

# The Impact of Elections Upon the Political Decision-Making Process\*

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According to traditional democratic theory, participating in elections is an important means by which citizens can influence the political decision-making process of a country. Lipset, for instance, speaks of « a social mechanism which permits the largest possible part of the population to influence major decisions by choosing among contenders for political office. » (1) As conditions for the working of these mechanisms Lipset mentions that there should be « one set of political leaders in office ; and one or more sets of recognized leaders attempting to gain office. » (2). There are countries with free elections where the conditions mentioned by Lipset are fulfilled only to a low degree, one of the most extreme cases probably being Switzerland. In this country the government is usually formed by amicable agreement, all the large parties participating according to their electoral strength in the government. (3) In Switzerland, therefore, the citizens *de facto* have not the possibility to cause, by their votes, a complete change from government to opposition parties, because all the large parties are already in the government. At most the citizens can bring about some changes within the government parties. It is also possible that one of the minor parties is so strengthened that it gets the right to enter the government. But as a matter of fact the Swiss government has not changed in party composition since 1959.

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(1) Seymour Martin LIPSET, *Political Man. The Social Bases of Politics*, New York, 1960, p. 45.

(2) LIPSET, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

(3) See my book : *Gewaltlose Politik und kulturelle Vielfalt. Hypothesen entwickelt am Beispiel der Schweiz*, Bern-Stuttgart, 1970.

Does all this mean that in countries like Switzerland the citizens cannot really influence the political decision-making process by participating in elections ? This seems to be the case, if one looks at the impact of elections upon the political decision-making process only from the perspective of choosing among contenders for political office. But there is another perspective of which one must take account. Elections may also have an impact upon the political decision-making process if the political decision-makers are influenced in their decisions by the anticipated reactions of the citizens on the election day. This second perspective is stressed also by traditional democratic theory. Dahl for instance notes that « the effective political elites ... operate within limits ... set by their expectations as to the reactions of the group of politically active citizens who go to the polls. » (4) Kenneth Prewitt summarizes the literature on this argument in a recent article as follows : « Since periodic elections hold officeholders accountable, these officeholders select policies in anticipation of voter response and thus choose policies which broadly reflect the preferences of the governed. » (5)

My point is that one must look from at least two perspectives at elections if one wants to make a complete statement about the impact of elections upon the political decision-making process of a country. If one restricts himself to the question whether elections result in a turnover from government to opposition parties, one may make an incomplete statement about the impact of elections in countries with governments formed predominately by amicable agreement. One would fail to take account of the fact that in these countries the political decision-makers may strongly anticipate the reactions of the voters.

Even if the voters have the possibility to cause a complete turnover from government to opposition parties, the argument is sometimes made that the elections, nonetheless, have a very small influence upon the political decision-making process. In a recent book Ralph Miliband for instance comes to the following conclusion : « What the evidence conclusively suggests is that in terms of social origin, education and class situation, the men who have manned *all* command positions in the state system have largely, and in many cases overwhelmingly, been drawn from the world of business and property, or from the professional middle classes. Here as in every other field, men and women born into the subordinate classes, which form of course the vast majority of the population, have fared very poorly-and not only, it must be stressed, in those parts of the

(4) Robert A. DAHL, *A Preface to Democratic Theory*, Chicago, 1956, p. 72.

(5) Kenneth PREWITT, « Political Ambitions, Volunteerism, and Electoral Accountability », in *The American Political Science Review*, vol. LXIV, March 1970, n° 1, p. 7.

state system, such as administration, the military and the judiciary, which depend on appointment, but also in those parts of it which are exposed or which appear to be exposed to the vagaries of universal suffrage and the fortunes of competitive politics. » (6) Thus for authors like Miliband a turnover from government to opposition parties does not really have an impact upon the political decision-making process because the social background of the members of the government remains always pretty much the same. As a consequence many authors of the New Left have concluded that it is useless to participate in elections even if a turnover from government to opposition parties is possible. (7) So there seems to be a general tendency toward scepticism about whether the choice of the voters on the election day has a great influence upon the political decision-making process of a country. This scepticism is particularly strong with respect to countries where the government is predominately formed by amicable agreement because in such countries the citizens have not even the possibility to cause by their votes a complete turnover from government to opposition parties. But there is also an increasing scepticism with respect to countries where majority rule prevails. In political science of today it is no longer generally accepted that in the words of Lipset, that we have already cited, elections are « a social mechanism which permits the largest possible part of the population to influence major decisions by choosing among contenders for political office. » (8) Because a clear link between the choice of the voters and the political decision-making process can very often not be shown, some critics conclude that elections have no impact at all upon the political decision-making process. Such a judgment may be premature because it does not take account of the impact of anticipated wishes of the voters by the political decision-makers. Unfortunately, there are only a very few empirical studies showing to what degree the political decision-makers are actually anticipating the wishes of the voters. Most certainly such studies would be very important for the development of democratic theory. This would be particularly true if research could demonstrate still more convincingly than it does today that the choice of the voters on the election day has only a minor influence on the political decision-making process of a country. In such a case, the only possibility for democratic theory to justify the institution of elections would be to investigate whether the political decision-makers are anticipating the wishes of the voters. Even if future research would

