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Essays on Political Actors and Attitudes: Do They Constitute Distributed Reflexivity? Part 1: Median Voter Theorem vs. Competence Fields

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Abstract

European political elites are faced with a loss of trust and the emergence of a growing number of sometimes rather obscure new political movements. How is this to be explained? What is the relationship between the logic that guides political attitudes of constituencies and the logic of political actors whose legitimacy is rooted in electoral choice of the constituencies? In this essay we approach this question from a systemic perspective, regarding this relationship as a problem solving feedback cycle. Classical approaches, such as the median voter theorem, view political actors as passively mirroring voters' preferences. An alternative approach that we suggest, assumes that the perception of competences of political actors on the part of constituencies is key in the sense that it does not only reflect voters' preferences, but it is also manipulable through the agency of political actors themselves. More generally, we argue that the perception of competence is socially constructed and contextually dependent.

Keywords: political philosophy, deliberative democracy, competence fields, median voter theorem

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1. Introduction

European democracies seem to be facing a crisis. In Greece the political system of the last 40 years is called into question. Loss of trust in the leaders of the party system of the last 40 years has led to the emergence of new political actors that nearly entered the government. After being governed by experts without democratic legitimacy, Italy seems to be lost in a permanent political crisis. Beppe Grillo's Five Stars Movement gained considerable support for a programme which is considered by many as a boycott of politics in general. 2010 municipal elections in Reykjavík, Iceland, were won by the Best Party, a quasi-political assemblage led by a comedian, with a political "platform" full of absurd promises such as free towels in swimming pools, acquisition of a polar bear for the local Zoo, and construction of a Disneyland near the city airport. A candidate at 2009 Croatian local elections gathered sizable electoral support with a cynical slogan: "*Everything to me, nothing to you!*" Another, somewhat less successful candidate at 2011 Croatian parliamentary elections, based his campaign on complete avoidance of public talk, under a quizzical slogan: "*Silence is gold. I'll talk in the Parliament!*" (Srbljinovic, 2013). Politicians in Romania do not seem to perceive political competitors as legitimate. Numerous additional examples of bizarre would-be political leaders and caricatural political parties can be found in many European countries. In Eastern European countries there is also a growing body of literature on loss of trust in political actors as a consequence of poor performance and corruption of political actors who are not believed to serve the interests of the common public (Voinea, 2012; Atanasov and Cvetanova, 2012). The first Croatian 2013 elections for the EU Parliament were marked by a very low turnout (around 20%) and an unusually high number of invalid ballots (more than 5%), most of which were intentionally spoiled as an expression of outrage at ruling political elites, both those of the ruling coalition as well as those in the opposition. It is somewhat paradoxical that in case those ballots were cast for the same party, this hypothetical "Party of the Disaffected" would enter the EU Parliament.

Where does this apparent crisis of political representation and representatives come from? Can this be analysed in a systematic manner, instead of simply blaming political leaders of being morally corrupted? While this moral argument might not miss the point entirely, it needs further explanation. For this reason we shall try to approach this problem from different angles in a number of essays in the following issues of the European Quarterly of Political Attitudes and Mentalities. Our thesis is that the crisis is twofold: on the side of constituencies, trust in politicians is low. On the other side, however – the side of political actors – not very reliable candidates receive significant support at elections. The purpose of the essays is to suggest a framework for a theoretical model of how formation of political attitudes and democratic selection of political action and actors are interrelated. In this first essay we shall examine a systemic perspective on the problem: in principle, democracy should enable selection of political actors who would adequately represent political attitudes of the society. However, as it seems, this has not operated well in the past years. We examine this problem in more abstract terms by regarding social systems as problem solving systems. The classical approach to investigate the relationship between political actors and political attitudes is the median voter theorem. It is suggested that this relationship can be addressed by a more general notion of – perceived – competence.

