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Context in political communication : measurement and effects on political behavior

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Introduction



In 1975, communication scholars Blumler & Gurevitch wrote one of the first essays about comparative research in political communication. Commenting on the state of such research, they remarked that:

“... In 1975, nobody could claim to be able to paint an assured portrait of the field of investigation.... It is not merely that few political communication studies have yet been mounted with a comparative focus. More to the point, there is neither a settled view of what such studies should be concerned with, nor even a firmly crystallized set of alternative options for research between which scholars of diverse philosophic persuasions could choose.” (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1975, p.165).

More recently, many authors agree on the importance of comparative studies in political communication (e.g., Blumler, McLeod, & Rosengren, 1992; Esser & Pfetsch, 2004; Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Semetko, 1996), and in spite of various discussions about how to conduct comparative (political) communication research (e.g., Edelstein, 1982; Esser & Pfetsch, 2004; Livingstone, 2003; Swanson, 1992), truly comparative studies in political communication are still very scarce, as acknowledged by several authors (Esser & Pfetsch, 2004; Graber, 2005; Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Voltmer, 2000). Blumler and Gurevitch (1975) diagnosed a lack of theoretical concepts and indicators as one of the problems hampering the development of comparative studies. Later in this introduction I argue that this particular problem has yet hardly been addressed and that even now, more than 30 years after Blumler & Gurevitch wrote their original essay, comparative research is still in its infancy in political communication and, more generally, in communication science¹. This dissertation is intended to contribute to the development of comparative research in the discipline, partly by a focus on relevant conceptualizations of contextual characteristics, and their measurement.

Comparative research in political communication

What is comparative political communication research? In order to address this question, I will first shortly discuss two exemplary studies in comparative political communication in order to point out the relevance and importance of this type of analysis. Second, I will characterize political communication as a field of research. Third, I will discuss what the nature is of comparative research and what added value such research would bring to the study of political communication.

¹ In a recent contribution, Gurevitch & Blumler (2004) conclude that comparative research in political communication has almost become ‘fashionable’. Yet, in their own words: ‘More comparative work doesn’t necessarily equate with better’ (p.327). The studies that they discuss - thorough and interesting as they may be - are all limited to the comparison of only two or three contexts. Although it is quite possible to do excellent research while limiting the number of contexts, it almost unavoidably leads to underidentification when attempting to specify the consequences of context. In order to allow comparative assessment of rivaling explanations, one needs larger numbers of contexts.

The first illustrative comparative communication study to be discussed was conducted by Voltmer (2000), and focused on differences across news systems. The author classified European newspaper systems in terms of content-diversity by locating them on two dimensions: internal and external diversity. *External diversity* exists if content divergence is brought about by separate media within a system, each medium aiming at its own audience. A system with a high level of external diversity is characterized by strong homogeneity or consistency of content within each medium (McQuail, 1992). *Internal diversity* refers to the level of diversity within each medium, rather than between different media in a system. An internally diverse media system is one in which all media individually offer a broad array of (political) views, typically in an attempt to reach a wide and diverse public. In her study, Voltmer does not only report the extent of external and internal diversity, but also its direction: are specific media systems biased towards the left or towards the right side of the political spectrum? Voltmer thus develops a way of conceptualizing and measuring a particular aspect of contexts within which political communication takes place: diversity.

Characterizing systems in this way is particularly useful if the contextual variable can be demonstrated to explain other differences between contexts, especially when located at a lower level of aggregation. Wattenberg (1984), for example, hypothesizes that a major reason for increasing voter volatility is the decrease of (internal) political homogeneity of media. Although Voltmer does not elaborate her study in that direction, it is obvious that her contextual typology could be used for a comparative assessment of Wattenberg's hypothesis on voter volatility.