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(6) Ralph MILIBAND, *The State in Capitalist Society*, New York, 1969, p. 66.

(7) For a typical statement of this argument see for instance: Robert WOLFE, « Beyond Protest », in *Studies on the Left*, vol. 7, 1967, January-February.

(8) LIPSET, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

show that the choice of the voters on the election day is more important for the decision-making process of a country than authors like Miliband are now arguing, even then it would be important for democratic theory to know whether, by what means and to what degree the political decision-makers are anticipating the wishes of the voters.

Looking from this point of view at the problem, it is indeed surprising that so little research has been done about the processes by which the political decision-makers are anticipating the wishes of the voters. One of the best empirical studies in this respect is probably an article by Kenneth Prewitt about « Political Ambitions, Volunteerism, and Electoral Accountability. » (9) The data for this research come from the San Francisco Bay Area where « more than 400 city councilmen were interviewed with a lengthy and largely open-ended questionnaire. » (10) Councilmen were asked for example « if they felt it were easy or difficult to go against majority preferences when choosing community policies » (11) To this question Prewitt gets answers as the following ones : (12)

« I don't feel the weight of voter responsibility. I am not all fired up for a political career. »

« You shouldn't give a damn whether you get elected or not. »

« In general it is easy to vote against the majority because I don't have any political ambitions. »

From such answers Prewitt comes to the following conclusion : « In reading these protocols it becomes evident that often the sentiments voiced by these councilmen do not match well with what the 'rule of anticipated reactions' leads us to predict. Indeed, if the reader of the protocols is bearing in mind the observation that elected leaders 'formulate policies in order to win elections', then the responses can only be described as puzzling. For it is very clear that councilmen infrequently refer to elections and, when they do, it often is in a manner which directly contradicts the premises of a theory of electoral accountability... The manner in which councilmen reflect on their relationships with the public indicates that the rule of anticipated reactions does not always operate. » (13)

Does the research reported by Prewitt really mean that the political decision-makers in the San Francisco Bay Area do not frequently anti-

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(9) PREWITT, *op. cit.*

(10) PREWITT, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

(11) PREWITT, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

(12) PREWITT, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

(13) PREWITT, *op. cit.*, p. 7f.

pate the reactions of the voters on the election day? I think we should be clear that the research of Prewitt is not dealing directly with the behavior of the decision-makers but only with statements by the decision-makers about their behavior. What is the link between statements about a behavior and the behavior itself? Usually you cannot expect a straightforward link. Often the statement about a behavior is saying more about the norm system of an actor than about his actual behavior. In my own research in Switzerland I had the possibility to compare the actual participation in elections according to official records and the interview statements about this participation. The comparison has shown that the statements in the interview situation indicated a much higher electoral participation than was actually true according to the official records. In the same research I have seen that in Switzerland there is a strong social norm that the « good » citizens should participate in elections. Taken together these two results can be interpreted in the sense that the statements in the interview situation were distorted in the direction of the prevailing social norm. (14)

Going back to the research of Prewitt the question is whether the answers of the councilmen do not, in the first place, indicate that according to their norm system a politician should not be too ambitious in seeking power. (15) The answer that one does not frequently anticipate the reactions of the voters would just mean that one does not want to appear as being a power seeker. Even accepting this interpretation, one could nevertheless make the argument that the norms of a decision-maker can tell us something about his behavior because there should be a positive interrelation between the norm system and the behavior of a person. Accepting this argument, one would expect that a councilman saying in the interview that he is anticipating to some degree the reactions of the voters would actually do more so than a councilman saying in the interview that he does not at all anticipate the reactions of the voters. So the interview could at least tell us who of the two actors is anticipating more even if it can say nothing, because of the bias toward the prevailing norm, about the absolute level of the anticipation process. Unfortunately, it is not certain whether the interview can give even this restricted answer

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(14) See for a further discussion of this point my book: *Buerger und Politik. Empirisch-theoretische Befunde ueber die politische Partizipation der Buerger in Demokratien unter besonderer Beruecksichtigung der Schweiz und der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, Meisenheim am Glan, 1969, p. 11ff.

