

Midterm Evaluation of The Norwegian National Election Studies of 2017 and 2021

Demokratisk og effektiv styring, planlegging og
forvaltning (DEMOS)

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Report of the Evaluation Panel

Background

The Norwegian National Election Study (NNES) forms the backbone of today's Norwegian election research, and its task is to collect and analyse data on voter mobilization and voting behaviour related to the parliamentary elections. In 2015, the Ministry of Local Government and Modernization asked The Research Council of Norway (RCN) to administer the National Election Studies for the period 2016 to 2023. Following an RCN call one application was received. This application was approved.

The current NNES-project is led by and coordinated from the Institute for Social Research (ISF), Oslo, in collaboration with the Department of Political Science, University of Oslo. The project also collaborates with The Department of Sociology and Political Science at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU), Trondheim, and the Department of Comparative Politics, University of Bergen.

According to the proposal the NNES is to provide both continuity and innovation to the NNES programme. A key goal is to build on the previous research and to provide continuity with respect to institutional affiliation, research design, data-collection methods, and analyses of voter behaviour. An equally important goal is to renew the field of election studies in Norway and to enable innovation in research questions methods and designs.

The two main objectives of the NNES are to

- Carrying out a large-scale postelection survey of voters in 2017 and 2021.
- Presenting the main results (of each survey) in a book, in Norwegian, that is accessible to a wide variety of readers, yet based on high-quality research.

The secondary objectives of the NNES are

- To initiate an election campaign study.
- To use innovative methods in the study of election turnout (such as experiments and panel studies of electoral roll data).
- To do an in-depth study of the immigration issue in Norwegian politics, using new methods (including survey experiments).
- To study and give advice to the Norwegian government on issues relating to the electoral system.

- To establish a dynamic research team that is able to follow Norwegian politics and conduct up-to-date research that has scientific value and is of relevance to the principal users of the NNES.

The NNES was initially funded for a period of four years, but with a potential of an eight years' timeframe. The project shall be evaluated three and a half years after its start-up to determine whether its activities are to be continued for the subsequent four-year period.

18 million NOK was allocated to the project for the first four-year period (2017-2021). The potential total budget for the full 8-years period including ISF's own funding, is 45 mill. NOK, with 36 mill. NOK in total coming from the RCN.

Evaluation of NNES

The evaluation will assess the scientific results NNES has achieved relative to the purpose of the call, and the revised project description, which forms the basis of the RCN's support. The evaluation will further consider whether the scientific results achieved are relevant and of benefit to users and the society. Further, the evaluation is to assess the plans for NNES activities in the potential final four-year period. The evaluation will give advice to NNES on aspects of their activity that should/could be improved.

The evaluation panel responsible for the evaluation was approved by the RCN 28 June 2019 and consisted of Professor Kasper M. Hansen, University of Copenhagen, Associate Professor Marcus Buck, UiT – The Arctic University of Norway, and Professor Terje P. Hagen, University of Oslo. The deadline for the committee's report was set to 1 December 2019. The committee's mandate follows as appendix to this report.

The evaluation is designed as a classical research evaluation based on a combination of quantitative and qualitative data. The data for the evaluation comes from three sources of data:

- Self-evaluation reports from NNES
- Site-visit by the evaluation panel in Oslo 14 October 2019
- Documentation and additional data collected by RCN

Both the self-evaluation reports and the documentation and additional data collected by RCN provide data on the main topics of the evaluation. The site-visit included meetings with the two leaders of NNES, Senior Researcher Johannes Bergh, ISF, and Professor Bernt Aardal, University of Oslo. The panel during the day of the site visit also met with stakeholders from the Ministry of Local Affairs and Modernization and the RCN.

The evaluation report is structured by six topics:

- Research activities
- Relevance and benefit to the research community, users and the society
- National and international cooperation
- Recruitment
- Organization and Management
- Plans for the future

The report ends with a summary of the recommendations for RCN.

Research activities

NNES builds on a long tradition of Norwegian election research going back to the seminal work of Rokkan and Valen from the mid-1950s. In the succeeding years, 14 consecutive voter surveys have been collected to analyse voter behaviour. The survey of 2017 marks the 60-years anniversary of the Norwegian voter surveys.

