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LOCAL ELECTIONS IN KOSOVO, A SET THEORETIC MODEL OF EXPLANATION

MEHDI SEJDIU ¹

Abstract

In the 2014 local elections in Kosovo many mainstream parties lost ‘partisan’ municipalities they have governed for 14 years. This disruptive election exhibited the high electoral volatility in the country, rather than the expected consolidation of the party system. Using the Qualitative Comparative Analysis this paper tests the configurations of conditions under which governing mayors of 2014, gained or lost votes in the subsequent elections in 2017. With the standard analysis we tested the variables of new/old parties, mayor popularity, voter turn-out, kept promises and municipality performances. The findings show that old incumbent parties with bad performance were more likely to lose votes in the local elections of 2017. The voting behavior of the Kosovar electorate in these elections is best explained by the rational-choice model of voting.

Keywords: Local Elections, Kosovo, QCA

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ACRONYMS

AAK – Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (political party)

fsQCA – fuzzy set Qualitative Comparative Analysis

INUS – a causal insufficient but necessary part of causal recipes which are themselves unnecessary but sufficient.

KLA – Kosovo Liberation Army

LDK – Democratic League of Kosovo

PDK – Democratic Party of Kosovo

UNMIK – United Nations Mission in Kosovo

Introduction

The study of less important elections has been a subject of scholarship since the 1950s by the US scholars who focused on the different outcome of US midterm elections compared to the national elections (Campbell, 1960) (Tufte, 1975) (Alesina and Rosenthal 1989, 1995). These theories on less important elections was exported to Europe in the 1970s. Here Dinkel studied the federal elections *Landtagswahlen* in Germany (1977, 1978), and other scholars started to look at the European Parliament elections called second order elections (SOE) (Reif and Schmitt 1980). The SOE model was also used to explain regional, local and municipal elections.

These theories however, usually fail to explain seismic elections in newer democracies like in the countries of Latin America or Eastern Europe, where *party systems are more fluid – with identifications, programs, and electoral options all subject to recurrent shifts* (Bustikova & Zechmeister, 2017: 92).

This paper is a case study of the conditions under which political parties in the local level gain or lose votes in the ensuing local elections. We focus on parties on the local level in Kosovo, a South-Eastern European country. As a case study it is a most-similar case design (Gerring, 2008: 668). We look at the electoral performance of local political parties that won in the elections of the years 2013 and we analyze the configurations of conditions under which these winning parties gained or lost votes in the subsequent local elections of 2017. Thus the research question posed in this paper is *Under configurations of what conditions do incumbent local parties in Kosovo gain or lose votes in the subsequent elections?*

The study of local elections is particularly important for the welfare state, since the welfare state analysis deals with the public sector and the public spending on welfare (Greve, 2018). The mayors are executives in charge of those policies in the local level, therefore studying the conditions under which incumbent mayors win or lose the elections is of utmost importance for the welfare state in that country.

The studies of less important elections took place during a time where EU had only member countries of the west, and still did not have member countries from Eastern Europe. Once the

Eastern European countries entered the EU, these models failed to be corroborated and showed the needs to be adjusted for elections that are held outside of consolidated western democracies.

Kosovo is not an EU member and is not entirely part of the Eastern European countries, however as a country from the former socialist-Yugoslavia and as a new democracy its elections are certainly more similar to newer democracies in Eastern Europe which have a socialist/communist past, than to the consolidated democracies of the west. Kosovo as a case study can tell us more about whether ex-Yugoslav countries have similarities with eastern Europe, or whether the new democracies of the Western Balkans have their unique electoral behavior and most importantly what models could explain the voter behavior in Kosovo or the region.

Kosovo can be categorized as a new democracy. The first elections of the country were held in the year 2000, under the supervision of the United Nations Mission in Kosovo. The country declared its independence on the 17th of February 2008 from Serbia, and de-facto from the international protectorate, so the local institutions gained full executive power.