However, structures are enacted by actors. For this reason, the following essay will concentrate on the perspective of political actors: why do political entrepreneurs often seem to be "more rational" than their audience - why do they often look like they "exploit" the audience for their own interests and aims, as stated openly in this grotesque claim: "*Everything to me, nothing to you*"? To investigate this question we rely on neo-Weberian sociological actor theories. Boudon's (2001) notions of instrumental and axiological

rationality are introduced and put into a dynamic framework. Combined with Risse's (2000) typology of situational logic, this allows to develop a mechanism of the relation between political actors and political attitudes that contributes to an explanation of the current crisis of political legitimacy in Europe.

In the final essay we shall integrate the systemic and the actor perspective. For this purpose we develop the notion of distributed reflexivity. This allows to sketch the long-term dynamics of the mechanism relating political actors and attitudes. Here we follow the research programme of deliberative democracy approaches (Bohman, 1995; Benhabib, 1996; Chambers, 2003) to investigate the emergence (and possible decline) of legitimacy of democratic political leadership. According to this view, democratic legitimacy arises out of free and unconstrained public discourse (Benhabib, 1996). However, this approach has not been uncontested. Free discourse does not guarantee that simply by the principles of discourse justice and common goods are achieved, but free discourse might also lead to agonistic pluralism (Mouffe, 1999). The examples of frivolous, would-be politicians demonstrate empirically that discourse might not lead to morally desirable results. Thus we end with the open question of whether the current crisis indicates a process of distributed reflexivity or communicative bubbles. The future will show.

2.   An Abstract Formulation of the Problem

In more abstract terms, social systems can be regarded as problem solving systems. Governments provide specialised institutions in order to solve problems that concern the whole of a society (Almond et al., 2006; Cioffi-Revilla, 2009).[2] Sometimes they fail to do so as demonstrated, for instance, by the breakdown of the Soviet system. Less dramatically, in democratic systems a government might be deselected because it is perceived as insufficiently or inadequately solving societal problems. Thus, it can be said that the duty of a government is to develop policies in order to solve societal problems. In democratic societies the people is the sovereign of the state,[3] hence the duty of the sovereign is to select an appropriate problem-solving agency. Thus a self-organised feedback cycle between political attitudes and political actors exists (Markisic et al., 2012).

Whereas politicians have the organisational capacities to set the agenda (Arnold, 1990), citizens of democratic societies select one of the proposed political agendas. However, as the above examples of grotesque politicians indicate, there is no guarantee that this would indeed be a problem solving feedback cycle. In particular, in times of crisis and uncertainty, democratic "search mechanisms" need not reach globally or locally optimal results.

Figure 1 provides a stylised representation of the search process that might – or might not – generate solutions for problems of public concern: problem solving activities generate some state of the society. For instance, reducing taxes in order to increase the economic activity changes social conditions, introducing new opportunities and new problems. Elections decide over a future political agenda which might be more advantageous or disadvantageous for the society. Note that a sharp distinction between "stable" and "critical" pathways is only an idealisation. Actually, there might be a gradual transition between

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[2] Theories of the evolution of social complexity (Cohen, 1985; Tuzin, 2002) emphasise that social stratification and differentiation can be regarded as an evolutionary solution to the problem of population pressure.

[3] Although this is not literally true, various definitions of democracy imply, in one way or another, that the people is indeed the ultimate sovereign (cf. Bobbio, 1987, pp. 29–54; Manin, 1995, pp. 161–192; Schumpeter, 1942, p. 269; see also Dahl's (1956, p. 84) definition of poliarchy). Authoritarian systems, on the other hand, also claim to govern in the name of the people. The key difference between democratic and authoritarian systems, however, is that the people of democratic regimes is comprised of individual bearers of basic and inalienable rights, while in non-democratic regimes it is the people *in toto* that prevails over individuals (Mastropaolo, 2012, p. 14).

