

¿Elecciones municipales o locales?

revisitando las elecciones locales 40 años después

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*******VERY PRELIMINAR DOCUMENT*******

The research at that stage is very preliminary and probably includes significant theoretical, bibliographical and empirical gaps; indeed, mainly basic descriptive analysis and bivariate relations feed the preliminary results. However, we are especially interested in debating the implications of the shift on the unit of analysis that we propose, from voters to municipal institutions, and the subsequent impact in research outcomes.

Abstract:

Municipal elections in Spain are held on the same day all over the territory, every four years, across more than 8100 municipalities. In addition, in 14 out of 17 regions, local elections overlap with regional elections. Previous studies have interpreted municipal elections as second-order elections, focusing on the aggregate dimension of the phenomenon, and studying elections mainly in a synchronic way (Delgado, 2008, 2010; Márquez, 2007; López Nieto and Delgado, 1992; Vallès and Brugué, 1997; Carrillo, 1989; Martínez Fuentes and Ortega, 2010). The nationalization of local elections in Spain has always been analyzed either from the perspective of the perceptions of voters and/or by the strategies of parties. In this paper, we propose to take the municipality as the unit of analysis. This shift allows us to include a multilevel dimension and a different temporal dimension in the analysis of local elections. Our main question is whether local elections in Spain are completely second-order elections and therefore whether they are effectively nationalized in terms of the levels of electoral turnout. We test the hypothesis that nationalization of municipal elections varies depending on the size of the municipality: the larger the municipality, the larger the nationalization of electoral turnout in municipal elections. Our approach allows for much more nuanced conclusions than previous studies and it fills relevant gaps in the study of local elections, as Kjaer and Steyvers propose (2019). We first carry out a temporary analysis of the 10 held elections to understand diachronically turnout figures. Secondly, in order to integrate the multilevel dimension, we carry out a quasi-experimental design to analyze whether the coincidence of local with regional elections has a systematic effect on nationalization (participation) of local elections.

1. Introduction

Undoubtedly, the seminal work analysing the degree of nationalisation of Spanish local elections is an article published in 1991 by Jordi Capo in the *Revista Española de Investigaciones Sociológicas* (Reis). He entitled his paper as “*Elecciones municipales, pero no locales*” (Municipal elections, but not local elections), and analysed the first four rounds of local elections in Spain after the recovery of democracy. His main conclusion in this work was the fact that, even though in small municipalities there was a large proportion of particularism and localism in electoral results, the overall picture of results was expressing more a national mood than specific features of local elections.

Jordi Capo used a particular research strategy (not so evident at that time in Spain) to analyse local elections in order to overcome political fragmentation: he took into account aggregated data on individuals to compare turnout –among other elements- in local and general elections. He compared individual aggregated data in a country like Spain, with a large variation of local units in terms of size, but with predominant small municipalities. Therefore, he concluded that the overall picture in terms of elected representatives –councillors and mayors- will always be “localized”, whereas the turnout and the main political parties' share of votes will appear “nationalized”, by the effect of large numbers.

After this work, all case studies concerning the Spanish local elections followed this path dependency, confirming the “second-order” nature of Spanish local elections. The “individual” based analysis of local elections take over all kind of explanations. Nevertheless, most of the works with individual basis try to include, as independent variable, the size of the polity to understand individual’s behaviour, and to overcome fragmentation effects. However, the question of how to deal with the large variation and heterogeneity of local units in Spain remains unanswered, when it comes to understand the impact of local units, as institutions, in turnout.

Following the logic of analysing votes and not institutions, local turnout appears systematically lower than in general elections, no matter which election we take. Taken both elections in contiguous chronological pairs, except for a couple of pairs where there is almost a tie, the local elections always present depressed participation, as the “second-order” election frame as well established.

However, the consensual methodological choices made until present to analyse local elections might be hiding patterns or elements that can potentially be crucial to understand local elections, as effectively a different kind of elections (Kjaer & Steyvers, 2019). Specifically, aggregate data can easily hide considerable differences between municipalities of different sizes. One of the main elements that can foster a new approach to local elections, at least in Spain, would be a shift on the unit of analysis, changing from individuals –citizens/voters- to institutions –municipalities-.

Obviously, both approaches may provide very useful information, but also may provide alternative (and new) information about local elections. Our choice in this paper is to use

mainly institutions –municipalities- as the main object of study, rather than voters. The following table resumes one of the main implications of this choice:

Table 1. Percentage of mean turnout depending on the research unit

		1979	1983	1987	1991	1995	1999	2003	2007	2011	2015	Mean
Object of study	Local elections											
	Voters (aggregated) N	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	
	% Mean Tournout	62,63	67,67	69,13	62,25	69,87	63,99	67,67	63,97	66,2	64,91	65,83
	Municipalities N	7673	7756	6481	7568	8065	8036	8070	8078	8080	8081	
	% Mean Tournout	65,93	71,71	73,66	75,14	79,00	77,11	78,72	76,89	79,69	76,97	75,48
Object of study	National elections											
	Voters (aggregated) N	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	
	% Mean Tournout	79,85	70,36	69,92	76,44	77,38	68,71	75,66	73,85	68,94	69,67	73,08
	Municipalities N	7806	8041	8066	8085	8093	8104	8109	8111	8116	8123	
	% Mean Tournout	78,49	72,53	73,55	79,17	80,00	74,96	79,59	78,07	75,16	74,98	76,65

Source: own elaboration

If we take a look to the individual’s approach to electoral results -voters-, the second-order nature of local elections appears clearly, since they are persistently less participative compared to the national elections (a total mean of 65,83% vs 73,08%). However, when shifting to municipalities as objects of study, a completely different picture appears. In this case, the mean participation for ten local elections has a very similar average turnout as national elections (analysing results at the local level, for a total mean of 75,48% vs 76.65%). In addition, if we take the voters approach for the national results (which is clearly the most adequate in this case), against the institutional approach to the local elections (which reflects better the real choice made by citizens), we find that, in average, local elections are more participative than national ones (75,48% vs 73,08%).

These results, somehow challenging the classical “second-order approach”, open new insights that merit putting forward a raw statistical explanation for such outcomes: the large variability in size of local governments makes the point. For the Spanish case, we count up to 75% of the municipalities with less than 2500 inhabitants, and those municipalities are, as the classical size and democracy approach sets forth, small political units that tend to participate more than larger ones. In any case, it appears that probably the question of size and participation, when institutions are objects of study rather than individuals, links naturally into the debate of second order elections.

Presented our case of study, our main question is whether local elections in Spain are completely second-order elections and therefore whether they are effectively nationalized in terms of the levels of electoral turnout. Are there any divergent patterns observable after 40 years of democracy and 10 local elections? Are those patterns related to the way in which we approach local elections, mainly with the frameworks for analysing first-order elections? Probably, nationalization of municipal elections strongly varies depending on the size of the municipality. For analysing this, we need to observe institutions and its size in a diachronic way.

The paper is organized as follows: in the next section, we introduce classical and new approaches to study local elections, followed by a section focusing on the case of Spain.

In a fourth section, we briefly explain our data and main research questions, for finishing with preliminary results and a light discussion.

2. Main theoretical insights

As it has been stated several times, local elections are still today under-studied in order to investigate its specificity and own characteristics (Kjaer & Steyvers, 2019). The question of whether local elections have a particular entity and sense, and if they can be addressed by specific theoretical and empirical means, still remains a challenging endeavour.

Large N configurations represent both, at the same time, a huge potential to test and develop theories and sometimes a methodological hurdle for empirical analysis. The potential attached to Numerosity -and to a less extent propinquity- "*permit conventional statistical analysis to take place on institutional forms and behavior, and also policy occurrences and outcomes*" (P. John, 2006:69). Moreover, local data allows ecological approaches for the electoral analysis, since the researchers are usually able to gather all universe data. However, this large amount of information available faces some theoretical and methodological limitations classically attached to this level of government. Manly, those limitations relate to its (secondary or subordinate) position on the political system of the State, its embeddedness in complex nested institutional settings and the (potential) large variation within and across municipalities in social and political aspects.