(15) The point that the prevailing norm system in the United States expects that the politician is not too ambitious in seeking power is also made at other places; see for example: John C. WAHLKE, Heinz EULAU, William BUCHANAN, LeRoy C. FERGUSON, *The Legislative System. Explorations in Legislative Behavior*, New York and London, 1962, p. 69ff.

about the behavior of our councilmen, because it may be also possible that the interrelation between the norm system and the behavior is a negative one. There is some plausibility that the strongest normbreaker attaches the most importance to the norm when asked about it in the interview situation because he has the greatest interest to hide consciously or subconsciously his real behavior to the interviewer. On the other hand, the person who is only a moderate normbreaker would not be so reluctant to tell the truth about his behavior because he is not anticipating strong sanctions for his behavior. For the research reported by Prewitt, this could mean that the councilmen, pretending in the interview that they are not at all anticipating the reactions of the voters, do actually anticipate more than their colleagues saying in the interview that they are moderately anticipating the reactions of the voters. It is not my point that this interpretation of the interview data is more correct than the interpretation given by Prewitt. It may be that Prewitt is right in concluding that the councilmen of the San Francisco Bay are not thinking too much about the next elections in taking their decisions. My point only is that the data of Prewitt may be interpreted also in a very different way. This is, of course, not a specific critique to the article of Prewitt but a general critique to the strategy to measure behavior variables with interview data. (16)

Is there not a better way than using interview data to investigate whether political decision-makers are anticipating the reactions of the voters? Another possibility is to use the method of participant observation. (17) If this method is used in a direct way we encounter the same problems as with the interview data. It may be that the actors in a decision-making process refer often to the reactions of the voters but that they are not really taking account of these anticipated reactions in taking their decisions. In such a case the processes of anticipation would have only a symbolic meaning. For the participant observer it would be extremely difficult to judge whether the decision-makers are referring only symbolically to the reactions of the voters.

In my own research I use the method of participant observation in a more indirect way. I have observed the same political system at four different time periods. The crucial point in my research strategy is that these four time periods have different time-distances to the election day. The political system that I have observed is a subsystem of the political system

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(16) PREWITT, by the way, is aware of the problem and he is handling his data in a much more cautious way than it is usually done. My critique to measure behavior variables with interview data does not apply so strongly if projective tests are used.

(17) For a discussion of this method see my book: *Gewaltlose Politik und kulturelle Vielfalt*, op. cit., p. 12ff.

of Switzerland, the Free-democratic Party (Freisinnig-demokratische Partei) of the Berne Canton. I have studied the decision-making process in this party from January 1969 till September 1970, using mainly the method of participant observation. During the whole research period I have observed all formal meetings of the party. Thanks to an agreement with the party I also had the opportunity to observe a large number of informal interactions. I was, for instance, regularly invited when leading members of the party had an informal working lunch (18).

What is important for the theoretical question described in this paper (19) is that the parliament of the Berne Canton was elected May 3, 1970. With respect to this election I distinguish the following four periods in the decision-making process of the party :

- January 1969 to June 1969 ;
- July 1969 to November 1969 ;
- December 1969 to May 3, 1970 ;
- May 4, 1970 to September 1970.

According to my research strategy these four periods differ in their time distance to the election day. My question is now whether the four periods differ also with respect to the decision-making process in the party. To answer this question I have chosen as my units of analysis the individual proposals articulated in any of the meetings of the party. The individual data concerning the life history of each proposal were then coded for computer analysis. This processing permits the testing in a quantitative way whether the party handled proposals differently during the four time periods. I am investigating, for instance, whether there are any differences with respect

- to the origin of the proposals,
- to the input of information,
- to the pattern of conflict resolution (majority rule or amicable agreement),
- to the intensity of the conflicts,

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(18) For a detailed description of the whole project see my article : *Tellnehmende Beobachtung des Entscheidungsprozesses in der Freisinnig-demokratischen Partei des Kantons Bern*, in *Wirtschaft und Recht*, 22. Jahrgang, n° 3, 1970.

(19) The research project has also other theoretical questions ; see my article : *Conflict Resolution and Democratic Stability in Subculturally Segmented Political Systems*, in *Res Publica*, vol. XI, n° 4, 1969.

- to the public visibility of the decision-making process,
- to the content of the decisions.

