



## Electoral Inquiry

## Making electoral democracy work

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## ABSTRACT

This note presents a new electoral studies research program that will examine party and voter behaviour in 27 elections (national, supra-national, and sub-national) in five countries (Canada, France, Germany, Spain, and Switzerland) and that includes a series of experiments designed to complement the analyses of these 27 elections. The purpose is to ascertain how the rules of the game, especially the electoral system, and the competitiveness and salience of elections influence the reciprocal relationship between voters and parties.

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The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada has awarded a major grant for a seven-year research project entitled “Making Electoral Democracy Work”. The goal of the study is to develop a comprehensive understanding of how the rules of the game influence parties and voters. The study will examine 27 elections (national, supra-national, and sub-national) in five countries (Canada, France, Germany, Spain, and Switzerland) and will include: an internet panel survey of the same citizens over different elections; an analysis of party strategies in these same 27 elections; and a series of innovative experiments designed to complement the analyses of party and voter behaviour. The total cost of the project is \$3.7 million (CDN).

The study is directed by André Blais (Montreal) and involves the following researchers from political science, experimental economics and psychology: William Cross (Carleton); Louis Massicotte (Laval); Martial Foucault and Claude Montmarquette (Montreal); Jim Engle-Warnick and Elisabeth Gidengil (McGill); Fred Cutler, Ben Nyblade, Paul Quirk, and Victoria Savalei (UBC); Laura Stephenson (Western Ontario); Indridi Indridason (California-Riverside); Christopher Anderson (Cornell); Matt Golder and

Sona Golder (Florida State); Christopher Achen (Princeton); James Kuklinski (Illinois, Urbana-Champaign); Thomas Gschwend (Mannheim); Jean-François Laslier (Paris); Ignacio Lago (Pompeu Fabra); Karine van der Straeten (Toulouse); and Hanspeter Kriesi (Zurich).

The aim is to examine how the rules of the game, and particularly the electoral system, and the competitiveness and salience of the election influence the dynamic and reciprocal relationship between voters and parties. The study will focus on four dimensions of party strategies: inter-party coordination, campaign strategies, mobilization, and candidate selection. With respect to voters, special attention will be given to the decision to vote sincerely, to vote strategically or to abstain, as well as assessments of the rules under which representatives are elected.

The study is designed to explain how and why voter and party behaviour varies across space and time. We will compare voter and party behaviour across five countries with different electoral rules. We will be able to see whether the same parties and/or voters behave differently when they find themselves in simultaneous elections with different voting rules (FPTP in the local district and PR nationally, as in Germany), a sequence of elections with different systems (PR for European elections, two rounds for legislative and presidential elections, and a mixed system for local elections, as in France), or a sequence of elections with the same

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voting system but different electoral contexts (federal and provincial elections in Canada). Finally, we will examine the effects of variation within countries, most especially variation in district magnitude (both across regions within the same election and across elections within the same region), particularly in Spain and Switzerland.

In each country, we have selected two regions to ensure some variation in the electoral system or electoral context. The regions are: Ile de France and Provence/Alpes/Côte d'Azur in France; Hamburg and Hesse in Germany; Zurich and Lucerne in Switzerland; Madrid and Catalonia in Spain; and British Columbia and Quebec in Canada.

In each of the French, German and Spanish regions, we will cover three elections: one national, one sub-national, and one supra-national. The sub-national election will be municipal in France, Land in Germany, and regional in Spain. In Canada, we will consider federal and provincial elections (local elections are nonpartisan) while we will cover federal, cantonal, and local elections in Switzerland (but local elections in Lucerne only, because local elections in Zurich are not all held at the same time). All in all, 27 elections will be included, to be held between 2011 and 2015.

The analysis of party strategies will be based on a combination of qualitative and quantitative sources, most especially information provided by the parties during election campaigns (party manifestos, press releases, TV ads, party websites), media coverage of the campaigns, party spending data (where available), as well as semi-structured interviews with party strategists.

The study of voter choice will be based on an internet panel survey in which the same voters will be interviewed three times (twice in Canada) in the last week of three different election campaigns. In each election the sample size will be 2000 respondents and the minimal panel sample size, that is, respondents who participate in each of the three waves, will be 1000. The questionnaire will include questions about vote choice, preferences, strategic considerations, political attitudes, political awareness, and evaluations of electoral institutions and overall democratic performance.

There will be a special attempt to ascertain how party strategies affect voters' choices and to determine how party strategies are themselves developed on the basis of anticipated voter behaviour (as conditioned by the prevailing electoral system).

Our observational analyses of party strategies and voter choice will be complemented by a series of laboratory experiments designed to isolate the causal impact of electoral institutions and/or contexts on party and voter behaviour. In most of the experiments the participants will

be invited to vote (or not) for one of the parties or candidates running in the election. The primary dependent variables will be whether participants decide to vote or to abstain, whether they vote sincerely or strategically, whether they vote "correctly" or not, and how satisfied or dissatisfied they are with the way democracy works. The main treatments will be the electoral system, the number of parties or candidates, and the amount and nature of available information. We will also perform a number of experiments in which the participants will be party leaders who have to decide whether or not to coordinate with other parties, whether or not to attack their adversaries, and which policy positions to adopt.

This ambitious research is based on systematic comparisons across individuals and parties, across countries and regions within countries, and over time within regions and countries as well as among the same individuals and parties. The study covers elections held under a variety of voting rules and contexts, and it encompasses both parties and voters. The causal processes through which the rules of the game affect the behaviour of both parties and voters will be explicated and tested through a combination of experimental, quasi-experimental, and non experimental approaches. The goal is to make an important contribution to the understanding of how electoral democracies actually function and why they perform better in some contexts than in others.

In addition to publishing our findings in traditional academic outlets our purpose is also to foster an active dialogue about our results and their implications for the design of electoral institutions with the policy community. To that effect, we will establish close links and organize joint workshops with our partners: the Sweden-based International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), the German Bertelsmann Foundation, and, in Canada, the Institute for Research on Public Policy, the Directeur Général des Élections du Québec, and Elections Canada. This collaboration will lead to the organization of an international symposium on the challenges of electoral democracy, to be held in 2015, which will be designed to stimulate an open discussion of proposals for institutional reforms to enhance the performance of contemporary democracies.

The project will benefit from the wise input of a scientific board consisting of leading international scholars: John Aldrich (Duke), David Austen-Smith (Northwestern), David Farrell (Manchester), Pamela Paxton (Ohio State), and Philip Tetlock (Berkeley).

More detailed information about the project can be found on our website: [www.electoral democracy.com](http://www.electoral democracy.com).