The Routledge Handbook of International Local Government

Richard Kerley, Joyce Liddle, Pamela T. Dunning

Second thoughts on second-order?

Publication details
Ulrik Kjær, Kristof Steyvers
Published online on: 03 Sep 2018

How to cite :- Ulrik Kjær, Kristof Steyvers. 03 Sep 2018, Second thoughts on second-order? from: The Routledge Handbook of International Local Government Routledge
Accessed on: 26 Sep 2023
SECOND THOUGHTS ON SECOND-ORDER?
Towards a second-tier model of local government elections and voting

Ulrik Kjaer and Kristof Steyvers

Local elections in a multi-level context

An increasing number of election and voting studies scrutinise the local government level (Clark and Krebs 2012). A search in the Social Science Citation Index based on the keywords ‘local’ and ‘elections’ in the topic returned 1103 articles in the category of Political Science only and dating back to the beginning of the 1960s (the US and the EU each represent about 43% of all contributions). Most of these studies are empirical and tend to focus exclusively on the level that is allegedly closest to the citizenry in a specific country during a specific period of time. In comparison, there is less theoretical, comparative or longitudinal work to provide an integrated understanding of the tiered dynamics of local elections and voting. Many studies thereby implicitly neglect some of the central aspects of the setting and era in which the local elections are embedded. Therefore Marschall (2010: 471) concludes her review by stating: ‘to say that a field of study of local elections exists would be a bit of an overstatement’.

In an increasingly multilevel context, scholars are occupied with analysing different types of elections at different political levels. In regard to local elections this raises questions such as: Is there anything specifically place-bound about these elections and if so, what, to which extent, how, and with what consequences? In other words: How do local elections differ from or resemble elections at the national (or regional and federal) level?

Earlier attempts to answer these questions can be divided into two overall groups. The first group focuses mainly on the European context. It sees local elections as essentially lower ranking and less important than national elections, serving at best a balancing, barometric or mid-term function. This conception is most prominently captured in the notion of second-order elections in Reif and Schmitt’s (1980) seminal study, which will be discussed below and serves as the main point of departure for this chapter. The second group argues that local elections differ from national elections. Given the differentiated nature of intergovernmental relations, this tends to figure more prominently in the American literature. According to Oliver (2012), local elections differ from national elections because they pertain to a government level that is smaller in size, has a smaller portfolio of services and functions and is more extreme in its distributive bias (see also Kaufman 2004).
While we acknowledge the merit in both perspectives, we find them equally incomplete when considered separately. Each accounts for only one of the two defining characteristics of almost any local government setting. First, local and national governments co-exist in a vertical relation. This relationship can vary substantially (depending on the level of political decentralisation, for example) but ultimately remains asymmetrical (as local authorities are universally a part of and subordinate to a central state). Second, having by default more than one place-bound authority means that there is horizontal variation at the local level (expressed in multiple entities with separate political institutions and an electoral chain of representation and accountability). Both groups of theories tend to miss one of these characteristics. The lower-rank view clearly incorporates the vertical relation, but overlooks the horizontal variation. The different-kind approach understands horizontal variation (with electoral phenomena differing across localities), but neglects the vertical relation to some extent (failing to situate the local elections appropriately in the contemporary, layered political structure).

This chapter includes both key features (vertical relation and horizontal variation) and therefore draws on insights of both conceptions (lower rank and different kind) in theorising on local elections and voting. Its main aim is to critically engage with the existing frameworks using the predominant second-order perspective as starting point and benchmark (Clark and Krebs 2012). The intention is to reformulate this into an alternative framework denoted as second-tier elections and voting. This notion emphasises the relationship with a first-tier national counterpart (which can be relatively weak or strong) while conceding variation among different local authorities (which can be minor or major). By integrating the insights of both groups of theories, the chapter strives at a more comprehensive understanding of local elections and voting in a multi-level context. Our contribution is thus primarily theoretical pointing out the potential of a comparative (empirical) approach.

The chapter proceeds as follows: The mainstream framework of local elections as second-order national elections is critically assessed; the alternative framework of local elections and voting as second-tier is introduced; and finally, the concluding section summarises the added value of the approach chosen and discusses how future research can further our understanding of the layered and differentiated nature of local elections and voting as second-tier.