Still today, the main elements explaining electoral behaviour in local politics remain somehow unanswered. We are still in a phase of preliminary understanding of what is distinctive about local electoral politics; no matter we refer to Europe or USA (Oliver et al., 2012; Kjaer & Steyvers, 2019). Recently, Kjaer and Steyvers (2019) offered a theoretical overview built on an exhaustive set of questions that remain open at the local level, based on the grounding idea that local elections are a set of different outcomes in different constituencies. Therefore, "*the fact that overall national interpretations [...] have to draw on generalising measures of central tendency inherently leads to an underestimation of place-bound heterogeneity in electoral dynamics*". In other words, the challenge remains on studying electoral behaviour at the local level on the grounds of particular and specific local theoretical concepts and categories, leaving aside the more established concepts of electoral studies at national or regional levels.

Up to present, the academic literature has approached the municipal elections from two contradictory perspectives: on the one hand, an analysis based on a position of lower rank with respect to the rest of electoral calls; or, in the other hand, in the opposite direction, understanding that the municipal elections have a different position from the rest (Magre, 2018). The lower-rank approach considers the vertical dimension of political systems, whilst the localism approaches analyses local elections from a horizontal perspective. Following the former approach, local elections are embedded within a larger political system and their specific political nature is nuanced by the existence of upper-tiers, much more powerful in political terms. The latter approach points out the fact that local elections are a different type of electoral arena because the local units differ

substantially between each other, and this causes a set of particularities (in terms of size, scope and bias; Oliver, 2012) of the municipal elections that makes them different from the rest of elections.

2.1 The concept of Second Order and Nationalisation

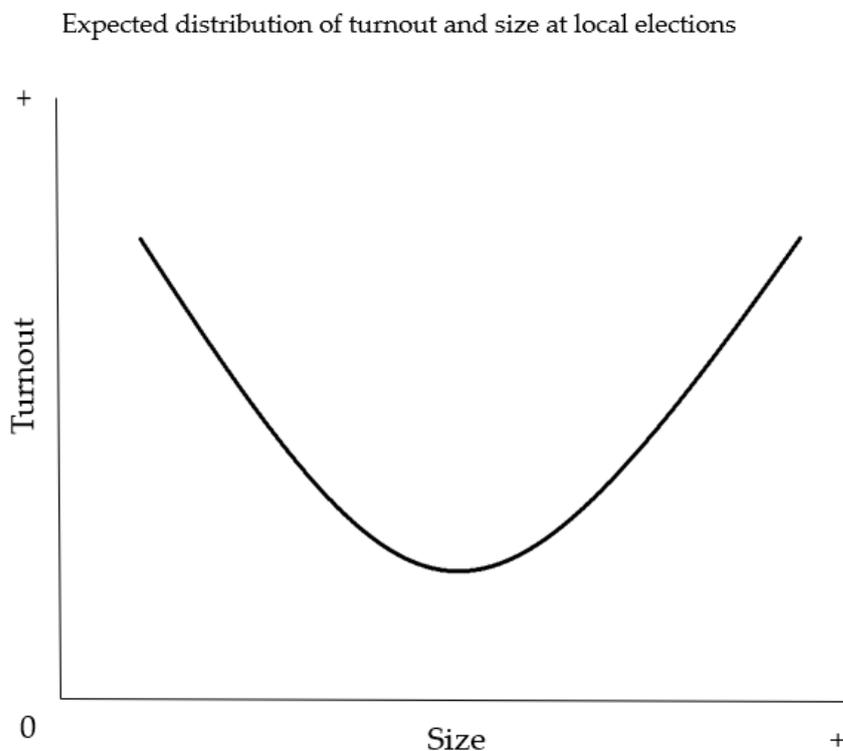
The main theoretical insights that derivate from the “lower rank approach” imply the conceptualization of local elections as “second order” elections and, correlatively, its nationalization in respect to “first order” elections. Second order elections are clearly identified by the fact that citizens express their votes in these elections not only because of conditions of the specific context of the local arena, but also based on factors in the national political arena (Reif & Schmitt 1980). As Schakel (2013) states: *“there is a hierarchy in perceived importance of different types of elections. National elections are of a first-order nature, and all other elections, such as European, subnational, and by-elections, are subordinate to first-order”*. This particular features of second-order election are usually measured in terms of turnout, the less-at-stake dimension or/and in terms of the share of votes to the different political parties involved in both contests (voting motives). In a nutshell, for second-order elections we expect low voter turnout and differences in vote choices between elections at different levels of government (usually “punishing” governments in place).

Departing from these premises, the relation between the second-order election concept and the literature on nationalisation is natural: when local elections are second-order, then local elections are a kind of reiterated national elections. In general terms, the concept of nationalization refers to the territorial homogenization of voting behaviour (Schakel, 2013), but this has usually implied the analysis of the changes in vote share to political parties. Our approach, instead, will focus exclusively on turnout at this particular stage of the research. In this paper, nationalisation will imply that local electoral turnout tends to approach (or equalise) the national electoral turnout; while localism would probably imply higher participation in local elections and higher dissimilarity between general and local elections.

Concerning the understanding of turnout in (local) elections, the size of the polity appears to be a key element, without being the only factor influencing the turnout (Gaarsted, 2002). It is widely accepted that individual and institutional factors do play a major role in understanding turnout. In any case, as Houwelingen (2017) resumes: *“Empirical studies concerning the relationship between municipal population size and turnout overwhelmingly point into one and the same direction: the larger a municipality, the less likely people are to participate in municipal politics”*. Taking this idea as a consistent foundation, a nuance can be introduced when several elections take place at the same time in a vertical simultaneity (Schakel, 2011, Clark & Krebs, 2012). When simultaneous vertical elections are held, the “more at stake” approach appears more naturally in the electoral contest, since the costs attributed to individually cast the vote decrease. This scenario has been empirically tested in regional elections, with the results pointing towards the idea of that the vertical and horizontal concurrence favours more coherence in electoral

results. Indeed, vertical simultaneity usually diminishes electoral differences across jurisdictions.

In resume, as Kjaer and Steyvers (2019) argue, *“the local tier fundamentally differs from the (supra- or sub-)national, complicating the straightforward application of theories and concepts that allegedly cover all tiers. It also implies a more positive and independent approach to the local beyond it being non-national”*. Therefore, from this puzzling situation, when revisiting the theoretical model of second order, they launch a large set of potential hypotheses to test new approaches to local elections. For our purposes, relating turnout and size, we stick to the hypotheses linked to cross-municipal variation, because they offer alternative possibilities with potentially divergent effects. Kjaer and Steyvers hypothesize that the larger or the smaller the municipality, the more localised second-tier elections and voting can be. In other words, and pushing the argument, size could imply a kind of u-shape distribution concerning turnout and size, which theoretically can be drawn like this:



Source: own elaboration

This u-shape distribution would imply that in the extremes of the universe of study participation increases, while in the middle positions –middle size units- of the observed local elections, turnout depresses. The main argument to sustain these hypothetical situations mobilises a double kind of reasoning. For small units the proximity and the closer bonds between politicians and citizens makes participation in small units a sort of civic duty and virtue. For larger units, the “more-at-stake” reasoning applies, since bigger political units might imply more substantial issues to decide, potentially generating redistributive political conflicts. Both arguments are theoretically solid to assume this “size and turnout paradox” at the local level.

These theoretical expectations can be tested on different research units, as we stated previously. The usual way to investigate the relation between size and turnout has always been based on citizens as individuals (voters, perceptions...), being the focus on local institutions a methodological exception. However, we consider that if the research question deals directly with the question of the size of the polity, the most suitable unit of analysis is the municipality, rather than individuals. The case of Spain is, without any doubt, one of the best to test the effect of the variation of size, under common electoral rules, in turnout outcomes when local governments are the research units.