Using the Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) method as a set-theoretic approach, we use conditions of participation, efficiency, popularity of the mayor, old or new party to determine conditions that lead to voter gain or loss for incumbent parties. The hypotheses are that (H1) to be a new party is a condition to gain votes, (H2) lower participation is a condition for incumbent parties to lose votes, (H3) popularity of the mayor is a condition for winning votes and (H4) good performance is a condition for voter gain.

The most important focus of this study is to understand why some parties manage to survive their first mandates by gaining votes, while others lose votes after holding office.

This paper is organized as follows, first a quick historical context is given about Kosovo and its democracy, then the theoretical framework will discuss the current literature on less important elections, newer democracies of Eastern Europe and variables we're testing in the study; the following section is the methodology that summarizes QCA as a method, the data collection, the calibration process of the variables and the cases, lastly the findings are summarized and we discuss about their implications to the literature and future research in this area.

Historical Background

Voters in newer democracies, just like in the consolidated democracies, make decisions based on group identities, policy divides, partisanship and retrospective evaluation. Nevertheless, in newer democracies the party system is more fluid with shifting identifications, programs and electoral opinions (Bustikova & Zechmeister, 2017: 92). The parties in the newer systems of democracies have shallow roots, no established ideologies and follow short-term goals to win elections, such as infrastructural projects in the dawn of the elections, clientelism, material incentives to vote, economic performance of the party and identity-based cleavages (Sejdiu & Haliti, 2016) (Bustikova & Zechmeister, 2017: 92).

The local elections in Kosovo have proven to show high volatility, the initial cleavage was created before the war where two of the biggest factions had conflicting views on how to act in the conflict with Serbia. LDK (Democratic League of Kosovo) was labeled the peace wing and believed that the conflict should be handled through non-violent means, which essentially meant civil resistance, lobbying and parallel institutions. PDK (Democratic Party of Kosovo) and AAK (Alliance for the Future of Kosovo) were named the War Wing, PDK and AAK believed an armed conflict could be the only way to win the conflict. In the first elections parties of the war wing had success in the regions where KLA (Kosovo Liberation Army) was active, whereas LDK had more success in the regions less affected by the war and more by be the peaceful civil resistance.

PARTY	Description
PDK	Center-right (war-wing) mainstream party, mostly governing since the war
LDK	Center-right (peace-wing) mainstream party governing mostly since the war
AAK	Center-right (war-wing) smaller regional party, twice a junior coalition partner
VV	Center-left (post-war movement) anti-establishment party, critical of international involvement in KS, been mostly in opposition
AKR	Centrist (post-war party) liberal party, twice part of the government as a junior coalition partner

Figure 1 Party Landscape in Kosovo

The third biggest party is Vetevendosje (Self-determination movement), a center-left party which ran for the first time in the 2010 elections with a platform against corruption, the dialogue with Serbia and for eventual unification with Albania.

Kosovo just like the semi-democratic countries of Eastern Europe is characterized with political corruption, private interest that shapes policies, politization and commercialization of media, push against liberal civil society, etc. The greatest motivation to democratize has been EU membership, which despite its incentives and condition, has had a limited impact on anti-democratic and illiberal sentiments (Bustikova & Zechmeister, 2017: 107; Levitz and Pop-Eleches 2010; Vachudova, 2008)

Theoretical Framework

The Kosovo local elections of 2014 changed the local political landscape, with parties losing cities in which they previously have been particularly strong, LDK losing Prishtina, PDK Mitrovica, AAK Peja and Gjakova, etc. Similar to Kosovo, certain elections in the Eastern European countries have changed the whole political landscape. According to a study from Haughton and Deegan-Krause (2015) countries in Central Europe experienced seismic elections in 2001 in Bulgaria and Poland, Hungary in 2010, Czech Republic in 2010 and 2013. These countries experienced the swing of at least 40% of the political landscape with new parties making significant gains.

Instead of the consolidation of the party system, these elections created high volatility. The pattern was similar throughout the countries. The electorate punished established parties, giving rise to “uncorrupted” new parties until the political earthquake would happen again and the cycle repeats itself. When compared to other cleavages, the theories of economic voting were superior in predicting elections (Bustikova & Zechmeister, 2017: 111).

