

BOOK REVIEW

## Consequences of Context: How the Social, Political and Economic Environment Affects Voting

Edited by Hermann Schmitt, Paolo Segatti and Cees van der Eijk. London, Lanham: ECPR Press / Rowman & Littlefield, 2021. 316p., £88,00/\$115,00 (hardcover)

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*Consequences of Context* edited by Hermann Schmitt, Paolo Segatti and Cees van der Eijk aims to provide an extensive study of how context influences individuals’ electoral behaviour. The editors – leading experts in electoral behaviour from a comparative perspective – grouped a stellar collection of scholars relying on the True European Voter project as the launch pad for this collective effort. The result is brilliant and this book represents the better example to date of the recent shift that occurred in the field of voting behaviour from methodological individualism to a more subtle view according to which voters’ preferences are determined not only by individual characteristics but also by the characteristics of the context in which voters are embedded. Contexts are distinguished on the basis of conceptual distinctions (operationalized into variables) rather than their ‘proper names’, following Przeworsky and Teune (1970). Specifically, the focus is on the social, political and economic features of context and citizens’ electoral behaviour involves both their participation in elections and their decision of which party to vote for. However, the objective of this study is not to investigate whether citizens vote and for which specific party. Conversely, this book aims to answer the more fundamental question of how the traditional micro-level determinants of these behaviours interact with the social, economic and political features of the environment in which elections take place.

This broad goal is systematically pursued across 12 chapters, relying on an integrated database of national election studies conducted in European countries in the second half of the 20th century. In particular, Chapters 1, 2, 3 and 12 are key to grasping the novelties and the main messages of this study. Indeed, the goal and research questions of the book are clearly stated in Chapter 1 by Segatti, Schmitt and van der Eijk. The thesis put forward in the book is that the key micro-foundations of voting (social background characteristics, sociopsychological attitudes, political inclinations and preferences about policy issues) tend to be the same everywhere. Yet, their relative importance varies across space and time. Clearly, the idea that context matters is not new. However, the novelty of this research (and hence its merits) concerns the variety of contextual characteristics considered, the type of contextual effect analysed and how the comparability problem of vote choice is addressed and solved.

As regards the latter, the set of vote choice options can significantly vary across countries and quite often within countries over time. Previous studies solved this problem by conflating party choice with a specific party characteristic (left-right positioning, dispersion of their social base, being in government or not). This is quite limiting in multi-party systems, especially when the goal is to assess the influence of macro-characteristics on micro-level predictors of vote choice. Other studies offer more adequate solutions by relying on multilevel conditional logit models,

which do not misrepresent the actual set of party choices available to voters. This book follows a similar logic, relying on an innovative multi-level logistic regression methodology with a stacked data matrix (i.e. respondents as cases have been reshaped into voter-party dyads), whose advantage is the inclusion of all parties, along with party characteristics, in the explanatory models, as originally shown by van der Eijk and Franklin (1996). Chapter 2 by van der Eijk, De Sio and Vezzoni clarifies that this analytical and methodological approach enables us to assess not only the direct effect of context on electoral behaviour but also its conditioning effect on the relative weight of different individual-level determinants of voting decisions. This is the second aspect that meritoriously differentiates this study from previous ones, which mostly focused on direct or indirect/compositional effects of contextual variables. Furthermore, this approach enables the shift of the focus from the explanation of party-specific vote choices to a systemic explanation of the voting decision process (the voting calculus) when different contextual characteristics are taken into account. This means, for party choice, that the focus is on the relations between individuals' characteristics and all the main parties and how these relations are conditioned by different kinds of contextual characteristics. Although (few) studies have already addressed this task [e.g. see my own work with Vincenzo Emanuele in *Italian Political Science Review*, 45(2), 2015], no study has had, to my knowledge, the same breadth so far not only in terms of both synchronic and diachronic comparative data used, but also for the variety of the contextual characteristics – politicization of social divides, institutional aspects, party competition over European issues and on populist appeals, the state of the economy, party system stability and fragmentation, left-right party polarization, ideological structuring – measured at country-level or, more often, at election-level. This represents the third element of novelty of this study and therefore the third main reason why this book is important.

This systemic analysis permits us to understand what drove voters to behave the way they did, something that is impossible to infer from election results. Therefore, the fourth remarkable merit of this book is that it dispels common myths and misleading interpretations of voters' motivations based on electoral outcomes, often widely disseminated in the media and sometimes also in the academic debate.