3. Spain as an optimal test-bed for a shift in the analysis of local elections

Why Spain allows us to test empirically this “size and turnout paradox” at the local level? Many arguments may apply. First, because of large N configuration of our institutional local system (an average of more than 8000 municipalities since the recovery of democracy); Second, local elections are held at the same time all over the territory (some of them overlapping with other upper-tier elections). Third, we have similar electoral systems and stable over 40 years for all elections. And, finally, we have a huge variation in size of the municipal units.

The regulation of the local electoral system is largely contained in the Spanish Electoral Law (Ley 5/1985 Ley Orgánica del Régimen Electoral General, LOREG), with some particularities included in the Local Government law (Ley 7/1985 Ley Reguladora de las Bases del Régimen Local, LRBRL). A first feature that, in addition, is essential for this research, is the way local elections are called. The call for local elections is quasi-automatic since there is a legal mandate that even sets a pre-established date (the fourth Sunday of May), except in very exceptional circumstances. Therefore, local elections take place every 4 years, with very little chance of changing or altering this term. This fact implies that the configurations arising from the results are maintained throughout the term, for all municipalities and for all other local institutions that hold elections on the same day. The results become a fixed photograph throughout the term.

Another relevant factor is the coexistence of several different electoral systems that apply to municipalities according to their population. The municipalities with more than 250 inhabitants are subject to what the Electoral Law calls the “common regime” (almost 70% of the total), which is the model that is commonly used as a reference, characterized by the similarities with the electoral system applied to other levels of government. The LOREG determines that, in this type of municipalities, the lists are closed and party-blocked and the distribution of the councillors is made using d’Hondt system, with a 5% legal threshold (higher than in other elections, such as the general elections where the legal threshold is set at 3%).

In addition, the LOREG provides two more electoral system options: an open list option and a direct election assembly system. The first one can be applied to all the municipalities with less than 250 inhabitants and supposes the election of the councillors (three or five depending on the population) by open lists and restricted vote (*panachage*). The assembly system (*concejo abierto*, which can be translated by “open council”) was

traditionally applied to municipalities of less than 100 residents. In this system, electors choose directly the mayor and all the neighbours are members of an assembly that acts as plenary board. This system was restricted in 2011 and it is currently very infrequent. Many municipalities that followed the open council system changed to the open lists system.

In synthesis, the 8.123 Spanish municipalities hold the election on the same day, every four years and this implies all of them are subjected to very similar contextual and electoral conditions.

3.1 Second-order and size in Spain

The re-start of the democratic regime in the late 1970's opened again the option of analysing local elections after 40 years of dictatorship. In fact, the first municipal elections took place in 1979. For that moment on, different attempts have been made to analyse the nature of local elections following different approaches and with different objectives (Magre, 2018).

The aforementioned text of Capó (1991) proposed a first approach to the analysis of local elections and showed some features that also appear in later studies: the comparison of the electoral dynamics with other electoral processes and a methodological design based on aggregated data. However, regarding this second aspect, some early works (Cazorla and Estévez, 1989) already carried out study that segmented by tranches of population and provinces, in relation to the results of the elections in Andalusia.

As temporal series grew, the second order effect of the municipal elections and their subordination to the electoral cycle began to be analysed more specifically (Delgado, 1997; 1999; 2000; 2006; 2010a). The same author also reveals the possible effect in the participation generated by a confluence with the European elections (Delgado, 2010b). In this study, in fact, an interesting revision of the municipal elections is carried out comparing them with the general elections and other elections that could take place simultaneously. It is interesting that the author affirms in the conclusions that "we should not fall into an exhaustive analysis by municipalities, which would offer us useful results, but of an extensive magnitude" (Delgado, 2010:33). However, the study points to a differential behaviour depending on the size of the municipality.

Other studies, Ortega et al. (2011) carry out a longitudinal analysis that, although not specifically focused on municipal elections, analyses participation according to the size of the municipality. This work shows the effects of municipal size in turnout using data of the Andalusian municipalities. More recently, studies have been developed showing the relationship between municipal size and turnout, in this case particularly for the municipal elections, and which also incorporate the effects of residential mobility in turnout (Magre et al. 2016; Vallbé and Magre 2017).

Some studies have also analysed the determinants of the vote in the municipal elections (Montero et al. Riera et al., 2015). The methodological approach of these studies includes

a selected range of municipalities and focus on individuals; that is to say, in some cases the study is focused on a particular autonomous community or on a reduced number of municipalities (Riera et al. 2016; Riera et al. 2017), and usually based on citizen’s perceptions, through survey data.

The different studies analysed show that the hypothesis of the second order of local elections has generally been considered as a starting point and has also been commonly accepted, at least from a general point of view. The studies, however, focused on aggregated analysis. Moreover, the studies that use specifically municipal desagregation are not countrywide and do not focus particularly on the analysis or existence of the second order issue. Thus, the analysis of the modulation of the second order effect, and so the “size and turnout paradox”, depending on the dimension of the municipality using countrywide disaggregated municipal data remains not fully studied.

4. Data and research design

A first step to understand the “distinctiveness” of local elections through the relationship between size and turnout at an institutional level implies the necessity of having census data on results to electoral and national elections at the municipal level. With this purpose, we build a comprehensive dataset including the results for local and general elections since 1979 to 2015, including all results of turnout at the municipal level, based on official data from the Ministry in charge of elections. More precisely, the database includes information for 10 national elections and 10 local elections, for a total N of 8181municipalities (today the official number of municipalities is 8131), for the 17 autonomous communities of Spain. The database includes also the absolute number of votes for every election at the local level, allowing also for individual analysis.

The territorial and population distribution, in mean, for the whole period considered are the following:

	N	%	Valid %	Autonomous community	N municipalities	Mean inhabitants
Up to 100 inhab	654	7,99	8,85	Castilla y León	2217	1142,19
From 101 to 250 inhab	1297	15,85	17,56	Catalunya	919	6956,16
From 251 to 500 inhab	1192	14,57	16,14	Castilla - La Mancha	903	1984,64
From 501 to 1.000 inhab	1099	13,43	14,88	Andalucía	745	9657,46
From 1.001 to 2.500 inhab	1307	15,98	17,70	Aragón	713	1720,68
From 2.501 to 5.000 inhab	706	8,63	9,56	Valencia	528	7968,43
From 5.001 to 10.000 inhab	516	6,31	6,99	Extremadura	379	2837,30
From 10.001 to 20.000 inhab	313	3,83	4,24	Galicia	309	8935,74
More than de 20.001 inhab	302	3,69	4,09	Navarra	240	1991,15
Total	7386	90,28	100	País Vasco	224	9231,16
Missing	795	9,72		Madrid	178	30186,49
Total N	8181	100,00		Rioja	174	1609,56
				Cantabria	102	5341,21
				Canárias	85	20089,23
				Asturias	78	14028,71
				Balears	65	12988,40
				Murcia	43	26961,36
				Ceuta	1	72552,10
				Melilla	1	63781,40

The main dependent variable for most of our purposes is turnout at the municipal level. Turnout, as an indicator, is not self-evident to measure nationalization –since we

do not control by parties' vote shares-, but appears to be a more robust indicator to measure the "second-order" approach: higher turnout rates can encompass naturally into the concept of "more-at-stake", rather than low turnout rates. However, if we consider nationalization not only as similar results in terms of vote share to parties, but also as similar patterns of electoral behaviour, then the territorial structure of turnout across units (and sizes) can be useful to approach some elements of the nationalization of the vote. At that stage of the research, we would like to find preliminary evidence for the following set of questions:

Concerning "second-order" premises:

- Are local elections "second-order" (depression of turnout in relation with national elections) in general terms?
- Is the "size and turnout paradox" of the local level happening in Spain? In other words, can we identify patterns of relation between size and turnout at the local level, and across the different sizes of the municipalities?
- Since we held local elections the same day all over the territory and we held simultaneous regional elections in some autonomous communities, but not in all of them.... the vertical concurrence of elections breaks the "second-order" nature of local elections?