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more and less efficient problem-solving activities. For instance, some decisions have to be made on how to dispose of nuclear waste. The future consequences remain uncertain. However, selling the waste to other states may generate new problems, whereas different problems (in different time horizons) may arise if the waste is stored below the surface of the earth. In sum, some political decisions may have consequences that in turn destabilise the political system or in the most extreme cases even the living conditions of the people.
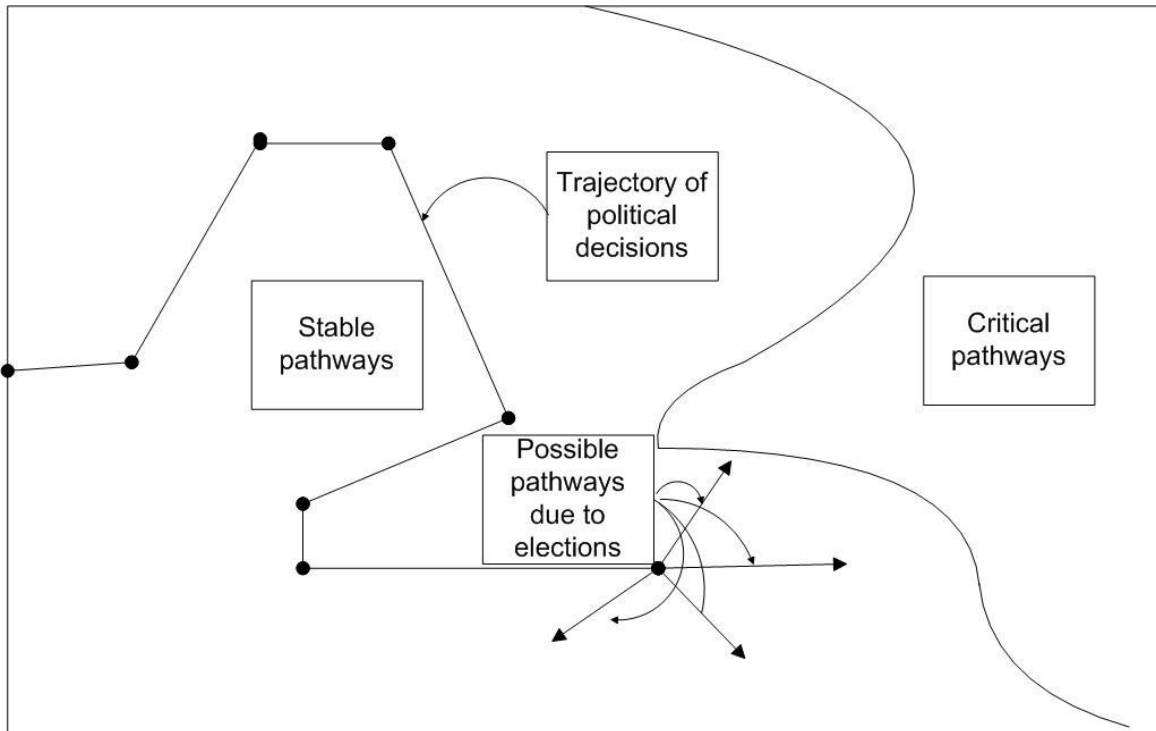

Figure 1.
Schematic representation of the problem solving search process

Since problems of public concern are defined by the constituencies whereas the agenda of political actors provides possible solutions, it seems necessary to investigate the relationship between political actors and political attitudes of the people in more detail. Successful politicians are those who are successful in, inter alia, convincing the audience. Beside the role of the media (Habermas, 2006), this might well lead to a selection pressure toward a strategic rationality of communication. These considerations suggest a closer inspection of relevant theoretical foundations.