However the economic models of electoral behavior such as the reward-punishment model (Stegmaier, Park and Lewis-Back, 2017) are not apt to explain local elections in Kosovo (Salihu, personal interview, 2018), because the municipalities do not have the means to create economic development, but they are often judged by their overall performance in urban and rural planning, transparency, environmental policies, permissions in construction work, ensuring running

services (water, sewage, pollution, roads, local transportation, heating systems). Local governments are also responsible for public procurement, early, primary and secondary education, local health and social services, housing, cultural activities, etc.

The ‘surge and decline theory’ (Campbell, 1960), the ‘referendum theory’ (Tufte, 1975) the ‘balancing theory’ (Alesina and Rosenthal, 1989, 1995), or the second order elections SOE, Reif and Schmitt (1980) cannot explain the voting patterns in Kosovo. Due to that reason we created a set of theoretical conditions to test the configurations under which incumbent parties gained votes in the local elections of 2017.

Taking into account the cycle mentioned earlier, big mainstream parties are punished by the electorate in Eastern European elections. In these countries instead of consolidations of political parties over time, disruptive elections lead to high volatility. Established parties lose, and ‘new uncorrupted’ parties win until the cycle that leads to a political earthquake in the future (Bustikova & Zechmeister, 2017: 111). From this argumentation we draw the first hypothesis that (H1) *to be a new party is an INUS condition to gain votes. We expect to see that Kosovo follows a similar pattern to Eastern European countries and that new ‘uncorrupted’ parties in Kosovo will more likely to gain votes after one mandate in the office, than the older mainstream parties did.*

The participation rate in local elections is often depended the turnout of low-probability voters. As turn out rates increases, more low probability voters become part of the electorate. The stable the high probability voters are more likely to vote for the incumbent parties from whom they benefit (Trounstine, 2012). This is corroborated by research from Hansford and Gomez (2010) which shows that incumbent presidents in the US elections lose their share of votes the higher the turn out. So the second hypothesis we test is (H2) *lower participation is a condition for incumbent parties to lose increase their share of votes.*

Similar to the political system in the Eastern European countries, parties often put new popular candidates to run. The personalization of politics led to studies showing that the voters increasingly vote for the candidate and not the platform or the party (Manin, 1997). The personalization hypothesis would stress the importance of the candidate in the elections, leading to our popularity variable and hypothesis that (H3) *popularity of the mayor is a condition for winning votes.*

The fourth condition is performance, it is derived from the School of Rochester, but is also known as economic voting, or rational voting. It was developed from Anthony Downs (1957) and considers variables such as rationality, choice, uncertainty and information. According to this theory voters reward incumbents who have benefited them and punish those who haven't. Hence our fourth hypothesis (H4) *is good performance is a condition for voter gain.*

In summary the theoretical conditions that will be tested in order to determine the reasons for voter gain or loss among incumbent parties are: being a new party, participation rate, popularity of the mayor and the performance of the party.

Methodology

The Kosovo local elections are a most-similar-case design (see Gerring, 2008: 668), which controls for the context factors impacting the outcome, with parties competing over the same electorate under the same laws and institutions. As a case study it is important as it sheds more light into the dynamics of local elections in newer democracies of the Western Balkans. A region where countries seek to reform and democratize to join the European Union in the future.

Set theoretic methods share three features: the data are membership scores of cases in sets, the relations between sets are perceived as set relations, third these set relations are interpreted in terms of sufficiency and necessity as well as deriving form of SUIN or INUS (Schneider & Wageman, 2007: 3).²

In this study we use the fuzzy set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA), (see Ragin, 2008; Schneider & Wagemann, 2012). The explanatory variables are not going to be tested as individual conditions standing alone, but rather as correlated conditions whose configuration lead to the outcome.

