

# Studying Sets of Electoral Levels: Toward a Conceptual Framework

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## Abstract

The paper focuses on the issues arising from the conceptualisation of the electoral space. It strives for a conceptualisation of electoral space that would allow adequately to interconnect individual types of elections with the respective spaces of electoral competition and electoral behaviour, but also to render the territorial and institutional differentiation of these spaces.

## Keywords

multi-level settings, electoral space, conceptualization

## Note

The paper has been elaborated as a part of the research grant “Political parties and interest representation in the contemporary European democracies” (MSM 0021622407).

## Introduction

This paper defines the conceptual apparatus suitable for the study of electoral competition and behaviour in multi-level settings. The attention paid to conceptualising the electoral space (the space in which electoral competition unfolds and electoral behaviour takes place) is not fortuitous or an expression of obsessive terminological purism. Rather, it is a conscious choice made necessary by the circumstances. An important (albeit not the sole) factor complicating study of electoral behaviour and competition in multi-level settings is its persistent dependence on conceptual tools and procedures primarily destined and tailored for single-level (in other words, intra-level) analysis (cf. Jeffery and Hough, 2009; Hough and Koß 2009; Deschouwer, 2007). The problem is not limited to the lack of adequately proven concepts for describing and explaining the character of sets of electoral levels, inter-level processes and relationships. It turns out that there is a secondary effect of creating a new conceptual framework and a new research perspective: the weak spots and limits of the traditional concepts and schemata in their usual, “single-level” application are revealed. Naturally, I will focus at the beginning of this paper on clarifying the key concepts I use, for without this operation it would be impossible to present the approach and point out the research possibilities it offers.

## Conceptualising the electoral space in sets of electoral levels

The key point of the research perspective I chose lies in the assumption that types of elections held in the given polity (in our case, the election of the national parliament, or its lower chamber, respectively; the election of the European Parliament; and the election of regional assemblies) are linked with a certain type of electoral (or electoral-institutional) space. This space is territorially and institutionally differentiated in a specific way and exhibits distinct features, systemic rather than random, that are linked both to the institutional status of the respective electoral space and to its horizontal differentiation.<sup>1</sup>

In this context it is obvious that a conceptualisation of electoral space which allows for (1) an adequate interconnection between the above-mentioned types of elections and the respective spaces of electoral competition and behaviour, and (2) an appreciation of the territorial and institutional differentiation of these spaces, becomes important for us. It also, at least in general outlines, explains why.<sup>2</sup>

The concepts of “electoral level” (or eventually “electoral-institutional level”), “electoral arena” (or, respectively, “national arena” (NA), “European sub-arena” (ESA), “regional arena” (RA)) and “set of regional arenas” (SRA) serve the first purpose. “Set of electoral levels” is then an overarching concept.<sup>3</sup> To fulfil the second objective the concepts of “regional segment”, or more precisely, “regional segment of the national arena” (RSNA) and “regional segment of the European sub-arena” (RSESA), complete the just-mentioned concepts. They depend on the regional conception of territorial differentiation I prefer—I will explain this below.

I will focus on the concept of electoral arena first, as it occupies a special place in my argument and I believe that its exact specification is a suitable starting point for the necessary refinement of the whole array of conceptual tools listed above. I believe that if the concept of electoral arena is to be a useful conceptual tool for studying electoral behaviour and competition in multi-level settings (that is, in entities with more than one institutional level of representation and self-governance) it is

<sup>1</sup>Here I mean systemic properties mainly linked to the distinctive structures of opportunities as seen by the electoral actors.

<sup>2</sup>I purposely mention electoral behaviour alongside electoral competition, as I believe that a conception of electoral space as a space where electoral competition unfolds (with a focus on how political parties and other subjects that put their candidature forward perform) is not necessarily a suitable conception of space for electoral behaviour (a conception more or less respecting the “voters come first” principle, which in this case means, above all, that I consider the electorate to be the element linking the set of electoral levels together, one that “precedes” the parties and other electoral actors and whose existence is essentially independent of them).

