wall" in the Midwest. That narrative was driven in part by relatively strong Clinton polls. For example, not a single poll taken in Wisconsin ever showed Trump ahead in the state; the modal poll had Clinton up by 6-8 points in the final weeks of the campaign. In Michigan, in the final week most polls showed Clinton up by 1-5 points. One survey from the Trafalgar Group showed Trump up by two points, but it seemed to be a conservative-leaning outlier from a Republican-affiliated landline-only automated pollster. Since landline-only polls skew toward older, more conservative respondents, it was rational to think that a Republican poll conducted this way might be doubly skewed to the right. In Pennsylvania, Clinton was up by about 2-4 points in most late campaign polls; the only poll to show Trump ahead was again from Trafalgar Group.

But the story of state-level polling error does not end with the five states that went in the opposite direction from what was expected. Trump's vote share was underestimated in more than 35 states, and in many cases by more than ten points. The figures below show how polling aggregates performed relative to actual outcomes, calculated by subtracting the actual result margin between Clinton and Trump from the poll's margin between Clinton and Trump: Poll (Clinton% - Trump%) – Actual (Clinton% - Trump%). Figure 1 (originally pub-
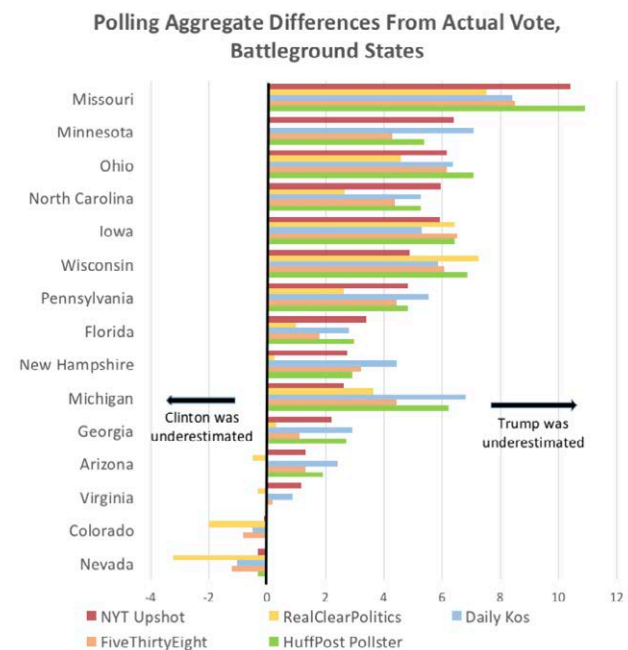


**Fig. 1.** Polling Aggregate Differences From Actual Vote, Battleground States.

**Fig. 2.** Polling Aggregate Differences From Actual Vote, All States.
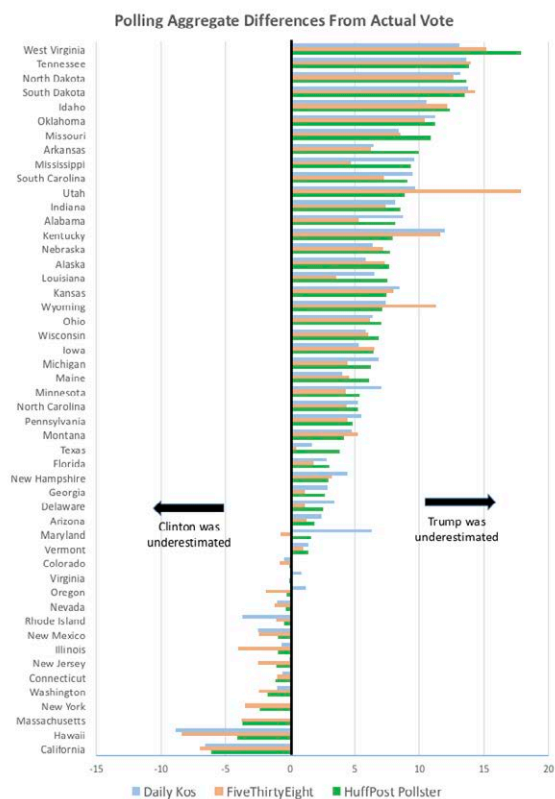
lished in Jackson 2016) shows the 15 most competitive states, where there were five aggregators active. Across the board – and including *RealClearPolitics*, whose national averages were nearly spot-on – Trump was systematically underestimated in 12 of the 15 states. The visual is even more striking among the aggregators who had all 50 states available (Figure 2, also originally published in Jackson 2016). The distribution is very lop-sided; Trump was underestimated in 35 states, while Clinton was underestimated in fewer than a dozen states. Average *A* scores (Martin *et al.* 2005) across all states for these three aggregators hovered around -0.04, again, demonstrating the consistent, lopsided bias in poll estimates.

The nature of the 2016 state-level polling errors – the vast majority of polls underestimated Trump regardless of any particular poll's characteristics – makes assessing the reasons for the misses difficult. The two most commonly-cited reasons for the 2016 polling misses are late shifts among voters, and overestimating college graduates, a weighting problem that was often not corrected (Kennedy *et al.*, 2017, p.3).

There is considerable support for last-minute shifts in vote intentions aiding Trump's side. According to

national exit polls, 13 percent of voters decided whom to vote for within the last week before Election Day (November 6), and 26 percent of voters decided in the last month. Those voters deciding in the last week broke 45-42 for Trump nationally, and voters deciding in the last month broke 48-40 for Trump nationally. Such late decisions might have been decisive in the three critical states of Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin: in Michigan, those who decided in October broke 55-35 for Trump, in Pennsylvania the last-week deciders went 54-37 for Trump, and in Wisconsin it was 59-30 in Trump's favor among those who decided in the final week. Many of the last polls in Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin were conducted a week or more prior to Election Day and could not possibly be expected to capture late deciders. But the polling industry cannot do anything about late deciders, except poll as close to Election Day as possible, and then communicate very clearly the risk and uncertainty that late deciders infuse into the estimates.

The second issue, the question of weighting to overcome bias, is closer to the root of the problem with pre-election polls, but only focusing on one weight – in this case, education – is only a small piece of the much larger issue, one which might also be responsible for making last-minute shifts seem substantial: All pre-election preference polls are attempting to sample from a population that does not yet exist. It is our contention that this missing population problem is at the root of pre-election polling inaccuracy. Pollsters simply cannot weight their way out of it, even under the best of circumstances.

THEORETICAL FAILURES OF PRE-ELECTION POLLS

In sampling theory, the population that an election poll wants to survey is people who voted in an election *which hasn't happened yet*. However, the fundamental admonition remains: sampling must be carried out, to the extent possible, following the scientific, mathematical methods of probability sampling laid down most fully by Kish (1965) and his disciples (Groves 1989; Weisberg 2005). Briefly stated, respondent selection must be made randomly (at every point where a selection is to be made), from a proper sampling frame, one targeting the relevant voting population. Following these principles has become expensive, and the problem of low response rates has not gone away. Indeed, it is our argument that it is impossible to get a representative sample of likely voters for a pre-election poll given the inability to get a sampling frame of actual voters before the election.

A true, probability pre-election poll, as defined by Kish's (1965) requirements, would have all of those who vote in the future election as the sampling frame. That sampling frame simply does not exist, forcing pollsters to substitute the frame of all Americans or registered voters. Thus, contrary to the long-standing assumption that Random Digit Dial (RDD) telephone polls are probability-based, we put them in the non-probability category, because there is no way to get a scientific random sample of Americans who will vote in the election prior to that election. That means a fundamental source of error in all the 2016 pre-presidential election polls stems from the fact that they employed *non-probability samples* rather than true probability sampling of future voters (Ansolabehere and Schaffner 2014; Brüggen, Van Den Brakel, Krosnick 2016; Shino and Martinez 2017).

We can see evidence of the inability to sample from the true population illustrated in the 2016 state polls. While the lop-sided nature of the poll underestimates is the first thing to stand out in Figure 2, equally important is the states with the largest errors. Polls underestimated Clinton most in California and Hawaii. Trump's largest underestimates were in West Virginia and Tennessee. The outcomes were never in question in any of those states, but the polling errors are very large. This points to an issue that has gone overlooked in election polling for decades: Polls that get the answer right, but still have considerable error, are considered "okay." Polls with small amounts of error that miss the result are considered bad. Not scrutinizing these errors in the right direction has cost us knowledge about polling errors. Pollsters estimate "likely voters," but often do not say how or why, or offer any discussion of how likely voter estimates are quite different from having a true probability sample of the correct population.

*How Mode and Sampling Further Complicate Election Polling*

The issue of sampling from the correct population is further exacerbated by mode and sampling problems that affect all polls. Pollsters in 2016 conducted both telephone and online polls. Consider telephone polls first, where the two main types are computer-assisted interviews (CATI) or those that are computer driven with no live interviewing – "robopolls." (The robopoll is quite inexpensive; however, it is illegal in the U.S. to use them on cell phones, so most pollsters using this method are either missing a substantial part of the population or use web-based methods to supplement the phone calls.) Historically, telephone samples come from random digit dialing (RDD), employing a computer algorithm for randomly selecting phone numbers that appear valid. Effectively, this defines the target population as all those who have (access to) a usable phone, so generating an obviously less than perfect list of voters. Moreover, the response rates with RDD have become perilously low, under ten percent of the numbers called (Keeter *et al.* 2017). Weights are used to account for nonresponse and make the survey representative of the U.S. adult population where it is not – although in well-designed samples these weights should be small. However, in this situation the sample's lack of representativeness of actual future voters is obvious: Not everyone reached by random selection will vote in an election, and there is no information beyond the respondents' own words to help inform whether they will vote. That survey respondents overestimate their likelihood to vote is a well-documented issue, even in the very high-quality and expensive American National Election Study (Jackman and Spahn 2019).

In an attempt to solve this inference problem, some pollsters turn to registered voter lists matched to phone numbers in order to generate their samples, making registered voters rather than American adults the population. These samples are closer to random samples of voters – where election pollsters want to be – than RDD samples and contain valuable information about registrants' past vote history. Nevertheless, these registered voter lists suffer from the exclusion of new registrants not on the rolls yet, and that not all sampled registered voters will cast a ballot. Some pollsters supplement these lists with additional sampling to address the issue of new registrants, but that brings back the issue of whether the respondent correctly indicates their likelihood to vote.

In contrast to telephone polling, online polling has found increasing use because of its low cost. Usually, the respondents are members of a panel, which serves as the database for subsequent surveys. The initial difficulty exists in recruiting the panel members, since an email list of all eligible voters does not exist. Most commonly, these web panels are made of respondents who have volunteered to participate in surveys via online advertisements. This is a means of self-selection whereby one learns of the panel, wants to be a member and can be, provided they satisfy the email invitation. While this volunteer method makes it easier to fill the panel, it still must wrestle (perhaps even more seriously) with the problem of opt-ins, who are not likely to be representative of the eligible voting population. The panel provider uses quotas and modelling to make any given survey appear representative of the U.S. adult population, and again the problem of the quality of the list, and the subsequent lack of represent-

ativeness of the sample drawn, surfaces. In a few cases, other means of recruitment are employed, such as RDD or address-based sampling using the United States Postal Service address file, which may lead to selection of a person in the household who answers the phone or responds to a mail request to join a panel. By this telephone method, a panel can be formed, and from it respondents randomly selected to participate in an election survey. Of course, even if the respondents are randomly selected from the panel, that does not mean they are representative of the population of future voters – again, the population does yet not exist.

In sum, most telephone and online election polls are based on a form of quotas, whether using them at the sampling stage or de facto forcing the data to fit quotas in the weighting stage. The respondents selected (even if eventually weighted), may not be truly representative of the socio-demographic sectors from which they were chosen, and almost certainly will not be representative of the yet-unknown population of actual voters. As Kalton (1983, 92) put it succinctly, regarding such methods "the chief consideration is to form groups that are internally homogenous in the availability of their members for interview," which makes them different from others in the category who were not sampled.

International polling experience is instructive here as well. In the 2015 United Kingdom General Election, the leading polls all showed a Labour-Conservative race too close to call, despite the final 6.5 percentage point lead of the Conservatives. A blue-ribbon committee appointed to investigate these discrepancies concluded that these erroneous results were the product of methods – essentially quota-style sampling – that rendered the surveys unrepresentative of the voting population (Sturgis *et al.* 2016).

British pollsters, in the run-up to the 2015 United Kingdom general election, all used quota sampling, applying weights known from population demographics (Sturgis *et al.* 2016). Following tradition, then, the UK quotas were fixed at the beginning of the sampling process. In contrast, common practice in the US basically fixes quotas at the end of the sampling process as weights, although some nonprobability online poll vendors do considerably more modelling and careful control of the sample than others. The essential disadvantage of either approach in nonprobability samples is that valid population parameter estimates, along with their probable error, are quite difficult to obtain (Freedman 2004). Therein lies the rub, as quota sampling, no matter how carefully designed and modelled, does not require that the respondents be selected randomly, and it certainly cannot select only those who will vote in the future.

## WHAT CAN POLLSTERS DO?

The best solution is for pollsters to continue to refine their craft and adhere to the highest standards. That means leaning on probability samples wherever possible, and particularly encouraging more investment in high-quality polling at the state level – a solution also suggested in the AAPOR report (Kennedy *et al.* 2017). Still, estimating the voting population will remain a significant issue. There is no theoretically-sound substitute for sampling using the correct population and sampling frame that would satisfy Kish's (1965) requirements for probability sampling.

Pollsters, attempt to resolve the problem by using "likely voter" selection or modelling based on a respondent's self-reported propensity to vote and/or their voting history as available on voter registration lists. As demonstrated by polling misses, these methods are insufficient to fix the problem. In one high-profile case, Gallup, one of the oldest and most revered pollsters, mis-called the 2012 election in part due to their likely voter models underestimating the likelihood that voters who favored President Barack Obama would vote (Gallup 2013). After an investigation into the issues, one of the giants of the industry, which was among the first to conduct pre-election polling, decided to no longer release pre-election polling horserace numbers. While Gallup's decision is unusual, most pollsters have faced similar challenges in determining which of their respondents will vote. As Nate Cohn demonstrated in *The New York Times* Upshot (Cohn 2016), and a Pew Research report shows (Keeter and Igielnik 2016), the act of trying to predict who will vote has considerable impact on the poll's final numbers. Cohn showed how different assumptions lead to completely different outcomes in a 2016 Florida poll.

Transparency on likely voter selection should be demanded, and perhaps multiple numbers presented to demonstrate the uncertainty of those likely voter estimates. By presenting only one set of "likely voter" numbers, pollsters lean dangerously close to indicating that these numbers are predictions of the vote, rather than simple snapshots of one potential electorate. Reporting the survey's margin of error helps, but this figure is typically buried in fine print below much larger numbers championing the point estimates. And, even with margin of error, there are many other sources of potential polling error that are unaccounted for in this simple figure – in particular the error of misestimating who will vote, but also coverage error and measurement error.

Additionally, increasing response rates offer a source of hope for pollsters seeking to improve their performance. Public polls generally do not release response

rates, but a study conducted by Pew Research revealed their RDD response rates to be in the mid-single digits (Kennedy and Hartig 2019). Assuming that most polls show similar response rates, a few examples of higher response rate polls are instructive. In one case, the British Election Study (BES) and the British Social Attitudes Survey (BSA), results were better than the public polls. The BES and BSA employed classic multi-stage stratified probability sampling in their investigations of the 2015 general election, achieving response rates of 56% and 51% (AAPOR Response Rate 1), respectively; furthermore, the actual Conservative vote lead over Labour (of 6.5 percentage points), was estimated by these surveys almost exactly, with BES at seven points and BSA at six points, so offering a telling contrast to the gross errors made in the commercial polling exercises (Sturgis, *et al.*, 2016).

The American National Election Study (ANES) is one of the few surveys conducted face-to-face (with an online component) using address-based sampling, and also shows signs of being more accurate than public polls. The response rates (AAPOR Response Rate 1) were 44% and 50% for pre-election waves, and 84% and 90% for post-election waves.[6] With respect to the reported vote shares, it was 48.5% for Clinton and 44.3% for Trump, yielding an estimated difference of 4.2 points, not perilously far from the actual difference of 1.9 points (48.1% for Clinton - 46.2% for Trump), similar to estimates from other pre-election polls (see Tables 2 and 3) but without the systematic underestimates for one or both candidates from which several of those polls suffered. Of course, this accuracy was achieved at relatively great expense, and ANES still overestimates the proportion of Americans who will vote.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FORECASTERS AND COMMENTATORS

Most importantly, however, polls should not be used as the sole basis for election forecasts or assertions about who will win an election. Pollsters, to their credit, often remark that vote intention polls are snapshots of opinion now, not on election day. In other words, they are measures of conditions at a moment in time, not meant to be used as forecasts of the final electoral event. Nevertheless, political scientists, data journalists, and interested voters routinely turn to vote intention polls to make an educated guess about who will win. To quote the recent AAPOR report: "they attempt to predict a future event.

As the 2016 election proved, that can be a fraught exercise." (Kennedy 2017, 4).

Given the fact that polls will always have accuracy problems due to the absence of a population and sampling frame from which to draw a true probability sample, it is simply not advisable to use polls as the sole input in a forecast. Turnout changes in every election, and there is no way to predict the exact patterns beforehand, which means the error in the polls due to population mis-specification for any one election cannot be quantified. Polls, and poll-based forecasts will always suffer occasional failures. Political commentators should also heed these warnings. Even those who understand the possible errors in election polls and forecasts often seem to lean heavily on those results to fill airtime on television and to produce splashy content online.

Several countries go so far as to ban polls in a certain time period before the election, ranging from one day in France to as much as 15 days in Italy. This is due to the belief that these polls could change opinions or influence turnout, and some include campaigning blackouts as well. The U.S. has not taken this step, but the question of how polls impact vote choices has been heavily researched, concluding that there are some connections between polls and voting behaviour (e.g., Moy and Rinke 2012). One would imagine that forecasts have an even more substantial effect. Indeed, research has shown that both forecasters and commentators pushing the message that Clinton was winning handily in 2016 could have depressed turnout (Westwood *et al.* 2020). Any exercise which has the capacity to impact voter turnout is one that should be very carefully considered for its public benefit before proceeding with widespread attention. Media poll-based forecasts are certainly in this category, and we strongly urge caution in creating, using, or interpreting such forecasts.

VOTE INTENTION AS PREDICTION: FORECASTING ALTERNATIVES

Because of the challenges that polling, as a tool for forecasting elections, seems to increasingly face, we would like to conclude with some alternative strategies for election prediction, away from the dilemmas of vote intention polling. We turn explicitly to other scientific methods of election forecasting, namely structural models and citizen forecasting (see, respectively, the examples of Lewis-Beck and Tien, 2016b; and Lewis-Beck and Tien, 1999). The target of our exercise ends with a correct prediction of the Electoral College outcome. As we observed early on, "A common measure, share of popu-

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[6] http://www.electionstudies.org/studypages/anes_timeseries_2016/anes_timeseries_2016_userguidecodebook.pdf.

lar vote, is rejected in favor of the tally that ultimately matters, the Electoral College vote share. Success or failure in that body, then, becomes the object of prediction, or forecasting." (Lewis-Beck and Rice 1992, 21). These two alternative forecast methods have traditionally focused on the popular vote, but if applied at the state level could be applied to the Electoral College.

In the election forecasting literature, structural models are a long-standing tradition. Typically, a single equation, specified according to well-established theories of voting behavior, finds application in prediction of the overall election outcome. Data are collected over a long time-series, with single forecasts made months before the election. Most of these models rely on some combination of objective economic indicators, survey data of presidential approval, and incumbent advantage (for examples see Abramowitz 2016, Lewis-Beck and Tien 2016a, Lockerbie 2016, Norpoth 2016). In 2016, these models generally performed very well, making forecasts within 2.5 percentage points of the popular vote outcome, at least 74 days before election day (see Campbell 2016 for a summary). These structural-model forecasts performed comparatively better than the likely voter polls taken in November where 13 of twenty-two November polls for Clinton and Trump were off by more than 2.5 percentage points (see Table 2 and Table 3 again). Nine of the eleven models correctly forecasted Clinton's popular vote win. They did not model the Electoral College.

