



Individualist theories of voting put to the test in the field: A case study of an election in a trade union organisation for administrative elites

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Abstract

This article analyses the social processes involved in making electoral choices in the context of an election within a trade union organisation for administrative elites. The methodology adopted is qualitative. The data was collected mainly on the basis of semi-structured interviews with voters. The analysis shows that the feeling of belonging to a socio-professional category functions as a dominant ideological support for political representation. It shows that the identity bond created by the candidate's membership of the socio-professional category generates a capital of trust among voters, which takes precedence over the political offering. Finally, it emphasises that voters have a moral obligation to maintain their loyalty to the socio-professional group to which they belong. In this respect, voters' choices appear to be continually subject to a process of collective interests.

Keywords: Electoral behaviour, social relations, election, trade union organisation

Introduction

Since its beginnings, sociology has focused on "social relations", and this is still the case (Donati, 2004) ^[8]. Social relations are the foundation of community life, and the central concept of sociology (Bajoit, 2009) ^[2]. It is also within this dynamic that Alain Touraine asserted that "the object of sociology is not a thing, but an operation that brings to light the relationships behind situations" (Touraine, 1974). In fact, any sociological object can and must be defined in relational terms. This is because the object studied comes from a relational context, is immersed in a relational context and generates a relational context (Donati, 2004) ^[8]. From this point of view, sociological discourse on voting requires an effort at distancing. This means freeing ourselves from common sense (voting as an individual act) in order to grasp the relationships that determine the act of voting.

However, in sociological work on "voting", this basic epistemological principle in sociology seems less obvious, as two opposing trends are at play. A classical trend dominated by collective explanations of voting and a contemporary trend favouring individual approaches. The first trend is that of sociological studies of voting dominated by the early work of Paul Lazarsfeld and the Columbia School and A. Siegfried. These researchers analysed electoral behaviour by means of localised observation, taking into account cross-referencing of ecological data, field observations, notarial statistics, localised polls and field experiments to account for the profoundly collective nature of the electoral act (Braconnier, 2012) ^[5]. This structural model, which has also sometimes been specialised to the African context (solidarity voting), incorporates the long periods of political socialisation, social affiliations and political identifications, and calls for greater account to be taken of the contexts of interactions, exchanges, discussions and micro-pressures that shape preferences (Lehingue, 2011) ^[12].

The second trend is that of contemporary electoral sociology, dominated by individualist approaches and

quantitative analyses (polls). In this trend, the model of the rational voter producing his or her own votes on the basis of a study of the political offer is reinforced (Braconnier, 2012; ^[5] Agrikoliansky and Le Grignou, 2016) ^[1]. This individualist model of the vote is based on the argument that current political contexts are increasingly characterised by new types of voters, more competent and more reasoned in relation to the short time available for campaigning and the electoral 'decision'. For example, Bourdieu (1977) ^[3] speaks of a cultivated voter, interested in politics, 'competent' and therefore rational. He also points out that sociological variables (social class, affiliation, identity, etc.) are more important for voters who are not very interested, not very politically informed and therefore not very "competent". While stressing that the activation of social ties in electoral behaviour would be the action of social categories unable to situate themselves clearly between the lines of force of the political field (Bourdieu, 1977; Gaxie, 1978) ^[3, 4]. Thus, for individualist approaches, enlightened citizens are capable of understanding the political game and making rational choices in their own interests.

On the basis of the above, it appears that the dominant approaches of contemporary electoral sociology (individualist approaches) are in contradiction with the dominant epistemological framework of the object in sociology (voting as a social relationship). This contrast highlights the relevance of returning to the sociological explanation of electoral behaviour on the basis of empirical studies. It is from this perspective that this article sets out to re-examine electoral behaviour by opting for the hypothesis of voting as a socially determined choice (or as a social relationship). Based on a survey of electoral behaviour within a trade union association of public servants, the study puts to the test the individualist thesis of the rational choice of educated or cultured voters. It is based on the following question: According to what logic do educated voters vote for their candidate? This main question is broken down into the following specific questions: what are the justifications associated with voters' choices? what are the effects of

political offers on voters' choices? How do the issues at stake in the vote, from the voters' point of view, influence their choice? The aim is to understand the processes by which voters make their individual choices. Specifically, the aim is to identify the ideologies associated with voters' choices, to show the link between voters' choices and the effects of political offers, and then to determine the issues that are negotiated in voters' decision-making processes.