3. Classical Approach to the Relation Between Political Actors and Political Attitudes: Median Voter Theorem.

The classical approach to this question is the median voter theorem, stating that on a scale from left wing to right wing political opportunities, the most successful political agenda is the one preferred by the

median voter (Downs, 1957). The median voter is the one who occupies the median position on the scale (**Figure 2**). Downs has shown that in a two party system a party that best represents the median voter will receive most votes (Srbljinovic, 2013). It follows that the median voter theorem predicts a tendency of political parties to move toward the middle of the political attitudes' space.
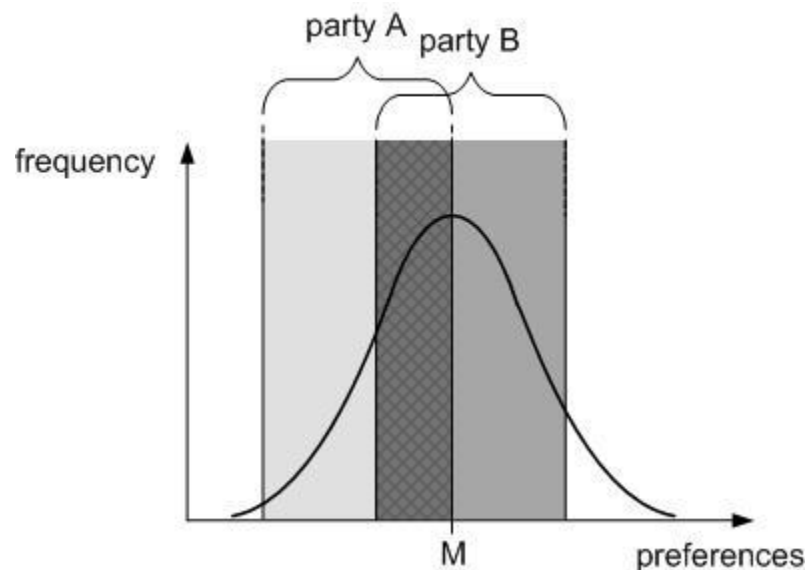

Figure 2.
Illustration of the Median Voter Theorem.

The Median Voter Theorem has been much explored in the past decades (Congleton, 2002). Particularly in majority voting systems it has provided reasonable predictions. However, research also revealed the limitations of the median voter theorem (Krehbiel, 2004). Here we emphasise that it is limited to a one dimensional scale from right wing to left wing and an assumption of an unimodal distribution of political attitudes. Moreover, the scale of possible agendas is predefined by the theoretical concept: an agenda is denoted as either left or right (Krehbiel, 2004). This might have been a correct reflection of the historical situation in the 1960s. However, since the end of the Cold War it often remains unclear how to categorise a certain agenda on a scale from left to right. For instance, in multiethnic societies votes might also be divided along ethnic lines (Snyder, 2000; Mann, 2005). This finding might also hold for other ideologies and social value orientations. Finally, the median voter theorem assumes that voters vote according to their true preferences. This is questionable in regard to the problem outlined in the introduction: why do political entrepreneurs get public support for dubious agendas characterised by ridiculous slogans, such as: "*Everything to me, nothing to you*"? Thus the median voter theorem does predict a certain kind of rationality of political actors, namely that they aim to maximise votes. However, it does so by assuming that this can be obtained by moving toward the middle of a pre-fixed scale of political attitudes. This does not capture the main point of a problem solving search process – selection of a certain kind of substantial solution to a substantial problem.