<sup>3</sup>The designation “set of electoral levels” should not be taken to imply that this “set” is exhaustive, as we leave aside the level of local elections, not to mention electoral spaces pertaining to other types of elections (such as those of the president or the parliament’s upper chamber). It should also be clarified here that by a “set of electoral levels” I do not mean simply a grouping of three given levels, but rather an *interconnected* set of levels.

not enough to define the electoral arena as just any space of electoral competition (Strmiska, 2008). A more precise definition is in order, because, as I already indicated, a number of spaces of electoral competition can exist and those spaces can exhibit various properties. To call all of these spaces “arenas” – whether consciously drawing on the connotations of this expression or not – only because an (electoral) competition or struggle takes place in them would be to arrest the concept’s potential from the outset.

From this perspective, the best way forward in the desired refinement of the given concept is to define the electoral arena as a relatively autonomous space of electoral competition and behaviour that corresponds to a distinguishable territorial unit of representation and self-governance.<sup>4</sup> The relationship to the corresponding unit or body of representation (and, implicitly, also to a certain type of election) which is unequivocally given, institutionally and territorially (or spatially), is very important because it gives the electoral arena the character of a whole<sup>5</sup>, independent of how, for instance, this arena is further divided into constituencies.<sup>6</sup>

On the basis of this definition, it is fairly easy to define the national arena in the national parliamentary election (in my conception, it is the country-wide electoral space linked to the chamber of deputies (lower chamber or to a unicameral parliament) and the regional arena in the regional election (an electoral space of a sub-state magnitude linked with the respective regional representative body). Taking into account the above-mentioned institutional and spatial aspects, both of these types of arenas can be said to have the characteristics of wholes. The same cannot be unconditionally said, however, about the national space on the level of the election of the European Parliament. Therefore I do not designate this space directly as an “arena” but as “sub-arena”: the given space does not have its own “territorially corresponding” unit of representation (and in this sense it can be considered a part or a “segment” of a specific supranational – European – electoral arena).<sup>7</sup>

From the definition given above of arena, it also follows that an electoral level overlaps with an electoral arena only in those cases where the whole of the electoral level is linked with only one unit of representation or self-government (only national parliamentary elections, or the election of the president thus come into consideration). The main characteristic of the electoral level understood as an electoral space is thus somewhat different: it consists in the relationship not to one unit, but to one certain type of elected representative body or executive power (and, ultimately, to a certain type of election). On its own, this relationship does not provide the electoral level with the characteristics of a territorial and institutional whole as is the case with the electoral arena. In order to do so, a direct link (or correspondence) between the electoral level and all territories or spaces of competition (pertaining to

<sup>4</sup>It is worth noting that this application of the concept of electoral arena draws to a limited degree on the use of this designation in scholarly literature that deals with first- and second-order elections, where it is employed together with the key concept of a *political* arena. It should be stressed, however, that this relationship does not imply acceptance of any presumption concerning the hierarchy of electoral arenas and institutional levels, for instance the identifying of second-order arenas with administrative and political subsystems (cf. Reif and Schmidt, 1980, especially p. 11).

<sup>5</sup>The issue of what makes an electoral arena a functional whole or at least an entity with distinguishable characteristics can of course be approached in various ways. The main criterion can be, for example, the link between the electoral arena and a certain configuration of competing actors (which therefore also links it, at least indirectly, to a certain party system producing such configuration): see, for instance, Kris Deschouwer’s article *Electoral Politics in Multi-Level Settings* (Deschouwer, 2007). Characteristically, the designation “electoral arena” appears in that article mostly as a concept auxiliary to the more important concept of party system and the differentiation of electoral arenas is evaluated primarily in the context of differentiating the party system or systems.

<sup>6</sup>Constituency as such cannot be considered an electoral arena (we abstract here from the situation where there is only one country-wide constituency on the given level). In the conception developed here, electoral arenas and constituencies cannot be understood as entities of equal status. This of course in no way precludes that, for instance, the differentiation between single- and multiple-constituency arenas (i.e. composed of one or more constituencies) could be meaningful, as this depends on the perspective adopted.