QCA recognizes the principle of equifinality, *a scenario in which alternative factors can produce the same outcome* (Schneider & Wagemann, 2012: 8). In our case that would be conditions different than popularity of the mayor, performance, participation and new party, could lead to

² INUS- a condition that is an "insufficient but necessary part of a condition which is itself unnecessary for the result.

the same outcome of voter gain. QCA elucidates causality through conjectural causation and asymmetry. The interpretation of asymmetry as a casual explanation is that *the explanation for the non-occurrence of the outcome cannot automatically be derived from the explanation for the occurrence of the outcome* (Schneider & Wagemann, 2012: 6). For instance, if we have a concept such as rich, the negated version cannot be merely poor. A set theoretic approach requires in this case two different definitions and operationalizations (Ibid.).

Voter Gain (Outcome)

Popularity

New party

Performance

Participation

To estimate the configurations of conditions we have four variables under which we will calculate the outcome of voter gain. The negated outcome -voter gain i.e. voter loss will also be calculated.

The data was collected from different data sources, the participation, new party and voting results were from data of the Central Election Commission of Kosovo. The popularity of the mayor was taken from the MOSAIC study of 2015 and the performance variable was qualitatively assessed for the purposes of this paper from Bekim Salihu

(2008), a researcher from the GAP Institute in Prishtina. Salihu is an expert and observer of local governance and elections in Kosovo.

The next section of the methodology will outline the calibration criteria of each condition.

Calibration

Voter gain is the outcome variable of this study. Voter gain is the relative voter gain/loss of the incumbent party after its mandate. Given Kosovo’s high natality rate, there are much more voters in the voting lists of 2017 than in 2013. In order to control the relative voter-gain or loss, we focused on the percentage share of loss and gain of the incumbent party.

Promises, were calculated on the basis of the monitoring work of the GAP research institute, which took the number of the promises and classified them as fulfilled, half-fulfilled, started and not started. The promises of a mayor were calculated as follows: 1 point for a fulfilled promise, 0.5 for a half-fulfilled promise, 0.3 for one that started and 0 for one that hasn’t. Then the

municipalities were divided accordingly in four groups with the ones who fulfilled the biggest share of promises (1, 0.67) and those who have not (0.33, 0)

Participation was calibrated based on the relative voter participation in percentage based to the previous elections. It is important to note again that more people were part of the voting lists in 2017 due to Kosovo’s high natality rate and big number of voters being eligible to vote for the first time in 2017, therefore we took the percentage share of the voters rather than the number.

Popularity of the mayor was taken from the MOSAIC survey in 2015, due to the lack of data for 2016 and 2017, the survey of the year 2015 had to be taken as a basis (MOSAIC Survey is done every third year).

New Party. Similar to the categorization of De Vries and Hobolt (2012: 251), challenger parties are defined on the basis of their office-holder experience in the local level. That means that parties who have not held office in that municipality before are a 1, whereas parties who held office before are 0. Ferizaj is a 0.5 since it was a swing municipality for the past 4 elections.

Performance. The performance was evaluated after an interview with Bekim Salihu from the GAP research institute who monitors the works of municipalities in Kosovo. He marked the overall performance of the municipalities with the criteria of: transparency, accountability, good governance and level of corruption. His marks were then calibrated to four different groups. In a ranking out of 10, the highest marks were 6 given to Viti and Mitrovica e Jugut, whereas the lowest was 1, given to Kamenica.

CONDITIONS	DESCRIPTION	CALIBRATION
GAIN	Relative vote gain/loss of the incumbent party in office.	Voter gain 1 (+15% to +5 %) 0.67 (+4.99% to +0.01%) 0.33 (0.00% to –5.00%) 0 (-5.01% to -20.39%)

SUCCESSFUL	Electoral promises kept	Voter loss 1 (85%-77%) 0.67 (77% - 70.01%) 0.33 (70% - 66.5%) 0 (66.49% 59%)
PARTICIPATION	Relative voter numbers compared to previous election	High Participation 1 (0.44 to -0.97), 0.67 (-0.98 to -2.38) 0.33 (- 2.39 to -3.78) 0 (-3.78 to -5.19) Low participation
POPULARITY OF MAYOR	Approval ratings of the mayor of the incumbent party	High Approval 1 (93%-70.01%) 0.67 (70% - 60.01%) 0.33 (60% - 50.01) 0 (50% - 31.30%) Low approval
NEW PARTY	Party has held the office before	1 New party 0 Old
PERFORMANCE	Transparency, accountability, no corruption, good governance	Performance (6-1 1 Very good (6) 0.67 good (5-4) 0.33 sufficient 0 not sufficient