Methodology

1. Scope of the study

This study concerns the election of the president of the union of general finance employees (RESAFIG). Created in 2008, this union association brings together a number of general finance employees, most of whom are graduates of the Ecole Normale de l'Administration (ENA). The targets of the study are the general finance staff who are members of RESAFIG and who took part in the vote. They are grouped into three categories: two socio-professional categories: contract staff and civil servants. Then there is another category comprising the members of the National Executive Bureau (BEN) and those of the election organisation and control committee. The choice of this trade union association meets a methodological requirement. That of resorting to a political universe in line with the testing of the individual character of the vote of enlightened citizens, capable of analysing the political stakes.

2. Data collection and analysis

The study is essentially qualitative in approach. The survey took place over the period from July to October 2014, a period that included the electoral campaign and the post-electoral period. The observation phase was carried out with union members during the election period within the finance building, located in the cité financière in the Plateau commune. Depending on the social structure of the targets, the interviews were conducted in several communes, according to the position and availability of the targets. Some of the interviews took place in the Finance Building, while others were conducted in the communes of Yopougon and Cocody, a location imposed by the targets.

Overall, the interviews focused on the justifications for voters' choices, the candidates' political offers and their weight in voters' choices, and the issues at stake in voting in terms of individual and collective expectations and rewards. The approach adopted in the field was one that paid close attention to the social environment of voting. This approach required the use of two data collection techniques: direct observation and semi-structured interviews.

Based on direct observation, we looked at a range of practices that created social ties during the election campaign and the voting process. These practices concern the forms of grouping and the profiles of discussion groups before and after the vote. We are also interested in the ways in which people are grouped together, either by professional category or by gender, during the voting process. The individual interviews covered all of the following themes: forms of justification for the choice of candidate, political offers and their effect on voters' choices, and the issues at stake in terms of collective and individual rewards.

Thirty (30) electoral agents were involved in the survey. These included two (2) members of the National Executive Board, two (2) members of the Election Control Commission, fourteen (14) contract workers and eleven (11)

civil servants. The data collected was subject to a thematic content analysis.

All the data collected (transcripts, observation notes) was analysed. Two analysis grids were constructed for the two categories of respondents. Ideas were selected, grouped, prepared and submitted for analysis in each of these grids. The following results emerged from this exercise.

Results

1. Reconstruction of statutory differentiation as a collective ideological springboard for political representation

Surveys show that workers have a mixed interest in the candidates' political offerings. This is because political preferences seem to be already established and each professional category remains more or less fixed on the candidate from the professional group to which it belongs. According to the dominant trend in the ideologies associated with voter choice, workers' professional identities (civil servant or contract worker) are reconstructed as a form of political representation. This can be explained by the fact that the professional world under study is criss-crossed by divisions based on historical processes of construction and deconstruction of both ideological and symbolic boundaries between civil servants and contract workers. These divisions have been progressively amplified by the perpetuation of the struggle waged by contract workers for a change in status that would see them raised to the rank of civil servant.

This conflictual dynamic around status plays into the electoral game and leads each category to construct its own political instrument in order to assert itself in the trade union "political field" during the ballot. In this way, the enhancement or re-enhancement of identity at work and loyalty to the professional category to which one belongs become a key factor in the orientation of workers' electoral choices. On both sides, the workers' vote is guided by a set of perceptions predetermined by the social structure of internal relations, itself shaped by identity issues and the boundaries they generate. This conflictual context generates a high degree of social cohesion within each category and encourages a high degree of homogenisation in the political representation of voters. This homogenisation, fuelled by the exacerbation of tensions surrounding the legitimacy or otherwise of the contract workers' demands for status, partly governs the "ethnicist" nature of the electorate's vote. Through the use of "them" and "us", union members are caught up in forms of structural constraints which highlight the fact that their vote is a kind of collective obligation. Here, the responsibility of workers towards their professional group is a resource mobilised by each professional category to control or redefine to their advantage the situation which is objectively unfavourable to them. For contract workers in the dominated position in this relationship, this resource enables them to challenge the institutional order within which they find themselves downgraded.

