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## The electoral situation as a chronotope

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**Abstract:** This article explores the phenomenon of elections as a political chronotope, a spatio-temporal realm where the mechanisms of democracy unfold. Its aim is to elucidate the unique socio-political nature of elections. The author establishes that the spatial and temporal characteristics define the format and regulations governing electoral interactions. The term «chronotope» is understood as an interdisciplinary concept that captures the essential connections between temporal and spatial features within a specific order of phenomena. Although extensive research has focused on the social, technical, and psychological aspects of expressing one's will, the ontology of elections, which encompasses the comprehension of the «unity of time and place of action» and the involvement of political actors in the electoral scenario, has been largely overlooked.

Additionally, this study concentrates on the concept of the electoral situation, which delineates the synchronous and diachronic connections wherein citizens' political choices are positioned, realized, and interpreted. The notion of the electoral situation can be correlated with the term «political landscape», which is only partially related to actual geography but predominantly pertains to the comprehensive conditions of an electoral competition (the coordinate system) and the participants involved in this process.

The article's author illustrates how the electoral situation constructs synchronous and diachronic connections

at various levels of political interaction. Notably, these connections are facilitated by political mythologems, which serve as unifying and integrative factors within the electoral chronotope. By examining these mythologems, the author highlights their role in shaping the narrative and symbolism surrounding elections, ultimately influencing the dynamics and outcomes of the electoral process.

Overall, this article delves into the intricate relationship between elections and the spatio-temporal framework in which they occur. By emphasizing the significance of the electoral situation and its connection to the broader political landscape, the author sheds light on the multifaceted nature of electoral processes, enriching our understanding of democracy's fundamental mechanisms.

**Keywords:** political landscape, political actor, actor-network theory, frame, frame analysis, chronotope, elections, electoral situation

### Introduction

Elections as a political chronotope, a kind of space-time universe, within the framework and conditions of which the mechanisms of democracy are implemented, is a topic that, in our opinion, deserves special attention today.

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One of the key concepts of this work is the term «chronotope». We take this term as an interdisciplinary concept that reflects the system of essential connections of temporal-spatial characteristics within a certain order of phenomena. In the context of political processes, the concept of a chronotope acts both as a characteristic of the subject section of the study and as the factual foundations of the study. That is, the chronotope in relation to the electoral process is a spatio-temporal format within which the political choice of a citizen is formed and implemented.

«Electoral situation» is the second important term of this study. Under the electoral situation, we understand the system of synchronous and diachronic connections and references, in fact, the chronotope in which the political choice of citizens is positioned, implemented and interpreted, according to their interests and in accordance with constitutional legal regulations. In contrast to the electoral process, the electoral situation is a more formalized, ritualized and time-contracted representation of electoral interaction.

The relevance of the topic of the article has several aspects.

Firstly, the presence in the election mechanism of conditionally «internal», professional, and «external», public, dimensions often masks the essence of what is happening. The seeming disproportion between the direct effect of the expression of will and its consequences requires clarification of such a correlation. The resonance of the political will, its scale and direction, remains incomprehensible, if we do not take into account the peculiarities of the time frame of the electoral process as a long and, at the same time, situationally rooted.

The second aspect of the relevance of the problem is that the information age involves a new look at all the phenomena of social life as a kind of symbolic resource. The politics of society is a sphere where not only persons or groups of people operate, but factors of interests, power, technologies. The electoral situation can be attributed to the number of ritual and symbolic phenomena, the meaning and content of which is revealed in communication and through interpretation. The realities to which the symbolism of electoral procedures, rhetoric and roles refer require an understanding of «keys»-codes that allow one to explore elections as a special social topos, a space of intersection of various interests, practices and strategies.

The third aspect of relevance, last but not least, is the lack of knowledge of the problem. Earlier in the history of political thought, elections were considered as a way to implement equality (Condorcet, 1785), an instrument of value implementation (Arrow, 1951), a way to integrate an individual into public life (Habermas, 1970), or the only way for democracy to make effective decisions (Dahl, 1957). At the same time, a high degree of research into the social, technical and psychological aspects of the expression of will leaves out the ontology of elections, namely, the understanding of the «unity of time and place of action» and how the actors of the political process are included in the electoral situation.