<sup>7</sup>A secondary characteristic of an electoral arena lies in its potential to be connected with a specific party system. A sub-arena does not have such potential, but it can be linked with a specific party configuration exhibiting some traits of a party system (but not those that follow from the relationship to the territorially corresponding unit of representation and governance or self-governance). The whole issue can be also approached in a different fashion, however; arenas of electoral competition, linked with various types of self-governing units, can be understood as spaces in which party sub-systems operate (Carneiro and Almeida, 2008).

the given type of election) would have to exist, among other things.<sup>8</sup> It is also necessary to consider the difference between electoral arenas embodied in a single electoral arena (NA) or sub-arena (ESA), on the one hand, and entities represented by sets of electoral arenas (regional, but in the four-level model, also local elections); in our case, I am concerned with the level of regional election represented by set of regional arenas (SRA). In any event, an electoral level cannot be automatically understood as a synonym for electoral arena.

I also have to bear in mind the above-mentioned difference when attempting to evaluate the relationship between electoral arenas (or a set of electoral arenas) and the set of electoral levels in the given country (or in a multi-level political system). Let us point out in this context that an electoral arena is by definition a single-level entity—at least in the perspective applied here. A set of electoral arenas can be either single-level (in the case of regional or local electoral arenas) or multi-level in character.<sup>9</sup>

A set of electoral levels (containing all territorial units or spaces pertaining to these levels) represents a multi-level setting that fulfils certain functions vis-à-vis the given polity and political system. Multiple points of view can be employed in evaluating a set of electoral levels and these viewpoints then influence, sometimes significantly, the conclusion that one is indeed dealing with an arrangement with specific “systemic” properties, with a hierarchy of individual parts, with mechanisms of interaction, and the like. Under the present circumstances, and bearing in mind the present state of electoral space conceptualisation, the question of the “systemic” status of this specific arrangement cannot be given an adequately grounded and unequivocal answer. That being the case, I will limit myself to saying that I consider the concept of the set of electoral levels to be useful and indispensable in its overarching role—at least for the time being.

As I already indicated, a set of electoral levels can be viewed in various ways; in the perspective I adopted, the fact that individual electoral levels are variously structured gains a special prominence. This brings us to the issue of the differentiation of electoral space (or spaces) which I will evaluate here in two phases. The key point of departure for both phases is the finding that territorially identical areas do not have the same institutional character on the individual levels. For instance, the difference between a national whole taken as an electoral arena (on the level of electing the national legislative body) and the same national whole taken as a set of regional electoral arenas (in an regional election) is obviously important for the analysis. The basic objective is the same in both phases: to show that an appreciation of the differentiation of electoral space together with the deployment of an innovated conceptual apparatus can contribute towards a significant transformation of perspective in the study of multi-level electoral phenomena and processes; above all, it can widen and refine this perspective.

In the first phase I must adequately reflect the fact that the set of electoral arenas evidently comprises entities of various types and that a wide range of comparisons is possible.

The fact that a three-level arrangement of this type contains territorial-institutional wholes, as well as sets of such wholes, has a special significance here. The wholes are regional (RA) and national electoral arenas (NA). In the given perspective, sets of wholes are represented by single-level sets of regional arenas (SRA). I decided to classify the national space of the election of European Parliament, i.e. the European sub-arena (ESA), on an *ad hoc* basis among the wholes and to understand it as a variant of country- or nation-wide arena.<sup>10</sup>

If we take into consideration the relations between wholes and sets of wholes on the one hand, and the differences between single- and multi-level comparisons, we obtain an interesting overview of juxtapositions of electoral arenas and sets of arenas of the same type in the three-level set (to simplify, the comparisons are only binary).

<sup>8</sup>This conclusion can provide a suitable point of departure for conceptualising and evaluating “national segments” in the election of the European Parliament.