These processes of ethnic categorisation (valid only during election periods) constitute a significant part of the identity production reinvested in the electoral game. Thus, it appears that for most contract workers, and to some extent civil servants, electoral choices are less governed by the arguments most likely to defend their interests. What really matters is the candidate's professional category. This is ideologically reconstructed as the most credible political

offer. In fact, the electoral decision is governed by an ideological basis founded on a logic of recomposition of relations of domination. This in turn requires an affirmation of professional identities and a duty of loyalty to one's own. As we have seen, contract staff and civil servants make very little reference to the candidates' political programme in their discourse on the direction of their political choice. For the most part, they confined themselves to deductions with a strong ideological connotation, even fixist, through a mechanical correspondence between the candidate from a professional category and his or her political project. As if to say that the candidate from a professional category will only propose a programme favourable to the group to which he or she belongs and not the other way round. As a result, for contract workers for example, no matter what political programme a civil servant puts forward, he or she will defend the cause of contract workers less than that of his or her socio-professional category, as illustrated by this statement from a contract worker voter:

"(...) our mobilisation within our central management enabled us to elect our contractual candidate"; "(...) we felt that the civil servants were very supportive, so we thought it was a good idea to also support our contractual comrade. we wanted to demonstrate the spirit of cohesion within our ranks".

In this discourse, we can clearly see a strong tendency towards identity, linked in particular to the salary relationship and the set of privileges that distinguish the two professional categories. This is reflected in the withdrawal into the group to which they belong, symbolised by the separation between "us" and "them", as if to show the dividing line between two identities. The constant use of "we" in the interviewee's discourse shows that the logic of identity is based on the production of a strong ideological foundation of common interest for the members of his category. In fact, on the basis of the possession of properties shared by the contractors, the effects of similarity generate a collective self-categorisation which results from the demands of their common identity. In this way, voters' competence and proven knowledge of political issues seem to be deactivated in favour of a form of ethnicisation built on blind loyalties that obey values other than those of the common interest (in this case, financial administration). Nor does this mean that there is a "complete ethnicisation of social issues" within the administration or a completely ethnicised reading of electoral reality. Rather, it is a dominant trend in a context defined as unfavourable to the activation of forms of belonging that are expressed in links at work and within professional categories.

2. Voting as an identity resource for negotiating contractual workers in the quest to improve their status.

As part of their ongoing quest to improve their status, contract staff use the vote as a collective resource to gain social recognition. According to their perception, loyalty to contract staff through voting is likely to make a significant contribution to restoring what they see as a social injustice. In addition, on the basis of the social division of labour and relations at work, contract staff see their statutory distinction from civil servants as arbitrary. For them, even though they did not enter the civil service through a competitive examination, the fact that they have the same qualifications and perform the same tasks as civil servants is reason enough to favour their integration into the civil service and

access to certain privileges, in particular the bonuses enjoyed by civil servants.

At the same time, the contract staff are pointing the finger of blame at the management body for the obstacle to their transformation into statutory employees. Believing that they had fulfilled their commitment through regular attendance at general meetings and their solidarity in the union struggle, they deplore the lack of reciprocity on the part of civil servants with regard to their integration. In addition, while the contract staff acknowledge that they have had regular and encouraging exchanges with the governing body on the key issue of their demands, they have noted over time, rightly or wrongly, that the latter seems little committed to bringing about a favourable outcome to their expectations. In fact, they suspect that the governing body is using them as a political bargaining tool to serve the interests of civil servants. With this in mind, this contract employee said:

"(...) as there aren't enough civil servants to form a union, they encouraged us to join them because there are a lot of them here. For example, at the last AGM the two unions came to give a report on their demands. There wasn't a single point that concerned the contract staff, and yet our files are there in front of them. But they're not interested".

He goes on to say:

"(...) here they promote civil servants more than contract staff. Our demands are ignored. when it comes to defending the interests of civil servants, the BEN is even prepared to join forces with other unions to fight. But when it comes to contract workers, we see nothing".

As this verbatim testifies, contract staff interpret the status quo, as far as their statutory transformation is concerned, as the result of a lack of solidarity on the part of civil servants. In their view, this lack of solidarity is the result of the differentiation of identity at the professional level which feeds the marginalisation to which they are subjected. In their eyes, civil servants appear to be the executioners who like to see them maintained in "contractual" status.

Thus, the mistrust which fuels the boundary between these two professional identities is partly fuelled by the perception of civil servants as being responsible for the obstacle to the statutory mobility of contract staff and by their presumed arrogance. As a response to this perception, the electoral behaviour of the contract staff under study is part of a collective logic. That of mobilising membership of a so-called "marginalised" category of workers as an ideological resource for negotiation in the quest for statutory upgrading. For them, the only credible interlocutor or resource capable of making their demands heard and successful is not a programme or a skill, but the strengthening of identity ties (putting these skills and resources at the service of the group). On this basis, the electoral choice takes on the form of a simple social ritual and thus responds to the need to preserve and maintain community links, perceived as a key resource in the struggle to redefine the parameters for access to the targeted statutory position.