Concerning "nationalization" premises:

- Are local elections nationalizing over time? This is, local electoral turnout tends to approach (or equalise) the national electoral turnout over time?
- Alternatively, by contrary, are local elections less nationalized over time? Localism would probably imply higher dissimilarity in turnout rates between general and local elections.

For analysing the previous questions, a set of simple methodological strategies are deployed, together with basic descriptive statistics. The analysis of both nationalisation and second-order approach of electoral turnout need to build a systematic method of comparison between the two types of elections considered. Besides the diachronic and direct comparison of turnout rates, we also created a system grounded on the second-order election theory, allowing us to compare turnout with the help of a difference variable. The turnout difference variable is calculated by subtracting turnout for the local election from turnout in the general/national election. We use difference variables instead of level variables to construct composite indexes and also to avoid (future) multicollinearity. The pairs of elections are the following:

General*	Local*
2015/12	2015/5
2011/11	2011/5
2008/3	2007/5
2004/3	2003/5
2000/3	1999/5
1996/3	1995/5
1993/6	1991/5
1989/10	1987/5
1986/6	1983/5
1982/10	1979/4

* Year / Month

Source: own elaboration

For analysing the effect of vertical concurrence of elections on the turnout rates, a quasi-experimental design is implemented. Since we cannot manipulate electoral conditions for academic purposes –fortunately–, the “treatment” can consist in the existence of concurrent elections in some parts of the territory and not in others. The decentralized system of Spain has granted certain “extra” powers to historical regions such as Catalonia and Basque Country, but also Galicia and Andalucía. In this case, the regional governments of these four regions have the competence to dissolve the regional parliament, the dispersal of the legislature and the subsequent call for regional elections, which is not the case for the rest of autonomous communities.

Finally, for the measuring to what extent general and local elections are getting similar in turnout rates, we built a raw measure of distances, and a simple dissimilarity index of turnout. This latter index grounds on the calculations made by our original difference variable, since we assign 1 to every pair of national-local election when the result is positive (this is, national turnout is equal or higher than local turnout at municipal level), and 0 when the result is negative (this is, local turnout is higher than local turnout at municipal level). This index ranges from 0 to 8, where 8 is a municipal unit that has always had lower local turnout rate compared to the national one in every pair; and 0 is the municipality where always local turnout is higher than national one in every pair.

The raw measure of distances is simply the absolute value of the difference variable. This is an indicator of de similarity or dissimilarity of results: the higher the value, the more far are numbers from 0 (equal results), the more dissimilar results may look. We have to notice here that, given the absolute value we cannot asses the direction of the dissimilarity, since it can be either for approaching national results or for detaching from it.

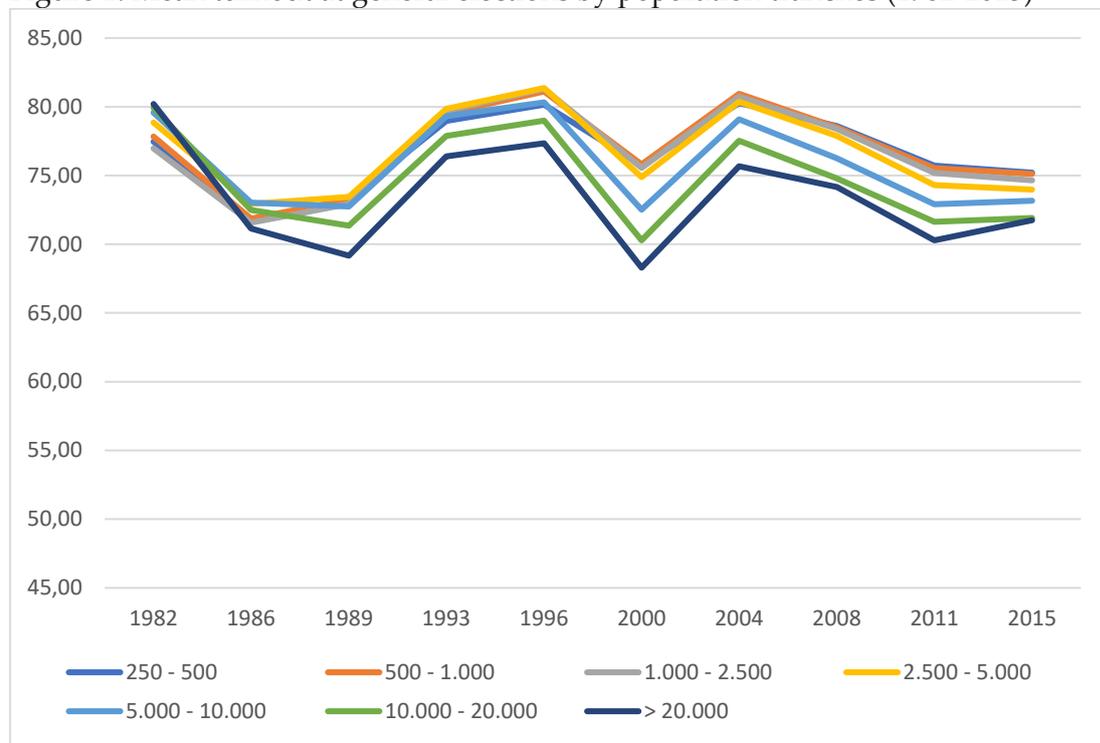
5. Preliminary results

In table 1 we already showed the main implications of the change of the research unit in results. Mainly, the fact of taking into account turnout rates at the municipal level, and not at the citizen level, produces a slightly different picture, exploring the “second-order” nature of local elections. In fact, when local elections are called, we have at the same time more than 8.000 different elections all over the territory. Taking municipalities

as observational units allows as to better capture the effect of the concrete institutional setting –and size- in turnout behaviour. However, as we also stated above, individual approach to results is also useful for our purposes when size of the polity is systematically included. For this reason, and in sake of methodological transparency, we firstly offer a diachronic analysis of electoral turnout at local and general elections at the individual level (voters).

If local elections are “nationalised” elections, we should find similar patterns of turnout behaviour at both elections and for most of the population tranches. First of all we graphically show the turnout rates for General elections for the period 1982-2015 with individual data aggregated into different sizes of the polity. Figure 1 accounts for the results:

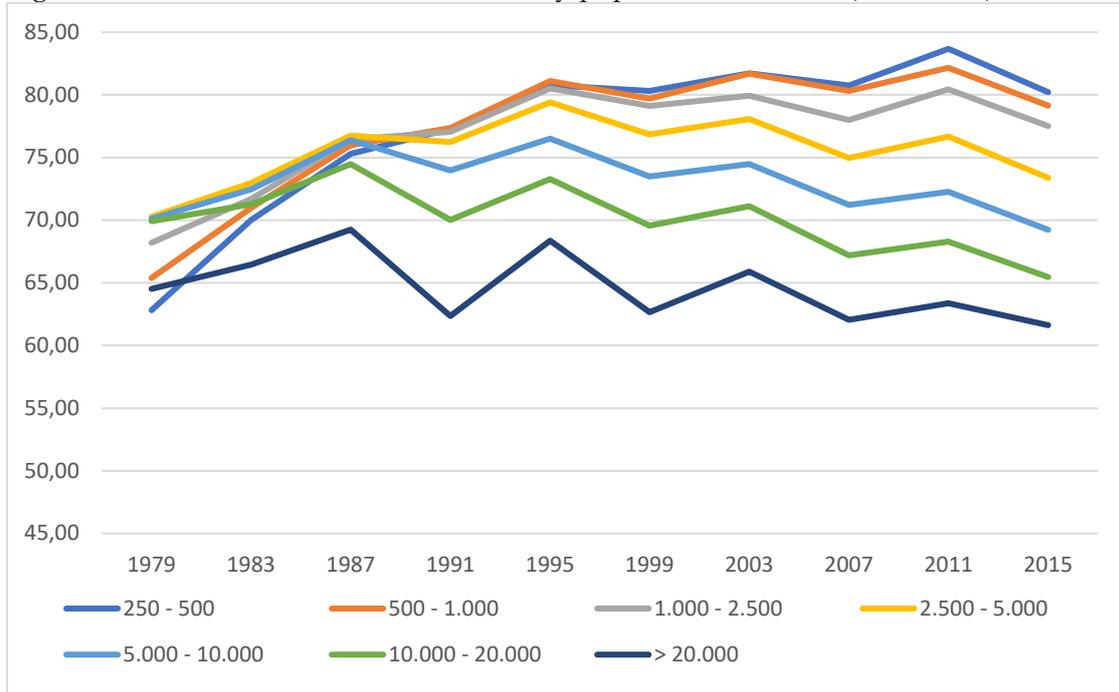
Figure 1. Mean turnout at general elections by population tranches (1982-2015)



Source: own data

The observable behaviour is quite clear: all population tranches behave similarly in terms of percentage of turnout in general elections. The shape of the figure allows identifying lower participation rates in more populated cities, but the overall image shows no divergent paths. What about local elections? Figure 2 accounts for the same information, but for local elections from 1979 to 2015.