**Local elections as second-order? A critical assessment of the mainstream framework**

**Second-order elections: reviewing frameworks and evidence**

A longstanding and dominant approach to the study of elections in multilevel systems assumes that they can be ranked in terms of perceived importance as captured in the distinction between first- and second-order elections coined by Reif and Schmitt (1980: 8–9). In their conception, this dichotomy refers to the allegedly decisive national contests with a ‘plethora of [. . .] various sorts of elections’ subordinate to national elections. Thus, links exist between elections at various autonomous layers with voting behaviour and partisan strategies at the secondary levels affected by conditions and calculations at the main political arena (Reif 1997).

Reif and Schmitt (1980: 8–15) also developed an analytical framework outlining the interrelated dimensions of this linkage. In second-order contests there is supposedly less at stake which systematically affects key electoral dynamics (lower turnout, more invalid votes, better prospects for small and/or new parties and greater potential for loss by governing parties). Party behaviour in the specific arena matters as well, mediated by its political and institutional circumstances (general role of parties and similarities in partisan competition and cooperation). Both are
influenced by the institutional-procedural relationship between different types of elections (in terms of timing or system). In addition, campaign efforts of second-order actors aimed at political mobilisation matter (interacting with media interest). Ultimately, the framework acknowledges genuine change in the main political arena as well as in structure and culture.

Originally applied to the first direct election to the European Parliament, the second-order framework has remained an important factor in discussions about the European Parliament. European elections are still seen as lower-salience elections where (dependent on the timing in the national election cycle) the governing and/or larger parties tend to lose votes (Norris 1997; Hix and Marsh 2007). The contemporary literature ranges from encompassing (longitudinal, comparative and/or integrated) assertions (Hix and Marsh 2011) to specific (cross-sectional, country-specific and/or dimensional) variants (e.g. Flickinger and Studlar 2007; De Vries et al. 2011). Despite the general stance ‘that the basic second-order model is fairly robust . . . [and] quite consistent’ (Hix and Marsh 2011: 12), a number of refinements qualify its explanatory power for geographical scope, topical dynamics and party-system configurations (Marsh 1998; Koepke and Ringe 2006; Clark and Rohrschneider 2009).

For regional elections, second-order reasoning is equally commonplace (Dandoy and Schakel 2013). As a convenient prism for scrutinising regional voting and party behaviour, it developed into a default analytical conjecture in a range of contexts (e.g. Hough and Jeffery 2003; Pallares and Keating 2003). Although studies confirm the subordination of regional to national elections (Hough and Jeffery 2006), the subnational translation of the scheme has recently been criticised. The undifferentiated mobilisation of its conceptual heritage induces a nationalisation bias that underestimates effects specific to the regional arena. Hence, a plea to treat these regional elections more on their own terms with potentially distinct voting judgments about regional issues. The national versus regional template of subnational elections may therefore vary depending on the scope of regional authority, the presence and/or success of non-state-wide parties and territorial identity (Schakel 2013). Comparative and longitudinal empirical analysis indeed points at the limited and contingent validity of classic second-order assumptions compared with specific regional conjectures (Schakel and Jeffery 2013). For instance second-order reasoning does not apply when both types of elections coincide. And its explanatory power seems confined to areas where regional authority and regional parties and/or identities are weak. Other country-oriented and/or election-based studies confirm the importance of arena-specific factors (e.g. Jeffery and Hough 2009; Bechtel 2012).

Meanwhile, second-order arguments have long been present and continue to emerge in discussions on local elections as well. In line with their categorisation as part of the plethora in the original framework, some authors have ‘a suspicion that . . . local elections may be only tenuously related to anything that happens with particular communities’ (Gregory 1969: 31), seeing their results as a ‘largely accidental by-product of central government’s popularity’ (Miller 1988: 2). However, this abidingly dominant stance in debates on if and why local elections matter (Clark and Krebs 2012) is more often based on a loose set of a priori assumptions than on systematic empirical grounds.

**Second thoughts on second-order?**

Three weaknesses emerge when the second-order framework is applied to local governments. First, as mentioned, the original framework is concerned with comparing the participation in and outcome of an election (as a momentum in a cycle) at a certain level (as a tier as a whole) with those of another one at a different level and point in time. Analytically, the model thus claims that any election is actually a *set of contests* in *different constituencies*. Hence, it focusses...
more on between-group (i.e. comparing categories of elections) than on within-group variation (i.e. constituencies for one category of elections). While this may be more straightforward when comparing national and European elections, it becomes increasingly difficult when local contests are scrutinised. In most European countries there are hundreds and in some up to thousands of local elections, as there is minimum one for each municipality (more if the electoral districts are wards). The fact that overall national interpretations (e.g. systematically lower turnout in local elections, successful small and new parties, national governing parties tend to lose) have to draw on generalising measures of central tendency inherently leads to an underestimation of place-bound heterogeneity in electoral dynamics.

