

Consortium for European Research with Election Studies (CERES)

What a European Research Infrastructure Consortium can do for us

Text adapted from an invitation from the Principal Investigators of the European Election Studies (EES) endorsed by the Planning committee of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) and issued at the PIREDEU Final Conference, October 2010.

Europe is home to a large number of national election studies – about half the election studies that are members of the CSES are European. Europe is also a place where funding strategies are quite complex, with traditional national (largely government-funded) sources being increasingly supplemented by a DG Research in the European Union that is handing out increasing amounts of money for real research (not just networking).

The largest amounts of research-related funding (in terms of millions of Euros) coming from the European Commission's DG Research are directed at research infrastructures. An infrastructure is what houses one or several large research enterprise(s), such as those involved in the conduct of a national election study in a given year. But the EU framework only considers trans-national research infrastructures that surpass a minimal critical mass (the smallest ones involve hundreds of researchers, and have budgets of at least 10 million Euro for a five-year period). None Europe's national election studies comes even close to these critical mass parameters. Yet, they spend a considerable proportion of their funds on infrastructural tasks: cleaning, harmonizing, linking, distributing and archiving the data they generate; providing, user-training, and preparing for future election studies. Indeed, in many cases even the overheads of survey research – interviewer training, sampling, questionnaire design and translation – would be eligible for infrastructure funding, along with up to 20% of the costs of data collection.

Even the European Elections Studies (EES) – a consortium of scholars who have studied European Parliament Elections since 1979 and who have fielded voter surveys in all (or virtually all) EU member countries at every EP election since 1989, is not large enough to receive EU infrastructure funding (the 2009 European Parliament Election Study budget was approx. 2.3 Million Euro for a 4-year period).

But the fact that existing election studies in Europe, whether national or transnational in orientation, are individually too small to attract infrastructure funding provides an obvious opportunity. Indeed the idea comes from the (now no-longer) head of the EU's DG research, who told Mark Franklin that only an association or consortium of those who study elections in Europe would stand any real chance of receiving infrastructure funding. Ironically, a European (Parliament) elections study did nevertheless receive European Commission infrastructure funding – but funding that took the form of a large grant from the European Commission's FP7 to conduct a feasibility study directed at evaluating the possibility of establishing an infrastructure for European Parliament

election studies. However, this feasibility study established clearly that such an infrastructure cannot focus on European Parliament elections alone, but needs to address the electoral process in Europe at all its different levels and facets.

The idea of looking beyond European Parliament elections in order to study electoral democracy in Europe also makes sense substantively. The quality of democracy in Europe is not only a national matter, even if national elections in Europe are still the primary route by which citizens empower their governments. Quite evidently, neither is electoral democracy in Europe simply a matter of European Parliament elections. Both types of elections are closely linked, with European Parliament elections reflecting national electoral processes and, in turn, having palpable repercussions on those processes.

A consortium for European research on elections is intended primarily to be a springboard from which to apply for EU infrastructure funding. Such funding would reduce the calls on national funding sources (or free up funds for other purposes) by paying bills that otherwise would use funds that could be more fruitfully employed. If the EES, or a national election study such as the BES, can use EU funding to meet the infrastructure-related costs involved in running the study, this will make it easier to apply for other funding and reduce the total amount of other funding needed (or increase the quality and extent of research that can be conducted). An EU-supported infrastructure would also involve guaranteed funding from national sources – something that can provide security to existing national election studies.

Such a consortium would have other practical benefits to offer. It can provide a clearing house for ideas and an inventory of “best practices”. It can offer help and expertise to those who do not yet have functional national election studies. And it might even manage some coordination in question wordings that would ease the way for projects following on from the European Voter project (of a decade ago) or the True European Voter project (of today). It could provide technical assistance of various kinds even to established election studies. These benefits would accrue not only to national and European Parliament election studies. They would also have the effect of bearing some costs of the infrastructure needs of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES), assistance with the recruitment of election studies to CSES, and possibly funding for pilot studies and methodological tests of relevance within multiple national contexts.

And, finally, it is to be hoped that such a consortium will pick up the baton dropped by PIREDEU when its funding ended at the start of 2011, serving as a venue to discuss strategies for investigating the quality of democracy in Europe, and providing the means to implement these.

The EES, in inviting other election studies to join in such a consortium, has no specific plans beyond the hope that such a consortium might open the way to infrastructure funding for it and other election studies. All other potential objectives are open for discussion and debate now that such an organization has come into being.