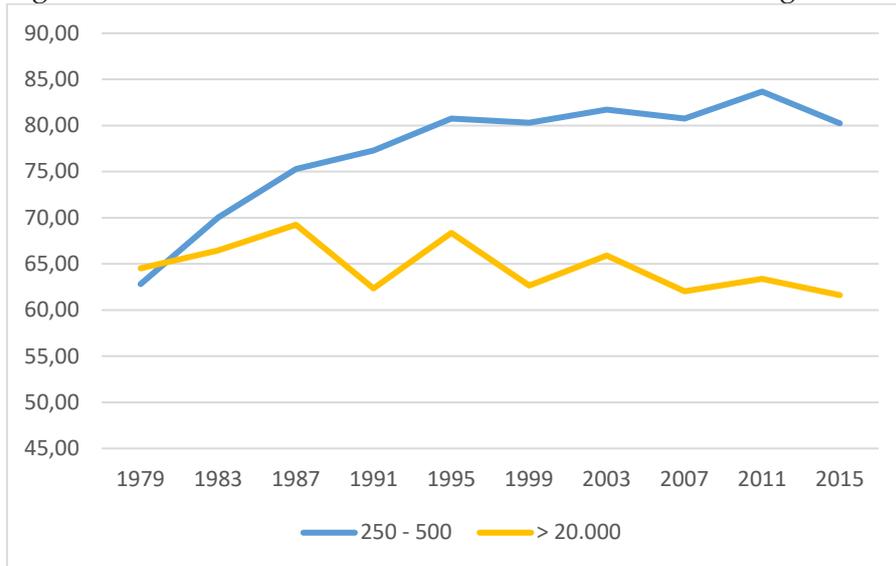
Figure 2. Mean turnout at local elections by population tranches (1979-2015)



Source: own data

In this case, the shape contains also patterns of similarity when elections are regarded by single electoral contest: usually all tranches increase or decrease participation in similar directions. However, there is a clear pattern of dissimilarity, since the first two electoral contests show results that are far more concentrated than the following ones, where a large differentiation in turnout between groups clearly appears. The dispersion of turnout rates affects more the more populated municipalities, somehow confirming a “second-order” pattern in local elections in those cases. It is important to comment that this effect was not appearing in the general elections. To better capture this possible effect we show, in the following figure 3, the same information but for the extreme cases of our universe of study (smaller municipalities vs the larger ones).

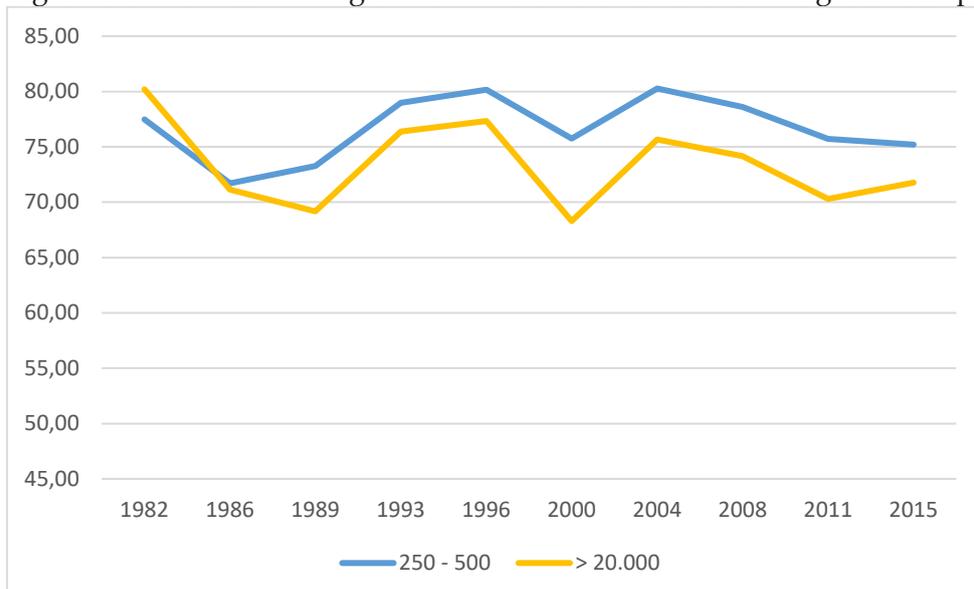
Figure 3. Mean turnout at local elections for smaller and larger municipalities (79-15)



Source: own data

From the last figure, we clearly observe a completely divergent pattern of turnout behaviour: the more populated cities of Spain present a stable (slightly declining) turnout rate in local elections (around 60-65%), while smaller units clearly show an increasing pattern in turnout, departing from a 63% in 1979, consistently increasing to more than 80% almost 40 years later. This simple information warns us about the “real nature” of local elections, when place-bound context is more controlled. However, one may argue that this behaviour can be the effect of the compositional nature of small localities, since the size and democracy literature has supported the hypothesis that smaller communities foster attachment, civic participation, and electoral turnout, while larger communities tend to depress it (Vallbé & Magre, 2018). If this would be a plausible explanation, similar results will appear in any other election, particularly in “first-order” ones. Figure 4 accounts for the same information but for general elections.

Figure 4. Mean turnout at general elections for smaller and larger municipalities (82-15)



Source: own data

Unexpectedly, the patterns of behaviour for both extremes of our distribution are not divergent for the case of national elections. The difference in turnout (larger municipalities participate less than less populated ones) appears as persistent, but the overall picture shows similar patterns of turnout behaviour. When focusing on size, local and general elections appear as different electoral contests, but specifically because of the different sizes of the polities, thus offering potential divergent explanations. These simple facts open up the possibility/need to disentangle the relation among the size of the polity and turnout in local elections. Our bet is that analysing institutions will help to deeper on alternative explanations.

5.1 Analysing institutions.

Again, Table 1 helps us to frame our analysis, since we can see that in aggregated institutional terms, local elections are not so clearly “second-order” elections. Table 5 offers a simple comparison of the difference of results for every pair of elections (National – Local) in function of the approach taken (individual as total mean of participation of voters, and institutional the mean of participation at the municipal level).