The claim is that this inherent feature of the local realm should gain prominence when associated elections are analysed. Certain cases (as time-bound contests in specific constituencies) will correspond more to the ideal-typical second-order features than others. Hence, it becomes of analytical interest to discern the factors that explain similarities and differences between localities in that respect. The proposed model explicitly includes possibilities and implications of place-bound variation. However, acknowledging municipal variance within or between countries does not equal ignoring some of the general trends found when characteristics of local elections are compared to similar political phenomena played out at the parliamentary election (Rallings, Thrasher and Denver 2005).

Second, most of the second-order research takes an aggregate perspective. Even though the framework was originally developed to understand individual voting behaviour, many of its dimensions and subsequent indicators draw on ecological characteristics of electoral units such as municipalities (e.g. by comparing local voter turnout with national turnout in proxy constituencies). The available empirical evidence is thus often indirect, evoking additional a priori assumptions on individual voters and subsequent causal logics (e.g. are differences in turnout explained by alterations in absenteeism by the same voter in different elections or do specific voters only turn out at some elections?). Rare individual-level studies of, e.g., the importance voters attach to the local versus other levels and voting motives have challenged the overall second-order nature of the local (Lefevere 2013; Elklit and Kjaer 2013; Marien, Dassonneville and Hooghe 2015).

Thus, more direct and individual-level data are needed to avoid variants of the ecological and individual fallacy. In addition, more distinction should be made between explanations at the municipal and at the voter level (Denters and Mossberger 2006). Hence, to avoid some of the confusion regarding the units of analysis in the second-order framework, a systematic distinction is made between elections (the aggregate level) and voting (the individual level) in the model introduced here. Each is concerned with specific questions: (How) are local elections different from national contests, can be examined at the aggregate municipal level; explaining voting, i.e., why and how do people vote at local elections (compared to national elections), relates to the individual voter level.

Third, the presumption that one type of election is unconditionally superordinate to all others has gradually given way to an exclusively nationalised frame of reference. This can be found in the mainstream interpretation and application of the framework where the less-at-stake dimension has become analytically central. From the original article by Reif and Schmitt, a more balanced reading can be discerned both in terms of the autonomy of each arena and the power relations between them. This is captured in the catch-phrase ‘there is less at stake to be sure but there still is something at stake’. It should be noted that while outlining this dimension, Reif and Schmitt (1980: 8–15) refer several times to the local level to illustrate their point. This seems to be neglected in subsequent research that aims to demonstrate the subordinate character of second-order elections.
Overall, this underplays the importance of the political and institutional circumstances of the respective arenas and underestimates effects on voting that are specific to and depending upon the actual arena. So, the model will attempt to treat local elections more on their own terms and assume that distinct judgments about specifically place-bound issues can guide local voting as well without denying the potential influence of national factors. Hence, elections and voting are localised to differing degrees (Rallings and Thrasher 2005: 595). Scant empirical evidence for the UK aligns with this nuanced assertion. Whereas second-order propositions are partly applied, the stakes of local elections were deemed sufficiently high to denote them as ‘one-and-three-quarters-order’ (Heath et al. 1999). An exploratory account of the Netherlands underlined the vitality to include arena-specific factors to accurately estimate the nature of local elections (Lelieveldt and Van der Does 2014). Therefore, it is postulated that the relationship between the less-at-stake dimension and its counterpart for the specific local arena is a dynamic and discrete balance rather than a static categorisation.

Local elections and voting as second-tier elections and voting?
Introducing an alternative framework

Based on these remarks, the alternative conception of local elections and voting as second-tier will now be introduced. It incorporates the default asymmetry in the vertical relations between the various tiers of governance (which is not addressed sufficiently in assertions that local elections are of a different kind) as well as the horizontal variation at each tier (unaccounted for in approaches that rank local elections as a whole to be of second-order).