Our parsimonious Political Economy model, with just two predictors (economic growth and presidential popularity) virtually hit the 2016 popular vote election outcome on the head, forecasting Clinton with 51.0 percent of the two-party vote (Lewis-Beck and Tien 2016b). One well-placed critique of this model, and other national structural models, comes from the fact that they do not directly estimate the Electoral College outcome. However, in practice, the two-party national popular vote, which the model forecasts, actually predicts the Electoral College voter share quite well, as a general rule. In Figure 3 we see the scatterplot, with the regression line of electoral vote on popular vote. Note that the 18 elections fall very close to the line, and the linear fit of the model is quite snug, at R-squared = .93. It correctly forecast all the ultimate winners of all but two of these presidential elections – 2000 and 2016. While not a bad track record in general (16 of 18), its miss in 2016 persuades us it is worth considering further the state level of analysis, where the decisions are made (Berry and Bickers 2012; Campbell, 1992; Holbrook and DeSart, 2003; Klarner 2012; Jerôme and Jerôme-Speziari 2016).

Last, but not least, we want to offer the alternative of citizen forecasting of US presidential elections. Looking first at the national level, we have shown that citizens can be very good at predicting who will win U.S. presidential elections (Lewis-Beck and Tien 1999). When asked before the election who they thought would win, a majority of ANES respondents correctly predicted the outcome in nine of eleven elections between 1956 and 1996, missing only the close elections of 1960 and 1980. In an update of this citizen voter model, Murr, Stegmaier, and Lewis-Beck (2016) forecast that for 2016, Clinton would win 51.4 percent of the two-party vote, based on the opinion of those who had decided to vote. This result was extremely close to the 51.1 percent of the two-party vote that she received. Of course, citizens will use polls as part of the calculus for their forecast, but they will also consider an unknown number of other factors that polls alone do not include, such as economic conditions, what undecided or third party voters might actually do, and how late-breaking events might change the outcome. [Murr, Stegmaier, and Lewis-Beck (2020), have recently published a citizen forecasting paper for British general elections, showing the clearly superior performance of vote expectations over vote intentions, 1950-2017.]

Murr (2015) has applied the citizen forecasting idea to respondents in each state, to good effect. Taking the ANES data (through 2012), he broke out respondents by state, and examined their answers to the question: "Which candidate for President do you think will carry this state?" Murr (2015) assigned the winner of each state (as judged by the Republican or Democrat who received the most "will carry" predictions) its electoral votes, summing them in order to arrive at the overall Electoral College winner. In eight of the nine elections, voter expectations by state matched the real winner overall. Note that this approach seems especially promising as a survey method, one that works at the state
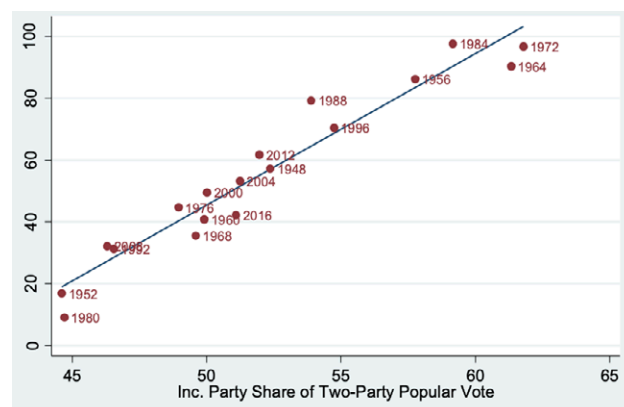


**Fig. 3.** Electoral College and Popular Votes, 1948-2016.

level. Finally, and importantly, the state subsets were not drawn to represent the states (rather, they were part of a very high-quality national random sample) but managed to work, drawing in practice on the "wisdom of the crowds" and in theory on Condorcet's Jury Theorem (Murr 2015). Clearly more work is needed to determine whether this method works at the state level in individual state polls of lesser quality than the ANES, but this analysis shows promising results. [It should be mentioned that Murr (2016) also applied the citizen forecasting strategy successfully to constituency results in the 2015 United Kingdom General Election.]

The relative success of these alternative methods of election forecasting at the national level, particularly in 2016, indicates that applying them to the state level and estimating Electoral College outcomes could be a substantial improvement over polls-only state-level forecasts. Indeed, using *only* vote intention polls to predict elections is an especially fraught exercise – one bordering on malpractice – given that there are other political and social factors that we know affect election outcomes. [An additional difficulty with the sole use of vote intention polls to forecast is deciding on the optimal lead time (Jennings, Lewis-Beck, and Wlezien, 2020).] Vote intention polls cannot possibly capture everything due to the unknown future population that pollsters are not able to sample. The result is that these polls often do not match outcomes, errors that become unnecessarily amplified in the context of vote intention polls-only forecasting. By combining these methods with more high-quality polls at the state level, we would gain much more insight into the possible Electoral College outcomes of a given presidential election.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In sum, while the problem of trying to survey a population that does not yet exist offers some intractable complications for pre-election horserace polls, we do see a few reasonable approaches to improving polls and forecasts based on lessons learned from 2016 as well as research on other forecast methods. Pollsters and organizations sponsoring polls should primarily focus on obtaining the highest-quality samples possible, especially at the state level, even when that means investing more money into the process. There is no guarantee that high-quality polls will be completely accurate all the time – in fact, it is almost guaranteed that they will not be correct on some occasions – but high-quality data are preferred and much more likely to be correct than low-quality data. Additionally, more information could be

gleaned from polls, again, especially those at the state level, by adding a short question asking which candidate respondents expect to win the election. While survey time costs considerable money, this question would be very short and relatively cheap. This would bring considerable additional media attention to the poll and the pollster, particularly in battleground states, and therefore be a worthwhile addition.

Forecasters should be extremely wary of relying on polling data alone. Given the unsolvable problem of not having the correct population, relying on polls – or even incorporating other information but weighting it heavily toward the polls – is a misuse of polling data. Instead, structural forecasting models should be developed that move beyond the popular vote to estimating the Electoral College, and citizen forecasts (using the above-mentioned survey question on who will win the election) should be expanded to do the same. Since two of the last five presidential elections (2000 and 2016) have ended in a split between the popular vote and the Electoral College, it is critical to model the Electoral College if the goal is to accurately predict who will take office. These two additional techniques could then be combined with polling data – but notably weighted equally with the polls – to produce an estimate of which candidate might win the Electoral College. [Another possibility involves combination of vote intention with structural models, in an effort to produce 'synthetic' models that help control for the omitted variable problem (Dassonneville and Lewis-Beck, 2015).]

The ultimate lesson from 2016 extends beyond pollsters and forecasters, however, to commentators and any 'Jill' who consumes election polling and forecast information: be aware of the limitations of these data, and do not become overconfident in any outcome until the votes are counted. For everyone producing data and estimates, think carefully about the public good of the messages going out or any impact – intended or not – that your data might have on whether someone votes, who they vote for, and how they experience democracy.

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# Some politics is local: the determinants of engagement in local and national politics across Europe

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**Abstract**. Understanding the roots of political engagement has been one of the critical tasks performed by students of comparative political behaviour. This paper adds to the literature by examining the determinants of political discussion about local and national affairs in Europe. A series of multilevel logit models are fitted to the data (n = 28,563 from 31 European countries) to test the individual and country level determinants of political discussion about local and national matters. At the individual level, we find that gender, the type of community, the type of civil society organisations people are members of, and their level of education affect the type of politics they engage with. At the macro level, citizens from countries with a higher economic development are more likely to engage in discussions about national affairs, while the impact of local government autonomy does not seem to make individuals more likely to engage in discussions about local politics. The findings suggest that if local politics is considered the share of politically disengaged citizens can be smaller than is typically estimated. The full range of democratic practice may thus remain underappreciated if non-national politics is left out of the picture in the study of political engagement.

**Keywords**. Political engagement, political discussion, local politics, geographical scale, Europe.

## INTRODUCTION

The intensity and scope of citizen engagement in established democracies has been one of the major topics of concern in the field of comparative political behaviour in recent decades (Lijphart 1997; van Deth 2014). According to various authors, citizens have grown increasingly disaffected from their political systems and are less prone to engage with politics than they once were. This growth in political detachment has been considered one of the main symptoms of the malaise that has affected several democratic polities in recent years (Mair 2013, 43). Other authors counterargue that there are currently more ways of participating in politics than in earlier decades (Dalton 2014). Per this account, the case is not so much that citizens are becoming detached from politics; instead, they have found different, previously unavailable ways of expressing their stances that go beyond the tradi-

tional realm of conventional participation. In any case, there is a considerable theoretical and practical interest in understanding what can lead to a larger portion of citizens becoming more engaged with their political systems.

Given the centrality of this topic in the literature, it is somewhat puzzling that a much less explored avenue of research has been the role played by the "geographical scale" (Agnew 2002, 17) towards which such political involvement is targeted[1]. The existence of overlapping layers of government – local, national and, in some cases, regional and supra-national – is by now an archetypal attribute of democratic polities (L. Hooghe and Marks 2001). But only recently have researchers given systematic consideration to differences in degrees of involvement towards each of them. It has been shown, for instance, that the gender gap in self-reported interest in politics depends on the territorial level in question (Coffé 2013) and that the levels of factual knowledge about politics also vary depending on the scale at stake (Rapeli 2014; Shaker 2012). These and other contributions, which are reviewed in greater detail in the following section, suggest that long held assumptions about the determinants of political engagement should be refined.

Against that backdrop, this article examines the determinants of frequency of discussion about national and local political matters in a wide set of European countries. Instead of assuming beforehand that the determinants of political discussion are one-dimensional – i.e. that they do not vary depending on the territorial level of government at stake – we test whether that is actually the case. The analysis is pursued by examining the roots of different profiles of engagement in local and national politics, therefore allowing us to grasp the origins of qualitatively different patterns of political involvement.

The article introduces three novel aspects with respect to the previous literature about political engagement towards different geographical scales. First, rather than examining subjective interest or objective knowledge, it takes a new dependent variable into focus: the frequency of political discussion. Political discussion is often used as a proxy for political engagement, yet it has remained overlooked why some individuals discuss some dimensions of politics more frequently than others. Second, the empirical analysis is not restricted to a single country, rather extending onto 31 European countries, thus offering room for generalizing with greater confi-

dence. The countries under analysis include the member-states of the EU and candidate countries at different stages of their economic and political development, therefore providing an ample range of national contexts. Third, the article tests a broader range of hypotheses in comparison with previous research, both at the individual and macro-level. By testing the impact of economic development and decentralisation we specifically account for the multilevel structure of the data and are able to understand that variations are due mostly to individual rather than country-level factors – contrarily to what research about "generalist" political engagement would make us expect (Inglehart 1990; Sanders and Bellucci 2012).

The results show that more than a quarter of individuals report discussing local and national political issues with distinct frequencies. Interestingly, this is not at the expense of local politics, which is more relevant for a significant share (15%) of respondents. Besides, the same factors can play different roles in fostering (or preventing) discussion depending on the level at stake. These results have relevant implications given the status of long-held debates about the volume of political engagement in democratic political systems. A classical thesis about political change in developed countries asserts that a process of "nationalization of politics" dilutes the relevance of local contexts and peculiarities and, therefore, their role as fosterers of political engagement (Caramani 2004; Sellers *et al.* 2013, 1–10). However, our analysis shows that the profile of an engaged citizen is not as rigidly defined as could be assumed if we focused exclusively on the national level of politics. One way to interpret our findings is that local politics might provide a gateway to attract to the fore of politics writ large citizens that are otherwise disengaged.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. The next section reviews the most relevant literature and presents the research hypotheses, and the third section introduces the data and models. The fourth section reports the results of the analysis. The article concludes with a discussion about the findings and what they might imply for our understanding of political engagement in a comparative perspective.

*Literature and hypotheses*

Two converging analytical routes downplay, either implicitly or explicitly, the significance of territorial levels in explaining the patterns and sources of political engagement. The first approach consists in focusing on engagement writ large, regardless of the geographical

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[1] Throughout this article, the notions of "territorial level" and "geographical scale" will be used interchangeably to refer to the various realms of politics with which ordinary citizens can interact, but particularly the local and the national.

scale at stake (Baybeck 2014, 98). For instance, authors dealing with political involvement frequently take into account actions conducted at various territorial levels, but then pool them together into a single composite dimension (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Also, the wording of questions upon which most of survey research about interest in politics is based typically does not refer to a specific territorial level, therefore denoting what we may label as a *generalist* engagement with politics (van Deth and Elff 2004; Sanders and Bellucci 2012). The consequence is that scholars end up dealing with the determinants of involvement with politics in a broad sense, without probing whether their conclusions can be extended to different geographical scales.

A second approach that leads to neglecting the importance of territorial levels is dealing exclusively with one of them, which more often than not is the national. In such cases, the instruments used to measure political involvement do not account for other scales, making it impossible to trace whether individuals invest similar amounts of their time and attention span in following different realms of politics. While it is hard to dispute that it is indeed the national level of politics that has the strongest impact on the lives of a majority of citizens, focusing only on it may conceal relevant dimensions of how citizens interact with the political environments that surround them (Oliver 2012, 1–2).

As stated in the introduction, this article takes the (self-reported) frequency of political discussion as a proxy for political engagement. In examining this variable we follow previous studies which have used it to measure "political involvement" (Inglehart 1990, 342), "political interest" (van Deth and Elff 2004, 480) or "informal political engagement" (Sanders and Bellucci 2012). This variety of conceptual labels should not distract us from the straightforward assumption shared by all these studies: individuals who state that they discuss politics frequently are expected to be more involved and interested in politics than those who report never doing so. Indeed, frequency of political discussion has been found to be highly correlated with variables such as subjective interest in politics, political sophistication and exposure to news coverage of current affairs (Kittilson and Schwindt-Bayer 2010, 995).

Though not as dominant a topic in the political behaviour literature as voter turnout and other modes of political participation, the volume of research aimed at unveiling the roots of political discussion has increased in recent years[2]. It is now accepted that both individual

and macro-level factors play a role in fostering it (Inglehart 1990). The literature presents some lines of overall convergence, but there is still disagreement regarding the magnitude and directionality of some effects. Moreover, since we attempt to disentangle the roots of political discussion about local affairs, on the one hand, and national issues, on the other, in building our research hypotheses we will also look for relevant cues from studies of closely related dependent variables.

When it comes to explaining individual-level differences in the frequency of political discussion, gender is among the factors that has attracted the most attention (Kittilson and Schwindt-Bayer 2010). Cross-national studies have shown the persistence of a gender gap in the frequency of (generalist) political discussion, although its magnitude has been reported to be in decline for a while now (Inglehart 1990, 348). Based on an analysis of data from a British sample, Coffé (2013) shows that male respondents tend to report higher levels of subjective interest in national and international issues, whereas female respondents are relatively more interested in local affairs. Thus, identifying politics exclusively with the national sphere may induce an overestimation of the political apathy of women, and exaggerate the perceived gender gap in political engagement. In line with the findings presented by Coffé (2013) we expect that:

*H1– Women will tend to have a higher tendency to engage in discussions about local politics, while men will tend be more engaged in discussions about national politics.*

Another strand of literature suggests that the type of community where individuals live in may influence the type of political discussion they engage with. In a classical study of local politics in France, Tarrow (1971, 356) highlights that some citizens from rural communities would report an ostensive detachment towards national politics and parties, while remaining actively engaged with local political affairs. Moreover, we know that inhabitants from cities (Rapeli 2014) display higher levels of factual political knowledge regarding national affairs, whereas individuals from rural areas tend to perform better when asked about local matters. It has also been documented that while overall levels of voter turnout tends to be somewhat higher in less populated areas, this is especially the case when it comes to local elections (Cancela and Geys 2016). Based on these various findings we thus hypothesise that:

*H2 – Individuals from rural areas will be more engaged in discussions about local politics, while city residents will be more engaged in discussions about national politics.*

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[2] A branch of the literature that falls behind the scope of this article deals with the extent to which political discussions are circumscribed to like-minded individuals (Eveland and Hively 2009).

Our third hypothesis regards the impact of education and socioeconomic status. In their analysis of responses from a representative US sample surveyed in 1989, Verba *et al.* (1995) find that political discussion is positively affected by the level of income but that educational resources do not seem to have an impact. An analysis of survey data from Hong Kong leads to similar conclusions (Lee 2009). Conversely, based on longitudinal data, Inglehart finds that those who achieve higher levels of education are consistently more likely to discuss politics (Inglehart 1990, 345). This finding was supported by subsequent analyses (Sanders and Bellucci 2012; van Deth and Elff 2004). Inglehart (1990, 351) also unveils evidence of life-cycle effects, as there is a curvilinear (inverted-U) distribution of political discussion after controlling for the fact that younger generations hold higher levels of education. A survey about the levels of factual levels of political knowledge in Philadelphia reveals that the performance gap between lowly and highly educated people is diminished once local politics is taken into account (Shaker 2012).

We hypothesise that this relationship can also be found in political discussions, as the local level of politics may present itself as having immediate relevance to the lives of less educated individuals, while presenting comparatively lower hurdles for discussing it. Conversely, those in the higher end of the social pyramid are expected to consume more information about national political issues (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995) and translate such exposure into more frequent discussions about it. Therefore, we expect that:

*H3 – Respondents with higher levels of education and socioeconomic status will be more engaged in discussions about national politics, while respondents with lower levels of education and socioeconomic status will be more engaged in discussions about local politics*

Our following hypotheses deal with the impact of civil society organisations in fostering political engagement. A considerable number of empirical studies have shown that members of associations consistently exhibit higher levels of political participation than non-members (Almond and Verba 1965; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Putnam 2000). While some contend that organisations do not generate more engaged individuals but instead pool them together (van der Meer and van Ingen 2009), we can nevertheless expect that members of organisations will discuss politics more frequently than non-members. It has also been argued that not all civil society organisations have identical effects in terms of political socialisation (Quintelier 2008). This argument

can be extended to the geographical scale that members of organisations engage with: while we should expect membership in a development aid organisation to foster discussion mainly about the national (and international) realms of politics, a leisure association for the elderly probably does not exert a similar effect. We can expect that the effect exerted by organisations upon their members' level of engagement should be a function of their preferential scope of intervention. Thus, we expect that:

*H4.A – A more intense involvement with civil society organisations oriented towards the national level will lead to more frequent discussion about national politics.*

*H4.B – A more intense involvement with civil society organisations oriented towards the local level will lead to more frequent discussion about local politics.*

In addition to the individual-level factors outlined above, the study of the roots of political discussion has evolved by also looking at the impact of macro contexts, which have been found to play a key role in explaining cross-national differences. Indeed, Inglehart's (1990, 352) assertion that nationality is the "strongest predictor of political discussion" was followed by several attempts to understand whether such macro differences could be attributed to structural and cultural factors. Thus, Van Deth and Elff (2004) find that economic development fosters the levels of discussion about politics. These findings are in line with the results from research about the levels of political participation in Eastern Europe (M. Hooghe and Quintelier 2014).

We hypothesise that higher levels of economic development will tend to be associated with a higher interest in national, rather than local, politics. Modernisation theory suggests that economic development produces a homogeneously integrated, national public, increasingly void of the peculiarities of local political subcultures (Sellers *et al.* 2013). On the other hand, following Tarrow (1971), it can be hypothesised that individuals from comparatively lower income contexts can feel detached from the national level of politics, while keeping the habit of discussing the more proximate local political realm. Our fifth hypothesis thus reads:

*H5 – Living in a country with a higher GDP will increase the likelihood to engage in discussions about national politics.*

When it comes to the impact of institutional variables in political discussion, research has shown that more inclusive rules can pave the way to higher levels of

political discussion (Kittilson and Schwindt-Bayer 2010; Nir 2012). Specifically, by exploiting the interaction of micro and macro level variables, these studies show how the gender gap in levels of political engagement can be reduced in the face of inclusive institutions.

Following these results, we posit that the level of decentralization of the system can also have an effect in making citizens engaged with the local level of politics. Specifically, we hypothesise that citizens will be more likely to develop an interest in what is going on at the local level if it bears significance for their lives. In their seminal study, Almond and Verba (1965, 125) stress that the patterns of citizens' attitudes towards their local governments vary precisely because the "structure of government and community organization changes from one nation to another". It has also been shown by Fitzgerald and Wolak (2014) that levels of trust in local and regional authorities vary as a function of the degree decentralization of a polity. Thus, our final hypothesis reads:

*H6 – Living in a more decentralized country will be associated with a higher level of interest in local politics*

DATA AND METHODS

Several studies about (generalist) political discussion in Europe (Inglehart 1990; Sanders and Bellucci 2012; van Deth and Elff 2004) rely on data from the Eurobarometer, which since 1973 has asked the following question: "*When you get together with friends would you say you discuss political matters frequently, occasionally or never*?" Our research question requires data about political discussion vis-à-vis multiple geographical scales, which this item does not provide. However, since 2010 the Eurobarometer surveys have often included a question that replicates the above formulation for local, national, and European matters.