Because the coding of the data is still in progress I present in this paper only my working hypotheses. Before doing this I will discuss the problem how the presence or the absence of differences between the four time periods shall be interpreted. If the decision-making process in the party will be significantly different from one time period to another, no matter in what direction the differences go, my interpretation will be that the time distance to the election day had an influence on the decision-making process of the party. This interpretation will only hold if the four time periods are not also significantly different with respect to important third variables like the situation of the international system or the general economic situation of the country. According to my checks the four time periods do not seem to differ with respect to important third variables. This would mean that I would have good reason to attribute differences in the decision-making process between the four periods to the different time distance to the election day. If my computer analysis were to show that the decision-making process in the party was influenced in such a way by the time distance to the election day, I would take this as an indicator that the decision-makers in the party were not indifferent to the outcome of the election but that they were anticipating in one way or another the reactions of the voters on the election day.

If the decision-making process in the party does not differ significantly from one time period to another, two interpretations are available which unfortunately are contradictory. One interpretation could be that the outcome of the election is not at all important for the decision-makers in the party and that they are not anticipating the wishes of the voters. The second interpretation on the other hand would say that the decision-makers are so concerned about the outcome of the election that they anticipate the wishes of the voters on the same high level, regardless of the time remaining to the election day. It does not seem proper to rule out a priori one of the two interpretations, but I think that the first interpretation can be considered as much more probable. Our starting point must be that decision-makers care about the outcome of elections only in cases where they are expecting rewards and/or punishments from this event. (20) A lot of experiences with animals and human beings have shown that rewards and punishments are perceived as more important the nearer they come in space and time distance. (21) Applied to our

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(20) This conclusion is derived from the theoretical work of Homans. See for instance : George Caspar HOMANS, *Social Behavior*. Its elementary forms, New York, 1961.

(21) See for instance HOMANS, *op. cit.*

case, these experiences mean that it is very improbable that the decision-makers of the party anticipate on the same level the reactions of the voters on the election day no matter how far away these elections are.

Therefore I will interpret the presence and the absence of differences between the four time periods in the following way : The greater these differences are, the more the decision-makers are anticipating the reactions of the voters. To test my hypotheses I will compare the nineteen different committees of the party with respect to the question how much they differ in their decision-making process from one time period to another.

I present now my hypotheses :

*Primary hypothesis*

The decision-makers in the party anticipate the reactions of the voters the more, the more they anticipate that the result of the election will change in a positive or negative way their balance of rewards and punishments. (22)

*Secondary hypotheses*

The decision-makers in the party anticipate the more that the result of the election will change in a positive or negative way their balance of rewards and punishments,

1. the more they perceive their political role as important,
2. the more they perceive their political role as depending on the result of elections,
3. the more they anticipate that the next election could change their political role,
4. the more they perceive their political party as an important group of reference.

These hypotheses may be explained as follows :

ad 1. : An actor perceiving his political role as relatively unimportant compared with his other social roles will not anticipate any notable rewards or punishments no matter whether he wins or loses the election. Whether an actor perceives his political role as important should depend strongly, as Prewitt puts it, on « whether office confers status or whether office is simply a by-product of previously achieved status, which is to say previously acquired prestige, wealth, leisure, security,

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(22) This hypothesis is derived from the theoretical work of HOMANS, *op. cit.*

and so forth. » (23) It is in line with the present hypothesis when Prewitt concludes : « Where political office is but a by-product, the conditions leading to volunteerism will be accentuated. Electoral accountability can be expected to suffer. » (24)

ad 2. : An actor perceiving his political role as not depending **strongly** on the result of elections (for instance a scientific expert of a party) will expect from the election outcome a much smaller change in his overall balance of rewards and punishments than an actor, for instance a member of the parliament, who may perceive his political role as depending strongly on the result of elections.

ad 3. : It may be that an actor perceives his political role as in a **general** way depending on the outcome of elections, but he may anticipate that the next election will not change his political role. The reason may be that the electoral system combined with a stable voting behavior **does** not allow a great change in the electoral outcome. In this case too the actor will not expect from the coming election a great change in his overall balance of rewards and punishments. From the perspective of this hypothesis we see how important may be for the processes of anticipation the electoral system and the stability of the voting behavior of a country.

ad 4 : Even if an actor does not expect from the electoral outcome a **great** change in his own political role, the result of the election may be important for his overall balance of rewards and punishments, if he perceives his political party as an important group of reference. In such a case the actor will get a great deal of emotional and symbolic rewards and punishments depending on whether his party wins or loses the election.

The variables of the four hypotheses just described should have a cumulative effect. For my empirical test this would mean that the reactions of the voters should be anticipated at the highest level in the party committee which has relatively the most actors

- perceiving their political roles as important compared to their other social roles,
- perceiving their political roles as in a general way depending on the outcome of elections,

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(23) PREWITT, *op. cit.* p. 15f.

