

## New perspectives on information and electoral competition

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## **New perspectives on information and electoral competition**

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How do voters make electoral choices? Answering this supposedly simple question is actually one of the most complex endeavors in electoral research. There has been substantial research output over the last 80 years with a number of traditions (e.g., sociological, social-psychological, or rational choice) being developed and refined (for an overview see van der Eijk and Franklin 2009). Among other things, these attempts at explaining vote choice have one assumption in common: that voters at large are informed about the electoral processes, party preferences, and their own preferences. Quality, quantity, and sources of information may vary regarding the different explanatory approaches. Nevertheless, an important strand in the literature has therefore examined the relationship between information and electoral choices—a strand that we investigate and extend in this special issue. Specifically, we present different perspectives on how electoral competition, the core factor structuring electoral choices, is related to information. By electoral competition, we mean the result of interactions between voters and vote seekers (candidates or political parties) in a systemic way. Clearly, this goes far beyond using the term as a minimalistic condition for democracy (Dahl 1971). Moreover, we do not limit ourselves to looking at party competition only which would be constrained to supply-side analyses. Instead, all papers in this special issue focus on a broader conception of electoral competition, as it more broadly encompasses the actions and

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The papers of the special issue were presented at the workshop “Electoral Competition in Cross-National Research: Linking Voters, Parties and the Media” at the 2013 ECPR Joint Sessions in Mainz coordinated by the guest editors Giebler, Banducci, and Kritzinger.

effects of voters, political parties, electoral institutions, and the media. By doing so, we take into account the outcomes of elections that is always a result of choices on the demand as well as the supply side. Hence, it is not surprising that there are several theories and approaches to electoral competition which also include assumptions about the information levels of vote seekers—maybe best and most well-known represented by the work of Downs (1957) or Stokes (1963).

Why should we care about electoral competition when trying to answer the question how electoral choices are made? Following Dahl (1971), the conduct of free, fair, and inclusive elections that are competitive is a minimal condition in most accounts of democracy. Elections, where multiple parties are forced to vie for political power, ensure real choice for voters and induce the governing elite to respond and political parties to deliver on promises. Empirically, the presence of electoral competition goes far beyond the mere distinction of democracies from autocracies: it improves representation (Powell 2000) and increases turnout (Franklin 2004), economic performance (Przeworski and Limongi 1993), quality of governance (Hobolt and Klemmensen 2008), and, in new democracies, stability (Wright 2008). Yet some studies find no effect or highlight the disruptive nature of too much competition (see, for example, Powell 1982). Moreover, authors like Duverger (1963) or Boix (1999) argue that electoral competition is a multi-stage process and that competitiveness can be influenced by a wide array of factors. Thus, while there are certain empirical regularities, the level of competition in contemporary political systems, its moderators, and its consequences are still a matter of debate—also reflecting a lack of conceptual clarity (Bischoff 2006). Among others, this shortcoming is addressed by several contributions in this special issue.

The articles in this special issue take different approaches to understanding the relationship of information to electoral competition. This relationship in itself encompasses crucial elements of contemporary representative democracies that go far beyond and far deeper than the contemporary debate about fake news and filter bubbles. Political parties provide information on their policy programs to distinguish themselves from other contestants and to attract as many voters as possible. Voters, on the other hand, have, collect, or update information on parties and contexts as a prerequisite for meaningful choices (e.g., Banducci et al. 2017). Moreover, the nature and amount of information a voter has available influences the relevance of the different elements of the vote function (e.g., Johann et al. 2017). However, electoral competition itself can be conceptualized as a source of information. For example, parties tend to increase the campaign magnitude in close-race constituencies, thereby providing more information for voters in those constituencies. The same can be said about polarization: voters tend to know more about parties and their policy positions in polarized and, hence, more competitive constellations (e.g., Prior 2013). To decrease costs for both parties and voters, ideally, the media functions as a mediator (e.g., Barabas and Jerit 2009). As a result, we argue that any approach to understand the effects of electoral competition on electoral choices, as well as to make sense of the aforementioned contradicting empirical findings, makes it necessary to acknowledge the relationship of information and electoral competition.