Eurobarometer 73.4 (European Commission 2013, fieldwork: May 2010), was selected among possible alternatives since it featured questions that allowed testing our hypotheses. The survey was conducted in 31 European countries, namely all current member states of the European Union and the United Kingdom, plus Turkey, North Macedonia, and Iceland. We opted for keeping the complete set of countries as we want to test our hypotheses in as wide a set of polities as possible. By also including non-member-states, we expand the range of economic development and political trajectories of countries, which increases the potential for generalization of our findings.

**Tab. 1.** Profiles of engagement across territorial levels.

| | | Local matters | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Never | Occasionally | Frequently |
| National matters | Never | D | L | L |
| | Occasionally | N | E | L |
| | Frequently | N | N | E |

Note to table Tab. 1: D: "Disengaged"; E: "Equally engaged"; N: "More engaged in national"; L: "More engaged in local" Original question: "When you get together with friends or relatives, would you say you discuss frequently, occasionally or never about…?" ("National political matters"; "European political matters"; "Local political matters".) Source: European Commission (2013, QA2).

Our dependent variable is the profile of political discussion of respondents. As we are interested in the interplay between the engagement towards local and national political matters, a new variable was generated based on the combination of the values of the variables about "local" and "national" political discussion[3]. We simplify the range of outcomes by aggregating the nine possible combinations into four *profiles of engagement* (Table 1). "Disengaged" ("D") respondents are those who never discuss neither local nor national political matters. If individuals report an identical frequency of discussion (for instance, by occasionally discussing local and national politics), they are labelled as "equally engaged" ("E"). Respondents can be "more engaged in national discussions" ("N") or, conversely, "more engaged in local discussions" ("L"), if they report participating in discussions about either of them more frequently. Our goal is to assess what makes individuals more likely to fall in each of the profiles, and particularly in these last two.

As the dependent variable is categorical and non-ordered, a classical linear model is not appropriate. The responses are also clustered at the country level, with two of the hypotheses being formulated accordingly. We thus rely on a multilevel logistic model and perform a series of contrasts in order to account for the non-binary nature of the response variable (Gelman and Hill 2007, 124). Since the dependent variable has four possible outcomes, we set three binomial contrasts, using the most frequent category of engagement profile ("E: equally interested") as a baseline against which the likelihood of an alternative response is tested[4]. In this case, the alter-

[3] The cases of individuals refusing to answer or responding "Don't know" were not taken into account.
[4] This follows the practice suggested by Begg and Gray (1984) and Agresti (2002, 273). It should be kept in mind that the choice of the reference category for the response variable does not affect the estimated probabilities or the fitted values (Dobson and Barnett 2018, 183).

native response consists of displaying a profile other than "E" ("D: Disengaged", "N: more into national politics", and "L: more into local politics"). Overall, this procedure is equivalent with performing a (multilevel) multinomial logistic regression (Begg and Gray 1984), but relies on less demanding computational routines.

Independent variables at the individual and country level used in the model are summarised in Table 2. Hypothesis 1 will be tested using responses to a question about the respondent's gender, while hypothesis 2 will be examined using a question about the type of community the respondent lives in: a rural area, a small/middle town or a big town. Our third hypothesis poses that individuals with higher levels of educational achievement and with a higher socioeconomic status shall engage more in discussions about national politics, whereas the reverse should hold for less-educated, lower status individuals. For the purpose of testing this we include variables about the age upon completion of education and self-placement in the socioeconomic ladder. Hypothesis 4 takes into account the organisational memberships of respondents in 12 types of organisations. These organisations were classified as either having a local, national or hybrid scope[5].

Hypotheses 5 and 6 are tested using country-level data. The 2010 figures of Gross Domestic Product per capita based on purchase power parity were obtained from the International Monetary Fund (2014) and transformed into the logarithmic scale. H6, about the impact of decentralization, is evaluated using the ratio of expenditure by local authorities *vis-à-vis* expenditures by the central government. We use this as a proxy for the relevance of local governments in respondents' lives: individuals from countries where local authorities spend more should be expected to be more affected by local level politics and therefore more likely to engage in discussions about it.

In order to control other individual factors identified in the literature about we include *age* and *occupation* as individual-level variables. When it comes to age, a curvilinear (inverted-U) effect has been attributed in fostering (generalist) political engagement. We include a variable for occupation, which can have three responses: inactive, professional/managerial and manual worker. While we do not expect these two variables to play a significant role in nurturing engagement towards a specific territorial level at the expense of other, we include them in the equation in order to account for their eventual effects.

The survey features 30,215 responses, of which complete data for the variables used in the model is available

**Tab. 2.** Summary of independent variables used in the analysis.

**Individual level**

**Categories**

| Gender | Female: 53.9%<br>Male: 46.1% |
|---|---|
| Age group | 15-24: 12.5%;<br>25-34: 15.3%<br>35-44: 17.5%<br>45-54: 17.5%<br>55-64: 16.7%<br>>64: 20.5% |
| Occupation | Non-active: 53.1%<br>Manual worker: 27.5%<br>Professional/Managerial: 19.4% |
| Type of community | Rural: 36%<br>Small/middle town: 35.1%<br>Big town 28.9% |

| Continuous | Min | Max | Mean | Std. Dev |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Organisational membership in national organisations | 0 (not members) | 3 (3+ organisations) | 0.32 | 0.69 |
| Organisational membership in local organisations | 0 (not member) | 3 (3+ organisations) | 0.38 | 0.71 |
| Age when finished full-time education | 10 (or younger) | 26 (or older) | 18.5 | 3.8 |
| Socio-economic status (self-placement) | 1 | 10 | 5.4 | 1.7 |

| Country level | Min | Max | Mean | Std. Dev |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Log(GDP 2010[USD]) | 8.44 | 11.56 | 10.02 | 0.72 |
| Local government spending / central government spending | 0.014 | 0.644 | 0.283 | 0.14 |

Note to Tab. 2: n = 28,563 individuals from 31 countries: France, Belgium, The Netherlands, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, Denmark, Ireland, United Kingdom, Greece, Spain, Portugal, Finland, Sweden, Austria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Bulgaria, Romania, Turkey, Croatia, Macedonia, and Iceland.

[5] Details about the operationalisation of this variable are available in the appendix.

for 28,563 cases. The data analysis was carried out using R and the models were fitted using package *lme4* (Bates *et al.* 2020).

<div align="center">RESULTS</div>

Before examining the performance of our statistical models we glance at how frequently European citizens discuss both local and national political affairs. Figure 1 shows a remarkable similitude between the intensity of discussion about both realms of politics. This raises the possibility that the overwhelming majority of respondents state the same frequency of discussion for both national and local politics, which would challenge the relevance of testing the determinants of engagement separately.

We probe this by looking at the distribution of profiles of political engagement, computed as explained in the previous section. The distribution of this variable, pooled (Table 3) and within countries (Figure 2), shows that a robust degree of association exists between the regularity of discussion about both levels of politics, with around 73% of respondents reporting identical frequencies: approximately 55% state that they occasionally or frequently discuss both levels, while 18% report never discussing neither of them. The reverse angle, however, is that more than a quarter of respondents report an unequal likelihood of entertaining discussions about the two geographical scales. The proportion of those in the sample reporting a higher interest in local politics (14.6%) exceeds, even if by a small margin, those reporting a higher interest in national politics (12.6%). This balance between the two profiles is a noteworthy find-

ing on itself, as it signals that engagement with national political matters does not exceed involvement in local affairs.
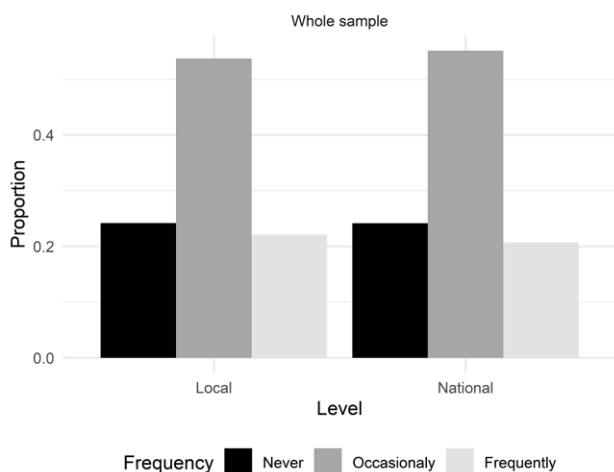
Similarly to van Deth and Elff (2004), and Sanders and Bellucci (2012) we also find considerable levels of variation in political discussion across countries (Figure 2). Disengaged citizens are typically more abundant in Southern and Eastern Europe and scarcer in Northwestern Europe – Greece being an exception as noted in prior research (van Deth and Elff 2004). In most countries the broader pattern of having similar proportions of citizens who are more interested in local matters, on the one hand, and national politics, on the other, is replicated. It is also noteworthy that the proportion of individuals who are more engaged with national politics shows higher variance across countries than the proportion of individuals who are more engaged with local politics. As will be seen, this has direct implications for our sixth hypothesis. Still, the ratio is not constant: in some countries interest in local politics is more widespread (e.g. Croatia, Bulgaria or Italy), while in others (e.g. Iceland, the Netherlands) the opposite happens.

We now focus on the results of our statistical analysis. Table 4 reports the odds ratios for the three contrasts, along with lower and upper bounds of their 95% confidence intervals. Each column from (1) to (3) reproduces results relative to a contrast between the baseline ("equally engaged") and one of the alternative outcomes. The odds ratios express the effect that a one unit change in one of the independent variables brings to the likelihood of moving from the baseline outcome "equally engaged" ("E") towards one of the alternative outcomes: "disengaged" ("D"), "more engaged in national matters" ("N"), and "more engaged in local matters" ("L"). For instance, the odds ratio associated with the category "female" in the first column is 1.59. In this case, the 95% confidence interval does not contain 1 (no effect), which indicates that the underlying logit coefficient is statistically significant. Thus, we can be relatively confident that female respondents are



**Fig. 1.** Frequency of political discussion by geographical scale.

**Tab. 3.** Frequency of outcomes: profiles of engagement.

| Profile | Frequency | Percent in sample |
|---|---|---|
| Disengaged - Not interested in none (D) | 5,014 | 17.6 |
| Equally interested (E) | 15,797 | 55.3 |
| More into national (N) | 3,591 | 12.6 |
| More into local (L) | 4,161 | 14.6 |
| **Total** | **28,563** | **100** |
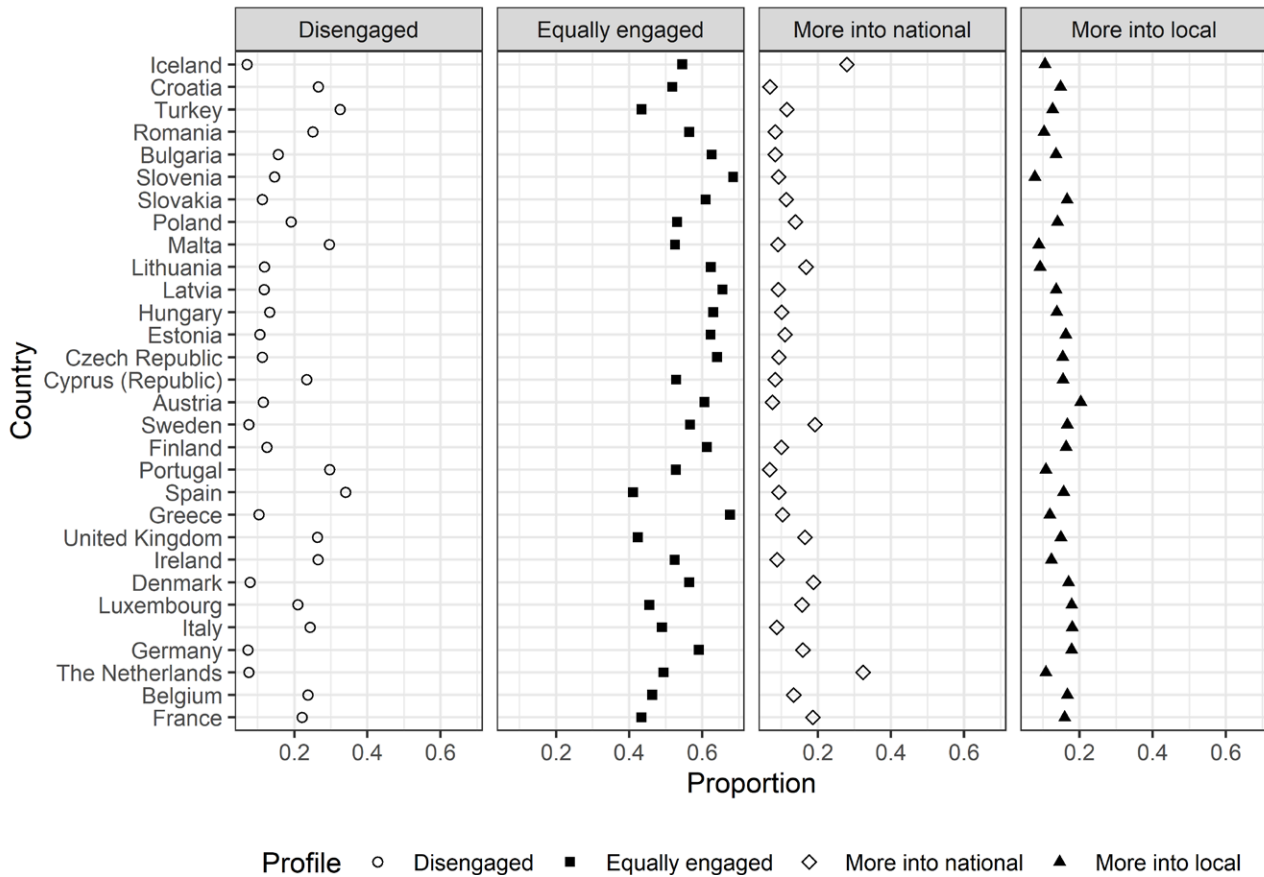
**Fig. 2.** Distribution of profiles of engagement within countries (proportions).

about 1.59 times as likely to fall in profile "D" when compared to male respondents[6].

Before proceeding to the results in the second and third columns, which are those of greater interest given our research question, we glance at the odd ratios reproduced in column (1), assessing the impact of the tested variables in the probability of being disengaged towards both levels of politics. Overall, the findings are in line with previous research about the roots of generalist political discussion. Higher socioeconomic status and more years of education, as well as being male, increase the likelihood of being equally engaged in both levels of politics rather than disengaged. The effect of age resembles a skewed and inverted U-shape, with the age group more likely to be involved in politics being the 55-64 years segment. Being a member of multiple civil society organisations focused on the local level of politics also increases the likelihood of engaging in political discus-

sion as opposed to staying disengaged. Interestingly, the odds ratios of the two macro-level covariates are near 1 and deprived of significance.

The most interesting results given our research question are those reproduced in columns (2) and (3), which present the odds ratios for the contrasts between the common baseline "E" and the alternative outcomes "N" and "L". When compared to the results of contrast (1), the odds ratios are closer to 1, suggesting that the explanatory variables are less powerful as predictors of moving from the baseline to the other outcomes.

In order to improve the interpretability of the results, the plots reproduced in Figure 3 illustrate the effect of changes in the independent variables of interest. Figure 3 focuses on just two of the alternatives to the baseline, "N" and "L", leaving aside the predicted probabilities of being disengaged towards both levels of politics. Each plot within the figure shows the predicted probability of moving from the baseline "E" towards one of the outcomes "N" and "L", given the values for the independent variables expressed in the horizon-

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[6] In order to provide a fuller portrait of the results, the appendix reports the underlying logit coefficients of the three models.

**Tab. 4.** Multilevel logit model odds ratios.

| | Disengaged (1) | More into national (2) | More into local (3) |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | Dependent variable: Profile of political engagement Baseline: Equally engaged in local and national discussions Contrast | |
| **Fixed effects** | | | |
| Intercept | 2.34 (-0.16, 4.83) | 0.01 (-1.85, 1.87)* | 0.23 (-1.16, 1.62)+ |
| **Individual level** | | | |
| Female | 1.59 (1.52, 1.66)* | 0.87 (0.79, 0.94)* | 1.20 (1.13, 1.27)* |
| **Age group (ref: 15-24)** | | | |
| 25-34 years | 0.63 (0.51, 0.76)* | 0.69 (0.55, 0.84)* | 0.78 (0.64, 0.92)* |
| 35-44 years | 0.45 (0.33, 0.58)* | 0.66 (0.51, 0.80)* | 0.73 (0.59, 0.87)* |
| 45-54 years | 0.38 (0.25, 0.51)* | 0.64 (0.50, 0.79)* | 0.69 (0.56, 0.83)* |
| 55-64 years | 0.31 (0.18, 0.43)* | 0.57 (0.43, 0.71)* | 0.67 (0.53, 0.80)* |
| >64 years | 0.41 (0.30, 0.53)* | 0.61 (0.48, 0.75)* | 0.80 (0.67, 0.93)* |
| **Occupation (ref: inactive)** | | | |
| Professional/Managerial | 0.66 (0.56, 0.77)* | 0.94 (0.84, 1.04) | 0.89 (0.79, 0.99)+ |
| Manual worker | 0.93 (0.83, 1.03) | 1.02 (0.91, 1.13) | 1.11 (1.00, 1.21) |
| Education | 0.89 (0.88, 0.91)* | 1.03 (1.02, 1.04)* | 0.97 (0.96, 0.98)* |
| Socioeconomic status | 0.92 (0.90, 0.94)* | 1.00 (0.98, 1.02) | 0.95 (0.92, 0.97)* |
| National CSO | 0.96 (0.88, 1.05) | 1.08 (1.01, 1.16)+ | 0.95 (0.87, 1.02) |
| Local CSO | 0.73 (0.64, 0.81)* | 0.90 (0.83, 0.98)‡ | 1.13 (1.06, 1.20)* |
| **Community (base: Rural)** | | | |
| Small/Middle town | 0.98 (0.90, 1.06) | 1.09 (1.00, 1.18) | 0.90 (0.82, 0.98)+ |
| Big town | 0.98 (0.90, 1.07) | 1.14 (1.05, 1.23)‡ | 0.68 (0.59, 0.77)* |
| **Country level** | | | |
| Log (GDP/capita) | 1.13 (0.87, 1.39) | 1.30 (1.11, 1.49)‡ | 1.13 (0.99, 1.27) |
| Local expenditures | 0.55 (-0.75, 1.85) | 1.73 (0.76, 2.70) | 1.88 (1.17, 2.60) |
| **Random effects** | | | |
| Standard deviation of intercept | 1.27 | 0.35 | 0.25 |
| N (individuals) | 21,303 | 19,744 | 20,299 |
| Log likelihood | -10,444.88 | -9,167.05 | -10,160.79 |
| Akaike information criterion | 20,925.76 | 18,370.10 | 20,357.58 |