As regards the empirical analyses, Chapter 3 by Schmitt, Segatti and van der Eijk provides two parsimonious microlevel explanatory models of electoral behaviour – one for electoral participation and one for party choice – relying on the main findings of the various schools of electoral behaviour. These models constitute the baseline upon which cross-level interaction effects with relevant context variables are estimated in subsequent chapters. Finally, in Chapter 12 van der Eijk, Segatti and Schmitt summarize the main findings of the research showing that for both electoral participation and vote choice the strongest contextual effects are those the authors labelled as relating to the 'substance and style of politics' (p. 232). In other words, factors driven by political leaders and parties, who politicise social divides, issues and policies, and who compete discursively by using frames that influence citizens' attitudes towards politics. This finding is relevant because it shows that the traditional emphasis on institutional aspects of context is too limiting. Furthermore, results show that some individual factors are most susceptible to being moderated by contextual factors: age and education as regards electoral participation; predictors containing subjective elements (leader sympathy, ideological distance, partisanship) as for party choice.

The relevance of the chapters discussed so far does not entail that Chapters 4–11 are not important: conversely, each of them superbly addresses a specific contextual characteristic and the way it interacts with the individual-level determinants of both electoral participation and vote choice. However, the reader can focus only on the topics in which she is most interested, without losing the overall meaning of the book, as long as she reads the aforementioned Chapters 1, 2, 3 and 12. This possible flexibility in the reading of the chapters, the clarity of the analytical framework and the ability shown by the authors to translate into simple language an innovative, fine-grained and empirically solid analysis strategy – but also complex to manage

and explain – represent further merit of this book, which results particularly suitable for university courses dealing with electoral issues, quantitative methodology and comparative research.

To conclude, this book represents a unique contribution that could be path-breaking in the field of electoral studies in a comparative perspective, with an impressive wealth of data. What is lacking? As recognized by the authors themselves, some analyses are inevitably exploratory given their novelty and, consequently, some interpretations are post hoc, requiring further theoretical and empirical elaborations. However, these tentative interpretations are promising for fruitful further research. In particular, the finding about the strong moderating effects of macro-variables related to the ‘substance and style of politics’ has all the potential to stimulate other analyses on the same topic, considering for instance the strategic role of political actors during the electoral campaigns and the effects of the media. Another possible limitation of the research is intrinsically linked to a research design based on pooled datasets, which considers elections as discrete-time events with time as a nominal-level variable. Although this choice is coherent with this book’s purpose, it also entails that results do not unveil whether there are changes over time in the moderating effects of contextual variables. Separate multilevel models for different time periods or different modelling of time effects could have helped in this regard, but all these tasks maybe could not realistically be combined within a single volume. Furthermore, an even more extensive usage of marginal effects plots could have helped the reader for a more straightforward interpretation of the cross-level interactions between macro-level variables and micro-level predictors of voting behaviour. However, this is a minor point, as well as some (few) inconsistencies between data shown in charts and the related comment in the main text (something that can be easily solved in a further edition of the volume).

A final consideration is linked to the limitations of any research based on regression analysis, as recognized by the authors themselves, which can estimate only total effects without unveiling whether a macro-level variable is a mediator of another macro-level variable. For this purpose, it would be necessary a different analysis strategy based on multilevel logistic structural equation modelling. The latter could permit the construction of models in which multiple contextual variables are included simultaneously to estimate and specify structural relationships at both the context and at the individual level, as well as the modelling of direct, indirect and contingent contextual effects.

Apart from these aspects, which could be properly investigated in future research, the book is highly recommended to all those who have an interest in electoral behaviour and in comparative politics more broadly. Indeed, the originality and breadth of the findings, the sound analytical framework and the rigorous methodology of this research can open the way to many other enquiries about the influence of context on both electoral participation and party choice. In this regard, this book represents the first, comprehensive overview of contextual moderation effects and, at the same time, it is the first step in the development of what could be called a meta-theory of electoral behaviour, in which the different existing approaches are considered as complementary rather than rivals. This attests to the ultimate, important value of *Consequences of context*.

## References

- Przeworski A and Teune H (1970) *The Logic of Comparative Social Inquiry*. New York: Wiley-Interscience.  
 Van der Eijk C and Franklin MN (1996) Choosing Europe? The European electorate and national politics in the face of union.