A second outstanding comparative study was reported by Hallin & Mancini (2004), who investigate the interrelations between different features of media systems – characteristics of the mass press (f.e., how many newspapers there are in a system, the readership of these papers, the commercialization of the newspaper market), political parallelism (partisanship of newspapers), journalistic professionalism (to what extent journalists apply standardized routines in reporting), and the degree and nature of state intervention (whether the state owns media, to what extent there are state regulations for ownership of media, and whether the state, or political parties, finance specific media). These four features of the media system are not independent; especially the latter three elements are interrelated. The authors surveyed the patterns in which these characteristics co-occur, and suggested the existence of three distinct types of media systems in Western Europe: *The Mediterranean or Polarized Pluralist model; the Northern European or Democratic Corporatist model; and the North Atlantic or Liberal model*. These prototypical models are important in the explanation of media as an aggregate in a system (why do media operate the way they do?), but even more in explaining media change. Besides that, the models may have implications for electoral behavior such as voting. Mass media effects may be of different nature, depending on the type of system one lives in: citizens' electoral participation in a Mediterranean system may be positively affected by partisan messages in the daily newspapers; whereas citizens' electoral participation in a liberal system may get positively affected by the media in terms of the perceived closeness of the

election race. This indicates that the media system is not only interesting as a feature *per se*, it also may have implications for (individual) behavior.

Suggestive as typologies as the one by Hallin and Mancini may be, they also have their drawbacks, particularly if the aspects underlying the typology do not reflect natural categories. If these aspects are continua, rather than, e.g., dichotomies, the question arises where to locate the cut-off, and, moreover, real-world distinctions are lost by the artificial collapsing of a continuum into a dichotomy. As a case in point, let us consider the aspect of parallelism, which is one of the four features that characterizes the different models in the Hallin & Mancini book. It specifies the nature and strength of linkages between political parties or ideologies on the one hand and the media (especially newspapers) on the other. More generally, the concept is meant to refer to the extent to which mass media reflect existing socio-political cleavages or political divisions in a country. According to the authors, political parallelism is strong in Mediterranean and North European countries, while it is absent or weak in the North Atlantic countries (with Britain as a notable exception). Inherently, this characteristic of a media system is continuous in nature, but by dichotomization all nuance is lost. The dichotomy cannot display whatever differences exist within each of the categories. When the variables that underlie the three types of media systems conceptualized by Hallin et al. are measured in more detail, the threefold typology may evolve into a set of continua, providing us more information and thus better understanding of media systems and their consequences.

Political communication

I introduced these two examples, in order to prepare the ground for how to define comparative political communication. This definition contains two components, a substantive one ('political communication') and a methodological one ('comparative'). *Political communication* relates to all processes of communication about politics that involve political actors, including the public. McNair demarcates the field further by emphasizing the intentional character of the communications involved; he defines political communication as 'purposeful communication about politics' (McNair, 1999, p.4). I follow his definition which incorporates the following aspects:

- 1 'all forms of communication undertaken by politicians and other political actors for the purpose of achieving specific objectives'
- 2 'communication addressed *to* these actors by non-politicians such as voters and newspaper columnists'
- 3 'communication about these actors and their activities, as contained in news reports, editorials, and other forms of media discussion of politics'(McNair, 1999, p.4).

In spite of its apparent breadth, however, this definition disregards interpersonal political communication amongst non-politicians. This is unfortunate, because communications amongst ordinary citizens are also of paramount importance for the way in which they give meaning to and interpret whatever messages from politicians

or from the media they are exposed to (e.g., Dekker, 2002; Gamson, 1992; McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999; McLeod, Scheufele, Moy et al., 1999; Mutz, 2002; Schmitt-Beck, 2004). Therefore, I also include the following in the definition:

- 4 communication about these actors and their activities as takes place between members of the public.