Note to Tab. 4: Each cell presents the odds ratio (with lower and upper limit of a 95% confidence interval in brackets) effect of a one-unit change in the value of each independent variable in moving from the baseline outcome E ("equally engaged") towards each alternative outcome within the three contrasts: D ("disengaged at both levels of politics"), N ("discusses more national politics"), L ("discusses more local politics").
P value: + < 0.05; ‡ < 0.01; * <0.001.
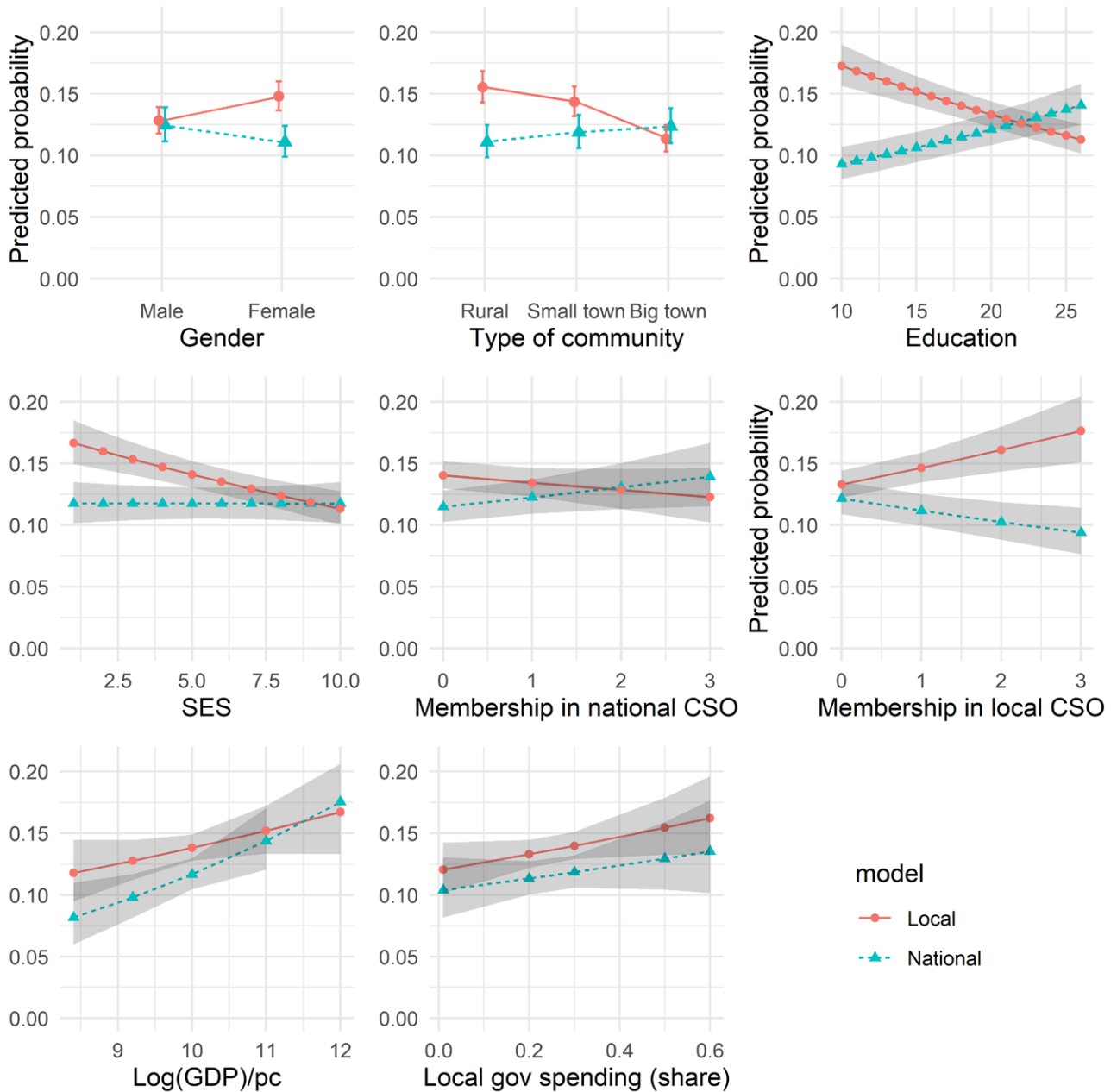
**Fig. 3.** Predicted probabilities of alternative outcomes by selected values. **Note:** Each probability value as extracted from the logit model was multiplied by the proportion of respondents in each contrast over the total number of respondents analysed. This procedure ensures that the sum of the predicted probabilities of the four alternative outcomes adds up to 1.

tal axis, while holding the remaining variables at their mean value. In order to present a sensible probability estimate we must take into account that the sum of probabilities for the four possible outcomes must add up to 1. Thus, each estimated value is multiplied by the proportion of individuals in each contrast relative to the overall sample.

Each line (in the case of continuous variables) and point (in the case of categorical variables) is supplemented by a 95% confidence interval. A positive slope indicates a positive relationship between an increase in the value of the independent variable value and the probability of moving from the baseline response ("E") towards the alternative outcome ("N", or "L"). Since in

all of the three contrasts the binomial distribution is skewed towards "E", the range of predicted probabilities is relatively narrow. However, the proportions of "E" are roughly equivalent across the two contrasts, which contributes to ease the comparability between coefficients and predicted probabilities.

The first hypothesis posited the existence of a significant difference between the likelihood of men and women fitting into the different profiles of our typology. The hypothesis is corroborated: as the odd ratios in table 3 and the top-left plot in figure 2 suggest, women are about 4 percentage points more likely to fall into profile "L" than they are to fall into profile "N". This means that the original finding of Coffé (2013) is replicated on a wider set of countries: women are not necessarily more detached from politics than men, but they are instead often more involved with other types of matters.

Our second hypothesis argued that inhabitants in different types of communities would show different degrees of engagement towards different territorial levels. The plotted probabilities in Figure 3 show that living in a rural area is a useful predictor of the type of discussions individuals engage with. In the contrast between the baseline category and the alternative outcome of being more engaged in discussions about local politics, inhabitants from rural areas have a predicted probability of being more engaged in local politics of 0.16, as opposed to 0.11 of residents in big towns. The difference is statistically significant at the 95% confidence level. The results also show that living in a rural area does not foster discussion about national politics in a comparable way: the predicted probability of moving from the baseline towards the alternative outcome "N" is 0.12, which does not significantly differ from the 0.11 of residents of cities. The effect of the type of community is not symmetrical in the sense that there is not a comparable gap between the inclination to talking about national politics between residents in big cities and residents in rural areas.

According to our third hypothesis, individuals with higher levels of education and socioeconomic status should be more prone to discussing national politics than respondents who are less educated and have a lower status. The results show that, on average, each year of completed education gives respondents a 0.3 percentage point higher probability of moving towards "N" and a 0.5 percentage point lower probability of moving towards "L". The implication is that our hypothesis is confirmed especially outside the central values of the distribution: individuals who left school before turning 18 years old (who correspond to approximately 40% of the sample) are more likely to be engaged in local poli-

tics; conversely, those who finished their education by the age of 24 or older (10% of respondents in the sample) are more likely to report a higher engagement towards national politics. The impact of self-reported SES is more modest, as shown by the less steep slopes. While respondents who identify as a having a status of 3 or lower (13% of the sample) are more likely to fall in the "L" category, the differences fall outside statistical significance for the remaining cases.

Hypothesis 4 regards organisational membership and has a twofold formulation. H4.A posited that membership in organisations oriented towards the national level would have an effect in fostering discussion about national politics. However, this is not corroborated by our analysis. A respondent who is not a member of any organisation with a national scope has a 0.11 probability of being more engaged in discussions about national politics, and an increase of one (organisation) brings only a 0.01 increase in the chance of moving from the baseline towards profile "N".

H4.B, on the other hand, argued that members of organisations with a local scope will be more likely to engage in discussions about local affairs. Thus, the effect of membership in local associations seems to be stronger: each membership brings a 0.02 change of moving from the baseline towards "L" and a -0.02 change in moving towards "N". In practical terms, a member of one single association devoted to local issues (17.9% of the sample) has a 0.12 chance of being more engaged in national discussions, and a 0.15 of being more engaged in local politics. As the ribbons in the plot do not intersect, this difference is statistically significant. The effect is amplified if the respondent is a member of two or three or more such organisations, but the number of respondents under these circumstances is low (5.7% and 2.6% respectively).

Our second set of hypotheses deals with macro-level factors. Figure 2 shows that variations within countries regarding the distribution of the "N" and "L" profiles are not very salient. However, we cannot reject the possibility of macro-level factors mitigating or exacerbating the effect of individual-level variables; therefore, testing hypotheses formulated at the country-level remains a crucial part of the analysis.

Hypothesis 5 posited that living in a wealthier country would enhance the probability of being more engaged in national politics. The plot shows that moving from the lower end of the spectrum of logged GDP values towards its upper end doubles the predicted probability of having a profile of type "N" from 0.08 to 0.16. However, as the ribbon around the line illustrates, there is a large error associated with this estimate, and

the predicted probabilities for intermediate positions of GDP per capita are so close to each other that their differences are not statistically significant. Also, contrary to our hypothesis, a higher GDP also seems to foster the likelihood of moving from the baseline towards a higher interest in local matters, although the slope is smaller and the associated error is higher. Therefore, while there seems to be evidence of an impact of economic development in increasing the likelihood of discussing national politics, the effect is not as strong or exclusive to national politics as initially expected.

Finally, the hypothesis that living in a more decentralized country stimulates the propensity to discuss local matters (H6) is not fully met. While it is true that individuals from countries where local governments are responsible for a negligible fraction of public expenditure will tend to discuss local politics less often than individuals from countries where the local government spends more, the errors associated with those predictions are large. Moreover, an increase in the proportion of money spent also leads to a small growth in the probability of discussing national politics. Taken together, the results of the two macro-level hypotheses suggest that country-level factors may not play a relevant role in inducing individuals to move to specifically inducing discussion about either local or national issues.

## CONCLUSIONS

While it would be an overstatement to argue that geographical scales have been completely absent from the research about comparative political behaviour, there is a scarcity of cross-national studies about the drivers of involvement towards different levels of politics. This article made use of survey data collected in a wide set of European polities to show that the frequency of political discussion about different territorial levels is not a function of the same set of factors. Gender, education, the types of organisation one is a member of or the type of community one lives in, for instance, play a significant role in determining the type of political discussions one is more likely to engage with.

Conversely, evidence of the impact of macro-level factors in fostering a differential engagement towards distinct territorial levels is not as compelling as initially hypothesised, despite earlier research having established that contextual factors matter a good deal to the intensity of generalist political engagement (Inglehart 1990). Even in countries in an advanced stage of economic development, there is the persistence of groups of individuals who remain more likely to discuss local affairs.

Furthermore, high levels of engagement with local politics do not seem to be an exclusive attribute of those living in highly decentralised countries. Given these results, it can be fruitful for future studies to add the temporal dimension into the analysis, by examining surveys conducted over multiple periods of time and testing whether the evolution of macro-contexts brings changes to the probability of being more engaged in discussing one specific level of politics.

Two further implications can be derived from our results, the first being of a substantive nature. A classical thesis about political change in developed countries asserts that a process of "nationalization of politics" dilutes local peculiarities and, consequently, their role as fosterers of political engagement (Caramani 2004; Sellers *et al.* 2013, 1–10). Our analysis shows that the profile of an engaged citizen is not as rigidly defined as could be assumed if we focused exclusively on the national level of politics. Across Europe, an important share of individuals in groups that are perceived apathetic towards politics writ large regularly take part in discussions about local political affairs. Thus, in a context of growing disengagement towards politics (Dēmētriou 2013, 6–7), the findings of this article suggest that interest in local affairs still plays a role in keeping a sizable share of individuals attached to the political realm, even if outside the scope of national politics. This potential effect of local engagement in bringing more citizens into a broader domain politics should not be overlooked by scholars and policymakers.

The second implication is methodological and is related to the underlying assumptions that members of the public may hold when answering questions about their political engagement. Indeed, the bias towards identifying politics exclusively with the national level of politics may not be restricted to authors. Our results signal that determinants of discussion about national politics, more than those for discussion of local matters, are in line with the explanatory variables of generalist political discussion (van Deth and Elff 2004; Sanders and Bellucci 2012). As Fizgerald (2013) demonstrates, a diversity of parallel conceptions of what is and is not political might coexist across the public; nevertheless, the performance of our model suggests that generalist studies may capture an underlying conception of "politics" that identifies it essentially with the national scale. In order to avoid crystallising an identification of politics with only one of its territorial axes, more research should keep into account investment in those different spheres. While this approach has already been followed in studies about voter turnout and party choice in local elections (Lefevere and Van Aelst 2014; Marien, Dassonneville, and Hooghe

2015), it should be extended to other dimensions of political behaviour. One direction that might prove particularly fruitful in the future is analysing whether individuals who exhibit different profiles are involved in different modes of political participation.

It should be clear that we do not advocate that focusing only on the national level of politics or that embracing a generalist perspective are malpractices in the study of political engagement. Indeed, either approach may be the most fruitful in light of researchers' particular goals. However, by invariably following either of these strategies we may end up ignoring important shades of how citizens practice their democratic citizenship.

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APPENDIX

## A.1. Classification of civil society organisations

Respondents were asked whether they participated in 14 different types of organisations. These 14 types of organisations were classified depending on whether their scope of intervention was more local, national or, in ambiguous cases, both national and local.

The question asked to respondents was the following:

*QE11: "Do you currently participate actively in or do voluntary work for one or more of the following organisations?"*

**Tab. A1.** Classification of organisations.

| Var | Option | Description of organization | Percent in sample | Scope |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| v514 | 1 | A sports club or club for outdoor activities (recreation organisation) | 10% | Local |
| v515 | 2 | Education, arts, music or cultural association | 7% | Both |
| v516 | 3 | A trade union | 4% | National |
| v517 | 4 | A business or professional organisation | 3% | National |
| v518 | 5 | A consumer organisation | 2% | National |
| v519 | 6 | An international organisation such as development aid organisation or human rights organisation | 2% | National |
| v520 | 7 | An organisation for environmental protection, animal rights, etc. | 3% | National |
| v521 | 8 | A charity organisation or social aid organisation | 5% | Local |
| v522 | 9 | A leisure association for the elderly | 3% | Local |
| v523 | 10 | An organisation for the defence of elderly rights | 1% | Both |
| v524 | 11 | Religious or church organization | 5% | Both |
| v525 | 12 | Political party or organisation | 2% | Both |
| v526 | 13 | Organisation defending the interest of patients and\or disabled | 2% | Both |
| v527 | 14 | Other interest groups for specific causes such as women, people with specific sexual orientation, local issues, etc. | 10% | Both |

**Tab. A2.** Multilevel logit model coefficients.

|  | Dependent variable: Profile of political engagement Baseline: Equally engaged in local and national discussions Contrast | | |
|  | Disengaged (1) | More into national (2) | More into local (3) |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Fixed effects | | | |
| Intercept | 0.85 (1.27) | -4.45* (0.95) | -1.54+ (0.70) |
| Individual level | | | |
| Female | 0.46* (0.04) | -0.14* (0.04) | 0.18* (0.04) |
| Age group (ref: 15-24) | | | |
| 25-34 years | -0.46* (0.06) | -0.37* (0.07) | -0.25* (0.07) |
| 35-44 years | -0.79* (0.06) | -0.42* (0.07) | -0.31* (0.07) |
| 45-54 years | -0.97* (0.07) | -0.44* (0.07) | -0.36* (0.07) |
| 55-64 years | -1.18* (0.06) | -0.56* (0.07) | -0.41* (0.07) |
| >64 years | -0.89* (0.06) | -0.49* (0.07) | -0.22* (0.07) |
| Occupation (ref: inactive) | | | |
| Professional/Managerial | -0.41* (0.05) | -0.06 (0.05) | -0.12+ (0.05) |
| Manual worker | -0.07 (0.05) | 0.02 (0.06) | 0.10 (0.05) |
| Education | -0.11* (0.01) | 0.03* (0.01) | -0.03* (0.01) |
| Socioeconomic status | -0.08* (0.01) | -0.0000 (0.01) | -0.05* (0.01) |
| National CSO | -0.04 (0.04) | 0.08+ (0.04) | -0.06 (0.04) |
| Local CSO | -0.32* (0.04) | -0.10‡ (0.04) | 0.12* (0.04) |
| Community (base: Rural) | | | |
| Small/Middle town | -0.02 (0.04) | 0.08 (0.05) | -0.10+ (0.04) |
| Big town | -0.02 (0.04) | 0.13‡ (0.05) | -0.39* (0.05) |
| Country level | | | |
| Log (GDP/capita) | 0.12 (0.13) | 0.26‡ (0.10) | 0.12 (0.07) |
| Local expenditures | -0.60 (0.66) | 0.55 (0.49) | 0.63 (0.36) |
| Random effects | | | |
| Standard deviation of intercept | 1.27 | 0.35 | 0.25 |
| N (individuals) | 21,303 | 19,744 | 20,299 |
| Log likelihood | -10,444.88 | -9,167.05 | -10,160.79 |
| Akaike information criterion | 20,925.76 | 18,370.10 | 20,357.58 |

Note to Tab. A2: Each cell presents the logit coefficient (with standard error in brackets) associated with a one-unit change in the value of each independent variable in moving from the baseline outcome E ("equally engaged") towards each alternative outcome within the three contrasts: D ("disengaged at both levels of politics"), N ("discusses more national politics"), L ("discusses more local politics").
P value: +< 0.05; ‡< 0.01; *<0.001.

# The representative deficit in different European Party Systems: an analysis of the elections to the European Parliament 2009-2014

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**Abstract.** This paper explores the extent to which different party systems in Europe effectively represent their citizens. We argue that many European countries suffer from a "representative deficit", which occurs when a significant portion of citizens have to vote for a political party whose stated views are actually quite different from their own. We measure the extent of this deficit in different European countries using data from *EU Profiler* and *euandi*, two Voting Advice Applications which served millions of users during the EP elections in 2009 and 2014 respectively. We find wide variation in the extent to which political parties are accurately tuned in to the preferences of their voters, a variation which is not clearly linked to the number of political parties or the proportionality of the electoral system. We attempt to explain some of this variation, and explore the reasons why some party systems offer better representation than others.

**Keywords**. Elections, voting advice applications, representation.

## INTRODUCTION

If it is the case that ideational congruence between representatives and the represented is the "central normative problem of democracy" (Rehfeld, 2009: 214; see also: Bolleyer and Reh, 2012), then the central questions for empirical research on the quality of democracy pertain to (a) measuring ideational symmetry between representatives and the represented and (b) explaining the factors that lead to variation in this symmetry. This paper attempts to contribute towards this enterprise by carrying out both tasks in relation to EU member states. In particular, our aim is to measure the "representative deficit" (i.e. the degree to which the average citizen fails to find complete ideational representation) in each member state as well as to identify the factors that might explain the (sometimes large) differences in representative quality between member states.

There is a considerable body of literature on ideational symmetry and representation. However, most of these works have focused on aggregate-level congruence between party elites and voters on a left-right scale (e.g. Dalton *et al.*, 2011; Rohrschneider and Whitefield, 2012; Thomassen and Schmitt, 1999). This is a weakness: as Dalton (2015: 1) claims, "the structure of political competition is becoming more complex, new issues are entering the political agenda, and new parties are engaging the voters". Against this background, this paper hence aims to improve on existing efforts by going beyond a unidimensional left-right scale towards a multidimensional approach. This is made possible by reliance on two unique datasets made available by the 2009 *EU Profiler* and its follow-up instalment *euandi* in 2014, both Voting Advice Applications [hereafter: VAAs] designed for use in each member state in the lead up to elections for the European Parliament (see: Trechsel and Mair, 2011; Garzia *et al.,* 2017). Unlike other data-sets which deal with citizens attitudes across Europe, available from Eurobaromater or the European Election Study for example, these VAAs were designed with the specific goal of ideationally matching citizens with parties on the basis of a large number of policy issues including economic as well as socio-cultural aspects of the political competition, and have hence yielded a rich data-set for measuring the congruence between participating users and profiled parties which goes well beyond the traditional left-right separation. In this way, they offer a unique opportunity to systematically compare deficits in different European countries across countries and time.

We distinguish between two broad sets of variables that may affect the quality of representation in a political system, that is, those pertaining to the organisation of the regime and those relating to the political community or civil society. Building on theory that emphasises the importance of the quality of the communicative relationship between the regime and citizens (both as individuals and collectivised in organisations), we focus on those variables relating to the regime that may affect the government's degree of responsiveness to citizens, as well as those variables relating to civil society that are likely to affect citizens' ability and willingness to communicate with their representatives.

The next section explains in more detail the representative deficit, as well as our understanding of the relationship between communication and representation. On this basis, we attempt to identify those variables relating to the communicative quality of a regime and civil society that are expected to affect the quality of representation in a democratic system. Following this, we outline our data and methods. In the ensuing results section, we find descriptive evidence to confirm that the quality of representation is indeed in decline across Europe, while the representative deficit in Central and Eastern Europe taken as a whole is significantly worse than in Western Europe. Concerning our explanatory variables, we find that many of the usual suspects relating to the regime do not in fact explain differences in the quality of representation between countries (i.e., number of parties, electoral size of country, level of decentralisation, proportionality of its electoral system, etc.). When it comes to those factors regarding civil society (i.e., press freedom, voice and accountability, electoral participation) we find significant explanatory power. The final section concludes with a discussion of the results and their potential implications.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### The Representative Deficit

The sum of policy options and preferences in a polity which can be used to make representative promises can be conceptualised in terms of a multidimensional "political space" (see, e.g., Benoit and Laver, 2012). In such a political space, each dimension is a single policy issue (for example, the extent to which the unemployed should be given benefits), with the range of preferences on the issue being equivalent to the total range of the dimension (in this example, from no benefits at all to very generous benefits). Theoretically, every citizen in a polity can be located at some point within this political space, and so can the political parties which compete to represent them.