Table 5. Mean of turnout percentage using different approaches

General Elections	“Municipal” Turnout %	“Individual” Turnout %	Local Elections	“Municipal” Turnout %	“Municipal” Difference % Mean	“Individual” vs “Municipal” Difference % Mean
1982/10	78,49	79,85	1979/4	65,93	12,56	13,92
1986/6	72,53	70,36	1983/5	71,71	0,82	-1,35
1989/10	73,55	69,92	1987/5	73,66	-0,12	-3,74
1993/6	79,17	76,44	1991/5	75,14	4,03	1,30
1996/3	80,00	77,38	1995/5	79,00	1,00	-1,62
2000/3	74,96	68,71	1999/5	77,11	-2,15	-8,40
2004/3	79,59	75,66	2003/5	78,72	0,87	-3,06
2008/3	78,07	73,85	2007/5	76,89	1,18	-3,04
2011/11	75,16	68,94	2011/5	79,69	-4,53	-10,75
2015/12	74,98	69,67	2015/5	76,97	-1,99	-7,30

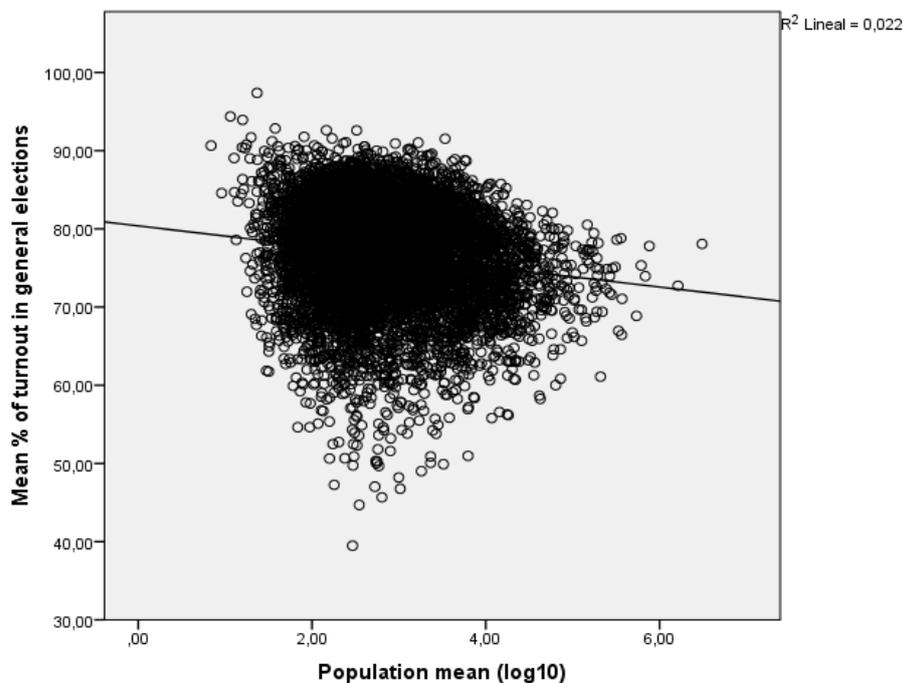
Source: own data

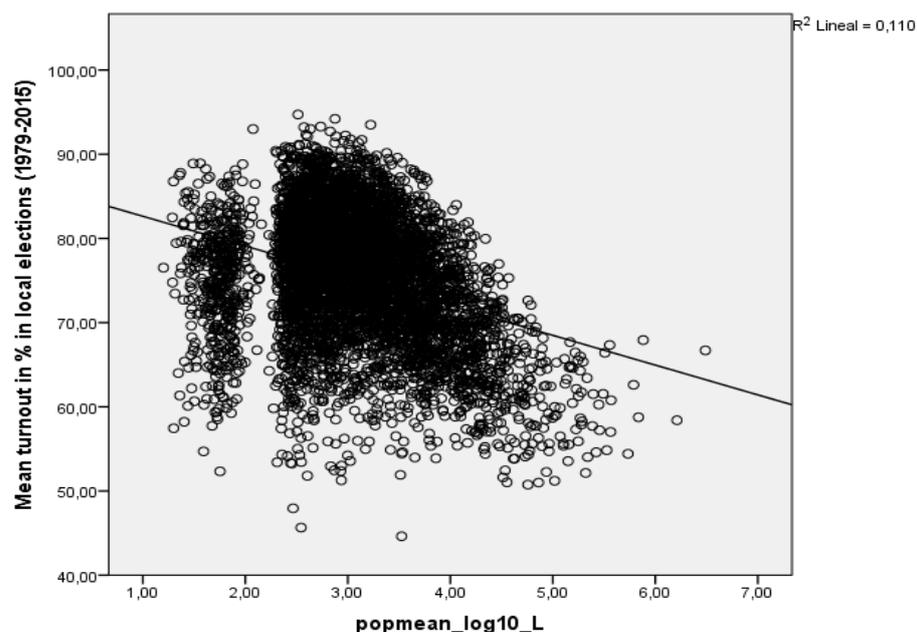
In this table, positive numbers in the difference imply a larger turnout for general elections, while a negative number imply larger participations for local elections in average. Results shows again a nuanced picture concerning the depressive turnout classically observed in local elections. In fact, the overall picture only offers two pairs of elections clearly depressed in terms of turnout (in red: 28G-79L¹ and 93G-91L), while

¹ Probably this pair of elections is not a good example, since are two founding elections from the new democratic Spanish political system with a very particular historical and political situation, making them probably incomparable.

offers two pairs clearly “localised” (in blue: 00G-99L and 11G-11L) and 6 other pairs with more balanced differences, sometimes going local and others going national.

The previous results are aggregated data treating in equal terms Barcelona or Madrid with the smallest villages of Spain and, consequently, they are completely hiding the effects of size. Indeed, in our institutional approach the question of size is the key element to understand the results shown. For a first approach to data, we propose a simple measure linking size and level of turnout. For preliminary purposes, the following scatterplots relate the mean population (in logarithm10 base) of local units and the aggregated mean in local elections and general elections. The point cloud generated clearly show a different pattern: size affects more turnout in local elections, than in general ones. In local contests, turnout decreases with size (correlation test significant at .000, with coefficient -0.154) and in general elections turnout slightly decreases with size (correlation test significant at .001, with coefficient -0.04), but without empirical impact.





To deeper into this relationship, and precise more the possible “localism” in local electoral turnout, table 6 offers the count of the number of municipalities that score negative in our difference variable (this is, when local turnout is higher than national, at the municipal level) in percentage, for the population bands previously established. For a more clear understanding, we colour the cells from dark red to light red in function of the percentage included for every population band. The results shown in table 6 seems to confirm that there is a sort of tendency that implies a higher level of “localism” in the turnout as population decreases. Inversely, when population increases, the percentage of municipalities being more participative at the local level decreases dramatically.

Table 6. Percentage of municipalities going localized by population bands

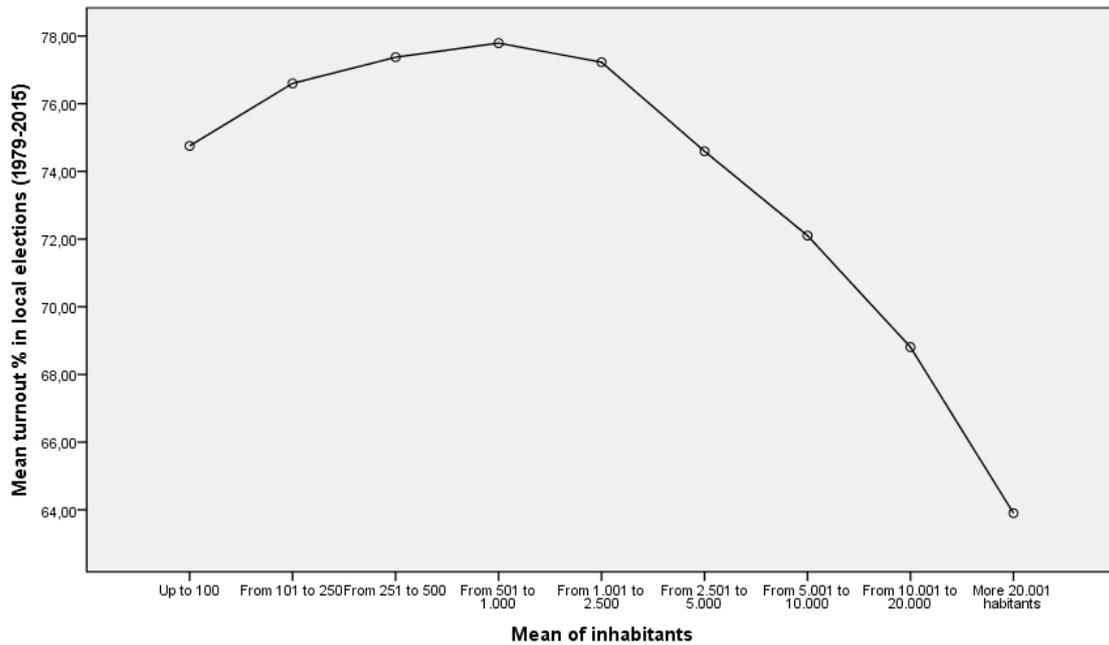
	Percentage of municipalities going localized (G-L<0)									
	82G-79L	86G-83L	89G-87L	93G-91L	96G-95L	00G-99L	04G-03L	08G-07L	11G-11L	15G-15L
Up to 100 inhab	16,5%	50,8%	6,2%	33,0%	53,1%	50,4%	56,9%	42,4%	77,2%	64,2%
From 101 to 250 inhab	16,9%	50,8%	55,9%	41,5%	58,0%	61,5%	56,4%	53,8%	79,1%	67,7%
From 251 to 500 inhab	15,8%	49,4%	64,4%	45,7%	59,0%	69,2%	60,2%	60,0%	86,8%	72,2%
From 501 to 1.000 inhab	15,5%	56,6%	71,4%	41,8%	55,2%	75,3%	60,2%	58,7%	87,7%	74,5%
From 1.001 to 2.500 inhab	13,4%	59,2%	77,1%	31,9%	41,9%	70,8%	47,0%	44,0%	83,6%	67,4%
From 2.501 to 5.000 inhab	10,0%	49,5%	73,3%	19,4%	20,6%	57,2%	24,6%	26,1%	68,4%	49,1%
From 5.001 to 10.000 inhab	7,3%	39,7%	73,6%	10,7%	13,4%	44,3%	14,6%	15,1%	48,4%	26,2%
From 10.001 to 20.000 inhab	3,3%	29,2%	67,4%	4,2%	4,5%	29,7%	6,1%	9,9%	23,6%	7,7%
More than de 20.001 inhab	1,7%	8,6%	36,4%	0,7%	2,0%	13,6%	2,0%	1,3%	5,0%	0,7%
N	946	3628	3853	2211	3187	4470	3370	3207	5439	4536

