Designing an infrastructure for research into citizenship, political participation and electoral democracy in the European Union

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The 2009 European Election Study

Elections are one of the primary instruments of democracy and one of the biggest exercises in democracy is the elections to the European Parliament where over 375 million citizens are eligible to participate. These elections offer an unprecedented opportunity to study the functioning of electoral democracy in general and the functioning of European democracy in particular.

Scholarly evaluations of electoral processes at the EU level have been hampered until now by the lack of co-ordination in the collection of empirical information on which such evaluations are based.

The 2009 European Election Study:

• Extends the work of previous European Election Studies.

• Delivers an integrated set of data linking public opinion attitudes and behaviour, elite messages (party manifestos), media content analyses and contextual information, addressing problems of data coordination.

• Provides the basis for creating a permanent infrastructure for conducting research into electoral democracy in the European Union, becoming more than a simple data collection effort.

• Integrates the technical and administrative procedures necessary to develop and maintain a database that links the activities and attitudes of political parties and candidates, mass media and citizens.

• Incorporates the most essential information required for the scrutiny and monitoring of any relevant aspects to the EU electoral process.

The feasibility study and integrated data were produced under the auspices of the EU funded project “Providing an Infrastructure for Research on Electoral Democracy in the European Union” (PIREDEU). The project was a joint effort coordinated by the European University Institute in Florence and involving 14 institutions across Europe.

State of the Art in Electoral Research

For the first time, a centrally coordinated research project covering all relevant aspects of the electoral process was conducted for all 27 member-countries at the 2009 European Parliament Elections. In investigating the feasibility of an infrastructure for the study of democracy in the EU, data were gathered on:

• The attitudes and behaviour of over 27,000 citizens in 27 countries.

• Information on campaign strategies and issue agendas for 1,350 candidates from 200 political parties across 27 countries.
• The party manifestos of 200 Political Parties contesting the European Parliament Elections.

• Campaign news coverage in the three weeks prior to the elections from 140 media outlets and almost 50,000 news stories.

• Attributes from 27 different political party, economic and media systems.

We bring this information together for the first time in an integrated database that is available for use by researchers, policymakers, the media, citizens and anyone interested in democracy in the EU. These data would be lost if not captured at the time of an election.

The unique contribution of the data project is linking data across all electoral actors: political parties, candidates, citizens, political and economic conditions and the news media. The data are linked conceptually and technically. Conceptually data can be linked by issue agendas, representation, ideology and position on European integration and other core concepts. For example, the mass survey as well as the elite survey includes items asking for the most important problem in the respondent’s country. Hence, researchers are able to compare these perspectives directly.

Technically the data are linked by establishing coding categories that are standard and common across the different types of data. For example, political parties share common codes for party manifestos, political candidates and voter partisan preferences. This enables a comprehensive research that addresses the relevance of a named problem in the media as well as in the party’s written documents.

Direction of Linkages Among Datasets:
Scientific and Technical Quality Data

In order to assure high quality data, a number of specific procedures were adopted to fence off the kind of data problems that can be found in cross-national electoral research. An important role was given to the Data Committee which was responsible for the overall quality and integrity of the data collected and for evaluating the procedures involved in ensuring data quality in an eventual infrastructure created on the basis of the design study.

Using the Data

The 2009 EES becomes an essential database for all those interested in electoral democracy in Europe and certainly not only social scientists engaged in comparative and evaluative research on the European electoral process.

For members of the academic community the new infrastructure creates unprecedented opportunities for transnational research on electoral representation and behaviour and the EU level, the role of the media, the emergence and transformation of new cleavages, and the process of electoral democracy in the European Union. It hence, advances the attractiveness of Europe as an object of study and as an environment for comparative political science research.

For the other stakeholders and non-academic users this database opens a window into processes of electoral democracy that have remained academically esoteric and obscure. We have designed a user friendly interface in the hopes that even those who are novices to data analysis can investigate the data and produce original analysis.

The 2009 European Election Study Database User Community:

- **Political Parties:**
  - Office holders
  - Party officials
  - Campaigners
  - Research institutes
  - Think tanks

- **Social Groups:**
  - Trade unions
  - Employers organisations
  - Churches
  - Organised lobbies

- **Private Users:**
  - Market research organisations
  - Media and campaign specialists
  - Consultancy firms

- **Academic Community:**
  - Political scientists
  - Communication scientists
  - Sociologists
  - European Studies
  - Economists

- **Media and Journalists**

2009 European Election Study
The above figure demonstrates one potential use of the data in comparing attitudes towards the European Union. Voters and EP Candidates were asked to express their attitudes towards the EU while, through content analysis, all mentions of the EU in news stories and in party manifestos were recorded. The figure shows the proportion of positive evaluations of the EU across all four data collection efforts. Clearly, political elites tend to be more favourably predisposed towards the EU compared to the stance of the media, whereas voters seem to find themselves ‘cross-pressured’ between the two messages.
Available Research and Current Results

The final conference held in Brussels “Auditing Electoral Democracy in the European Union” (18-19 November 2010) engaged the academic and policy user community with a special focus on the 2009 European Elections. In addition to research papers on topics ranging from voting in European Elections to attitudes towards European integration, three special sessions introduced the integrated PIREDEU database (of voter, candidate, media, manifesto and context data) and provided hands-on training on how to use the database. The papers presented at the conference are available through: www.piredeu.eu/public/FConf2010.asp


A comprehensive collection of earlier and current research of the European Election Study can be found on the web at www.piredeu.eu/public/Bib_EES.asp

The Future of the European Election Study

A Consortium for Electoral Research in Europe (CERES)

Looking towards the future, a final activity of the PIREDEU project has been to collaborate in founding a Consortium for Electoral Research in Europe (CERES).

With the development of an infrastructure we are expanding the database prior to the next election to follow three main directions: first, incorporate the data already provided by studies of past EP elections (1979-2004); second, link these data to other studies (for example the study of Members of the European Parliament); and third, add supplementary data collected at the time of future elections to the European Parliament.

The ultimate goal of CERES is a permanent infrastructure for electoral research in Europe. The PIREDEU feasibility study has clearly established that an infrastructure to study electoral democracy in Europe cannot focus on European Parliament elections alone, but needs to address the electoral process in Europe at all its different levels and facets. With this in mind, CERES was established as the way forward to ensure that high quality data are available for the benefit of researchers and practitioners from all communities.

CERES will constitute the academic foundations and an infrastructure for accessing, depositing, processing and adding value to election and public opinion data that is efficient, reliable and adheres to international standards.
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For more information on the project visit: www.piredeu.eu

For more information on preliminary data visit: www.piredeu.eu/public/Data_Release.asp

The final release of data is available from December 2010 through GESIS – Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences.

For questions or comments please send us an email at piredeu@eui.eu

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