As Chantal Mouffe (1999) argues, the whole of society can never be represented since the very nature of identity formation and choice necessitates exclusionary tendencies. What this means in this context is that the choice for one policy position is always a choice against a whole set of others. Citizens have a wide variety of preferences: it is likely that, even in a moderately sized polity, political space is effectively full, with every point occupied by at least one person. There are, by contrast, typically only a few political parties which contest elections. This makes it inevitable that the great majority of citizens cannot find a party whose position in political space coincides exactly with their own. There will always be, in other words, a mismatch in the extent to which the opinions of citizens are represented in their polity, something which has previously been described as a "representative deficit" (Alvarez *et al.,* 2014: 239). However, public opinion is not distributed evenly throughout political space, and nor are political parties. Hence the extent to which representation is in deficit will vary,

relative to the positioning of both parties and the public at large.

Much of the literature on representation is structured around the study of political parties (Dalton *et al.*, 2011; Rohrschneider and Whitefield, 2012; Thomassen and Schmitt, 1999). However from the perspective of parties the problem of representative deficit is theoretically complex, because it is a result of the behaviour of the party system as a whole, not individuals within it. For example, if we assume, following Downs (1957), that parties are essentially "vote maximizers", the need to pursue public opinion would push the majority of parties to move towards the centre ground, which would leave public opinion on the extremes less and less catered for and result in a homogenization of the political offer. Hence a party level incentive to improve representation would result in an increasing representative deficit. Furthermore, vote-seeking models of party behaviour have been heavily criticised, with examples abounding of parties abandoning the centre ground. For this reason, our major interest in this paper lies in considering factors relating to the system of democracy as a whole which might explain not just the behaviour of individual parties but their distribution throughout political space.

*Representation and Communication: Some Hypotheses*

Our particular focus is on the communicative relationship between citizens within a polity and political actors. In many ways deliberative democrats have been successful in achieving what Simone Chambers (2012) refers to as the aim of moving political science from a vote-based to a talk-based agenda. Certainly, regardless of whether or not one subscribes to one or other theory of deliberative democracy, the crucial role of discursive engagement between representatives and the represented in promoting good democratic representation cannot be ignored. To put it in James Bohman's words (2010), the goal of democracy is to turn citizens' communicative freedom into communicative power. That is to say, to the extent that citizens are endowed with the basic needs and liberties required to organise and participate politically (*communicative freedom*), they should be ideally able to translate the many discourses that go on in their associations into a wider discussion with their representatives who, in carrying out their law-making functions, are responsive to the discursive force behind these exchanges (*communicative power*). This account need not be at odds with the fact that democracy is essentially a competitive system that, while requiring compromise, is not necessarily geared towards deliberative consensus.

The key question then is under what conditions is citizens' communicative freedom likely to be translated into communicative power? Understanding the problematic thusly, we must analyse those factors which are likely to most affect (a) the responsiveness of representatives to the discourse of citizens and their organisations and (b) the extent to which citizens are willing and able to express their communicative freedom.

Surveying standard accounts of democracy, it is possible to highlight a range of variables that are expected to have an impact on either of the above dependent variables. Concerning those factors expected to affect the responsiveness of representatives, we highlight (i) the electoral system, (ii) the number of parties, (iii) the size of the country, (iv) the level of decentralisation, and (v) the length of time a country has been democratic. Briefly, we can explain the rationale behind the choice of these independent variables.

For the first independent variable, we expect that Proportional Representation, rather than First-Past-The-Post electoral systems, will give rise to better representation (for an elaboration see: Gerring and Thacker, 2008: 13-14; 48-57). The winner takes all nature of the latter can be seen as incentivising party drift towards the median voter, whereas the more even distribution of parliamentary seats for which the former system is designed provides an incentive for at least some parties to rely on voters from their ideological support base. This helps to ensure that the values and interests of non-median voters do not get left behind in public discourse. Closely related to this variable is the number of parties in a political system. Quite simply, when there is a greater partisan offer, one can expect that citizens will have more opportunities to find a better electoral fit and thereby reduce their representative deficit (Bright *et al.*, 2016).

The size of the country and the level of decentralisation are variables that are closely related to one another. From Montesquieu (1989 [1750]) to Robert Dahl (1989), the size of the polity has been taken to have a major impact on the quality of representation. The more voices there are per representative, the less likely it is that these representatives will be successful in being able to reconcile the diverging values and interests of those she represents. One can therefore expect that smaller countries and countries that are highly decentralised, so that decisions are taken as close as possible to citizens on the local or sub-federal level such that only the remainder is left to national representatives, will have a better quality of representation.

Democracy is more than just free and fair elections, but a political culture and set of norms support-

ing strong communicative relationships between representatives and the represented. However, a democratic political culture does not emerge overnight and is often haunted by some of the non-democratic habits characterising the previous regime. Therefore we may expect that the longer a democratic regime is in place the more likely it is that the political culture will have taken on the appropriate habits for establishing a good standard of representation.

When it comes to citizens' willingness and ability to express their communicative freedom, we identify several independent variables that are expected to be significant: (vi) freedom of the press; (vii) voice and accountability; and (viii) political participation. The quality of these democratic features is not easy to measure and often have multiple components. In recent years, however, data sets have emerged with relatively reliable measures and we draw on these.

Regarding the first of these variables, freedom of the press is widely recognised to be an essential condition for democracy. The press is the primary forum in which competitive politics is mediated. It serves as a crucial discursive conveyer belt between representatives and the represented (Habermas, 1996). Significant restrictions on media freedom would interfere with this mechanism, excluding a wide range of views at the expense of a more circumscribed set, ultimately undermining the communicative relationship between citizens and representatives. In order to measure the variable of press freedom, we draw on data from the World Press Freedom Index, a data set based on an assessment of press freedom within countries across the world from a range of actors, including journalists, academics and activists (Becker *et al.*, 2007).

Voice and Accountability is a category of indicators within the wider World Bank Governance Indicators project – a data-set measuring the extent to which citizens can effectively express their views and to which public officials can be publically held to account (Kaufmann *et al.*, 2009). This dataset is also compiled from assessments by civil society actors and the like. Effectively, the less citizens can be seen as capable of raising their voice and the less reason politicians have to fear accountability mechanisms, the less likely it is that there will be communicative conditions that are favourable to the quality of representation. A further indicator we take in this regard is the level of turnout in elections. Higher turnout can be expected to impact positively on the representative deficit since the more citizens who are engaged in the electoral process across the society, the more likely it is that representatives will be incentivised to take a wide range of preferences into account.

A final (control) variable we consider, which does not fall within the categories of regime or public sphere is the level of economic performance, imperfectly measured by GDP. One might expect greater wealth to give a political system the resources for developing robust democratic institutions, in addition to giving citizens the required leisure for the kind of political engagement required for democratic accountability. One might also expect that the more resources at a government's disposal the greater would be the chances of it meeting the preferences of more citizens. Indeed, the fiscal ability of the government to meet the demands of conflicting identities, even in ethnically divided societies like Belgium, has been given as an important reason for political stability (Hooghe, 2003).

## DATA AND METHODOLOGY: USING VAA DATA TO MEASURE PARTY-VOTER PROXIMITY IN THE POLITICAL SPACE

In this paper, we measure the political space, and hence its inherent representative deficit, in 27 different EU member states[1], using data drawn from the *EU Profiler* and *euandi*. Although different in some respects, VAAs share a common underlying principle: they help users in their act of making a party choice and casting a vote by comparing their policy preferences on major issues with the programmatic stances of political parties on the same issues (for a review, see: Garzia and Marschall, 2016; 2019). The core of every VAA that enables this comparison is a list of political issue statements formulated by the body that created the VAA, e.g., "social programs should be maintained even at the cost of higher taxes".[2] Each user can express her degree of agreement or disagreement with each particular statement (see Figure 1, left). The resulting issue preferences of the user are then matched with the positions of the parties included in the VAA on these same issues (only parties already represented in parliament or with a reasonable chance to achieve representation in the election under analysis have been included in the VAA system). After comparing the user's profile with that of each party, the applica-

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[1] For reason of longitudinal comparability, we decided to exclude Croatia from the sample insofar as this country only took part in EP elections in 2014.

[2] For the selection of the 28 statements included in both VAAs, party manifestos were analysed to understand not only how frequently certain policy areas were mentioned, but also the 'urgency' with which parties discussed individual issues. At the same time, opinion polls, earlier party manifesto coding, groups of experts, academics and journalists were consulted for what they considered to be the key issues in the election. The various lists were then analysed together and the issues that occurred most frequently and urgently were selected for inclusion.
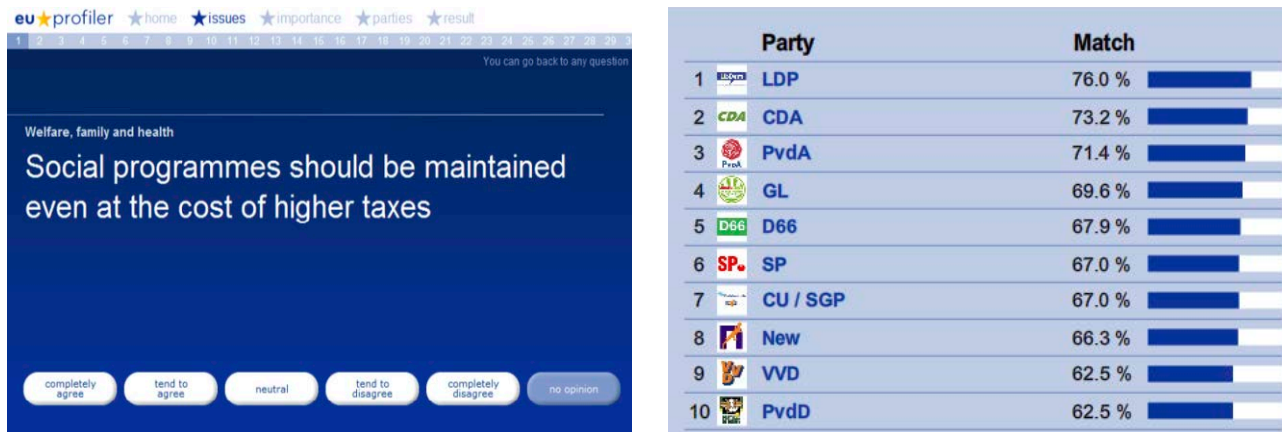
**Fig. 1.** Example of a VAA statement (L); the 'voting advice' provided in the results screen (R). *Source:* www.euprofiler.eu.

tion produces a "voting advice", usually in the form of a rank-ordered list, at the top of which stands the party closest to the user's policy preferences (see Figure 1, right)[3].

The concept of "representative deficit" was first derived and empirically measured by Alvarez *et al.* (2014: 239). In analogy to the work of these authors, we calculate the representative deficit by looking at the extent to which each individual matches up to all other political parties in the national space, following a matching rule developed by the *EU Profiler* itself. Each issue statement produces responses on a 5-point Likert scale, from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The distance from party to individual is measured using this scale. The representative deficit variable ranges thus from 0 to 100 percent and corresponds to the distance between a potential perfect overlap of 100 percent and the real extent of overlap between the best-matching party "on offer" and the user's preferences, as shown to the user in the match-list visualization of the VAA. The smaller the representative deficit, therefore, the better the policy congruence between the best-matching party in a given voting space and a VAA user's preferences.

The information produced by the VAA is useful to us in two major respects. First, with its numerous issue statements, it provides us with a measure of where parties are located in a high-dimensional issue space. The methodology employed in both *EU Profiler* and *euandi* involved an iterative approach that integrates party self-placement and expert assessment into the final positioning of political parties on the thirty political statements included in the VAAs (for a deeper discussion, see: Gar-

zia *et al.,* 2015). The information produced by these VAA projects is also useful insofar as it allows a straightforward comparison between the parties' location in the policy space and that of a large array of users/voters. Traditional analyses of the ideological positions of the general population commonly resort to traditional surveys. Nonetheless, VAAs would seem to feature a number of advantages *vìs-a-vìs* more traditional research tools. For one thing, VAAs are able to measure users' position over a much larger set of policy issues as compared to more "traditional" representative samples such as national election studies. Even more importantly, they allow comparisons of the issue positions of parties and voters using the same data source. In turn, this can help assessing our research questions by means of a straightforward measurement of the extent to which parties and voters are mutually congruent.[4]

By way of illustration, Figures 2 and 3 below visualize the state of political space in the United Kingdom and France respectively. These figures simplify the various questions asked into two axes, namely, a left/right dimension and a pro/anti EU dimension. The density plot shows the location of individuals in our sample, with smaller concentric circles indicating concentrations of people.

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[3] The matching algorithm of both VAAs is based on the city bloc method. For a better description of the calculation of user-party overlaps, see: www.euprofiler.eu and www.euandi.eu

[4] Note, however, that one of the major problems linked to VAA research in this field is, for evident reasons, the highly non-representativeness of VAA usage. The problem of self-selection into the sample, which results in its non-representativeness, can be possibly mitigated in the light of Almond's seminal distinction between the *general* public, the *attentive* public (which largely informs the general public by osmosis) and the *elite* public (e.g., politicians, high level civil servants). In a sense, VAA samples primarily come from the attentive public of each European country (see: Marschall, 2014). Under the assumption that it is the attentive public that informs the general public, then VAA samples may be thought to serve as the next best gauge of public opinion than a random sample of the general public itself.
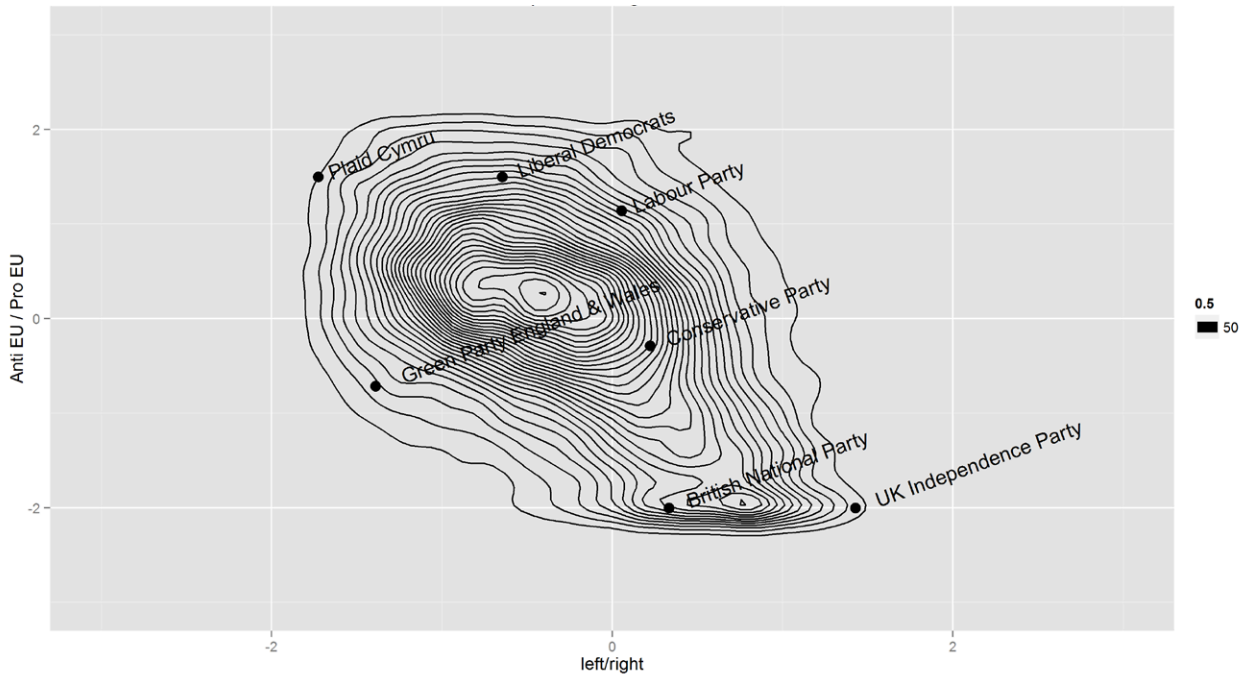
**Fig. 2.** The Political Space in the UK.

The plot for the UK shows two poles, one slightly to the left of centre and slightly more pro-European, and one slightly to the right of centre and strongly anti-European. The distribution of parties around these poles is intriguing: while all lie within the outermost line of the density plot, only the British National Party really emerges as close to one of the two poles. The plot for France shows only one pole, by contrast, further to the left and more pro-European than the UK. Again, interestingly, few parties are anywhere near the centre of this pole, with many lying outside the political space implied by citizens altogether. These plots highlight clearly therefore that the overlap between citizens preferences and political parties is far from perfect, and that the distribution of citizens and parties in political space is complex.

THE REPRESENTATIVE DEFICIT ACROSS DIFFERENT
PARTY SYSTEMS: EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

The mean value of the national representative deficit for the whole sample of *EU Profiler* users in 2009 is 28.2 per cent (N = 473,045) – that is, on average, users' best matching party in their national constituency leaves about a quarter of their political preferences unrepresented. The figure for *euandi* users in 2014 is slightly higher (M = 32.4; N = 399,882). In Table 1 we present the average value of *EU Profiler* and *euandi*

users' representative deficit broken down by their country of residence.[5]

Table 1 shows some interesting descriptive findings which are worth commenting on briefly. There are general signs of a worsening of deficits between the 2009 and 2014 rounds, which supports the general thesis that democratic representation is getting worse in Europe. There is also a clear, systematic difference between Western and Eastern Europe, with Eastern European countries having comparatively higher deficits.

These findings complement those of Beate Sissenich (2010: 12), who believes that the nascent and fragile accountability mechanisms in Eastern European countries were set back by the EU's insistence that acceding member states from Eastern Europe transpose community law into national law by streamlining the domestic legislative process (Rose-Ackerman, 2007).

The difference between East and Western Europe exists in both 2009 and 2014, though is narrower in 2014. This narrowing can largely be explained by disproportionately large increases in deficit for Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, Greece, Malta and Portugal. While we do not have a systematic explanation which links all of these countries, it is interesting to note the presence

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[5] Note that these figures are calculated based on the resulting proximity score between users and the best matching party based on the 17 common statements included in both *EU Profiler* and *euandi*.
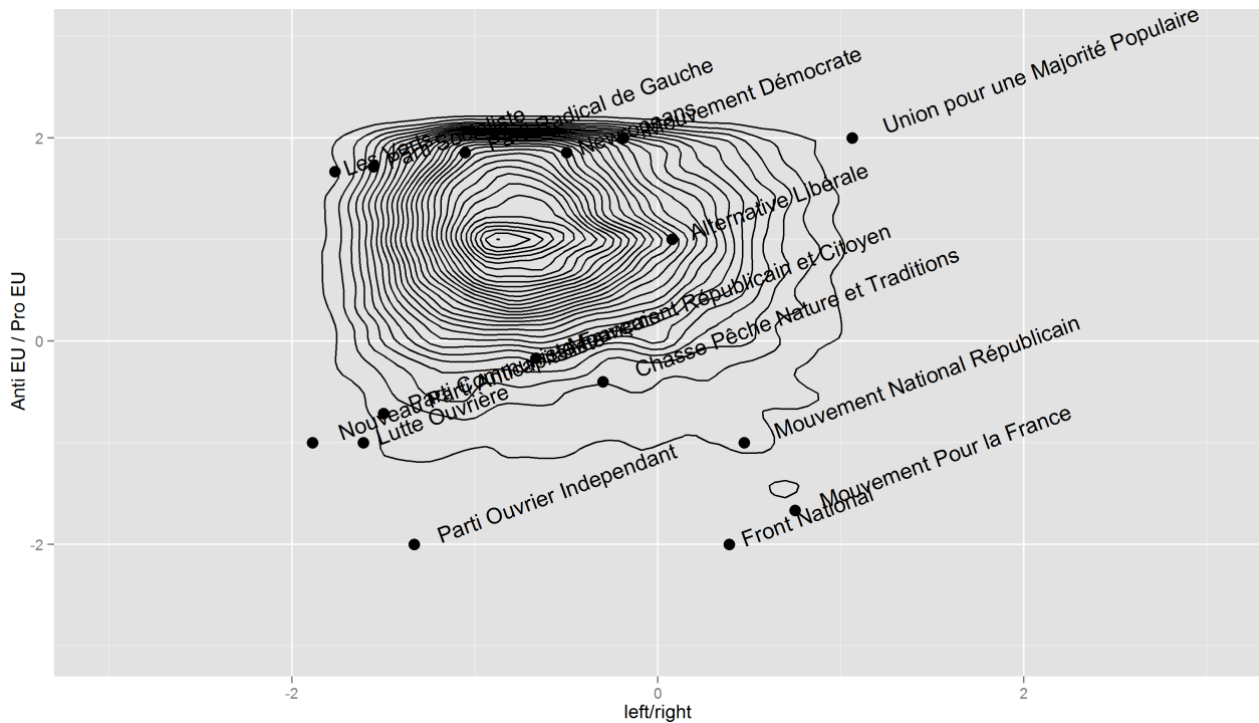
**Fig. 3.** The Political Space in France.

of Cyprus, Greece and Portugal in this list, as they are three of the countries who were hardest hit by the European debt crisis, and who had to give up some of their fiscal sovereignty. Ireland and Spain, the other countries in this category, also experienced increases in representative deficit above the Western European average increase. This offers some support for the idea that loss of sovereignty in this way has served to worsen the quality of democratic representation in these countries – a thesis widely put forward over the last years in various sectors of the news media but not systematically argued for or empirically tested in academic research.