<sup>9</sup>I do not use the concept of *multi-level* set of electoral arenas here. In what follows, set of electoral arenas always means set of regional arenas (SRA), which is single-level by definition. SRA is always complete, containing all regional arenas.

<sup>10</sup>If we view the electoral level’s properties through the prism of their determination by the structure of the given level (assuming a national and not a supra-national perspective), such classification is justifiable. Both NA and ESA can be understood as national wholes represented by sets of regional segments. This of course does not preclude the application of other viewpoints in which the differences between NA and ESA gain importance.

Table 1: Overview of types of binary comparisons of arenas and sets of arenas<sup>11</sup>

Type of comparison and its object	Intra-level	Inter-level
Whole—whole (arena—arena)	RA—RA	NA—ESA, NA—RA, ESA—RA
Whole—set of wholes (arena—set of arenas)	RA—SRA	NA—SRA, ESA—SRA

This overview of binary comparisons can be variously adjusted. For instance, one might consider another – albeit ancillary – criterion: are we comparing territorially identical entities or not? Naturally, application of this criterion has immediate significance only for evaluating comparisons of some types of arenas, because national or supra-national entities, that is, NA, ESA and SRA, are territorially identical (I ignore here abnormal situations where this premise is not valid).

Table 2: Overview of types of binary comparison among territorial units

Comparison and its object	Intra-level	Inter-level
Territorially identical formations I. (arena—arena)		NA—ESA
Territorially identical formations II. (arena—set of arenas)		NA—SRA, ESA—SRA
Territorially different formations I. (arena—arena)	RA—RA	NA—RA, ESA—RA
Territorially different formations II. (arena—set of arenas)	RA—SRA	

This overview requires further commentary as the interpretation of what “territorially different formations” are and are not may differ in some points. To simplify the whole issue, I did not differentiate in Table 2 between (a) territorial dissimilarity of two regional arenas and (b) territorial dissimilarity between (any) regional arena and the national electoral arena or a set of regional arenas (territory pertaining to the given regional arena is naturally part of the territory of the national electoral arena, and equally of the territory pertaining to the set of regional arenas or the European sub-arena). It would therefore be possible, and in some respects also desirable, to continue with further refinements and adjustments leading to a differentiation between comparing (a) formations that are territorially different, but of the same type, and (b) formations that are territorially different, but also of different types, and so on.

Although I do not wish to overemphasise the usefulness of the overviews provided in the two tables above, I believe they can stimulate thinking about the purpose and potential of vertical and horizontal comparison of various types of electoral spaces. The models I am dealing with here are not purely theoretical constructions, as intra-level and to some degree also inter-level comparisons of variously defined and designated territorial and institutional formations have been a natural part of the comparative agenda in the field of electoral studies. This research *de facto* encompasses comparisons of wholes with wholes, parts with wholes, and parts with parts.

In the second part I will look at the issue of electoral space’s internal differentiation from a somewhat different perspective, namely a regional one. Connected with this is, among other things, an emphasis on the importance and expediency of the *intra-level* perspective in evaluating spatial differentiation. It can be stated that in research undertaken by political science and political geography, the “regional option” asserts itself very strongly during the process of selecting the territorial unit of analysis (cf. Eagles, 1995; Elkins et al., 1980). Similarly to studies of the “nationalisation” of European electorates, parties and

<sup>11</sup>Comparison of the kind “set of wholes” – “set of wholes” is not included in the table because the three-level model used does not provide suitable grounds for such a comparison. It could be applied in a four-level model with a local level, though; it would involve a comparison of two (single-level) sets of arenas, regional and local.

party systems, for instance (cf. above all Caramani 2004), the privileged initial units of analysis in our endeavour are the sub-national regional areas and naturally also the national wholes to which these areas pertain. There are various reasons for this option, but essential for us is the fact that it secures the necessary degree of (intra-)national and international comparability. It also leaves open the possibility of a further development of ecological analysis which takes into account various relationships existing both within the electoral levels studied (or in the wider context of spaces pertaining to the individual types of elections) and in the networks of relations connecting these levels.