It is argued that voting and elections are embedded as one feature in the broader dynamics of local politics and government. This context dependency merits consideration as the local tier fundamentally differs from the (supra- or sub-)national, complicating the straightforward application of theories and concepts that allegedly cover all tiers. It also implies a more positive and independent approach to the local beyond it being non-national. The embedding is conceived as such that the framework departs from the broadest dynamics continuing along a non-deterministic chain of causal mechanisms. Hence, the model starts with the specific features of local government. These will in turn affect the way politics is conducted at the local level. How local politics functions will again influence how local elections play out, which ultimately affects if and how people vote in local elections.

The following sections will discuss each block of features conjointly comprising the second-tier framework. In the critical assessment of the second-order model, an alternative argument takes the potential for variation between different cases properly into account. Therefore, within each block, factors will be elaborated upon that may account for variation between as well as within countries leading to one or more hypotheses. A neo-institutional approach for the comparison is adopted (Davies and Trounstine 2012). This stresses the importance of formal political structures as well as more informal norms and routines for scrutinising attitudes and behaviour of (composite) actors (Lowndes 2009). Variation in the institutional set-up will be the starting point to explain cross-national as well as cross-municipal variation, between spaces and over time. As local government and politics features vary, this will also help explain similarities and differences in second-tier elections and voting across local political units and eras. For voting, the potential of cross-individual variation is added.

As the ambition is to reformulate rather than to refute the second-order model, its relevant dimensions and characteristics will be incorporated in the second-tier framework. It is argued that a number of second-order postulates are valid and reliable and can thus be included as premises for the empirical study of local elections and voting. Hence, the first two second-order dimensions
make up the backbone for the argumentation. From the less-at-stake dimension, the presumed effects on voting behaviour will be retained and estimated to be most apparent in second-tier voting features. Thus, voters are expected to have less impetus to turn out in second-tier elections. If they do, expressive characteristics of voting prevail (such as – deliberately – casting an invalid vote or punishing established national and/or governing parties). Here the stakes are nationalised. It is expected that these voting behaviour features depends on the position in the national electoral cycle of second-tier elections. Regarding the specific arena dimension, the general starting assumption is that something different is at stake in local elections and voting. The idea to analyse these in their own terms evidently runs as a common theme through the framework. It is hypothesised that the extent to which stakes are localised depends on various circumstances found in the features of second-tier government, politics, elections or voting explained below.

Moreover, in the critical assessment, the connection between the less-at-stake and the specific arena dimension was rephrased as an evolving equilibrium. It is argued that an inverse relationship exists between the extent to which specific arena characteristics determine local elections and voting and the potential effect of features of the less-at-stake dimension. The default mode of less-at-stake can thus be counterbalanced or even overwritten by characteristics that enhance the specific arena dimension. The institutional-procedural dimension will be most apparent when we discuss the effect of the electoral system as part of the variegated institutional set-up of second-tier elections. The campaign dimension will be included in outlining this feature as well. The second-tier framework is graphically presented in Figure 27.1 and will be elaborated in the next sections.

Figure 27.1  Second-tier elections and voting
Second thoughts on second-order?

Second-tier government features

First, it is argued that government features at the second-tier level affect elections and voting along the less-at-stake dimension. Therefore, second-order assumptions will apply (P1). In comparison to the first tier, the second tier is evidently comprised of more and smaller units. This scalar configuration affects the local polity scope (Denters et al. 2015). By default, second-tier elections and voting compose political bodies with relatively less power and/or influence. In many instances, the scope of the second tier is a combination of local self-government (a general competence to address matters of local interest) and multi-level co-governance (the second tier operating as an implementing agency of supra-local regulations and programs with differing degrees of discretion). This dichotomy clearly focuses on the vertical dimensions of polity scope. From a horizontal perspective, it can be noted that in the era of place-bound partnerships between the various spheres of society, local government is identified as the enabler at the nexus (Barnett 2011). Additionally, local government often directly affects the daily life of its citizens. Hence, second-tier elections and voting may be seen as equally relevant albeit in different domains of governance (Lefevere 2013), supporting the something-different-at-stake logic.

For cross-municipal variation, size seems a relevant factor but with potentially divergent effects. We may both argue that the larger (H1a) or smaller (H1b) a municipality, the more localised second-tier elections and voting. Regarding the former, in larger units more substantial issues might be at stake, generating redistributive political conflicts enhanced by well-developed or renowned partisan and civic actors. Pertinent to the latter, smaller units are associated with less (nationalised) partisanship, closer bonds between politicians and citizens and less ideologically conflictual and more harmonious place-oriented politics (Kjaer and Elklit 2010).