We will now move on to a series of analytical models which seek to explain variation in representative deficit at the country level. On the basis of our theoretical review, we explore a number of variables which are potentially relevant. In the first block we include all variables related to the political and institutional features of the countries under analysis. Firstly, we code the proportionality of the voting system used in terms of the electoral threshold to gain representation in the European Parliament for a party in a given country.[6] We expect more competi-

tive systems (that is, systems with a lower effective electoral threshold) to lead to lower degrees of representative deficit. We also look at the number of political parties, as measured by the number of relevant parties included in the *EU Profiler* and *euandi* VAAs (i.e., parties already represented in national and/or EP parliaments as well as parties bearing a reasonable chance to gain representation through that election) as an obvious factor which ought to reduce the extent to which representation is in deficit. We also control for the degree of institutionalization of the party system (measured as the years since a given country became democratic), the extent of decentralization (measured with a dummy coding '1' all countries in which federal/regional decentralization governance practices are in place) and the electoral size of the country (measured through the number of seats available to that nation in the European Parliament).

The second block of variables includes those related to the public sphere. To this purpose, we resort to summary measures developed by Reporters Without Borders (*World Press Freedom Index*) and the World Bank (*World Governance Indicators: Voice & Accountability*).

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[6] Although all EU countries employ a proportional system of seat allocation in EP elections, it is worth highlighting that the ratio between the number of available seats per country and the nominal threshold can vary substantially (e.g., between 1 percent in the case of Germany

to 17 percent in the cases of Cyprus, Malta and Luxembourg). For this reason, we make use of the effective electoral threshold as a way to measure the proportionality of each nation's electoral system.

**Tab. 1.** Average Representative Deficit by Country.

| | 2009 | 2014 | Δ2014-2009 |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | Western Europe | |
| Austria | 27,01 | 25,84 | -1,17 |
| Belgium | 21,14 | 23,68 | +2,54 |
| Cyprus | 26,94 | 43,91 | +16,97 |
| Denmark | 22,94 | 32,26 | +9,32 |
| Finland | 23,98 | 32,37 | +8,39 |
| France | 24,28 | 27,26 | +2,98 |
| Germany | 26,82 | 27,14 | +0,32 |
| Greece | 26,97 | 35,87 | +8,90 |
| Ireland | 32,33 | 37,98 | +5,65 |
| Italy | 25,85 | 31,76 | +5,91 |
| Luxembourg | 24,68 | 28,47 | +3,79 |
| Malta | 28,78 | 36,36 | +7,58 |
| Netherlands | 19,66 | 22,37 | +2,71 |
| Portugal | 29,22 | 37,53 | +8,31 |
| Spain | 21,93 | 27,4 | +5,47 |
| Sweden | 26,44 | 28,51 | +2,07 |
| United Kingdom | 24,39 | 26,66 | +2,27 |
| MEAN WE | 25,49 | 30,90 | +5,41 |
| | | Central and Eastern Europe | |
| Bulgaria | 25,53 | 44,18 | +18,65 |
| Czech Republic | 27,01 | 31,60 | +4,59 |
| Estonia | 27,11 | 24,95 | -2,16 |
| Hungary | 28,87 | 35,12 | +6,25 |
| Latvia | 42,28 | 29,30 | -12,98 |
| Lithuania | 38,37 | 38,00 | +0,37 |
| Poland | 38,42 | 34,62 | -3,8 |
| Romania | 36,79 | 43,41 | +6,62 |
| Slovakia | 34,56 | 40,09 | +5,53 |
| Slovenia | 28,84 | 27,04 | -1,8 |
| MEAN CEE | 32,78 | 34,83 | +2,13 |
| MEAN EU27 | 28,19 | 32,38 | +4,19 |

*Note:* Cell entries are mean values of users' representative deficit by national voting district (i.e., country of residence).

Although there are other international databases measuring the quality of the public sphere, the chosen databases are best suited for relating to our VAA data. Not only do *World Press Freedom* and *Voice & Accountability* indices provide observations for all 27 countries profiled in by the selected VAAs, they are also annually constructed databases, thereby allowing us find matching years with our VAA data so that we may carry out longitudinal analysis.[7] Note that higher values of the

*World Press Freedom Index* corresponds with less press freedom, whereas higher values of the *Voice & Accountability* index corresponds with a comparatively more discursively open and accountable political system. Finally, turnout is measured through the percentage of eligible voters casting their ballot in the EP elections of 2009 and 2014 respectively. The analysis also includes countries' GDP per capita (as provided by the World Bank) as a statistical control for potential effects of the economic conditions across the financial crisis. Descriptive statistics for all variables included in the statistical analyses are presented in Table 2.

Before presenting the results of our analyses, it is worth commenting briefly on the modelling strategy employed. As discussed above, there are a wide variety of factors which are theoretically important when considering representative deficit. This suggests an analytical model which contains multiple independent variables. However the number of observations (27 countries observed in both 2009 and 2014) is very low for estimating such a model. Furthermore, the multiplicity of potential independent variables increases the chances of committing a Type I error simply through testing multiple potential combinations.

Given this situation, we have adopted a three pronged strategy. First, we estimate univariate OLS regressions for each variable of interest for both 2009 and 2014 waves, to establish if there is a statistically significant correlation between the variable in question and representative deficit. These single regressions are reasonable in terms of statistical power, and the opportunity to run the same test in both 2009 and 2014 enhances confidence in the results and makes Type I errors less likely. Second, we estimate a full model including all relevant variables, again for the 2009 and 2014 waves. These full models allow us to see which variables, if any, remain significant once all potential factors are taken into account.[8] Finally, we estimate a first difference model, which looks at the extent to which *changes* in independent variables correlate with changes in dependent variables. Again, this provides a further check for the results, decreasing the possibility of Type I errors. Our simple univariate and combined multivariate models are presented in Tables 3 and 4 respectively.

A number of findings stand out from these tables. Univariate relationships between our independent vari-

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[7] For both elections, we resort to the values of the indices relative to

the respective previous year (i.e., 2008 and 2013) in order to exclude potential intervening effects of the election itself on experts' assessment.
[8] Inclusion of all variables in a multivariate model is justified by the lack of significant collinearity: correlations between independent variables are all below 0.6, with the sole exception of *Voice & Accountability* and *Years of Democracy* in both 2009 ($r=.84$) and 2014 ($r=.78$).

**Tab. 2.** Descriptive statistics of variables included in the analysis.

| 2009 | Mean | St. Dev. | Min | Max | N |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Dependent Variable* | | | | | |
| Representative Deficit | 28.19 | 5.60 | 19.66 | 42.28 | 27 |
| *Institutions* | | | | | |
| Electoral Threshold (%) | 2.29 | 2.35 | 0.00 | 5.00 | 27 |
| Number of Parties | 8.96 | 2.78 | 4.00 | 16.00 | 27 |
| Number of Seats in EP | 29.07 | 26.38 | 5.00 | 99.00 | 27 |
| Decentralization (dummy) | 0.30 | 0.47 | 0.00 | 1.00 | 27 |
| Years of Democratic Rule (1945=0) | 42.59 | 21.02 | 16.00 | 64.00 | 27 |
| *Public Sphere* | | | | | |
| World Press Freedom Index (2008) | 5.09 | 2.80 | 1.50 | 12.50 | 27 |
| Voice and Accountability (2008) | 1.15 | 0.30 | 0.51 | 1.60 | 27 |
| Turnout in EP elections (%) | 46.16 | 18.91 | 19.60 | 90.80 | 27 |
| *Controls* | | | | | |
| GDP per capita (in Euro) | 32603 | 20592 | 6738 | 100735 | 27 |
| **2014** | **Mean** | **St. Dev.** | **Min** | **Max** | **N** |
| *Dependent Variable* | | | | | |
| Representative Deficit | 32.36 | 6.32 | 22.37 | 44.18 | 27 |
| *Institutions* | | | | | |
| Electoral Threshold (%) | 2.10 | 2.32 | 0.00 | 5.00 | 27 |
| Number of Parties | 8.70 | 2.57 | 3.00 | 13.00 | 27 |
| Number of Seats in EP | 27.41 | 25.21 | 6.00 | 96.00 | 27 |
| Decentralization (dummy) | 0.30 | 0.47 | 0.00 | 1.00 | 27 |
| Years of Democratic Rule (1945=0) | 47.59 | 21.02 | 21.00 | 69.00 | 27 |
| *Public Sphere* | | | | | |
| World Press Freedom Index (2013) | 16.59 | 7.33 | 6.38 | 28.58 | 27 |
| Voice and Accountability (2013) | 1.10 | 0.38 | 0.29 | 1.68 | 27 |
| Turnout in EP elections (%) | 44.01 | 18.49 | 13.05 | 90.40 | 27 |
| *Controls* | | | | | |
| GDP per capita (in Euro) | 34754 | 22283 | 7713 | 110665 | 27 |

ables and the representative deficit goes by and large in the expected direction. Countries with lower electoral thresholds and a comparatively higher number of relevant parties experience lower degrees of representative deficit (although the regression coefficients fall short of conventional levels of statistical significance in 2014). The number of years spent as a democracy also appears strongly related to lower representative deficit in 2009 and 2014, though the effect decreases in 2014 (this might be expected as the relative importance of the difference in years as a democracy should decrease as time goes by). Decentralisation is a significant predictor of lower degrees of representative deficit in both election years as well. No statistical association would seem to appear between representative deficit and the electoral size of the country.

Moving to variables more directly relating to the public sphere, we can see that voice and accountability has an especially impressive correlation with the representative deficit. In every case the relationship is highly significant (in spite of the extremely low number of observations) and signed as expected. Higher degrees of press freedom would also seem to correlate negatively with the extent of of representative deficit, though the relationship is statistically significant only in 2014. As expected turnout rates in EP elections correlate positively with lower degrees of the representative deficit, but the coefficient is statistically significant only in 2009.

**Tab. 3.** Univariate OLS regression estimates.

| 2009 | b | S.E. | P>|t| |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Institutions* | | | |
| Electoral Threshold | 1.33 | 0.39 | **0.002** |
| Number of Parties | -0.81 | 0.37 | **0.038** |
| Number of Seats in EP | -0.04 | 0.04 | 0.376 |
| Decentralization | -4.89 | 2.20 | **0.036** |
| Years of Democratic Rule | -0.16 | 0.04 | **0.001** |
| *Public Sphere* | | | |
| World Press Freedom Index | 0.06 | 0.40 | 0.887 |
| Voice and Accountability | -11.48 | 2.88 | **0.001** |
| Turnout in EP elections | -0.11 | 0.05 | **0.052** |
| *Controls* | | | |
| GDP per capita (in Euro*1000) | -0.15 | 0.05 | **0.002** |
| 2014 | b | S.E. | P>|t| |
| *Institutions* | | | |
| Electoral Threshold | 0.64 | 0.53 | 0.236 |
| Number of Parties | -0.67 | 0.47 | 0.172 |
| Number of Seats in EP | -0.07 | 0.05 | 0.155 |
| Decentralization | -5.65 | 2.47 | **0.031** |
| Years of Democratic Rule | -0.13 | 0.05 | **0.028** |
| *Public Sphere* | | | |
| World Press Freedom Index | 0.30 | 0.16 | **0.080** |
| Voice and Accountability | -10.36 | 2.64 | **0.001** |
| Turnout in EP elections | -0.07 | 0.07 | 0.287 |
| *Controls* | | | |
| GDP per capita (in Euro*1000) | -0.14 | 0.05 | **0.011** |

*Note:* Dependent variable: Representative Deficit at country level.

**Tab. 4.** Multivariate analysis, OLS estimates.

| 2009 | B | S.E. | t | P>|t| |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Institutions* | | | | |
| Electoral Threshold | 0.91 | 0.43 | 2.11 | **0.050** |
| Number of Parties | 0.02 | 0.34 | 0.04 | 0.965 |
| Number of Seats in EP | 0.01 | 0.04 | 0.28 | 0.780 |
| Decentralization | -4.13 | 1.90 | -2.18 | **0.044** |
| Years of Democratic Rule | 0.02 | 0.09 | 0.24 | 0.811 |
| *Public Sphere* | | | | |
| World Press Freedom Index | -0.93 | 0.43 | -2.17 | **0.044** |
| Voice and Accountability | -12.48 | 7.35 | -1.7 | 0.099 |
| Turnout in EP elections | -0.01 | 0.06 | -0.18 | 0.856 |
| *Controls* | | | | |
| GDP per capita (in 1.000*Euro) | -0.01 | 0.07 | -0.16 | 0.878 |
| Constant | 45.80 | 8.96 | 5.11 | **0.000** |
| R-Squared | | 0.74 | | |
| 2014 | b | S.E. | t | P>|t| |
| *Institutions* | | | | |
| Electoral Threshold | 0.35 | 0.46 | 0.76 | 0.457 |
| Number of Parties | -0.43 | 0.42 | -1.04 | 0.314 |
| Number of Seats in EP | -0.03 | 0.06 | -0.49 | 0.627 |
| Decentralization | -4.56 | 2.45 | -1.86 | **0.080** |
| Years of Democratic Rule | 0.24 | 0.10 | 2.32 | **0.033** |
| *Public Sphere* | | | | |
| World Press Freedom Index | -0.48 | 0.28 | -1.71 | **0.097** |
| Voice and Accountability | -21.35 | 6.21 | -3.44 | **0.003** |
| Turnout in EP elections | 0.03 | 0.09 | 0.36 | 0.722 |
| *Controls* | | | | |
| GDP per capita (in 1.000*Euro) | -0.09 | 0.09 | -0.99 | 0.335 |
| Constant | 60.81 | 8.99 | 6.77 | **0.000** |
| R-Squared | | 0.65 | | |

*Note:* Dependent variable: Representative Deficit at country level.

Finally, our GDP per capita measure shows that there is a strong relationship with the dependent variable, with richer countries reporting systematically lower values of the representative deficit.

In terms of the full model, there are fewer statistically significant results. Loss of statistical significance is especially pronounced in the case of institutional-level variables. After controlling for all other variables, only the decentralization variable is significant in both years, while electoral threshold remains within conventional levels of statistical significance only in 2009 and years of democratic rule only in 2014.

Moving to public sphere variables, the multivariate analysis confirms the strong impact of the *Voice & Accountability* index. Press freedom also emerges as statistically significant in both models, but counter to our expectations and preliminary results: once all other factors are taken into account, higher press freedom would

seem to result in comparatively higher degrees of representative deficit. Finally, the effect of electoral turnout seems to vanish along with that of GDP per capita. We would hence conclude that our data offers stronger support for the influence of the public sphere on the quality of representation, when compared to those variables related to the arrangement of the regime.

To test the robustness of these results and to dig deeper into causality, we estimated one First Difference (FD) model aimed at explaining across-time changes of

**Tab. 5.** First-Difference Estimation (2014 – 2009).

|  | b | S.E. | P>\|t\| |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Institutions* | | | |
| Electoral Threshold | 0.43 | 0.95 | 0.652 |
| Number of Parties | 0.45 | 0.39 | 0.257 |
| Number of Seats in EP | 0.47 | 0.65 | 0.481 |
| *Public Sphere* | | | |
| World Press Freedom Index | -0.51 | 0.22 | **0.031** |
| Voice and Accountability | -42.20 | 13.35 | **0.005** |
| Turnout in EP elections | 0.14 | 0.12 | 0.271 |
| *Controls* | | | |
| GDP per capita (in 1.000*Euro) | -0.08 | 0.33 | 0.811 |
| Constant | 9.63 | 2.70 | **0.002** |
| R-Squared | | 0.49 | |

*Note*: Dependent variable: Difference (2014-2009) in Representative Deficit at country level.

mean representative deficit at the country level. The FD estimator is intended to wipe out time invariant omitted variables using the repeated observations over time. In other words, estimation takes place by regressing "changes on changes" using OLS (Wooldridge, 2001). To put it more simply, changes in aggregate-level representative deficit across the five years under analysis (i.e., say representative deficit in Italy equals ´25.9´ in 2009 and ´31.8´ in 2014, the value of the dependent variable for Italy equals to ´5.9´) are explained as a function of across-wave changes (Δ) in the key independent variables included in the previous models. Note that the variables related to decentralization and the number of years under democratic rule are excluded from this analysis as no change could be witnessed across the two time points under analysis.

The results, as presented in Table 5, point in the same direction of the previous analyses, and further provide support for the idea that decreasing representative deficit in a given country is linked to higher voice and accountability. The result also seems to suggest that it is linked to comparatively lower press freedom. However, it is worth noting that the degree of press freedom in a given country is included in the voice and accountability index, which is an aggregate index of a wide variety of measures. Hence, in this model, press freedom acts as a kind of "correction" to the more general *Voice & Accountability* index, indicating that while increases in voice and accountability are generally positively correlated with decreases in representative deficit, increas-

es that relate specifically to press freedom have less of an impact. This is supported by the univariate models, which showed no statistically significant correlation between press freedom and representative deficit.

CONCLUSION

This paper began with the contention that the degree of ideational congruence between citizens and their representatives constitutes the central normative problem of democracy. While this statement may be relatively uncontroversial, empirical studies have rarely given centre stage to the representative deficit. Perhaps this is in part due to the fact that databases documenting the quality of democracy across countries tend not to provide objective measures of this phenomenon. With the availability of international VAAs, such as those employed in this paper, we are in a position to provide relatively reliable measures of the representative deficit across countries and across time. This, in turn, puts us in a unique position to contribute towards an understanding of those factors that tend to impact the quality of ideational representation in the EU.

Our descriptive statistics are interesting in themselves, corroborating widespread reports of a democratic decline in the Western world, as well as a notable gap in the quality of representation between Western and Eastern Europe. Interestingly, it was observed that those countries suffering from a loss of financial sovereignty in Europe had an above average worsening of their representative deficit between 2009 and 2014. While we could not offer systematic evidence for the relationship between financial sovereignty and the representative deficit, it stands to reason that ideational congruence will suffer when the communicative conveyer belt between citizens and representatives is shut down on salient domains typically reserved for domestic government due to the intervention of international and supranational bodies.

When it comes to determining those variables that most impact the representative deficit, we found contrary to expectations that many of the institutional variables we explored do not have a substantial impact on the dependent variable. What did stand out as influential are factors more directly related to the public sphere, namely voice and accountability and press freedom. However, while the former clearly emerged as the most important variable influencing the representative deficit, press freedom was found to be negatively correlated with the representative deficit. As said, there are methodological grounds to believe in the spuriousness of this correla-

tion. Nevertheless, our analyses would not seem to offer support for the hypothesis that increasing press freedom *increases* the quality of representation.

A potential explanation for this unexpected relationship between press freedom and representation can be found in the work of Bernard Manin (1997). On Manin's view, press freedom is essential for a good democracy, yet the proliferation of media inevitably leads to a much wider diversity of opinions than in a relatively unfree press environment. On this view it stands to reason that greater diversity of opinions, made possible by a free press, will make it more difficult for representatives to find ideational congruence with their citizens in political space. The general lesson here is that, while representation may be at the heart of democracy, everything that is democratic will not necessarily improve ideational congruence.

To conclude, there are both unsurprising and surprising findings in this paper. Somewhat unsurprisingly, we have found a decline in the representative deficit across Europe; a persistent difference between Western and Eastern Europe; and the importance of voice and accountability in determining the representative deficit. More unexpected were our findings concerning the relative unimportance of institutional factors, electoral turnout and GDP for our dependent variable, as well as the relationship between press freedom and the representative deficit. While we do not claim that ideational congruence between representatives and the represented is the only relevant factor for assessing a good democracy, or even for evaluating good representation, what we do insist upon is the importance of such a measure to *any* research on the quality of democracy. This paper has been an attempt to advance research on this fundamental question within the European context in a cross-national and longitudinal analysis.