Source: own data

Another possibility to analyse in a more systematic and disaggregated manner the degree of “second order” of local elections is to assess the “size and turnout paradox”. This hypothetical situation may imply a sort of u-shape distribution of local turnout when size is taken into account. For testing this, we build a preliminary figure taking into account the mean of turnout rates at local elections (from 1979 to 2015) divided by

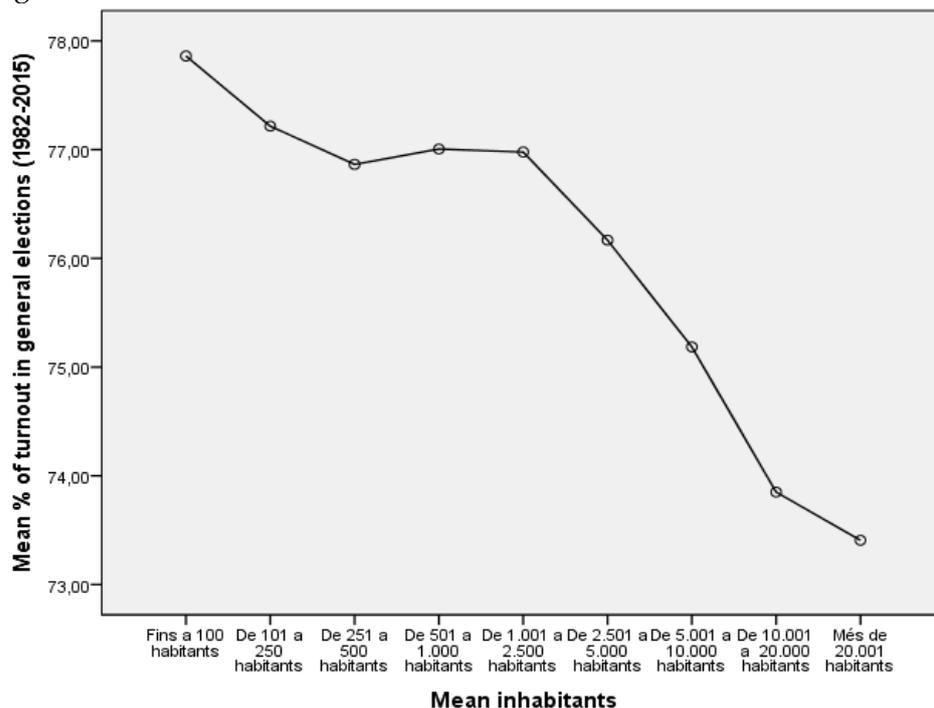
population bands in order to assess the impact of the size of the polity in local turnout. Figure 6 accounts for this distribution:

Figure 6. Size and turnout distribution at the local level for local elections



The mean of the distributions relating size and turnout mean by population bands offer a u-shaped distribution, but mainly inverted. Bigger municipalities turnout less, while smaller and middle-sized (for Spanish standards) turnout clearly more at local elections. Given this results, we draw an alternative figure with the mean turnout by population bands but for national elections. With this comparison the idea is to find divergence or similarity with figure 6.

Figure 7. Size and turnout distribution at the local level for local elections



The previous figure shows clearly a different picture. In this case, turnout follows a classic linear pattern of Olson’s paradox of size: as size increases, the turnout declines. Here the important comparison is not in the concrete means, which are higher for national elections, but the compositional effect of size. The comparison with figure 6 reinforces the idea of local elections as a different kind of elections, compared than national ones.

A subsidiary question to answer was to test whether the vertical concurrence of local elections produced a specific effect on local electoral turnout. For doing this, we run a quasi-experimental design, based on the simple idea that the “treatment” would be the vertical concurrence of elections (in 15 autonomous communities), whereas the non treated municipalities would be the ones that do not hold both elections at the same time (Catalonia, Basque Country, Andalusia and Galicia). For a first assessment of this natural experiment, we simply run a t-test of independent means of the mean turnout at local elections (79-15), where municipalities were assigned by its belonging to one or another type of autonomous community.

Table 7. T-test of means of local turnout

Estadísticas de grupo										
Comunidades Autónomas		N	Media	Desviación estándar	Media de error estándar					
part_mea n_L	Históricas	1982	71,5185	7,51540	0,16881					
	Generales	3958	77,1439	7,03357	0,11180					
Prueba de muestras independientes										
		igualdad de varianzas		prueba t para la igualdad de medias						
		F	Sig.	t	gl	Sig. (bilateral)	Diferencia de medias	Diferencia de error estándar	95% de intervalo de confianza de la diferencia	
									Inferior	Superior
part_mea n_L	Se asumen varianzas iguales	17,728	0,000	-28,402	5938	0,000	-5,62543	0,19807	-6,01371	-5,23715
	No se asumen varianzas iguales			-27,783	3739,688	0,000	-5,62543	0,20247	-6,02240	-5,22845

Table 7 reports the difference in means and, as expected, local turnout was higher in the municipalities of the “treatment” group, by 5,63% of difference (71,5% vs. 77,1%).

With Levene's test significant at $p \leq .05$ then we can conclude the variances are significantly different in both groups.