Cross-nationally, divergence in the territorial and functional organisation of second-tier government may matter. Also the functional scope and discretion of local authorities captured in the vertical power relations of intergovernmental arrangements may matter. These have traditionally been grasped in qualitative categorisations that often distinguish between the Southern and the Northern European model (Hendriks, Loughlin and Lidström 2011). In addition, quantitative and discrete measures (using multiple numerical and scalar indicators) have refined and actualised the assessment of cross-national differences in place-bound authority (Sellers and Lidström 2007; Ladner, Keuffer and Baldersheim 2016). The approach and outcome in these typologies differ, but they share that the autonomous position of the second tier may arise through a functional or political rationale. In the first, the municipal ethos is predominantly about the ability to shape and deliver a substantial amount of public services and provisions. In the second, communalism dominates instrumentalism. Local authorities represent different polities with specific identities, providing leverage for vertical interest mediation. It is assumed that both faces of autonomy reduce second-order effects. Thus: The larger the scope of local authority (H1c) or the stronger the engraining of political communalism (H1d), the more localised second-tier elections and voting.

Second-tier politics features

Second, it is postulated that politics features at the second-tier level affect elections and voting along the less-at-stake dimension. Due to these, second-order assumptions will apply (P2). One crucial local politics feature is the contemporary preponderance of party government in an initially less partisan polity (Copus and Erlingsson 2012). Commonly, organisations associated with the various functions of parties became institutionalised and dominant in place-bound decision-making. Also in the local variant of this governing type, political exchange increasingly galvanises around partisan interests and frames. Ultimately, this stems from the long-term
process of politicisation as the ‘. . . breakdown of traditional systems of local rule through the entry of nationally organized parties’ (Rokkan 1966: 244).

Despite its original teleological assumptions, the end stage of full politicisation has not yet been achieved (Aars and Ringkjøeb 2005; Kjær and Elklit 2010). This echoes the enduring relevance of an alternative conception of place-bound governing as largely outside the political (i.e., partisan) sphere and merely factual and harmonic in which different actors commonly strive for a single best solution to local issues (Copus et al. 2012). Therefore, it is assumed that local party government is a matter of degree and function of cross-municipal variation in politicisation. As the latter is closely associated with national frames of references, it is hypothesised: the less local party politicisation, the more localised second-tier elections and voting (H2a).

Cross-nationally, the internal form of government and the prevailing mode of local democracy seem to matter. The first refers to horizontal power relations between the legislative and executive branches. Captured in various qualitative typologies (Mouritzen and Svara 2002; Steyvers 2016), these essentially differ between a local presidential (i.e., a directly elected and singular executive as in the strong mayor form) and various subtypes of parliamentarian systems (i.e., non-directly elected and collegiate or managerial executive as in the collective, committee-leader or ceremonial form). This affects the scope of the electoral chain of command and how conflictual or consensual local politics will be (Hendriks, Loughlin and Lidström 2011). Consensual political processes will erode the partisan profiles of politicians, leading to less nationalised voting. Hence, in local consensus democracies (H2b), second-tier elections and voting will be more localised.

**The features of second-tier elections**

Third, it is assumed, the second tier has some electoral features that affect voting along the less-at-stake dimension. Due to these, second-order assumptions will apply (P3). The nationalisation of the local party system seems key in this respect. This refers to the degree of resemblance in terms of partisan competition and cooperation between local and national levels (Thorlakson 2006). The dominant strand is that national parties are increasingly present and/or obtain more homogenous results in all constituencies (Caramani 2004). The centre of gravity has thereby shifted away from mere place-bound dynamics. When national parties substitute local, second-order voting effects are likely to appear.