This dissertation is situated in the field of political communication as it studies communications about political actors and their activities in newspapers and on television newscasts, which are directed towards the general public, and which may be discussed between the members thereof. Communication is intentional or purposeful (Graber, 2005; McNair, 1999) as far as we can assume the sender of the message to be aware of the message contents. Whether the sender also tries to accomplish any attitudinal or behavioral consequences does not matter in this respect. This study focuses in particular on aspects of political communication as defined under 1, 3 and 4. Communication from the general public to specialized political actors (the second part of the definition) is not addressed in this study, nor are communications between professional political actors. This study thus looks in particular at ‘top-down’ communication, while recognizing that this represents a partial view of the total field of political communication². Studying bottom-up communication requires, however, different data as well as different design and approach which does not lend itself easy to integration with the top-down communication processes that are the central focus in this dissertation.

Comparative research

Research is comparative to the extent that, in the terminology of Blumler et al. (1992, p.7): “Comparisons are made across two or more geographically or historically (spatially or temporally) defined systems”, which can be regarded as “set[s] of interrelations that are relatively coherent, patterned, comprehensive, distinct, and bounded”. Implicit in this characterization is that comparative research is inherently multi-level in nature: focusing on the ways in which relationships between variables defined, for whatever kind of units, vary between different contexts within which those units exist. This implies that at least two different sorts of units have to be distinguished in comparative research – individual units and contextual units – and that the relevant aspects of each have to be measured.

This dissertation focuses especially on the development of the latter kind of variables (the features of contexts, in particular of media contexts) and on their application in the explanation of individual-level phenomena. More in particular, the dissertation focuses on the party-political media context and its effects on electoral behavior of citizens (Chapter 1, 2, and 4). In one of the chapters, the comparative focus is on issue-specific media contexts and their effects on electoral behavior (Chapter 3). This agenda implies that the

² Bottom up communication seems to increase in volume and importance, mainly due to the broader use of the Internet (e.g., Bennett & Entman, 2001; Norris, 2001; Van Kempen & Brants, 2002).

independent variables of prime interest in this study are contextual and the dependent phenomena are individual. Contextual and individual-level variables are related to each other in a multilevel explanation. In this manner, the explanatory focus is on individual behavior, using aspects of context as causative factors, or, conceivably, as moderators of other (individual-level) causes.

Why comparative?

Why would we want to conduct comparative research? What are the advantages of ‘going comparative’? A rather simple, but effective answer is provided by Graber (1993), who argued that the fact that political communication varies between cultures, makes it necessary to conduct comparative research. Moreover, she argues, it does not only vary, it also has political effect on the thinking, beliefs, and behavior of citizens. According to the French authors Dogan & Pelassy (1990), there are two main benefits that comparative research provides. The first advantage is that it helps to avoid ethnocentrism (see also Esser & Pfetsch 2004). Comparisons require and provide reference points, which specify the phenomena under study for specific contexts – a country, region, or time period, for example. Comparing the distributions and interrelations of individual-level phenomena in one specific context to those distributions or interrelations in other countries, regions or time periods, may contribute to our understanding of causation at the individual level, as well as of the specific character of the various contexts. Individual-level relationships that would appear as ‘obvious’ in one context, yet which are not replicable in different contexts force us to reconsider our understanding of them as well as to specify what the differences are between the contexts that generate these different patterns of individual-level relationships. In short, by making comparisons, one may escape from a narrow vision that, even if one were to be exclusively interested in a single context, would obstruct adequate understanding of that context.

A second benefit of a comparative perspective that Dogan & Pelassy (1990) mention is that it enables one to find more general interpretations of empirical findings. A clarifying example in this case – from the field of electoral studies – is provided by Van der Eijk, Franklin, Mackie & Valen (1992). They argue that the breakdown of linkages between particular social groups and political parties that can be observed in many ‘mature’ democracies since the late 1960s used to be interpreted differently in different countries (e.g., ‘depillarization’ in The Netherlands, ‘decline of class voting’ in the UK), and that these different interpretations suggested different origins and causative factors. However, after comparing these weakening linkages in a number of countries, the authors argue: “We are now able to see the cross-national commonality of a process which involves the breakdown of linkages between particular social groups and political parties which used to represent the interests of those groups electorally” (p.408). The weakening of linkages has little to do with the specifics of the nexus between politics and religion in the Netherlands or between politics and class in Britain. The common background is rather that the mobilizing capacity of group interests declines when those interests have successfully been integrated in a regime of democratic politics. Not only does this