To prevent possible misunderstanding two points must be emphasised now. First, in my conception, an “inter-level” relationship is truly a relationship between at least two distinguishable and institutionally-defined electoral levels (or a relationship between entities pertaining to these different levels) and not a relationship between part and whole pertaining to one and the same institutional level. Second, the “regional option” has certain specific characteristics not entirely common in the context of electoral studies. It is important to realise that not all “regions” are the same; scholars denote various territorial or institutional formations by the terms “sub-national/sub-state region” or “regional area”. In the context of political geography, the common praxis, and one that is entirely legitimate in the discipline, is to divide the national territory into regional areas in countless ways depending on the dimensions observed and criteria applied (cf. Eagles, 1995; Csillag and Agnew, 1995). But in my perspective, it is not so—and cannot be so: a region is a firmly defined institutional unit of representation and self-government.<sup>12</sup> In this perspective, regions therefore do not represent “purely territorial” formations whose number and character one could arbitrarily set according to the descriptive, analytical or comparative needs and issues of the moment. This brings a number of limitations, but it also gives to the above mentioned “regional option” a new meaning and dimension. I am convinced that what the concept of region and regional area loses in flexibility, it gains in its descriptive and analytical capacity.

As I do not use the concept of region and regional area in their usual “single-level” application, but occupy myself with electoral behaviour and competition on three levels, the process of refining these conceptual tools is not necessarily a simple affair free of misunderstandings, contrary to how it might seem at the outset. To a distinctly lesser degree, this is also true of the related concept of “national whole”. Here I must briefly return to the above-mentioned point of departure, i.e. to the statement that territorially identical areas do not have the same institutional character on the various levels of the set. The utility of the terms “regional area” and “national whole” is indeed that they designate either “territorially identical” entities or entities of the same territorial type (i.e. “regional” or “national”), irrespective of their institutional status. One has to bear in mind that in defining concepts such as “regional area” or “national whole”, the territorial, but especially the institutional factors, need not appear in the same light and contexts as they do when defining the concepts of electoral arena and level.

In this conception, a sub-national regional area represents a regional arena (RA) in terms of regional electoral competition and behaviour. In other words, it is a relatively autonomous space of electoral competition corresponding to a distinct territorial unit of representation and self-government (in the given case, a region). The national whole is then represented by the set of regional arenas (SRA). In the election of the national legislative body, a region is a segment of the one and only country-wide electoral arena (RSNA—regional segment of the national arena), regardless of whether and how the national arena is divided into constituencies, and also regardless of the relations between regional areas and constituencies. The same is true of the election of the European Parliament, with the proviso that in this case the country-wide space of electoral competition, that is the European sub-arena (ESA), can be considered neither merely a national segment of the European trans-national electoral space, nor another fully-fledged national electoral arena. The use of the term “sub-arena” in this case refers to both (a) the European space of electoral competition, or to the “combined” space of electoral competition for the seats in the European Parliament (as it is impossible to talk about a truly *homogeneous* European electoral arena), and (b) to the corresponding national arena. In some respects, the given sub-arena

<sup>12</sup>It is probably fitting to remind the reader that this emphasis on “institutional focus” or “institutional frame” is not unusual in the political science’s research into territorial differentiation of various electoral and political phenomena (cf. Elkins et al., 1980, pp. xi–xii).

can be considered derivative of this national arena, especially in connection with the functioning of the party system and the production of candidate lists.<sup>13</sup> The regional segment of the European sub-arena (RSESA) is therefore a very specific phenomenon which can equally be viewed as a “segment of a segment” or as a part pertaining to a hybrid national formation which itself has some traits of a derived—not fully-fledged—whole, but also at the same time traits of a specific part.

The conception which introduces segments of national arena and of the European sub-arena enables us to consider a new dimension of intra-arena differentiation of electoral space and to increase the number of possible binary comparison types listed in the preceding two tables. In addition to the comparisons of “wholes with wholes” and “a set of wholes with (individual) wholes”, similarities can now be sought between “parts and parts”, “wholes and parts” and “sets of wholes and parts”, though the last category is listed here mainly for the sake of completeness. In all cases, “parts” are represented by segments (RSNA, RSESA) of national electoral spaces.