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This limitation can be overcome with the notion of competence (Mueller 1989). The concept of competence is related to the social construction of target population. Schneider and Ingram (1993) argue that addressees of policy interventions are socially constructed types of subgroups of the population. These types may be positive (e.g. the rich) donors or negative (e.g. minorities) receivers of state policies, and they may also be powerful (strong) or powerless (weak).
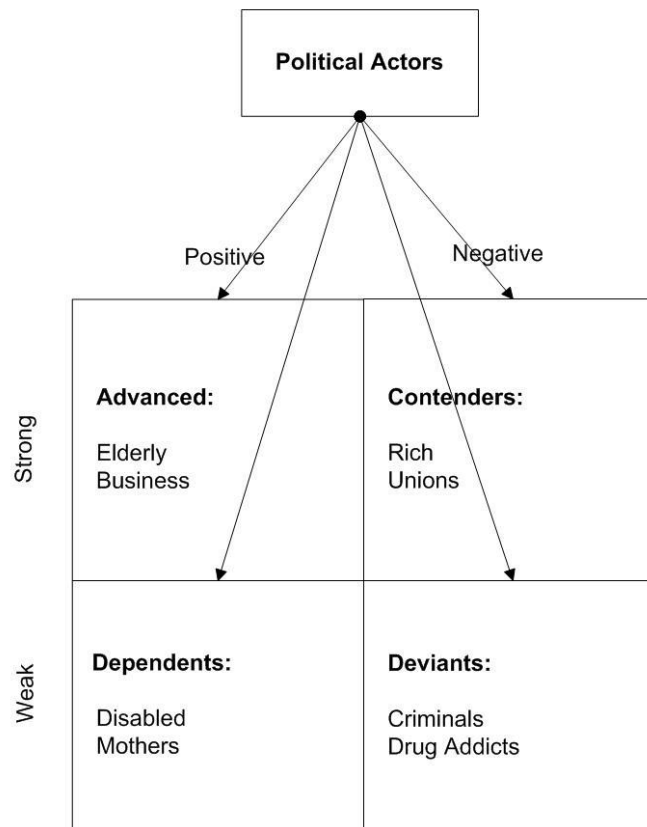

Figure 3.
Schematic politicians' representation of target population.

As illustrated in **Figure 3**, the concept of target population focuses on how politicians address constituencies, e.g. targeted drug addicts have generally been construed as a weak and deviant subpopulation. Similarly, Schneider and Ingram (1993) argue that a policy addressing negatively and weakly constructed target populations such as criminals or drug addicts is mostly perceived as more competent by the majority of the population if it is restrictive and burdensome (at least in the US). Thus "law and order" policy is likely to be perceived as competent. Here we add the reverse relation of how constituencies perceive political actors. We emphasise that a political elite needs to be regarded as competent in order to convince a political audience of the effectiveness of the respective policy (Mueller, 1989). As another example, political actors offering competence in defence activities might be regarded as important by many people, while those offering competence in Voodoo activities might have problems to

convince a sufficient number of followers (at least in the Western world). Thus competence is related to certain issues of public interest and there may be a multiplicity of competence fields.

Insofar as political actors need to convince the constituencies of their competence in problem solving to gain legitimacy, the concept of competence follows deliberative democracy approach. Multiple points of view are considered by this concept. However, it differs from this approach insofar as political actors and constituencies are explicitly distinguished. This allows to take differential power of political actors and constituencies into account. Thus far it is in line with the basic assumption of the median voter theorem that political actors react to voters' preferences. However, the concept of competence allows to overcome the assumption of an unimodal distribution over a one-dimensional scale. For instance, a political party might be perceived as highly competent with regard to economic issues but less competent with regard to security issues, or domestic and cultural politics.
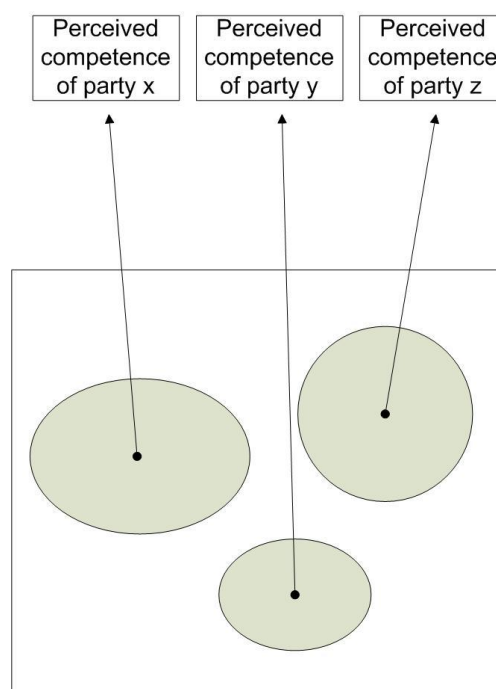

Figure 4.
Schematic representation of competence fields.