Still, others have emphasised the enduring relevance of various non-national lists and/or independent candidates complementing national partisan actors. These tend to maintain a significant supporting part on the municipal scene (Reiser 2008). Party system nationalisation is then not an absolute end-state of contemporary local elections. As a matter of degree, it also remains territorially diverse. Each place-bound party system is a specific mix of local (non-national or independent) and national (local chapters of parties) elements and multilevel correspondence will thus differ across municipalities (Kjær and Elklit 2010). With the degree to which the same parties are competing identified as a central political circumstance in the original second-order framework, it is therefore argued: the less nationalised the local party system, the more localised voting (H3a). Additionally, second-tier election campaigns (and municipal variation therein) may matter. Existing mass media logics tend to induce a nationalised bias (with a default focus on supra-local politicians and issues rendering place-bound dynamics subordinate) countervailed by mobilisation efforts by local political actors (Epping, Vos and De Smedt 2014). The specificity of campaigning at this level (more candidate-oriented and community-anchored) also enhances the idea that something different instead of less may be at stake in local elections. Thus: the more localised the campaign efforts of political actors and/or the framing by the mass media, the more localised voting (H3b).
Second thoughts on second-order?

Cross-nationally, variation in the system and the timing of second-tier elections appears important. The system refers to the rules for conducting local elections and the interplay of districting (one or more constituencies), the ballot structure (closed or open) and the electoral formula and giving way to (subtypes of) proportional, non-proportional (plurality or majority) and mixed systems (Van der Kolk 2007). These are assumed to have (psychological) effects on second-tier voting. Proportionality is associated with multipolar consensus democracy limiting a nationalised electoral frame. It is therefore argued that: a proportional electoral formula will lead to more localised voting \((H3c)\). However, non-proportional systems are usually not at-large elections as the municipality is often divided into different constituencies (with a comparatively lower district magnitude). This implies candidate-centred voting. Thus: the more constituencies in the local political unit, the more localised voting \((H3d)\). The timing pertains to the momentum of local elections in relation to that of their national counterparts conditioned by potential differences in length (concurrent or variegated) and/or the tenure (fixed or amendable) of both terms. The second-order literature argues that the size of effects is a function of the position of these elections in the national electoral cycle – the closer to the mid of the national electoral term the more do second-order elections have barometric tendencies (with aggregated interpretations of national parties’ failure or success). Therefore: the less local elections are timed at the mid-point of a national cycle, the more localised voting \((H3e)\).

Second-tier voting features

Finally, actual second-tier voting features are incorporated, referring to the motives for turning out and voting for a specific party and/or candidate in the local elections. It is assumed here that second-order assumptions will apply depending on individual voters’ attitudes and behaviour \((P4)\). Essential to the second-tier voting is that this kind of voting is a matter of balancing national and local considerations. Voters may be mobilised along pre-existing national partisan belonging enhanced by nationalised media frames and/or ditto party or candidate strategies (focused on issues, ideology or government participation). At the same time, the proximity and the portfolio of the second tier and the need for parties and candidates to be locally anchored and known (i.e. ‘friends-and-neighbour’ politics – see Jennings and Niemi 1966) can bring local reasoning to the fore. Another feature concerns the actual alignment of the vote across the various levels (Kjaer and Elklit 2005). Some may split their vote, opting for a different party (or candidate representing it) at local and national elections. Vice versa, specific individuals will differ in the combination of motives and adjustment along a continuum of localisation and nationalisation of their second-tier voting. Based on the findings of previous research explaining the importance of the local level relative to others (Lefevere 2013) and construing the congruence of local with national voting (Marien et al. 2015), it is argued that those who are higher educated \((H4a)\), hold more moderate ideological positions \((H4b)\), have an outspoken valuation of local policy \((H4c)\) and are familiar with one or more candidates \((H4d)\) are more likely to localise their voting.

Conclusion

Conclusions on local as second-tier elections and voting

In this chapter, the dominant second-order framework to elections at the local level is critically assessed, and substituted with an adapted conception of second-tier elections and voting. While acknowledging the relevance of key second-order postulates, the proposed model starts from
the acknowledgment of place-bound heterogeneity, the need to substitute aggregate insights with individual counterparts and the placement of localities and individuals along a continuum of localisation and nationalisation. Given the nested nature of the model (from voters over elections to politics and government) a number of premises were developed with hypotheses to assert variation between voters, municipalities and/or countries in second-tier elections and voting. These are summarised in Table 27.1 below. According to each second-order feature included in our model, second-order premises are opposed to the presumed conditions for the localisation of second-tier elections and/or voting.