reformulation lead to a more general interpretation of the evolution of electoral politics, it also helps to explain why the decline in linkages between social groups and political parties takes different forms and occurs at different points in time in different countries. This example nicely illustrates what the comparative method can add to single-context research: the potential to understand seemingly unique processes as different manifestations of common patterns, providing more leverage to assess the empirical relevance of their putative causes. Finding such common patterns may even provide evidence-based expectations about future developments.

In a somewhat different fashion, I can illustrate the benefit of comparative research by way of an example in terms of regression analysis. The emphasis of most individual-level media exposure studies is on the explanation of individual variation in the dependent variable (e.g., the *b*-coefficient within a regression equation). Within the confines of a single context, the *a*-coefficient – usually referred to as the constant, or the intercept – is often considered to be of little interest, although it is part of the equation that describes or ‘explains’ the dependent variable. However, when analyzing multiple contexts (countries, for example), the *a* will acquire a distinct value for each of the contexts. These different values characterize contexts and can thus not be accounted for by individual-level characteristics. Instead, if they are to be explained, they require independent variables at the contextual level (Przeworski & Teune, 1970). When investigating the effects of context – in other words, when engaging in comparative research – comparison of intercepts thus becomes of importance in addition to comparison of the *b*’s that encapsulate the relation between individual-level independent and dependent variables, and which also can vary across contexts. Moreover, when studying different contexts, one may find not only the intercepts to vary between them, but also the estimated *b*-coefficients. In that case too, understanding those differences would require contextual variables (which would then function as moderators of the individual-level relationships expressed in the *b*’s).

Contextual units

This dissertation focuses on different kinds of contextual units, each of which can be expected to comprise aspects of the ways in which media impinge on citizens, as follows.

The first kind of contextual units to be compared in this study are political systems (Chapter 1 and 4). In most cases, political systems equal countries. In some cases, however, countries consist of more than one single political system, as is the case in, e.g., Belgium. Belgium contains at least two systems (possibly three, if one counts Brussels separately), namely Flanders and Wallonia. The same applies to the UK, consisting of Great Britain (itself comprising England, Scotland and Wales) on the one hand and Northern Ireland on the other. Why political systems as units? One reason is that the dependent variable in some of the chapters is structured largely in terms of political systems. When explaining citizens’ electoral participation the political system defines the social/political/economic parameters within which and state of affairs against which elections take place. The countries that will be investigated are member states of the European Union in 1999. This distinction between political systems is largely coterminous with that between con-

textual characteristics that are of particular relevance in the field of political communication such as the media system – e.g., the assortment of media that people can be exposed to, their diversity in all kinds of ways, and their individual characteristics.

Elections, as they occur at different moments in time are the second kind of contextual unit to be used in this dissertation (Chapter 2). Within a given political system, each election provides a separate context with its own characteristics. Usually these contexts do not differ much in institutional terms (party systems, electoral systems and media systems tend to be highly stable over time), but they do differ in terms of political climate, and in the strength and nature of linkages between media and political parties. A comparison across elections (which by necessity also involves a comparison across time) thus allows studying the effects of more transient aspects of contexts. Such a comparison will be presented in Chapter 2 for Sweden, for the period of 1979 to 2002, a period that comprises eight different election contexts.

The third kind of contextual unit that will be used in this study is defined by information environments (Chapter 3). The particular kind of information environments that will be studied in this dissertation are defined by the contents of daily newspapers. People who are exposed to a particular daily newspaper share a particular information environment. Readers of other papers share another information environment. For reasons to be explained in Chapter 3, an investigation of the effects of information contexts will be located in Great Britain.