(24) PREWITT, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

- expecting that the next election could change their political role (for instance because they run in an electoral district with a lot of floating voters),
- perceiving their political party as an important reference group compared with other reference groups like language groups, religious groups, regional groups, etc.

To make it hopefully quite clear I repeat once more that my indicator of how much a party committee is anticipating the reactions of the voters is how much the decision-making process of the committee changes from one time period to another. There is still the possibility that a committee anticipates the reactions of the voters but always on the same level no matter how far away the election day is. I have tried to show that such a case should be very improbable. Who does not accept this interpretation, will of course neither accept the results of my empirical test.

In my research I am not only interested in the question whether and to what degree the decision-makers anticipate the reactions of the voters but also in whether strong processes of anticipation influence the decision-making process in a conservative or a progressive sense. (25) Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee in their well-known book *Voting* make the assumption that the political decision-makers are indeed anticipating the reactions of the voters and that these processes of anticipation have a conservative impact upon a political system. According to these authors «there are periods of great political agitation (i.e., campaigns) alternating with periods of political dormancy. Paradoxically, the former-the campaign period-is likely to be an instrument of conservatism, often even of historical regression... Its counterpart, of course, is what we believe to be an important potential for progress during the periods of relaxed tension and low-pressure political and social stimuli that are especially characteristic of America between political campaigns... Change may come best from relaxation.» (26) Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee justify this hypothesis as follows: «Political campaigns tend to make people more consistent both socially and psychologically; they vote more with their social groups and agree more with their own prior ideas on the issues. But new ideas and new alignments are in their infancy manifested by inconsistency psychologically and heterogeneity socially; they are almost by definition deviant and minority points of view. To the extent that they are inhibited by pressure or simply by knowledge of what is the proper (i.e., majority)

(25) By a progressive decision I mean a decision that changes the status quo. A conservative decision on the other hand does not change the status quo.

(26) Bernard R. BERELSON, Paul F. LAZARSFELD, William N. MCPHEE, *Voting. A Study of Opinion Formation in a Presidential Campaign*, Chicago, 1954, p. 317f.

point of view in a particular group, then the campaign period is not a time to look for the growth of important new trends.» (27)

I accept the hypothesis of Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee that processes of anticipation of the election day tend to increase group solidarity. But I doubt whether an increase in group solidarity means necessarily an increase in conservative decisions. Whether this is the case or not depends probably on the number and the structure of the reference groups of the political decision-makers. If the political party is the only important group of reference, it may be, as Berelson and his co-authors expect, that the « campaign period is not the time to look for the growth of important new trends.» The explanation may be that with an increase of group solidarity decisions in the party are taken the more and the more by amicable agreement because majority decisions could threaten the group solidarity. As I have shown elsewhere (28), with a strategy of amicable agreement it is difficult to attain a fast social change.

The situation is more complicated if the political decision-makers have besides their party other important reference groups like language and religious groups. If all these groups have not strongly conflicting goals an increase in group solidarity should lead also in this case to more decisions taken by amicable agreement and hence to more conservative decisions. But if on the other hand these groups have strongly conflicting goals an increase in group solidarity will result in a higher level of conflict within the party. If for example the decision-makers in the party belong to different language groups with strongly conflicting goals and if these language groups are perceived as important groups of reference, an increase in group solidarity will result in more conflicts about language issues within the party. According to theorists like Lewis Coser conflicts may be helpful for social change. (29) But if the intensity of the conflicts passes a certain threshold the result may be also a situation of stalemate, no decisions being taken at all. Thus I think that the influence of electoral campaigns on the political decision-making process is more complicated than Berelson and his co-authors have stated in their hypothesis. I hope that my research in the Free-democratic Party of the Berne Canton may help to specify more precisely the conditions under which an electoral campaign influences the decision-making process in a progressive or in a conservative way.

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(27) BERELSON, LAZARFELD, MCPHEE, *op. cit.*, p. 317.

(28) See my articles : Nonviolent Conflict Resolution in Democratic Systems : Switzerland, in *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. XIII, n° 3, 1969. The Principles of Majority and Proportionality, in *The British Journal of Political Science*, vol. 1, n° 1, 1971.

(29) Lewis A. COSER, *The Functions of Social Conflicts*, New York and London, 1956.

In this article I have not tried to answer questions of normative democratic theory. I have for instance not taken a position on whether the impact of elections upon the political decision-making process should go primarily through the decisions of the voters on election day or through the processes by which the decision-makers anticipate the wishes of the voters. But I hope that my research project may clarify somewhat the empirical basis for the discussion of such important questions of normative democratic theory.

