

Call for proposals

« Here's to the losers » Toward a political sociology of electoral defeat

Université Libre de Bruxelles (Cevipol)
16 - 17 October 2014

"The profound goal of politicians is not to win, but to be defeated". This surprising postulate lies at the heart of the satirical book *Que le meilleur perde. Eloge de la défaite en politique (May the best lose. A praise of defeat in politics)* published in 1986 by a researcher, Frédéric Bon, and a journalist, Michel-Antoine Burnier. By reversing the common sense approach to political activities, the authors go well beyond the joke and invite the reader to reconsider the traditional notion of defeat and victory in politics. Electoral defeat may probably not be the main purpose politicians pursue, but it is definitely a core element of any political competition, especially in a democratic regime. Very few politicians have never experienced it either directly (as candidates) or indirectly (as advisors, assistants, members of a campaign committee, etc..)

While each election produces far more losers than winners, electoral defeat has so far raised only little interest among sociologists and politologists. The conference to be held at the Université Libre de Bruxelles on **16 and 17 October 2014** aims to stimulate research and discussion on the topic. Rather than trying to identify explanatory factors of electoral defeat, it seeks to gather research dealing with its implications at individual and collective levels. Studying the impact of an electoral defeat on the person or the group that experienced it may indeed contribute to a better understanding of politicians' career patterns, political commitment and disengagement processes, change in political parties or even, at a broader level, of the underlying logic of political competition in a variety of contexts.

More specifically, three main issues will be addressed in a comparative and multidisciplinary perspective:

1. The definition and interpretation of electoral defeat.

The first panel of the conference will address the interpretive struggles over the electoral result and its meanings that take place after each election. Who are the various actors involved in the labelling of an electoral result as a success or a failure ? What criteria do they use in making such a

determination ? To what extent does the dynamic of interpretive struggles over electoral results vary from a context to another ? Under what conditions is it possible to deny a defeat or to give it a positive connotation ? How to explain that the interpretation given to an election may change over time ?

2. Politicians facing defeat.

The second panel of the conference will be devoted to the study of individual implications of electoral defeat. How can we explain the various effects of electoral defeat on those who experienced it ? How do politicians strive to bounce back after a defeat ? Under what conditions do they engage in strategies of political repositioning or/and professional conversion ? What are the specific issues professional politicians have to face when losing elections ? Under what conditions does an electoral defeat put an end to a political career ? Does experiencing electoral failure affect the way politicians internalize and accept the rules of the political competition ?

3. Electoral defeat as a test for political parties

Finally, the third panel of the conference will focus on implications of electoral defeat for political parties. To what extent do electoral defeats affect power relations within parties, both at the national and local levels ? Under what condition does a defeat have an impact on the functioning (e.g. candidate selection methods, internal hierarchy, budget management...), the public identity (public stances, methods of communication...) and the alliance strategy of the party experiencing it ? When does electoral defeat means death for a party ?

Proposals may deal with one or several case studies. Comparative and transdisciplinary approaches are very welcomed. Potential contributors are invited to submit a short abstract (2 pages maximum) to Frédéric Louault (flouault@ulb.ac.be) and Cédric Pellen (cedric.pellen@ulb.ac.be) by **15 may 2014**. Abstracts should include a brief description of the research problem and methodology, and a short biographical sketch of the authors. The results of the selection will be given by **30 June 2014**. Full papers accepted for presentation should be sent by **1st October 2014**. Papers may be written either in English or in French.

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