3. Issues of collective domination and the weight of social constraints in electoral decision-making

The survey data shows that the electoral decision is predetermined by the issues of domination of professional categories, which subject voters to moral constraints and other forms of obligation. In fact, contract staff are more keen to vote because the election of a contract staff member is seen as a way of better negotiating their status upgrading.

Civil servants, on the other hand, showed a more mixed response, with two more or less opposing trends emerging in this category. For some civil servants, the election of section heads is not such an important issue, as they feel that contract staff have no means of reversing or balancing the balance of power between civil servants and contract staff. Hence the high level of abstention from these elections among their ranks, according to their testimony. For these civil servants, voting is seen as a means of regulating the conflictual relationships between the opposing categories, which are clearly caught up in a spiral of power games. According to this perception, for these civil servants the vote represents a simple recourse that should only be activated in the event of a probable threat to the institutional structure that ensures the dominant position of the category to which they belong in this ideological confrontation. Thus, the low probability of such a scenario in reality makes them less inclined to get involved in what is ultimately a non-major issue for them. Having said that, by proceeding in this way, the electoral behaviour of these civil servants indicates that what matters is preserving the dominance of the socio-professional category to which they belong, rather than political offers. We could speak of a "social predisposition" to vote, because this logic pre-exists electoral campaigns. For them, the electoral choice is partly governed by the "no stakes" nature of the outcome of the elections in the relationship of domination that places them in adversity with the contract workers.

For the second category of civil servants, voting is more important because it appears to be a symbolic and cognitive resource for the collective affirmation of their dominant position. Even if these civil servants cannot be said to be "withdrawing into their own identity", what emerges from their discourse is the feeling that a possible upgrading of the status of contract staff is a way of discrediting their merit. This merit is nothing other than having passed the competitive entrance exam for the Ecole Normale de l'Administration (ENA), certainly one of the most prestigious and selective in Côte d'Ivoire. As a result, gaining entry to this elite national institution is considered a 'luxury' that not everyone can afford. This partly justifies the intransigence of these civil servants on the legitimacy of maintaining the competitive examination route as the sole criterion for access to their status. Although some of them took a relatively moderate stance, none of them, for example, expressed the wish to see this transformation of the status of contract staff. In so doing, their electoral decision was part of a twofold logic: to enhance their statutory position (a symbol of their merit) and to assert their superiority by maintaining the symbolic boundary that separates them. With this in mind, a civil servant member of the National Executive Bureau (BEN) stated:

"(...) no, it's not up to the union to take these actions. To join the civil service, there are competitive examinations and that's not the responsibility of the budget department. If you take people on the job like that and put them there, how do you expect them to become civil servants? Contract workers feel they've been wronged, even though we're not the same people.

In the same vein, another civil servant member of the union stated:

"(...) we don't even know what we civil servants have done to contract workers? Frankly, contract staff don't like us. they say we're not fighting for them and that they want to be

integrated. But you can't join the civil service without passing a competitive examination.

This use of rhetoric, which consists of describing as "normal" what is denounced by contract staff, contributes to fuelling tensions and thereby reinforcing identity boundaries. By saying *"we're not the same people"*, civil servants are asserting their supremacy, their superiority, which also fuels the boundaries between the two categories. This desire to preserve their prestige in relation to contract workers highlights the fact that politicisation within the union organisation is part of a collective process of widening conflictuality, the historical dimension of which informs the predisposition of workers in their preference for political choice.

From the above, it appears that the identity fibre resulting from the differentiation between civil servants and contract workers is very active in the political game and functions as a predisposition to electoral decisions. By predisposition, we mean the predetermined nature of electoral choices, voters being caught up in a structural logic that escapes them and which places them under forms of obligation. Thus, on both sides, voters are guided by the logic of solidarity, domination and allegiance to the group to which they belong, and less by autonomous thoughts or the desire to obtain personal advantages. Voting is therefore seen as a collective decision shaped less by individual interests than by those of groups reflecting and exacerbating community and identity-based cleavages. In this way, electoral mobilisation takes place on the basis of claims of belonging and conflicts of identity and relations of domination, although this approach does not exhaust the reality of voting. From this point of view, the forms of social solidarity forged by ethnicised social relations in this professional environment, and the power plays, influence voters' political decisions. This means that they are not politically autonomous as such (guided by their own opinions), but they express themselves as members of one or other of the two categories and are relatively bound by obligations of loyalty. In fact, the basic unit in this trade union political field is less the individual than the groups defined as instruments of struggle around the belief in a common cause (expectation and retribution).