### Table 27.1 Local second-tier elections and voting: premises and hypotheses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Second-tier features</th>
<th>Second-order premise</th>
<th>Second-tier localisation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Government</strong></td>
<td>Due to second-tier government features, second-order assumptions will apply (P1)</td>
<td>The larger (H1a) or smaller (H1b) a municipality, the more localised second-tier elections and voting. The larger the scope of local authority (H1c) or the stronger the engraining of political communalism (H1d), the more localised second-tier elections and voting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Politics</strong></td>
<td>Due to second-tier politics features, second-order assumptions will apply (P2)</td>
<td>The less local party politicisation, the more localised second-tier elections and voting (H2a). In local consensus democracies (H2b), second-tier elections and voting will be more localised.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Elections</strong></td>
<td>Due to second-tier elections features, second-order assumptions will apply (P3)</td>
<td>The less nationalised the local party system, the more localised voting (H3a). The more localised the campaign efforts of political actors and/or the framing by the mass media, the more localised voting (H3b). A proportional electoral formula will lead to more localised voting (H3c). The more constituencies in the local political unit, the more localised voting (H3d). The less local elections are timed at the mid of a national cycle, the more localised voting (H3e).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Voting</strong></td>
<td>Depending on individual voters’ attitudes and behaviour, second-order assumptions will apply (P4)</td>
<td>Those who are higher educated (H4a), hold more moderate ideological positions (H4b), have an outspoken valuation of local policy (H4c) and are familiar with one or more candidates (H4d), are more likely to localise their voting.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Future research into local as second-tier elections and voting**

While it should be obvious that the second-tier framework is preferable to the second-order one since it opens up for a much more nuanced understanding of local elections and local voting behaviour, it is also obvious that the main constraint to this approach is the data situation. The hypotheses put forward in this chapter are quite straightforward, and a systematic empirical testing of these hypotheses should be undertaken. However, when it comes to local elections and not least local voting, reliable and comprehensive data are not always available. In the best of all worlds, data – including electoral statistics and survey data on electoral behaviour – would
be available for all municipalities in every country (and over time, to be very optimistic). Survey data are available in a few countries, but in most countries a few indicators in the electoral statistics (turnout, number of candidates, votes per party) are the only data available for each municipality and thus for municipal-level analyses. Therefore, this is a call for more and better data. A model to mimic could be the Danish Local Election Study: at the two most recent local elections in the 98 Danish municipalities (in 2009 and 2013), a survey was conducted including several thousand respondents carefully selected to ensure that at least thirty potential voters from each municipality were interviewed to allow for multi-level analyses (see Elklit and Kjaer 2013; Elklit, Elmelund-Præstekær and Kjaer 2017).

As we await the gathering of more data on the local government level, some of the premises and/or hypotheses put forward can already be analysed based on existing data. The variation across municipalities within countries can be analysed for countries where data already exist. Cross-country analyses can be conducted by carefully selecting countries with sufficient data available to pursue some of the hypotheses where sufficient variation cannot be found within a single country. This way some of the hypotheses can be tested. It can also be analysed whether contemporary trends such as municipal consolidation and supra-local centralisation affect the relationships proposed between local government, politics, elections and voting and the variation therein (i.e. along homogenisation or nationalisation of the second-tier).

Putting together datasets from different sources covering different countries to study local elections and voting behaviour within a second-tier framework is laborious and sometimes troublesome, but the rewards should be correspondingly high. As Arend Lijphart advocated almost half a century ago, going local will allow for circumventing the ‘many variables, small N’ problem (Lijphart 1971). And it will be possible to say something general about how for instance the party system, the electoral formula, media coverage etc. affect voting behaviour. However, and more to the heart of this chapter, it will be possible to evaluate how ‘local’ local elections are. To which extent are local elections second-rank or second-kind in the minds of the electorate? And not least: What institutional settings create the degree of interconnectedness between elections at the local and the national/European level?

Such findings would definitely allow a more normative discussion on how connected to (or isolated from) the national election local elections should be. To what extent and under which conditions are local elections able to fulfil their essential functions of authorisation, responsiveness and accountability in a place-bound representative democracy? The importance of these mechanisms goes well beyond specific municipalities and offices. Indeed, it remains of first order to the overall health of democracy in contemporary multilevel governance. While some of the more empirical analyses called for in this chapter require compiling of data, these more normative discussions can start right away. So, the chapter not only invites to further discussion of the second-tier framework and empirical testing of the hypotheses proposed within this framework – it also welcomes a more normative discussion about how the knowledge of what factors localise/nationalise local elections should be used when made available.

References


Second thoughts on second-order?