The degree of electoral competition can be structured by the respective context. Hence, we in particular focus on information effects induced by electoral campaigns

and news media from a comparative perspective. Here, political parties differ in terms of strategies and capacities as well as coverage by the media. Simultaneously, the contributions to this special issue take into account that voters differ in their exposure to campaign and media effects and that they possess different characteristics leading to unequal levels of information and unequal information effects. Switching the perspective, the same can be said about information: Amount and accessibility of information are dependent on a mix of individual as well as contextual factors. Hence, the papers in this special issue investigate heterogeneity in this regard as well.

The relationship of information, electoral competition, and electoral choices of parties as well as voters is complex<sup>1</sup>. For example, the supply side provides information to varying degrees which is then taken up and processed by the media. Voters differ not only in information processing capacities but electoral competition levels make it also more or less reasonable to invest in information seeking—in general or in regard to specific supply-side actors. The list of potential linkages might not be endless but clearly is beyond a reasonable scope of a single analysis. In their entirety, the papers in this special issue address the most important linkages as deduced from various branches of research. Hence, beyond their stand-alone contribution, the collection of papers helps us understand in a more detailed way how these constituting elements of democracy, information, competition, and behavior affect each other and which (causal) mechanisms are at work. By doing so, they also provide insights on how a comprehensive research agenda could look like.

Three studies presented in this special issue focus primarily on the demand side of elections. Wagner's paper (2017) provides an upgrade to existing measures of electoral competition. In doing so, he addresses the aforementioned issues of missing clarity, both in terms of concepts as well as measurement approaches. Wagner starts with the observation that competition is more or less exclusively measured on the meso or macro level, thereby neglecting the micro-level concept of availability—understood as the electoral availability of an individual to several parties—inherent to classical conceptual work on electoral competition. Therefore, in a first step, he develops such a measure which enables researchers to test the microfoundations so often underlying statements about electoral competition without running in danger of ecological fallacy. Moreover, the nature of the measures allows for aggregation, both on the level of parties as well as countries. In a second step, the paper investigates the sources of individual-level competition from a multi-level perspective. Regarding the overall special issue, Wagner's paper provides a clear statement on the importance of theoretically derived measures of electoral competition to prevent unreliable findings in the context of linkages between information, electoral competition, and political behavior.

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<sup>1</sup> As will be shown below, the special issue does include contributions which are not limited to demandside behavior but does cover supply-side behavior as well. Hence, the term 'electoral choices' is used in a broader definition that encompasses the behavior of both crucial actor groups in representative democracies. Clearly, most of the arguments presented above do apply to both groups or do refer to the dynamic relationship of both. For the sake of readability, we use the simpler term 'behavior' synonymously.

Similar to Wagner, Vegetti et al. (2017) present a new measure of an individual's information on party placements on the left–right dimension. Especially in, but not limited to, the context of spatial voting models, (correct) information on party placements plays a crucial role for electoral choices. Hence, understanding party placements by individual voters, constituting a very specific type of information, becomes crucial for analyses of both electoral competition as well as behavior. However, as the authors argue, there are no convincing approaches measuring the information level regarding party placements in a party system for each individual. Vegetti et al. do not just close this gap with their proposed measure of such knowledge but also investigate its determinants. Here, electoral competition in terms of party system polarization is of high importance: General political knowledge decreases in relevance if polarization increases. In other words, the paper helps us to understand the relationship between general and specific political knowledge while at the same time it is highlighting the positive impact of competition which makes general knowledge less relevant for meaningful electoral choices based on correct party placements. Existing and more general information is not always used to generate specific knowledge or information but is diminished in importance by factors linked to high levels of electoral competition.

A third paper focusing on the demand side is also part of this special issue. However, due to some technical peculiarities it was published in an earlier issue (1/2017). The paper by Giebler et al. (2017) provides in way a follow-up part to the paper by Merz. It focuses on the behavioral consequences of parties' visibility in the media. In other words, it investigates the effect of information levels regarding parties on the electoral choices by voters. As it was demonstrated by several studies, governing parties tend to lose votes in EP elections in comparison to first-order national elections: voters voice their dissatisfaction with current governments by supporting parties in opposition. Giebler et al. investigate whether media framing can help governing parties to overcome or at least to decrease their competitive disadvantage in second-order elections. By increasing the importance of EU-related factors for vote choice, government actors should benefit as they may enjoy a better reputation and may be considered the more competent actors on EU issue. The authors show that there are indeed media effects by priming the issue of Europe. Where government actors are visible in EU news coverage, EU issue voting tends to increase loyalty while decreasing the probability to vote for the opposition and thus improves the electoral prospects for governing parties. This is even more the case if the issue is primed by negative campaign coverage.