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# The effect of the media in times of political distrust: the case of European countries

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**Abstract**. No study has yet explored the effect of all communication tools on political trust. Instead, studies on the media and their relationship with trust in political institutions have tended to focus on just a few types and have yielded contradictory results. This study aims to fill this gap, considering – on the one hand – television, the press and radio, and – on the other – the Internet and online social networks. Given that forms of media inevitably suffer from political choice as well as the political system, we analyse the effect of the media on public political trust. Based on pool data gathered by Eurobarometers (2014–2017) and multi-level regression techniques, it is possible to state that, of the various forms of media, the press and the Internet have a very significant effect on public political trust, as does media freedom.

**Keywords**. Media, Europe, political trust.

## INTRODUCTION

In the last decades, the subject of political trust has attracted significant interest in the field of political science. Increased interest in social trust and its nexus with political trust, growing levels of disaffection with the political system on the part of citizens (Norris 1999, 2011) and fluctuations in political trust over time (Van Ham & Thomassen, 2017) all continue to capture scholarly interest with regard to confidence in institutions.

How do the media affect public political trust? Debates about the role of the mass media in promoting political culture and affecting political support have generated opposing theories. On one side is the 'media malaise' thesis, which claims that the mass media affect citizens negatively, fostering political alienation by fuelling their cynicism (Mutz & Reeves, 2005) and, on the other, is the 'mobilisation' approach, which claims that the mass media augment citizens' political interest, learning, efficacy and participation (Norris, 1999). The theoretical debate between these perspectives has rendered the relationship between the media and democracy highly controversial.

Since the 1990s, the power of the media in democracies has been widely acknowledged (Manin, 1995) and its effects are evident. The media comprise a set of institutions that play the role of the 'civic teacher' in demo-

cratic societies (McComb, 2004), but some doubt persists as to their positive effect on democracy (Kellner, 2004). Despite a large number of studies on the subject, the effects of the media on the political system need further investigation, as suggested by Gunther and Mughan (2000) who, in examining the nexus between the media and democracy, highlight a paradoxical situation: in countries in transition the media play a crucial role in promoting the democratic process whereas, in mass democracies, they scarcely contribute to improving the quality of democracy. In other words, although the media represent a 'prerequisite for moulding the democratic quality of society' (Dahlgren, 2009, p. 108), they appear to have failed to consolidate democracies (Kleinnijenhuis, van Hoof & Oegema, 2006) and, in the case of new media, have generated misguided mobs rather than an informed public (Viner, 2016).

In contrast to previous studies, this investigation distinguishes traditional media (television, radio and newspapers) from new media (Internet and online social networks) and considers the freedom of the press in order to analyse how media affect political trust in European countries. The decision to compare different forms of media stems from the fact that citizens have multiple news sources from which to choose and varied ways to share their political views. Only a comparison of all media can shed light on how the media are used to obtain political news, a process that shapes the trust the public then places in political institutions.

In the scientific debate around media and political trust, the role of the independence of the media is undoubtedly important: where the media are free, there is a greater pluralism of voices and values (Czepek, Hellwig & Nowak, 2009), citizens are more satisfied with how democracy functions (Rodrìguez & Zechmeister, 2018) and demonstrate greater political knowledge (Leeson, 2008). However, in the last twenty years, the freedom of the press seems to have atrophied (The Economist, 2018): the number of journalists who have been imprisoned or have suffered violence for their work has increased – even among northern European countries which have always been characterised by high levels[1] of press freedom – and significant fluctuations are found in some countries of eastern and southern Europe, which have become or tend to be 'partially free' (Freedom of the Press, 2017). Given that control of public broadcasters by the political class could undermine the political

support of citizens, illuminating the effect that media freedom has on political trust is a necessary step in defining the health of a democracy.

Using information gathered by Eurobarometer, this paper looks at levels of political trust between 2014 and 2017, a difficult period for European governments and their institutions, as the Great Recession, globalisation and peak of the migrant crisis prompted harsh criticism of governments. Thus, this study contributes to the literature by providing a better understanding of differences in levels of political trust between individual European Union (EU) member states as well as changes over time. Applying a fixed regression model, we find differences between media showing how they and the media system play an important role in political support.

## POLITICAL SUPPORT, CITIZENS AND POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS

What do citizens really mean when they say they support democracy? Easton (1965) proposed a classification of political and institutional systems, combining three specific political spheres (political community, regime and authorities) with two types of political support (specific and widespread), but did not directly categorise political institutions or figures according to the type of support they enjoy. Subsequently, Norris (1999) expanded the original conceptualisation of political support, locating attitudes towards democratic regimes in the middle of a unidimensional continuum.

Adopting the institution-based notion of trust, political trust can be defined as the evaluation given of an entity (Van der Meer & Hakhverdian, 2017), for example, a political party, government or parliament (Thomassen, Andeweg & Van Ham, 2017) included in the core institutions of the state including branches of government (Norris, 2011). Political trust is useful in generating collective power (Gamson, 1968) and essential for the functioning of democracy (Hetherington, 1998) since it helps improve both the legitimacy and effectiveness of democratic regimes (Mishler & Rose, 2001). Reflecting on the stability of political systems (Easton, 1965), political trust represents an essential component of civic culture (Almond & Verba, 1963) and provides a reservoir of support when regime performance declines (Turper & Aarts, 2017).

Political trust may be seen as an extension of generalised trust, assimilated through the process of socialisation and later transferred to the political system and its institutions (Levi & Stoker, 2000). Others argue that the relationship between generalised trust and political trust

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[1] A survey carried out in the spring of 2017 by the University of Tampere, Finland, and the Finnish Association for Investigative Journalism (TJY) found that one in four journalists had been the victim of verbal or physical violence triggered by articles on refugees, immigration and racism (Jouralisti, 2017).

is weak or even non-existent (Kaase, 1999) because they are 'different things with different causes' and 'largely independent of each other' (Newton, 2001, pp. 201–203). To explain political trust, one should use political variables (Newton, 2007).

Political trust is a multi-faceted concept: it has been conceptualised as a political orientation towards figures as well as institutions (Denters, Gabriel & Torcal, 2007); political institutions have been defined in terms of being partisan or neutral (Rothstein & Stolle, 2008), and others have added international classifications (André, 2014). Hooghe (2011) represents political trust as a one-dimensional concept, in which citizens' differing levels of trust in political institutions are synthesised in an index of political trust using factorial techniques or additive aggregation procedures (Kroknes, Jakobsen, & Grønning, 2016). According to the established procedures used in the majority of studies on political trust, this study combined citizens' confidence in government, parliament and political parties into one single measure.

## MEDIA AND POLITICAL TRUST

The media can be considered a determinant factor of political trust. The media and politics are two interconnected worlds, the first of which allows the public to know the policies defined by the second and activates discussion between social figures and interest groups. In mediating between the various social interests, the media are increasingly able to define citizens' attitudes towards and perceptions of the social and political issues within the national debate (Fryberg *et al.*, 2012). The effects the media have on public opinion, and consequently on institutions, depend on the role they play within society and how they respond to citizens and institutions (Memoli & Splendore, 2014).

It is well-known that familiarity with an object can create a more favourable assessment of it, provided that it is not connected to negative signals (Zajonc, 2001). One might, therefore, hypothetically expect that, when the media diffuse bad political news, levels of political trust should decline. However, it is not always so. In general, political news has a modest impact on support and the effect can be either positive or negative, depending on the medium (Van Aelst, 2017), the content and the coverage of the news (Gross, Aday & Brewer, 2004) as well as on the citizens' ideological leaning (Brosius, Van Elsas & de Vreese, 2019). Furthermore, in some countries, the decline of political trust 'would not necessarily be bad news. It would represent the rise of a public that

is - and perhaps as they should be - sceptical of many forms of power' (Cook & Gronke, 2005, p. 801).

The principal features characterising the various forms of media differ greatly. Television news is a primary source of information for the general public. This medium influences public opinion (Page, Shapiro & Dempsey, 1987) and is useful for obtaining information on international affairs (Gunter, 2005). However, given the relatively superficial coverage of news stories on television, viewers perceive that they have learned little and, as a result, feel politically inefficacious (Barthel & Moy, 2017). The increasing visibility of political conflict through television is likely to exacerbate incivility among citizens, with detrimental effects on political trust (Muzt & Reeves, 2005). In contrast, Aarts *et al.*'s (2012) analysis of developed democracies shows that the level of exposure to television news has no effect at all on political trust (see also Ceron, 2015), but much depends on the type of broadcaster (Curran *et al.*, 2014).

It is generally agreed that newspaper exposure is more positively correlated with trust (Ceron, 2015) and other attitudes than exposure to television (Milner, 2002). Its news requires greater attention and, therefore, makes a greater impression on its audience (Graber, 1988). Its influence is due, in part, to the typographical style generated by the effect of printing (Postman, 2000). The press is characterised by more serious analyses and background information (Aarts, Fladmoe & Strömbäck, 2012), and its readers are better informed than television news viewers (Moy, Torres, Tanaka & McCluskey, 2005) showing a higher level of political knowledge than those using other media (Elo & Rapeli, 2010).

Despite its rich history, studies of radio as a medium are primarily undertaken in contexts where television is controlled by a minority. Radio broadcasting provides a useful means of expressing opinions about local political systems and develop a civic sense among listeners (Helge, 1994). In areas where the economy is thriving and collective well-being is evident, competition with other information tools, especially television, is consistent (Waisbord, 2000).

As previously observed, newspapers provide more detailed coverage of news and, therefore, appear more transparent than other traditional forms of media (Moy & Hussain, 2011), generating greater familiarity and knowledge of political institutions (Armingeon & Ceka, 2014). Furthermore, the more citizens use newspapers to find out about political institutions, 'the more they concur with newspapers regarding the attributes of the country's political institutions' (Camaj, 2014, p.198). It is, therefore, possible to hypothesise that *there is a posi-*

*tive nexus between the use of the press to acquire political news and political trust* (H1).

The studies on new media have yielded contradictory results (Groshek, 2009) when analysed in terms of political trust. For Diamond (2010), the Internet promotes pluralism in the market for political communication and, as Xenos and Moy (2007) show, tends to weaken the influence of political elites and traditional media. It encourages political interest among those who are not typically engaged (Davis & Owen, 1998) and may be a tool for either democratisation or authoritarianism (Best & Wade, 2009), with its effects contingent on the political environment in question (Cho, 2014). Offering a different means of obtaining information (Hill & Hughes, 1998), use of the internet seems to turn people away from involvement in the political arena (Sunstein, 2001) disconnecting citizens from the political community and fostering critical citizenship (You & Wang, 2019).

In today's multimedia environment, information is easily distributed on the Internet. The growth of online news has prompted a new set of concerns, as information control is less possible (Im, Cho, Porumbescu & Park, 2014) leaving the public with the responsibility of critically evaluating the reliability of online information (McGrew, Breakstone, Ortega, Smith & Wineburg, 2017). The Internet appears to facilitate the spread of 'fake' news, redefining aspects of political commitment (Dahlgren, 2015) and causing the public to doubt new media and its importance in democratic societies (Gallup & Knight Foundation, 2017). Given the increasing difficulty for the public in differentiating between false and correct information (Tandoc *et al.*, 2017), the use of the Internet as a source for political news is questionable, as is its ability to contribute to political-institutional support.

Online social networks were not designed specifically to foster political discussion (Papakyriakopoulos, Medina Serrano & Hegelich, 2020) but studies have, nevertheless, found that they help mobilise citizens (Bajomi-Lazar, 2013) and enable the public to discover, and possibly discuss, the political choices of rulers and the health of democracy (Coleman & Blumler, 2009). While, for some, use of social media contributes to the public's evaluation of the performance of the political system (Bailard, 2012), for others, the mere use of social media seems unrelated to democratic support (Ceron & Memoli, 2016) and negatively connected with levels of trust in political institutions (Ceron, 2015). Much depends on the partisan lens used by the public to evaluate the news (see Leeper & Slothuus, 2014), on party attitudes (Klein & Robinson, 2020) and on the content of the media more generally (Aalberg, Strömbäck & de Vreese, 2011).

Since the Internet appears not to facilitate public political support through online social networks, it is possible to hypothesise that *the use of the Internet to acquire political news affect negatively political trust* (H2).

A free media system is indispensable for the media to operate effectively and efficiently within society. Although the media are seen as the 'fourth estate' alongside the executive, legislature and judiciary, they require strong protection from political censorship, the government and other powerful influences so that they can freely reflect the different audiences they serve. With free media system, attempts to manipulate news are less successful (Birch, 2011) and public debate is fuelled (Mouffe, 2009). These aspects allow the public to access the information they need to make informed political choices (O'Neil, 1998) and to influence the political process (Ofcom, 2012) and good governance (Norris, 2004). Like the public, the political environment also benefits from a free media system, which promotes and strengthens the legitimacy of political decisions (Mutz & Martin, 2001) and facilitates an increase in public trust in political institutions (Zmerli, Newton & Schmitt-Beck, 2015).

Nevertheless, even with a free media system, the relationship between the media and the political system generally remains problematic. While the public function of the media as a watchdog for public authorities may stimulate the latter to make wise choices, public authorities – even while engaging in media pluralism – are simultaneously called upon to regulate the growing media market. The vicious circle between the media and public authorities makes media freedom a major factor in the consolidation of political trust. In many European countries, media freedom is declining (The Economist, 2018), especially in those southern European countries where there is no solid tradition of freedom of the press (Splendore, 2017). Given that 'media restrictions shape the window through which citizens see the political world' (Schedler, 2013, p. 274), it is probable that *when countries have free media, citizens' political trust increases* (H3).

## METHODS, DEPENDENT AND INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

The hypotheses discussed in the previous section have been tested in 28 European countries using four Eurobarometer surveys. By using a range of data concerning political trust and applying a Polychoric Principal Component Analysis, an additive index was constructed as a synthesis of analysed information (Table 1).

**Tab. 1.** Factor analysis.

| | Political Trust |
|---|---|
| Political parties | 0.802 |
| National government | 0.945 |
| National parliament | 0.969 |
| Kaiser – Meyer – Olkin test | 0.721 |
| Barlett's Test (Sig.) | 0.000 |
| Eigenvalue | 2.474 |
| Cronbach's Alpha | 0.800 |

Source: Eurobarometer 82.3 (2014), 83.4 (2015), 86.2 (2016), 88.3 (2017).

In twenty European countries out of twenty-eight,[2] between 2014 and 2017 the level of political trust increased (Figure 1), although it remains low in some countries. This trend was true across Europe, from north to south; further, in some of them there were increases in political trust above the European average, including in Portugal, Ireland, Hungary and France, where public opinion, over time, has proved to be more inclined to support political institutions.

In 2017, levels of trust in political institutions with values significantly above the European average were found in Luxembourg, Sweden, the Netherlands and Denmark. On the other hand, in Greece, public opinion appears to be dissatisfied with political institutions, most likely due to the fact that the political choices advanced by the Troika to negotiate the economic crisis reduced the effectiveness of institutions, thereby making them less credible in the eyes of the public.

The six principal independent variables used in the current study are represented by the use of the media to obtain news on national political matters via television, the printed press, radio, the Internet, online social networks,[3] as well as freedom of the press.[4] These variables enabled me to test the above hypotheses and assess how media consumption and freedom of the press affected political trust. I tested these hypotheses while controlling for a set of variables commonly used in the literature. First, at the individual level, I considered the sociodemographic variables of gender,[5] age,[6] education,[7] occupational status[8] and social class.[9] In addition, I considered ideology,[10] perception of the national economy,[11] satisfaction with democracy,[12] political discussion index[13] and two measures of media trust, one for traditional media and another for new media.[14] At an aggregated level, since both economy and institutional quality play a decisive role in political support (Van der Meer & Hakhverdian 2017), I considered GDP per capita PPP (purchasing power parity; logarithmic value) and Rule of Law.[15]

Table 2 summarises the variables that will be employed in the analysis providing descriptive statistics, while Table 3 reports correlation coefficients among variables. Despite a moderate correlation between Freedom of the Press, Rule of Law and GDP (log), when we remove either the Rule of Law or the GDP (log) from the regression model, the effect of Freedom of the Press on the dependent variable persists.

EMPIRICAL RESULTS

The multivariate analysis was conducted on a data set combining nearly 54,000 observations at the individual level nested with information at national level. The combination of these two levels of information suggests the use of a multi-level modelling procedure that considers the hierarchical nature of the data and, after running

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[2] The countries are Austria, the Czech Republic, Greece, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, and Romania.

[3] The question was: 'Could you tell me to what extent you…watch television on a TV set, read the written press, listen to the radio, use the Internet, use online social networks?' The answers included 0 'Never', 1 'Less often', 2 'Two or three times a month', 3 'About once a week', 4 'Two or three times a week', 5 'Everyday/Almost every day'. Answers of 'Don't know' were not considered in the analysis.

[4] The Freedom of Press index provides information about media independence and assesses the degree of print, broadcast and digital media freedom among countries and territories. It is characterised by three specific levels: 0 to 30 = free, 31 to 60 = partially free, 61 to 100 = not free. As there are no 'not free' European countries, it was recoded as 0 (partially free) to 1 (free).

[5] The variable is coded in the following way: 1 = males, 2 = females.
[6] The age range is 15 to 99.
[7] The variable is coded in the following way: 0 = no full education; 1 = still studying; 2 = <15 years; 3 = 16–20 years; 4 = 20+ years.
[8] The variable is coded in the following way: 0 = self-employed; 1 = employed; 2 = not working.
[9] The variable (left-right scale) is coded in the following way: 0 = working class; 1 = lower class; 2 = middle class; 3 = upper class; 4 = higher class.
[10] The variable is coded in the following way: 1 = left; 10 = right.
[11] The variable is coded in the following way: 0 = very bad + rather bad; 1 = very good + rather good.
[12] The variable is coded in the following way: 0 = not at all satisfied + not very satisfied; 1 = fairly satisfied + very satisfied.
[13] This is an additive index which ranges from 0 (where respondents do not discuss political issues at the local, national or European level) to 3 (where respondents discuss political issues at the local, national and/or European level).
[14] These are two additive indexes. While the traditional media index (television, press and radio) ranges from 0 (no trust) to 3 (trust), the new media index (internet and online social network) ranges from 0 (no trust) to 2 (trust).
[15] The values for each variable relate to the year preceding each survey.
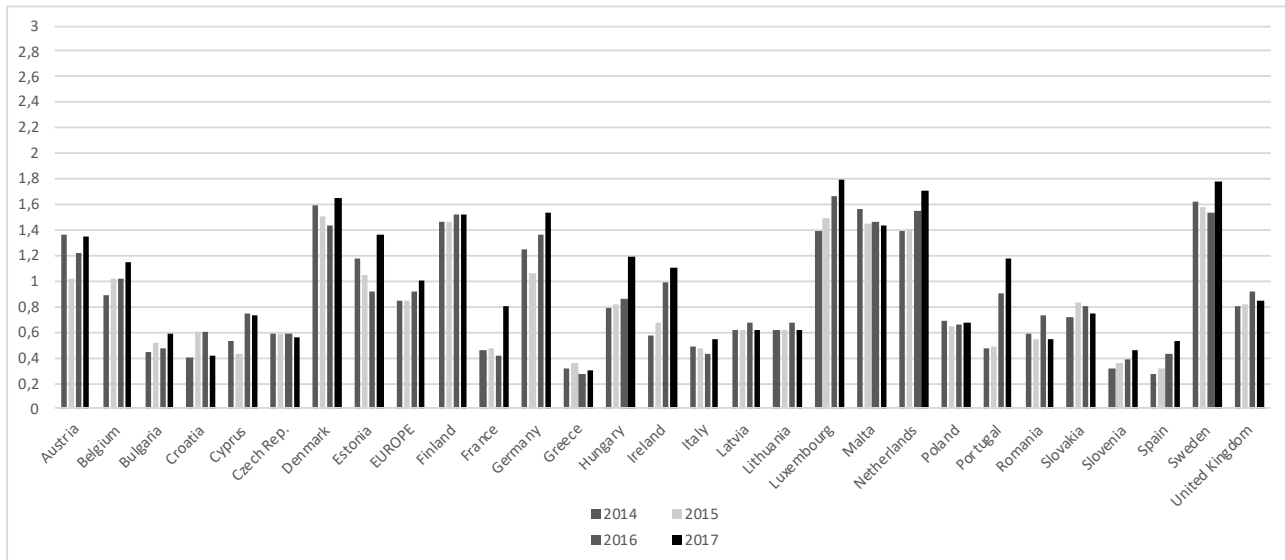
**Fig. 1.** Political Trust in Europe. Source: Eurobarometer 82.3 (2014), 83.4 (2015), 86.2 (2016), 88.3 (2017).

a Hausman test (prob>chi2=0.000), we employed a fixed-effect regression model with clustered standard errors.[16]

The first model, reported in Table 3, estimated the effects of traditional forms of media on political trust. The regression model explains 32.3% of the variance in political trust. As was expected, newspapers appear to increase political trust in the public (H1): this trend is found among those who use this medium at least weekly (B=0.037) and further intensifies when its use becomes daily (B=0.055). Compared to television and radio, newspapers – precisely because they are more accurate in detailing events – tend to reduce the sensationalist dimension by favouring a neutral and detached representation of the facts. By encouraging greater knowledge and awareness of political facts, newspapers bring the reader closer to institutions, fuelling a sense of political trust even when the political and institutional reality is problematic. This does not occur with television or radio which, for diverse reasons possibly related to programming schedules and short political news shows, rarely appear to increase political trust and, in the case of radio, actually discourage it.