Figure 2 Calibration

City	New	Part	Prom	gain/ loss	popular	Performanc e
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Ferizaj	0.5	1	0.67	0.33	0	0.33
Prishtina	1	0.33	0.67	1	1	0.67
Peja	1	0.67	0	1	1	0.67
Prizren	0	0.33	0.33	0	0	0.33
Gjakova	1	0	1	0	1	0.33
Gjilan	1	0	0.33	0.67	0	0.33
MitrovicceJugut	1	0.67	0	1	0	1
Viti	0	0.33	1	1	1	1
Kacanik	0	1	1	0	0	0.33
Vushtrri	0	0.33	0.67	0	1	0.33
Podujeve	0	0.33	0.67	0	0	0
Lipjan	0	0	0.33	0	1	0
Shtime	0	0.67	1	0	1	0
Rahovec	0	0	0.33	0	0	0
Kamenice	0	0.33	0	0	0.33	0

Figure 3 Data Matrix

Results

In the QCA run with the fsQCA 3.0 program the necessary conditions were tested first with both the Voter Gain outcome and with the negated outcome \sim Voter Gain (i.e. voter loss). The most significant necessary condition was the variable of the new party that had a consistency of 0.8 and a coverage of 0.72 (See Annex).

In the second part the standard analysis with the Quine-McCluskey algorithm was used with both the Voter gain outcome and the negated \sim Voter gain outcome. The complex, parsimonious and intermediate solutions were tested.

Model Gain: f(New,Part,Prom, Popular, Performance)

Complex and Intermediate Solution	Raw coverage	Unique coverage	consistency
New*Part* \sim Prom*Performance	0.4	0.4	1
New* \sim Part* \sim Prom* \sim popular* \sim Performance	0.134	0.134	1
Solution coverage: 0.534 Solution consistency: 1			

Figure 4 Complex and Intermediate solution for Voter Gain

The complex (conservative) and intermediate solution overlap with each other. According to the results for voter gains the INUS conditions are new parties, higher participation rates in the election and good performance of the incumbent. Or New parties and less participation, less promises no popularity and bad performance.

The second INUS condition contradicts the first SUIN condition, rendering the model not valuable to analyze voter gain.

Model Gain: f (New, Part, Prom, Popular, Performance)

Parsimonious Solution	Raw coverage	Unique coverage	consistency
New*~Prom	0.666	0.666	1
Solution coverage: 0.666 Solution consistency: 1			

Figure 5 Parsimonious solution for Voter Gain

The parsimonious solution is the least complex solution, and in our standard analysis the parsimonious solution shows new party and not keeping promises as the result of the algorithm. This solution does not entail much explanatory value either.

Model ~Gain: f (New, Part, Prom, Popular, Performance)

Complex and Intermediate Solution	Raw coverage	Unique coverage	consistency
~New*~Part*~Performance	0.501	0.235	1
~New*Prom*~Performance	0.45	0.184	1
Solution coverage: 0.685 Solution consistency: 1			

Figure 6 Complex and Intermediate Solution for Voter Loss

The Complex and intermediate solution shows that the old parties, less participation and bad performance are an INUS condition OR old parties, that kept promises but performed worse.

Model ~Gain: f (New, Part, Prom, Popular Performance)

Parsimonious Solution	Raw coverage	Unique coverage	consistency
~New*~Performance	0.751	0.751	1
Solution coverage: 0.751 Solution consistency: 1			

Figure 7 Parsimonious solution for voter loss

The parsimonious solution shows that old parties and bad performance were conditions for parties to lose votes.

Discussion

The model with the negated outcome showed more meaningful results than the first model with the positive outcome. The variable of promises did also not bring meaningful results, that may have been a result of quantifying the number of promises fulfilled rather than differentiate the performance qualitatively like it was done with the performance variable that was much more consistent in both models.