Also, the institutional responsibility for the election research have been exceptionally stable over time as the voter surveys have been the responsibilities of ISF and the Department of Political Science, UiO, as far back as to 1967. For a long period these two institutions were not only responsible for the data collection but also represented the institutional affiliation for researchers that published scientific work from surveys. For the last waves of the election surveys this has changed and the current analyses are as already stated done in cooperation between four different institutions.

The current survey follow the design and collection procedure from the former surveys. In view of the evaluation panel, the main design with a large post-election survey is carried out in a professional way and the data are of exceptional high quality when it comes to e.g. sampling, response rate and question wording. The NNES team has also been able to add a few new elements to the 2017-survey (e.g. on political emotions). At the same time the survey has secured the continuity in the time series. Included in the 2017-surveys is also a four-waves panel element and survey experiments. Both elements are assumed to provide better causal estimate on voting behaviour.

The first results from the election study has been published in a peer reviewed book in Norwegian (Bergh & Aardal 2019). The book does a good job in explaining the election to a broad audience and put it in perspective to previous elections. Compared to previous Norwegian books on elections, this volume has elaborated on statistical analyses and also include improved graphical displays of the statistical findings, yet disseminates well to a non-scientific audience.

Questions can however be raised regarding causality in some of the analyses as several of the explanatory variables clearly are endogenous. Bergh & Aardal (2019) do include some of the elements from experiments and panel-part of the data that have the potential of handling the endogeneity problems, but there is still room to advance the analyses to come closer to the causal mechanism behind voter behaviour. The use of instrumental variables (IV) and regression discontinuity designs (RDD) might be helpful in this respect. The latter has been mentioned by NNES in the application but have yet to be applied in published works.

Relevance and benefit to the research community, users and the society.

The NNES uses actively the traditional academic channels, i.e. peer reviewed articles, the peer reviewed book, presentations at the yearly Norwegian political science conference, the Nordic political science conference (NOPSA), the ECPR conferences etc. for communication with the research community. The research community is invited to seminars and presentations of research results both at the ISF premises and elsewhere. By way of the official communication infrastructure at the ISF, the NNES is also to some extent active on social media. Overall, it is fair to say the NNES is one of the most active disseminators of research results within the field of political science in Norway.

In general, the NNES also very vigorously communicate with stakeholders and other users. The researchers at NNES routinely rank highly amongst the most cited academics in the media, to some extent by default as the users tend to have a high interest in elections and electoral results. However, the NNES is also active between elections in disseminating results, acting as consultants in electoral matters and so on. In particular, professor Aardal's homepage (www.aardal.info) is a rich source of easily accessible information that covers a different set of topics than the NNES webpage (<https://www.samfunnsforskning.no/vi-forsker-pa/valg-og-demokrati>). At the same time, it should be pointed out the one weakness of the NNES communication infrastructure is precisely related to this. If this "private" web page could be installed and maintained under the aegis of the NNES, it would enhance the robustness of this communication channel for the future.

It is fair to say that NNES is the point of reference Norwegian election research arena, not least given the quality of the data collected. The researchers at the NNES readily participate in the discussions and debates on electoral research. Critique and suggestions from others are readily discussed by the NNES researchers, also in the mainstream media.

At the international level the participation is more confined to the academic arenas (see further discussion below). This is as expected as Norwegian parliamentary elections has limited interest for a broader international audience outside the research community.

National and international cooperation

As stated above, the NNES team has been extended the last years to include researchers from the University of Bergen and NTNU. However, the NNES team has to lesser degree been able to

engage with a strong groups of researcher, which are very successful in publishing in top-international journals in political behaviour applying causal designs (examples include Henning Finseraas and Jørgen Bølstad). Also up-and-coming more interaction with the Norwegian economists working in the field of political behaviour would be a strong match to apply more causal designs. One way to reach out to these groups could be that NNES team set-up a conference focused on causal design in political behaviour.