In this dissertation, media contextual variables are used as independents, i.e. as explanations of individual-level phenomena. The individual-level variable that this study will particularly focus on is electoral participation. The major contextual variable in the book is based on one of the characteristics that Blumler et al. (1975) proposed: the degree of mass media partisanship, derived from the concept of press-party parallelism by Seymour-Ure (1974). The dissertation will demonstrate that this concept can be measured in comparative terms and that it matters for the explanation of individual-level electoral participation. A context of strong press-party parallelism structures political behavior of the people differently than when press partisanship is weak (Chapter 1, 2, and 4). In addition to press-party parallelism I will investigate in Chapter 3 a different contextual variable, namely the consonance or dissonance of people's information environment with the beliefs they hold in particular areas. In this chapter, the impact on individual level participation is also assessed.

Plan of the book

Apart from this introduction and the conclusions, this book consists of four chapters, each of which can be seen as a separate study³. Chapter 1⁴ introduces the concept of Media-Party Parallelism (MPP), the central concept in this dissertation. It indicates the

³ The consequence of this format is that occasionally overlapping information is presented in different chapters.

⁴ This chapter has been published in *Political Communication* (2007): 24(3), pp. 303-320.

extent to which newspapers and television news programs within a political system (mostly: a country) correspond ideologically with particular political parties. Such parallelism applies to media contexts and can not be disaggregated to the level of individual citizens. It is a proper contextual property (Lazarsfeld & Menzel, 1969).

I expect that MPP has a positive effect on electoral participation, because a highly partisan media context is likely to reinforce existing citizens' partisan orientations, which, in turn, are known to be related to turnout (e.g., Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954; Brynin & Newton, 2003; Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960; Franklin, 2004; Gimpel, Dyck, & Shaw, 2004; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944). Moreover, I also expect that political interest moderates the effect of MPP on participation: the MPP-effect will be stronger for the least politically interested, because they will be more open to mobilizing influences. I expect a stronger degree of parallelism to exist for newspapers than for television news, because of historical differences in the evolution of these media in western countries. Whereas major population groups could usually sustain their own newspapers – resulting in a large variety of titles and the possibility of homogeneous audiences – TV had to develop in a situation of scarcity of channels which often led to 'catch all' news casts aiming to reach a broad public (Gunther & Mughan, 2000). These hypotheses are tested on the basis of cross-section survey data from the 15 member states of the European Union in 1999. The findings support the hypotheses: MPP does exert a positive effect on electoral participation, while this effect is moderated by political interest in the expected direction. The analyses also demonstrate that in these countries newspaper-party parallelism is indeed stronger than television news-party parallelism.

Chapter 2⁵ applies the MPP concept to longitudinal data for Sweden. This is an important addition to the first chapter, because it strengthens the causal inferences from that chapter. The question that remains unanswered by the analyses presented in Chapter 1, is whether one can expect turnout levels to decline when the strength of media-party parallelism declines? This should indeed be the case if the causal attribution is right. The analyses in Chapter 1 pertain to a single moment in time, and are therefore unable to test the over-time implications from the hypothesis about the effects of parallelism on participation. Moreover, the conclusions of Chapter 1 are based on the assumption that potentially confounding contextual factors were adequately controlled – an assumption that cannot be tested easily in a cross-sectional design. To the extent that they were not, the relationship between media-party parallelism and participation might be based on spurious relationships. An over-time design within a single political system will automatically control potential confounding contextual variables (at least to the extent that these are stable over time), and will therefore provide an assessment of the implicit *ceteris paribus* assumption in the cross-sectional analyses. If the same relationships are found in both analysis designs, the causal claim about the effects of media-party parallelism is strengthened.