Our first hypothesis (H1) *to be a new party is an INUS condition to gain votes* was confirmed by the QCA in both models, the New Party variable kept being a condition for voter gain, or in the negated outcome for voter loss. That also supports the argument by Bustikova & Zechmeister, that new ‘uncorrupted’ parties are likely to be supported once they win the election. Whether this ends eventually with a cycle of new parties becoming corrupted over time is an interesting argument that could be observed through time series analysis in the future.

The second hypothesis (H2) *lower participation is a condition for incumbent parties to lose votes* was corroborated in the second model. This does not fall in line with the theoretical assumption that when the turn-out is lower, the incumbent party is more likely to win (Trounstine, 2012). Incumbent parties in Kosovo, contrary to the belief are more likely to lose votes when the participation is lower.

Our third hypothesis (H3) *popularity of the mayor is a condition for winning votes*, was not corroborated by our findings. The popularity of the mayor in itself was not a necessary or sufficient condition to gain votes in the local election. Even though the candidate of the party

tends to be an important factor often in elections, in our finding the popularity of the mayor did not play a crucial role.

The fourth hypothesis supported the role of the rational voter (H4) *bad performance is a condition for voter loss*. This hypothesis was corroborated with our findings. The rational choice model theory of voting explains well the behavior of voters in local elections in Kosovo.

The parsimonious solution for voter loss $\sim \text{New} * \sim \text{Performance}$ (old party and bad performance) is in line mostly with the rational choice model. This theory holds however by taking into account the turn out in elections (participation variable) and a previous reputation of the party (new party variable). With less voter participation incumbent parties tend to lose votes, even if an old party runs with a new candidate, voters will still likely punish the party in the coming elections. PDK ran often with new candidates such as Prizren, or Kamenica but still lost votes and elections in municipalities where they held office for many mandates. Whereas newer parties were less likely to be judged so harshly by the electorate.

The rational choice model of performance explains better the outcome of the Kosovo local elections in 2017 than other models for less important elections. The surge and decline theory that developed from the midterm elections in the United States does not hold for the Kosovo elections, since participation rates are higher in local elections than in the national elections. This could come out of the patrimonial structures and families organizing to elect someone they know for a seat in the city council.

The cycle model following Dinkel's (1977) research on the Landtag elections can also not be applied to Kosovo since the country is not federal, and the municipal elections in Kosovo are held at the same time, so the argument cannot be tested over a cycle with different times for elections like in the federal states (Bundesländer). The Second Order Elections, also fails to explain the local elections in Kosovo, due to the participation being higher in the Kosovo elections.

Economic models of voting might be more suited to explain elections in Kosovo, however it was given that municipalities do not have many competencies for economic development, so instead of the economic performance, the overall municipality performance can be taken as a variable to base the rational choice theory on.

Conclusion

The local elections in Kosovo follow a similar trend to the elections in Eastern European countries. Instead of party consolidation, disruptive elections show high volatility, changing significantly the political map of the country. This paper analyzed the conditions under which incumbent parties win or lose votes. The outcome of winning votes did not show significant results, however the negated outcome showed that old parties and bad performance lead to voter loss.

The findings are significant for the politics in the local level, since old parties have relied for 14 years on their partisan regions, but all old parties have lost many of the partisan regions in 2014. More importantly, many of those old parties could not win back these municipalities in 2017, even when the performance of the new incumbent party was not good. Voters proved to have more punitive behavior towards old parties with bad performance on the local level.

This research proves that the disruptive elections of 2014 will have ramifications for the changing political landscape of Kosovo, since new incumbent parties are more likely to hold office after their first mandates.

As a method QCA can be used to analyze conditions under which parties win or lose elections. Other conditions could be tested to come up with more robust results. Conditions such as quality of the opposition, clientelism and accountability could be interesting. Specific policies rather than performance as a whole could be tested in order to estimate which policies were more important to the local population. Whether national elections have any impact on the local elections could also significant for the field of voter behavior research in the region.

As for Kosovo's young democracy, voting out mainstream political parties with bad performance is a sign of competitive elections and that democracy is growing. Even when incompetent political leaders hold an office, they can always be outvoted.

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