Furthermore, the NNES-team could conduct an open call for small elements for the coming 2021 survey and give participating researchers with specific purposes access to data before its general release. This would encourage stronger collaboration with the strong group of researchers working with causality problems within political behaviour.

There have been some international collaboration. (Late) Rick Matland, Loyola University Chicago, has been working with Johannes Bergh on the GOTV-experiments which has also led to an international publication under review. Peter Maurer from Freie Universität Berlin has contributed to Bergh & Aardal (2019). Additionally, Johannes Bergh serves as the Vice-Chair of two EU-funded research networks (COST Actions). Apart from these examples very little international collaboration has been achieved and little effort has been described to attract high quality foreign researchers. The NNES team also lack publication from the 2017-survey in the top political science journals so far. A few articles are submitted for review but few, if any, to the top journals. Furthermore, the world is still waiting for the major contribution that sums up and analyses 60-years of Norwegian voter surveys.

NNES is part of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) and do also deliver data to the collaboration. Much more could however be done to encourage international collaboration. The data could be easier accessible in English and the Norwegian trend file including all its documentation should also be available in English. With the extremely strong data sets that are available through the Norway NNES there is also room for initiating conference where national and international researchers come together to utilize the data.

Recruitment

Theories and results from the election research are important parts of the curricula in political science at all Norwegian universities. A significant number of students are also recruited into election research and base their master thesis on survey data from NNES. At the PhD-level the numbers of candidates at least at the University of Oslo, are relatively low.

Organization and Management

NNES is, as stated initially, led by and coordinated from the Institute for Social Research (ISF), Oslo, in cooperation with the Department of Political Science, UiO. In practice, the main hub of NNES is at ISF and ISF is responsible for both strategic and day-to-day management of the project, including accounting, dissemination and reporting. According to the projects leaders the cooperation with ISF is sound. ISF supports the project with adequate management and

runs the project well. The alternative of moving the day-to-day management to UiO was shortly discussed with the project leaders but not recommended. The evaluation panel agrees to this.

The project has been run from ISF since the 60s and fits well into the project portfolio at the institute. For longer periods the NNES has been the main profiling project at ISF – a position that remains also today.

As part of the management of the project, NNES is assumed to set up a reference group. In the panels view the reference group needs to be activated and used for discussion of both scientific questions and future impact, not least relative to the international research community.

Research plans

When it comes to future research plans the NNES in their self-evaluation report basically states that they will continue.

However, much improvement could be reached in the coming years. In addition to advance the analyses of causal mechanisms behind voter behaviour as discussed above, the evaluation panel recommends:

- Analysis and dissemination of geographically voting data.
- Better analysis and dissemination of the entire trend line across many of the variables in the data sets.
- Extend the use of socio-demographical variables from SSB both present and historically.

To bring these suggestions into the core of the election analyses and not simple as an add-on would potentially bring Norwegian election in the forefront of electoral research where it belongs.

Summary of recommendations for RCN:

The Evaluation Panel's main recommendation is to amplify the funding period for NNES so it covers the eight years' timeframe. ISF, in cooperation with the Department of Political Science, UiO, continues as project leader.

Additionally the Evaluation Panel recommends that:

- 1) Action should be taken to install and maintain professor Aardal's homepage (www.aardal.info) under the aegis of the NNES in order to enhance and secure the robustness of this communication channel for the future.
- 2) More resources should be used to stimulate the interaction with younger scholars that works with applications of causal research designs. One way to reach out to these groups is to set-up a conference focused on causal design in political behaviour.
- 3) The NNES-team conduct an open call for small elements for the coming 2021 survey and give participating researchers with specific purposes access to data before its general release.

- 4) The NNES-team prepare the data so it easier is accessible for English speaking researchers.
- 5) NNES sets up a conference where national and international researchers come together to get to know and utilize the NNES data.
- 6) NNES initiates an English language book project that utilities the 60 years of Norwegian election studies to be published at a high ranging international university publisher.
- 7) NNES sets up and activates an international reference group that can be used for discussion of both scientific questions and future impact.

Copenhagen/Oslo/Tromsø, 26 November 2019

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