5 This chapter has been published in *Scandinavian Political Studies* (2006), 29(4), pp. 406-421.

I focus on longitudinal survey data from Sweden, covering the period from 1979 to 2002. The Swedish national election studies constitute – to the extent of my knowledge – the only data source that allows this kind of analysis by virtue of the fact that the necessary survey questions were included in all election surveys since 1979. This provides a series of 8 comparable surveys. Each of these covers a separate (temporal) context, which is likely to differ from other contexts in, amongst other things, the strength of media-party parallelism. The analyses of the data show the over-time development of MPP and its hypothesized effect on electoral participation. Furthermore, this study investigates why it is that MPP also affects those citizens who are not (directly) exposed to political news. A two-step flow of communication is hypothesized to explicate this. The analyses provide support for this hypothesis.

Chapter 3 presents a somewhat different study. It focuses on the behavioral consequences of consonance or dissonance of information in relation to prior attitudes. The chapter builds on the theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) which holds that people will try to reduce whatever dissonance they experience between attitudes and information. This chapter elaborates this in the context of voters' decisions whether or not to turn out and vote in European Parliament elections. Previous research suggests that positive attitudes towards the EU have a positive effect on electoral participation (Blondel, Sinnott, & Svensson, 1998; Niedermayer, 1990). I hypothesize that people who are exposed to information about the EU that is consonant with their existing attitudes are more prone to go and vote in European Parliament elections than those exposed to dissonant information, who may reduce their dissonance by non-voting. The study focuses on the UK because it provides an excellent case to test hypotheses of consonance and dissonance, owing to the fact that both public opinion and newspaper coverage is very outspokenly positioned as either anti- or pro-EU. The study utilizes European Election Study data of 1999.

Chapter 4 elaborates and investigates the nature of the causal mechanism that generates the effects of MPP effect on electoral participation. Without a clear perspective of this mechanism – largely consisting of the sequence of relevant mediating factors – causal inferences remain vulnerable (Holbert & Stephenson, 2003; King, Keohane, & Verba, 1994). Two mechanisms behind the effect of media-party parallelism on participation are tested in this chapter, namely the mediating effect of party-political attachments and of political discussion. The data used are from cross-section surveys in the 15 member states of the European Union in 1999.

After these four main chapters, a concluding chapter summarizes the main results and discusses the overall implications of their findings. It will also reflect on how to further advance comparative research in political communication.

The appendices of this book provide detailed information on the empirical data that are used in the various chapters, on the variables that feature in the analyses, and on the calculation of the contextual characteristics.

It is obvious that a few common strands connect the four empirical chapters of this dissertation, in spite of the fact that they can very well be regarded as separate studies. The first common strand is the focus on context in explaining the dependent variable. In

all chapters, the 'observational unit' (the unit used in data collection and data analysis) is the individual; the 'explanatory unit' (the unit that is used to account for parts of the pattern of results obtained) is the context (Ragin, 1987; Przeworski & Teune, 1970).

Although this dissertation focuses on consequences of particular aspects of the political communication context in comparative perspective, the methods used here may conceivably help scholars in other fields of communication studies. In the book, I argue and demonstrate that it is important to take the media context into account and that doing so leads to important additions in our understanding. In order to explain differences in distributions or interrelationships of individual characteristics between systems (e.g., attitudes or behavior), it is of crucial importance to include the media context. Doing that may result in a more complete understanding of individual attitudes and behavior.

A second commonality between the four chapters is that they all attempt to explain electoral participation in terms of media exposure and media context. The media are often blamed for demobilizing the public, particularly so in the United States (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Patterson, 1993, 2002; Putnam, 2000), but increasingly also in Europe (Aarts & Semetko, 2003; De Vreese, 2004; De Vreese & Semetko, 2002). According to such 'media malaise' theses, turnout is in decline as a result of a deterioration of different aspects of media contexts. Newton (1999) and Norris (2000) both offer excellent reviews of this discussion. I do not intend to enter this lively (and at times heated) debate, but its protracted existence demonstrates how natural it is to hypothesize some kind of linkage between the media context and electoral participation, and thus also how necessary it is to investigate that relationship empirically.