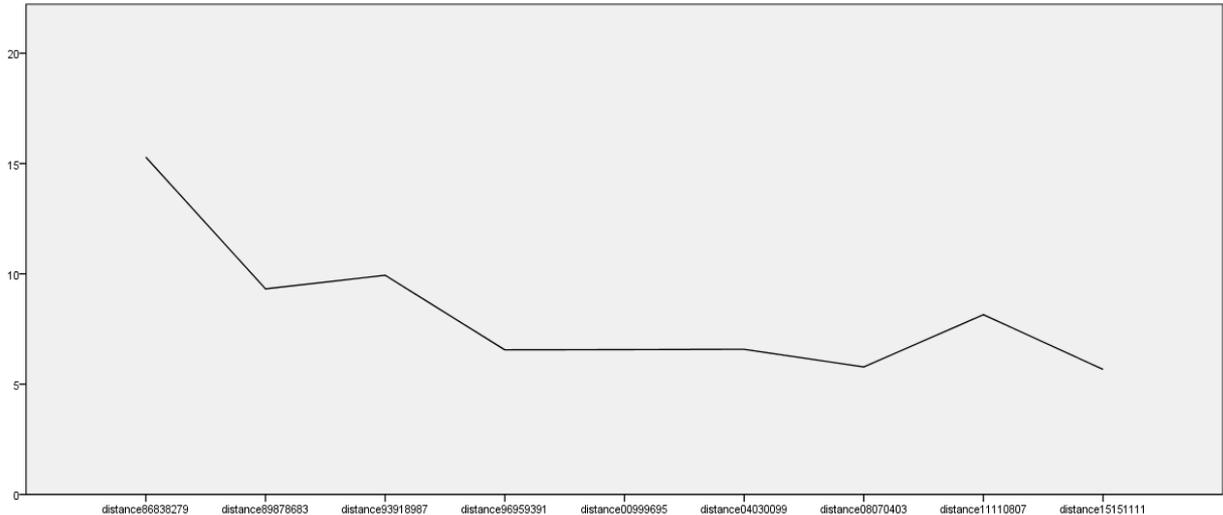
Finally, we would like to draw the attention to the process of "nationalization" of local governments in terms of turnout % at the municipal level. We understand nationalisation here whether local electoral turnout tends to approach (or equalise) the national electoral turnout over time? For answering this question, we build a simple measure of distance consisting on the comparison by pairs of pairs of elections. This is to say, we calculate the difference from national to local as we made previously, generating 10 pairs of differences. In this case, the comparison is calculated again but from pair to pair, going back in time. For example, we calculate the variables at the municipal level in this way:

$$P1 = (\% \text{ turnout } 2015 \text{ National elections} - \% \text{ turnout } 2015 \text{ Local elections}) - (\% \text{ turnout } 2011 \text{ National elections} - \% \text{ turnout } 2011 \text{ Local elections})$$

$$P2 = (\% \text{ turnout } 2015 \text{ National elections} - \% \text{ turnout } 2015 \text{ Local elections}) - (\% \text{ turnout } 2011 \text{ National elections} - \% \text{ turnout } 2011 \text{ Local elections})$$

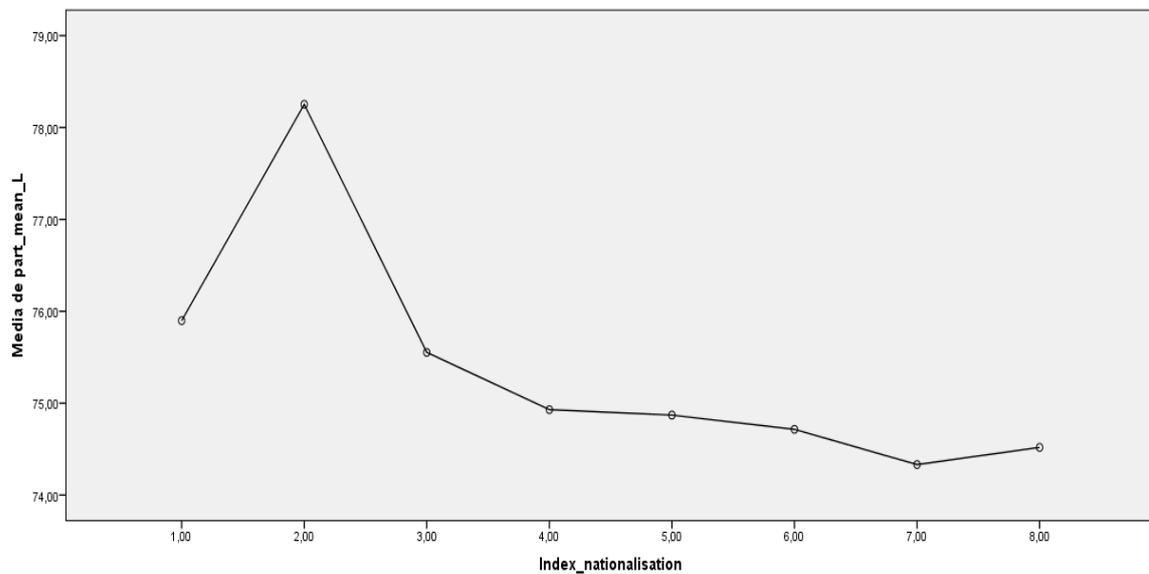
With this calculation, we obtain a raw measure on how the differences in turnout between both arenas evolve. Higher numbers will imply more differentiation between arenas, while lower numbers will imply more similarities in turnout. The following figure accounts for this information.

Figure 8.



The previous figure seems to configure a tendency of differences to become less evident in time. 40 years ago, we find a large difference between (86G-83L) – (82G-79L), whereas the mean difference between (15G-15L)-(11G-11L), has decreased up to 10 points from the first calculation. All of them however, are positive, showing a consistent pattern of nationalisation (higher numbers for the participation in national elections), measured through turnout percentage.

Finally, we built a composite measure, a sort of Nationalisation Index, where each locality scores 1 for every pair of elections where national elections are more participated than their local counterparts. With this, we build an approximate measure of “nationalisation” of elections at the local level over time. Theoretically this index ranges from 0 to 10, where 0 would be a municipality who has always had higher turnout rates in local elections (national elections had never been more participated than locals), and 10 would be a municipality where the turnout in the general elections has always been higher than local. We analyse the turnout percentage in local elections in function of this Nationalisation Index. The following figure accounts for it:



Although the tendency would be to a slight decline of turnout % at local elections when the Index increases, the differences are not statistically significant through ANOVA (except for the group of municipalities scoring 1, 2 and 3 in the Index).

6. Discussion (preliminary thoughts)

This article addresses the nature of second order elections using a different approach that is based on municipalities instead of on the aggregated individual results of the municipal elections. This is to say, we consider that the features of the elections in each municipality should be included in the analysis. We do not deny the existence of general trends, but we claim that exploration of the behaviour of 8.000 units (such as in the Spanish case) should be considered taking into account their own context. In this paper we focus on the effects of the size of the municipality.

This methodological approach implies a relevant change in the way municipal elections are analysed and offers interesting opportunities for different analytical perspectives, some of which are not still develop in this very preliminary version of the study.

The results, at this stage, show a different picture of municipal elections compared to previous approaches. For the case of Spanish municipalities, turnout in municipal elections is higher than in general elections in a large piece of municipalities. In addition, a clear relation between size and turnout in municipal elections can be observed. The smaller municipalities tend to present higher turnout figures than larger municipalities and these differences become wider in the extremes.

If the concept of second order - measured through a depressive electoral participation - is not an explanation that correctly describes the Spanish local government, the strategy that we have pointed out in the text is the incorporation of the context in the explanation. The appropriateness of the strategy is supported by the territorial structure of the Spanish state, which ends up building two different worlds that hardly allows a uniform explanation, as the second order approach implies.

The grounding argument of the “second order approach” is that the citizens participate more in the elections that they consider more important. That is, those in which the voter appreciates the “more-at-stake” idea, and that, therefore, makes voting participation more likely, for a simple cost-benefit calculation. The logical implication of this argument is that the type of election that is considered most relevant is invariable in all population bands. That is, if the public opinion determines that the legislative elections are the most decisive of all, this perception will apply to all population bands. This reasoning does not hold consistently, especially in states where the territorial structure combines an important majority of small-medium municipalities combined with some with more than one million inhabitants. Therefore, it will be necessary to further investigate, the variability of the indicator that measures the importance of the elections according to the population bands. In the Spanish case - and perhaps in the rest of the countries of southern Europe -, we could launch the hypothesis that the importance of the elections varies, according to the size of the polity. If the hypothesis is proved true, the theoretical base of the second level stabs in a very important way.

The same territorial structure that we have referenced could be the basis of the differences in voter participation, from another aspect: institutional variables such as the length of the mayor in office or the structure of the party system could be part of the explanation in the observed differences.

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