The scenario presented in the new media model (model 2; R-square=0.275) is bleak: use of the Internet negatively impacts the dependent variable (H2) with a U intensity level, to a greater degree among those who use it sporadically (two or three times a month, B=-0.174) or systematically (every day/almost every day; B=-0.176)

and less intensely among those who use it one or more times a week. From the data, it emerges that the use of the Internet to acquire political news appears to have intensified a distrust of political institutions in one por-

**Tab. 2.** Descriptive statistics.

|  | Mean | St. dev. | Min | Max |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Political trust | 0.903 | 1.149 | 0 | 3 |
| Television | 4,651 | 0.998 | 0 | 5 |
| Press | 3.065 | 1.872 | 0 | 5 |
| Radio | 3.727 | 1.757 | 0 | 5 |
| Website | 3.675 | 2.019 | 0 | 5 |
| Online social network | 2.595 | 2.272 | 0 | 5 |
| Freedom of Press | 0.769 | 0.421 | 0 | 1 |
| Trust traditional media | 1.658 | 1.278 | 0 | 3 |
| Trust new media | 0.768 | 0.861 | 0 | 2 |
| Gender | 1.535 | 0.499 | 1 | 2 |
| Left-right | 5.278 | 2.290 | 1 | 10 |
| Education | 2.926 | 1.084 | 0 | 4 |
| Age | 49.477 | 18.238 | 15 | 99 |
| Satisfaction with democracy | 0.536 | 0.499 | 0 | 1 |
| Political discussion | 2.852 | 1.770 | 0 | 6 |
| Occupation | 2.430 | 0.634 | 1 | 3 |
| Social status | 1.334 | 1 | 0 | 4 |
| Satisfaction with national economy | 0.770 | 0.421 | 0 | 1 |
| Log Gdp per capita PPP ($t_{-1}$) | 10.382 | 0.330 | 9.680 | 11.461 |
| Rule of Law ($t_{-1}$) | 1.149 | 0.631 | -0.102 | 2.100 |

Source: Eurobarometer 82.3 (2014), 83.4 (2015), 86.2 (2016), 88.3 (2017), World Bank, World Governance Indicators, Freedom of Press.

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[16] Testing for time-fixed effects, the result (Prob>F=0.737) suggests that one could accept the null hypothesis that the coefficient for all years is jointly equal to zero; therefore, no time-fixed effects were needed.

**Tab. 3.** Correlation matrix.

| | Political trust | Television | Press | Radio | Website | Online social network | Trust traditional media | Trust new media | Gender | Left-right | Education | Age | Satisfaction with democracy | Political discussion |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Political trust | 1.000 | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Television | -0.001 | 1.000 | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Press | 0.195 | 0.096 | 1.000 | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Radio | 0.086 | 0.130 | 0.334 | 1.000 | | | | | | | | | | |
| Website | 0.062 | 0.062 | 0.140 | 0.155 | 1.000 | | | | | | | | | |
| Online social network | 0.026 | -0.074 | 0.001 | 0.044 | 0.591 | 1.000 | | | | | | | | |
| Trust traditional media | 0.400 | 0.083 | 0.201 | 0.129 | 0.064 | 0.0281 | 1.000 | | | | | | | |
| Trust new media | 0.160 | 0.008 | -0.011 | 0.014 | 0.159 | 0.212 | 0.309 | 1.000 | | | | | | |
| Gender | -0.025 | 0.033 | -0.062 | -0.038 | -0.009 | 0.065 | 0.026 | -0.002 | 1.000 | | | | | |
| Left-right | 0.032 | 0.027 | 0.001 | 0.011 | 0.009 | 0.006 | 0.019 | 0.045 | -0.037 | 1.000 | | | | |
| Education | 0.056 | 0.067 | 0.166 | 0.148 | 0.122 | -0.024 | 0.044 | 0.001 | 0.010 | 0.022 | 1.000 | | | |
| Age | 0.056 | 0.189 | 0.200 | 0.088 | -0.371 | -0.481 | 0.028 | -0.142 | -0.034 | -0.003 | 0.232 | 1.000 | | |
| Satisfaction with democracy | 0.436 | 0.010 | 0.179 | 0.096 | 0.098 | 0.041 | 0.298 | 0.060 | -0.013 | 0.040 | 0.054 | 0.034 | 1.000 | |
| Political discussion | 0.089 | 0.007 | 0.221 | 0.132 | 0.090 | -0.003 | 0.038 | 0.017 | -0.085 | -0.010 | 0.136 | 0.138 | 0.043 | 1.000 |
| Occupation | -0.008 | 0.029 | -0.040 | -0.104 | -0.210 | -0.159 | -0.013 | -0.081 | 0.079 | 0.053 | -0.329 | 0.227 | -0.018 | -0.047 |
| Social status | 0.175 | -0.061 | 0.168 | 0.086 | 0.214 | 0.106 | 0.117 | 0.050 | 0.003 | 0.081 | 0.164 | -0.019 | 0.170 | 0.148 |
| Satisfaction with national economy | 0.407 | -0.036 | 0.185 | 0.102 | 0.101 | 0.032 | 0.227 | 0.020 | -0.049 | 0.028 | 0.066 | 0.044 | 0.434 | 0.091 |
| Freedom of Press | 0.400 | 0.141 | -0.055 | 0.224 | 0.158 | 0.148 | 0.131 | -0.120 | -0.012 | -0.056 | 0.054 | 0.074 | 0.197 | 0.007 |
| Log Gdp per capita PPP ($t_{-1}$) | 0.240 | -0.046 | 0.275 | 0.176 | 0.161 | 0.018 | 0.117 | -0.168 | -0.042 | -0.074 | 0.067 | 0.117 | 0.285 | 0.056 |
| Rule of Law ($t_{-1}$) | 0.264 | -0.058 | 0.320 | 0.179 | 0.191 | 0.029 | 0.158 | -0.174 | -0.038 | -0.057 | 0.088 | 0.128 | 0.312 | 0.074 |

| | Political discussion | Occupation | Social status | Satisfaction with national economy | Freedom of Press | Log Gdp per capita PPP ($t_{-1}$) | Rule of Law ($t_{-1}$) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Political discussion | 1.000 | | | | | | |
| Occupation | -0.047 | 1.000 | | | | | |
| Social status | 0.148 | -0.111 | 1.000 | | | | |
| Satisfaction with national economy | 0.091 | -0.021 | 0.205 | 1.000 | | | |
| Freedom of Press | 0.007 | 0.042 | 0.040 | 0.245 | | | |
| Log Gdp per capita PPP ($t_{-1}$) | 0.056 | 0.046 | 0.144 | 0.360 | 0.611 | 1.000 | |
| Rule of Law ($t_{-1}$) | 0.074 | 0.055 | 0.115 | 0.375 | 0.766 | 0.853 | 1.000 |

Eurobarometer 82.3 (2014), 83.4 (2015), 86.2 (2016), 88.3 (2017), World Bank, World Governance Indicators, Freedom of Press.

tion of the population, possibly due to the quality of information disseminated through this medium (the control of which remains problematic), and to the tendency to select only information that strengthens an existing opinion. At the same time, online social networks appear to reduce political trust only when they are used daily or almost daily (B=-0.038).

From the first two models, it is clear that not all forms of media contribute to encouraging support of democratic institution: both traditional and new media are found to constitute, in some cases, an obstacle rather than an aid to the consolidation of democracy.

Model 3 estimates the effect of media freedom on the political confidence index (R-square=30.5). Although freedom of the media is more fragile today than any time since the end of the Cold War, it continues to be decisive in nourishing the public's sense of trust in political institutions (H3; B=0.109). The strength of independent news media contributes significantly to the formation of public opinion, allowing people to make informed choices in their political decisions. Nevertheless, the legitimatising effect of media pluralism on the political process does not seem to characterise all EU countries; this is particularly evident in those countries[17] where, over time, the media system has been subject to significant restrictions (Freedom of the Press, 2017; Repucci, 2020).

Model 4 uses all six independent variables and explains 30.8% of the variance in political trust; all hypotheses were confirmed. Forms of both new and old media were found to produce differentiated effects on political trust. Among these, newspapers and the Internet appear to be the cornerstones on which political trust can be established, consolidated or eroded. Much depends on the frequency of use and the context in which the media operate. When the media system is only partially free, citizens appear to distance themselves from their political institutions by becoming more critical and disheartened because the media no longer adequately represent the diversified perspectives and interests in the societies where they operate. Furthermore, the limits that oppose their freedom tend to cause public perceptions of political institutions to worsen. Television, radio and online social networks, whose effects on the dependent variable are rarely statistically significant, appear to contribute little to political trust. In conclusion, in the European media, where some political leaders have silenced critical media and strengthened those that offer favourable coverage (Repucci 2020), freedom of the press has become a luxury rather than the norm and the legitimising role of the institutions is

conveyed by the press and the Internet, which are able to bring citizens closer (in the case of the former) or further away (in the case of the latter) from their political institutions.

By checking these effects on the dependent variable using sociodemographic, economic and political indicators, I found that those with higher levels of education had less negative attitudes towards political institutions. If education encourages the public to be more critical of institutions, the perception of well-being gives them greater optimism and a greater propensity to trust in political institutions. Indeed, whether we consider the national economy, real (B=0.467) or perceived (B=0.439), or whether we look at the social status of the respondents, with the exception of the 'middle-lower class', trust in political institutions is more than positive. This is clearly not always the case: when the system of rules that governs the exercise of public power becomes more rigorous, citizens tend to rely less on political institutions (B=-0.346).

If it is true that trust generates trust among individuals (Putnam, 1993), the same connection can be found at the institutional level: when citizens trust in media, the level of political trust increase (traditional media: B=0.209, new media: B=0.133). The same scenario emerges when looking at the involvement of citizens in the political arena, whether at the level of discussing issues (B=0.015) or at a more general evaluation of the political system, i.e. satisfaction with the functioning of democracy (B=0.532).

In conclusion, a fluctuating level of political trust could prove acceptable, as institutions are not always able to achieve acceptable performance levels. However, not all types of media appear to facilitate the efforts of political institutions because, in some cases, as with the press or the Internet, they may amplify political and institutional criticalities and, hence, fuel public distrust.

## CONCLUSION

In recent years, the economic and migration crises have caused the already tense relationship between citizens and political institutions to be questioned. Citizens in Western democracies seem to be experiencing a democratic malaise towards their political systems (Norris, 2011); indeed, a crisis of governability characterises numerous consolidated democracies (Kupchan, 2012). Lower standards of living, job insecurity and growing socioeconomic inequality are increasingly stimulating citizens to demand a more appropriate response from their institutions.

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[17] The countries are Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Italy, Poland and Romania.

**Tab. 4.** Political Trust - Linear Fixed Regression Model.

| | Model 1 | | Model 2 | | Model 3 | | Model 4 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Coeff. | Rob. Std. Err. | Coeff. | Rob. Std. Err. | Coeff. | Rob. Std. Err. | Coeff. | Rob. Std. Err. |
| *Micro level* | | | | | | | | |
| Tv (never) | | | | | | | | |
| less often | -0.005 | 0.032 | | | | | 0.017 | 0.033 |
| two or three times a month | 0.999 ** | 0.042 | | | | | 0.107 ** | 0.043 |
| about once a week | 0.035 | 0.033 | | | | | 0.051 | 0.032 |
| two or three times a week | 0.021 | 0.026 | | | | | 0.042 | 0.026 |
| everyday\almost every day | -0.0026 | 0.021 | | | | | -0.002 | 0.022 |
| Press (never) | | | | | | | | |
| less often | -0.010 | 0.018 | | | | | -0.003 | 0.017 |
| two or three times a month | -0.003 | 0.026 | | | | | -0.000 | 0.024 |
| about once a week | 0.037 * | 0.019 | | | | | 0.044 ** | 0.020 |
| two or three times a week | 0.034 * | 0.017 | | | | | 0.043 ** | 0.017 |
| everyday\almost every day | 0.055 *** | 0.023 | | | | | 0.070 *** | 0.021 |
| Radio (never) | | | | | | | | |
| less often | -0.022 | 0.023 | | | | | -0.018 | 0.023 |
| two or three times a month | -0.060 ** | 0.026 | | | | | -0.055 ** | 0.026 |
| about once a week | -0.011 | 0.017 | | | | | -0.006 | 0.018 |
| two or three times a week | -0.031 | 0.021 | | | | | -0.028 | 0.020 |
| everyday\almost every day | -0.045 * | 0.024 | | | | | -0.033 | 0.023 |
| Internet (never) | | | | | | | | |
| less often | | | -0.034 | 0.038 | | | -0.029 | 0.033 |
| two or three times a month | | | -0.174 *** | 0.044 | | | -0.163 *** | 0.047 |
| about once a week' | | | -0.120 **** | 0.027 | | | -0.119 **** | 0.026 |
| two or three times a week | | | -0.138 **** | 0.030 | | | -0.141 **** | 0.031 |
| everyday\almost every day | | | -0.176 **** | 0.035 | | | -0.161 **** | 0.035 |
| Online social network (never) | | | | | | | | |
| less often | | | 0.004 | 0.020 | | | 0.006 | 0.020 |
| two or three times a month | | | 0.040 | 0.034 | | | 0.046 | 0.035 |
| about once a week | | | 0.036 | 0.024 | | | 0.040 * | 0.021 |
| two or three times a week | | | -0.003 | 0.019 | | | -0.003 | 0.019 |
| everyday\almost every day | | | -0.038 ** | 0.017 | | | -0.001 | 0.019 |
| Gender | -0.018 | 0.012 | 0.007 | 0.013 | -0.015 | 0.012 | -0.012 | 0.012 |
| Education (no full-time education) | | | | | | | | |
| still studying | 0.014 | 0.107 | -0.109 | 0.117 | -0.009 | 0.113 | -0.028 | 0.115 |
| <15 | -0.165 *** | 0.048 | -0.225 **** | 0.050 | -0.171 *** | 0.050 | -0.188 *** | 0.049 |
| 16-20 years | -0.142 **** | 0.032 | -0.187 **** | 0.037 | -0.159 **** | 0.034 | -0.153 **** | 0.032 |
| 20+ years | -0.076 ** | 0.029 | -0.106 *** | 0.031 | -0.090 *** | 0.031 | -0.078 ** | 0.031 |
| Age | 0.002 ** | 0.001 | 0.002 ** | 0.001 | 0.002 *** | 0.001 | 0.001 | 0.001 |
| Occupation (self-employed) | | | | | | | | |
| Employed | -0.020 | 0.021 | 0.007 | 0.019 | -0.015 | 0.019 | -0.014 | 0.020 |
| not working | -0.021 | 0.023 | -0.018 | 0.020 | -0.016 | 0.023 | -0.022 | 0.022 |

|  | Model 1 | | Model 2 | | Model 3 | | Model 4 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|  | Coeff. | Rob. Std. Err. | Coeff. | Rob. Std. Err. | Coeff. | Rob. Std. Err. | Coeff. | Rob. Std. Err. |
| Social status (the working class of society) | | | | | | | | |
| the lower middle class of society | 0.026 | 0.024 | 0.039 | 0.026 | 0.024 | 0.025 | 0.030 | 0.024 |
| the middle class of society | 0.055 ** | 0.024 | 0.080 *** | 0.027 | 0.054 ** | 0.025 | 0.062 ** | 0.025 |
| the upper middle class of society | 0.144 *** | 0.047 | 0.190 *** | 0.051 | 0.148 *** | 0.048 | 0.153 *** | 0.048 |
| the higher class of society | 0.117 * | 0.072 | 0.155 ** | 0.073 | 0.116 | 0.075 | 0.126 * | 0.072 |
| National economy | 0.448 **** | 0.028 | 0.489 **** | 0.030 | 0.443 **** | 0.027 | 0.439 **** | 0.027 |
| Left-right | 0.005 | 0.008 | 0.004 | 0.009 | 0.004 | 0.009 | 0.005 | 0.009 |
| Satisfaction with democracy | 0.540 **** | 0.034 | 0.635 **** | 0.045 | 0.533 **** | 0.034 | 0.532 **** | 0.034 |
| Political discussion index | 0.014 *** | 0.003 | 0.017 **** | 0.004 | 0.014 **** | 0.004 | 0.015 *** | 0.003 |
| Trust in traditional media | 0.239 **** | 0.013 | | | 0.211 **** | 0.014 | 0.209 **** | 0.014 |
| Trust in new media | | | 0.234 **** | 0.016 | 0.122 **** | 0.013 | 0.133 **** | 0.013 |
| *Macro level* | | | | | | | | |
| Freedom of Press | | | | | 0.109 *** | 0.028 | 0.103 *** | 0.028 |
| Log GDP per capita PPP | | | | | 0.411 | 0.264 | 0.467 * | 0.246 |
| Rule of Law | | | | | -0.345 ** | 0.144 | -0.346 ** | 0.142 |
| Constant | -0.010 | 0.067 | 0.251 *** | 0.084 | -4.049 | 2.800 | -4.459 * | 2.604 |
| Sigma_u | 0.184 | | 0.232 | | 0.251 | | 0.248 | |
| Sigma_e | 0.935 | | 0.958 | | 0.930 | | 0.928 | |
| Rho | 0.037 | | 0.056 | | 0.068 | | 0.066 | |
| R square | 0.323 | | 0.275 | | 0.305 | | 0.308 | |
| Number of observations | 53,922 | | 53,922 | | 53,922 | | 53,922 | |
| Number of countries | 28 | | 28 | | 28 | | 28 | |

Note: The robust standard errors have been adjusted for 28 cluster (countries); *p<0.10, **p<0.05, ***p<0.01, ****p<0.001. Source: Eurobarometer 82.3 (2014), 83.4 (2015), 86.2 (2016), 88.3 (2017), World Bank, World Governance Indicators, Freedom of Press.

Among the determinants of political trust, some forms of media seem to play a salient role. Studies have considered the impacts of the media in different political regimes, highlighting the diverse effects that old and new forms of media generate within the public domain. However, no study has yet examined the effect of both traditional and new media on levels of political trust. This article has thus sought to contribute to existing knowledge by providing an account of the dynamic interrelationship between the media and political support.

Using Eurobarometer data collected from 2014 to 2017, this study found that, in European countries, political institutions can achieve appreciable levels of performance. Support for political institutions is as high as ever in Scandinavian countries but, in southern European countries (with a few exceptions), political institutions are struggling to meet citizens' demands.

Comparisons between traditional and new media reveal a clear lack of homogeneity within the individual conceptual labels that aggregate television, radio and the press, on one side, and the Internet and online social networks, on the other. The contrast that emerges between newspapers, on the one hand, and the Internet, on the other, encapsulates how little the distinction between traditional and new media has diminished in the last four years, rendering the media galaxy much more articulate. Although for some scholars the new media are characterised by deference to authority (Donohue, Tichenor & Olien, 1995), favouring topics and interpretations proposed by government officials while neglecting alternative voices (Bennett, Lawrence & Livingston, 2007), the results of this study are more nuanced. As was expected, where the media system is free, media outlets are able to play a key role in bringing citizens closer to politics (as in the case of the press) or making them more critical, sceptical and disheartened (as in the case of the Internet) (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018).

A limitation of this work lies in the absence of information in the data-set used that would have enabled me to evaluate the slant of the news, a crucial factor in fully

understanding the effects of the media on political support. Future research could consider these aspects by examining the differences between traditional and new media, as well as expanding the number of cases and the time frame.

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