The remaining two contributions in this special issue focus on the political supply side. The paper by Trumm et al. (2017) investigates the impact of campaign efforts on turnout levels in the 2010 UK general election. In doing so, the authors look at the relationship of behavior on the supply side on information levels. In addition, they link information levels to behavior on the demand side and show that competition leads to unequal weight of campaign efforts in this regard. In general, campaigns (are supposed to) provide information of all sorts to citizens to make meaningful choices and, on a more general level, to politicize public debate which leads to mobilization. Hence, bigger campaign efforts should be associated with higher levels of turnout. As the authors show this is indeed the case. In fact,

controlling for the effect of competition levels, measured as marginality between winners and first losers, Trumm et al. show that the effect of campaign efforts is not just independent of competition levels but also of substantive size. While there is already a long tradition of research on the direct effect of competition on behavior in terms of electoral participation, this paper enriches our understanding of the driving forces behind turnout by validating a direct impact of information provided by electoral candidates on behavior. Moreover, it also shows that the origins of campaign efforts—and with that the origins of information—matter as campaign spending of candidates running for smaller is irrelevant for behavior (if measured in terms of turnout).

Merz (2017), on the other hand, looks at the supply side in terms of party strategies to gain visibility in the media. More precisely, he investigates the representation of party programs and electoral manifestos in the media with the latter constituting the most important source of information for citizens on political issues. Such a representation is a crucial resource for electoral competition as it allows parties to build or foster issue ownership and issue linkages. In contrast to earlier studies, he can show that neither distinctiveness nor extreme position leads to more pronounced party-issue linkages in the media. Rather, 'the more, the better' describes the most efficient strategy. If a party wants to be linked to a specific issue in order to improve its competitiveness, higher salience leads to a more pronounced representation, while content—in a positional definition—seems to play a secondary role. Linking this to the study of Vegetti et al. who find a strong relationship between polarization and political knowledge, one might conclude that either citizens have additional sources of information beyond traditional media, for example, personal networks or the internet, or that information on parties is more effective in a systemic—party system polarization—than a party-specific—extreme positions or distinctiveness—conceptualization. In terms of the relationship of competition, information, and behavior, Merz increases our understanding of how and which behavior on the supply side gets picked up by the media and, hence, how party-specific information levels might occur which then have an impact on electoral competition and electoral choices.

The papers in this special issue address electoral competition from the perspective of parties and voters alike, arguing that neither electoral competition nor information influences all parties or all voters equally. Moreover, two papers add a media perspective, thereby including a third major actor in democracies in general and during election times specifically. Beyond important insights regarding the role of information in the context of electoral competition and the other way around, the papers also contribute to the state-of-the-art literature on diversification of electoral choices of both parties and voters (Bardi et al. 2014; Weßels et al. 2014). Additionally, the collection of papers takes into account the varying nature and definitions of competition as well as information and provides novel ways to measure both. In doing so, they close central gaps between theoretical concepts and empirical research. Finally, this special issue also provides insights into the relevance of context and a multi-level understanding of politics and democracy. Understanding the linkages between information, electoral competition, and electoral choices seems only possible as a result of linking micro-, meso-, and macro-level theories and measures.

In sum, there is not a straightforward answer to the 'simple' question on how electoral choices are made. Even though we limited ourselves to the role of information and electoral competition in electoral choices and the contributions in this special issue complement each other, the overall picture is rather complex. As it is more often the case than not, asking a simple question does not imply getting a simple answer. Recent developments, ranging from the weakening of cleavage structures and dealignment to an individualization of societies and a diversification of media and information sources, call for explanatory models which are able to incorporate heterogeneity. By taking these developments and heterogeneity seriously, this special issue provides a relevant piece of the puzzle for an important question in democracy research while pointing out fruitful avenues for future research.

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One of the articles that is part of this special issue was accidentally already published in a previous issue of *Acta Politica*: Giebler, H., Kritzinger, S., Xezonakis, G. and Banducci, S. (2017) Priming Europe: Media effects on loyalty, voice and exit in European Parliament elections. *Acta Politica* 52(1): 110–132.

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