In **Figure 4**, the square indicates the space of political problems and the circles indicate the competence of hypothetical parties in these problem fields. Note that the graph illustrates the competence as perceived by a single actor. This needs to be aggregated over the population. Moreover, it is important to note that competence is a constructivist concept: what is essential is perceived competence, and not some "objectively" measurable indicators. For instance, it might be reasonably questioned if "law and order" politics is truly effective. Nevertheless, political actors may still be perceived as competent if they advocate harsh measures. Perceived competence can be measured by votes. Thus, the notion of competence is related to the issue of legitimacy: if power is not based on pure coercion, political leaders or power

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structures need to be regarded as competent in order to gain legitimacy. Elections provide such legitimacy because the results can be regarded as the evidence that the winner is perceived as the most competent candidate. At least two dimensions are involved in such a "proof": first, what kind of agenda is seen as facing the most urgent societal problems (e.g. economic progress, freedom, or equality). Second, what kind of agenda is perceived as the most efficient to solve these problems. However, the current crisis shows that political leaders are often no longer regarded as competent to solve societal problems. Perceived competence is always only relative with regard to other competitors. Presumably frivolous politicians (Srbljinovic, 2013) do not gain votes because of their competence, but due to loss of trust in the competence of their competitors; i.e. protest voting can be interpreted as a signal against other candidates rather than in favour of the candidate voted for.

In this context, corruption (in the broadest sense) is an important factor. While competence is normally judged as the ability to satisfy public interest, corrupt politicians are seen as serving only partial interests, which implies an incentive for such politicians to frame partial interests in terms of public good. Since successful political entrepreneurs are those who are successful in convincing the audience of their competence, a selection pressure toward a certain kind of shrewd political communication is to be expected. Thus we are faced with the question that political entrepreneurs often seem to be "more rational" than their audience – entrepreneurs often look like they "exploit" the audience for their own interests and aims. The trustful audience seems to be "less rational" than the entrepreneurs. And grotesque candidates and their followers most often seem to be disillusioned and powerless, able to see through the ongoing political farce on the one hand, but unable to change much on the other. Therefore they seem to resort to bizarre devices as a means of exposing pointlessness of distorted political processes.[4]

4. Outlook

In this essay we investigated the problem of relationship between political actors and political attitudes of the people from the perspective of the constituencies. If, for instance, the constituencies regard as the most urgent problem the question of polar bears in the local zoo, it can be assumed that either the people do not have more serious problems or that no other political agenda is perceived as problem solving. Indeed, the problems caused by globalisation or financial crisis are both rather novel and serious. No solutions exist which have been proven successful in the past. In contrast to e.g. problems caused by criminality or drugs, these problems produce a high degree of uncertainty, not only in terms of probability of success of the proposed measures but also - and more seriously - in terms of what to do at all. In terms of a search process, voting for polar bears can be regarded as a random walk. As it is known from complexity theory this indeed is a reasonable strategy. Voting for candidates promising polar bears can also be regarded as a mild, yet ingenious form of civil disobedience. And, it is well known from the theory of civil society that "civil disobedience initiates a learning process that expands the range and forms of participation open to private citizens within a mature political culture" (Cohen and Arato, 1992, p. 567). In fact, Reykjavík's zoo still lacks a polar bear, although the Best Party is doing a considerably serious job.

However, the perspective of the constituencies differs from that of political actors. What kind of strategies and cognitive resources are to be expected from political actors and how are these related to those of the constituencies? This will be investigated in the next essay.

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[4] Note also that frivolous candidates can actually be welcomed by political elites since what such candidates do, in effect, is to shift the focus of public attention from the more contentious fields of competence, such as economy, social justice and the like, to the more innocuous competences of poking fun, making sarcastic remarks and so on.

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