Discussion

Electoral decisions and the resulting motivations are influenced by collective processes. While confirming this hypothesis, the results focus on four points. The first result concerns the ideologies associated with the choice of candidates. This highlights the reconstruction of statutory differentiation as the dominant ideological springboard for electoral choice. Electoral choices are then guided by allegiances or feelings of belonging (in this case, professional allegiances), which are set up as the dominant form of political representation. In fact, the voter is not alone in the ballot box, since he or she is there with the group to which he or she belongs, with all that this entails in terms of professional ties and friendships. The second result concerns the effects of election campaigns on voters. Here, the study shows that for voters in general and contract workers in particular, the solution to their problem lies not in the candidates' programmes or their speeches, but rather in the confidence they have in the candidates. This trust is generated by identity ties and nurtured by the feeling of loyalty of the candidate to the group to which they belong.

These first two results corroborate those of Agrikoliansky and Le Grignou (2016) ^[1] and Braconnier (2012) ^[5]. The first objective fits in well with the results of Braconnier's work (2012) ^[5]. She states: "It was *in the field that we discovered that the very conception of voting as an individual act produced in an individual mode appeared to form a real obstacle to understanding what electoral practices encompass, today as much as in the past*". Thus, when she sought to reconstruct individual patterns of participation in the course of her research, it was rather family patterns that she identified on the electoral rolls. In her view, these empirical realities provide an understanding of voters in their family, friendship, residential and professional environments, which makes it possible to analyse the collective nature of voting. The second objective corroborates the work of Agrikoliansky and Le Grignou (2016) ^[1]. These authors take the view that election campaigns do not radically alter electoral choices, which are always driven by the long-term nature of political socialisation and social allegiances. At the very most, they reinforce latent dispositions that become actualised when the political offer crystallises.

The third result looks at what is at stake in the vote. At this level, the results show the predetermined nature of the electoral decision through the importance of collective issues of domination which summarise the expectations of voters in each camp. In this respect, we note the determining weight of social constraints in terms of maintaining the dominance of the group to which one belongs, obligation and solidarity in the electoral decision.

Garrigou (1992; 1993) ^[10-11] agrees with this finding regarding the influence of social constraints on electoral decisions. He shows how the intensity of social ties and the relationships of dependence that result from them have been able to produce high turnouts and lead to community voting practices that are far removed from a certain rhetoric of universal suffrage. For this reason, Sainty (2006) stresses the importance of reintroducing the debate around political competence. In this way, we can clearly move away from an analysis in terms of the stock of knowledge or political sophistication towards a processual analysis of political competence, in which territory is not the most decisive element but only one of the factors that can be mobilised among others to support political reasoning.

All in all, this discussion argues in favour of extending a qualitative and contextualised analysis of individual political reasoning. It is not a question of returning to the classic debates between holism and individualism, but of insisting on field research in order to observe the behaviour of players in detail throughout the electoral process. This is because the electorate's environment and the perceptions it generates cannot be dissociated from the electoral decision.

Conclusion

The analysis of voting continues to be the subject of debate in sociology, and this study is a modest contribution to that debate. Based on a field survey of electoral behaviour in a political universe made up of educated, enlightened voters with a good understanding of the political game, the study gives an account of the social mechanisms by which voters make their electoral decisions. The results of the study show that the individualist thesis that the vote of 'competent' voters reflects an individual choice is put to the test by local empirical realities. This is because voters, despite their

intellectual maturity and knowledge of the issues at stake in the election, are caught up in issues of collective domination and structural constraints that weigh on their electoral decisions. These decisions are guided either by an ideology of class struggle with a view to social justice, or by an ideology of domination by the group to which they belong, or simply as a ritual. In short, there is a collective construction of individual choices. That said, the study does not deny the rationality of voters. Rather, it shows the fundamental nature of social relations in electoral practices and the importance of a contextualised analysis of electoral practices in given social spaces. From this point of view, a return to voting as an object of sociology is necessary in order to better define the methodological contours of in-depth qualitative field studies combined with quantitative data.

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