Table 3: Overview of types of binary comparison among territorial units

Comparison	Intra-level	Inter-level
Whole—whole (arena—arena)	RA—RA	NA—ESA, NA—RA, ESA—RA
Whole—set of wholes (arena—set of arenas)	RA—SRA	NA—SRA, ESA—SRA
Part—part (segment—segment)	RSNA—RSNA, RSESA—RSESA	RSNA—RSESA
Part—whole (segment—arena)	RSNA—NA, RSESA—ESA	RSNA—ESA, RSNA—RA, RSESA—RA, RSESA—NA
Part—set of wholes (segment—set of arenas)		RSNA—SRA, RSESA—SRA

After the dimension of intra-arena (and therefore, by definition, intra-level<sup>14</sup>) differentiation of the electoral space has been added to the equation, the agenda of the comparison in a three-level setting has grown considerably and now seems substantially more comprehensive and significantly more diverse than it is in single-level contexts.

In terms of potential adjustment stemming from the consideration of whether we compare territorially identical formations or not, to what had already been said in connection with Tables 1 and 2 one can add that intra-level, horizontal comparisons of the type RSNA—RSNA, RSESA—RSESA (similarly to RA—RA) constitute by definition a comparison of entities that are “territorially different but of the same type”.

Inter-level, vertical comparisons of the type RSNA—RSESA, RSNA—RA, RSESA—RA (and eventually RA—RSNA—RSESA) can mean comparison of “territorially identical” entities (i.e. one regional area in various roles and differing context/level)—but it is not necessarily so. In other words, although it is usually the case, it is not a matter of course, as it might seem *prima facie*. The motives for vertical comparisons of “territorially different” RA, RSNA and RSESA might differ according to whether we are observing behaviour of the electorate (in which case the motive for comparison will probably not be very strong) or what the parties offer in an election (in this perspective such a comparison can be interesting).

For illustration, imagine a simple three-level set with three regions (regions/regional arenas A, B, C; the numbers designate types of regional segments: 1—RSNA, 2—RSESA).

<sup>13</sup>An electoral arena’s potential to be linked with a specific party system is its secondary trait. A sub-arena does not have such capability, but it can be linked with a specific party configuration exhibiting some traits of a party system (but not those traits that stem from relationship to the territorially corresponding unit of representation and governance).

<sup>14</sup>Intra-arena comparisons are by definition intra-level, but not every intra-level comparison is necessarily intra-arena. RA—RA comparison is intra-level but inter-arena at the same time.

Table 4: Possibilities of comparing regional units

Type of regional unit	Region (regional unit)		
RSESA	A2	B2	C2
RSNA	A1	B1	C1
RA	A	B	C

For example, the conformity of “party supply” (whether it means the number of subjects that put forward their candidature, or some other interesting situation) across A, B1 and C2 can constitute a sufficient starting point and grounds for the comparison of these units, despite the fact that we are dealing with three territorially differentiated formations with distinct electorates. Comparison of A–A1–A2 is not the only possibility that could be considered (for instance, we could imagine a combination of incongruent “party supply” in the “natural” chain of the type A–A1–A2 and congruent version of this supply in the “random” chain of type A–B1–C2).

## Concluding Remark

The preceding remarks about the character of comparisons in the given research field open up space for a very interesting discussion which can proceed in various directions. It should be said that one observation has a special importance in this perspective: without an adequate sensibility towards the differences and specific traits of the horizontal (intra-level) and vertical (inter-level) comparisons it is impossible to approach the selection of dimensions of electoral behaviour and competition suitable for analysis objectively, without the biases of unsaid assumptions—nor it is possible to solve effectively the issue of how effectively to conceive the congruence of territorial and institutional units and sets of units in the dimensions chosen and observed.

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