The purpose of the article is to create a convincing description of the election phenomenon as a special socio-political chronotope and to show that spatial and temporal characteristics set the format and rules of electoral interaction.

The objectives of the article include:

- conceptualization of the concept of «chronotope» in relation to the electoral situation;
- analysis of the temporal aspect of the electoral situation;
- consideration of the principles of organization of the symbolic electoral space.

The methodology of the work is based on the use of two approaches: actor-network theory (B. Latour, P. Bourdieu) and frame analysis (E. Goffman).

## **Actor-network theory and frame analysis**

According to the provisions of the actor-network theory, objects (nonhumans) and subjects-actors (actors) of social relations should be considered operationally: they form a network of connections that simultaneously functions on two levels – material and semiotic. Objects (in our case, political interests, positions, power, resources) determine the ways and means of including actors (participants in the political process) in the interaction system, while the actor, through the interpretation of objects, «sets up» the operation of the system. The actor, therefore, is not only the bearer of the activity principle, but also the subject that produces and puts into action the semiotic space of the political process.

Taking into account the fact that the electoral situation is an element of the electoral process and a synchronous snapshot of the election event, we decided to use also the methodological principles of frame-analysis (E. Goffman) and designate the electoral situation as a specific frame.

Under the frame (according to the methodology of G. Bateson and E. Goffman) two phenomena are meant. On the one hand, this is a synchronously grasped and functionally outlined social situation, which, as a rule, is associated with a repeatedly repeated phenomenon or use of objects, a set of skills, rules and practices for mastering this situation and staying in it. The electoral situation corresponds to this description, since it is a rigidly determined, limited in space and time, regularly repeated system of actions.

On the other hand, the frame is the specific optics of the actor-participant of the process, the observer or the researcher, who «reads» the situation according to the context. The electoral situation, built as a political interaction, can be «read» as an element of a show, a sporting event, a ritual, a game, etc. It is important to note that in a frame contexts do not conflict or exclude each other. They interact, forming a system of cross semantic references. A frame is procedural knowledge, namely, knowledge of how things, phenomena or actors interact within the framework of one typical event (Goffman, 1974).

## Temporal aspects of the electoral process

In political theory, it is elections that have become associated with social instruments that reveal the main trends in social transformations, political moods, and changes in the value priorities of the population. Elections began to be considered by researchers as a clear demonstration of current political and economic interests, as well as the spectrum of political forces representing them.

Elections have traditionally been considered one of the most important instruments for the implementation of democracy. An essential aspect of the work of the democratic mechanism is the implementation of political decisions based on the equality of citizens. The social realization of equality was interpreted by researchers as establishing an equivalent relationship

between individual values and the possibility of direct action (K. Arrow), as personal participation in the public sphere (J. Habermas), as the ability to understand and formulate one's own interests as strategies for political activity (R. Dahl). However, such an implementation has certain event bindings.

It seems to us that, as an object of study, elections should be structured in accordance with temporal and spatial criteria. For the study to be effective, we need to conceptually distinguish between two important working concepts: the electoral process and the electoral situation.

The electoral process should be understood as a dynamic phenomenon, institutionally and procedurally formalized. The essence of this process, according to the Electoral Code of Ukraine, is to carry out «during the period of time established by ... the Code ... electoral procedures related to the preparation and holding of the relevant elections, the establishment and official announcement (publication) of their results» (Виборчий кодекс України, 2021). In the interpretation of Ukrainian legislation, the electoral process acts as an integral and homogeneous chronotope: it is territorially limited, periodically repeating, as well as continuous and «cannot be canceled, stopped or postponed» (Виборчий кодекс України, 2021). Thus, democratic procedures have a rigidly defined time frame and an unconditionally regulated format.

The dynamic component of democracy, which is a duration within a given format, was described by Robert Dahl. For this researcher, the electoral process is a way to implement actual equality and an essential tool for polyarchy, that is, the transformation of a politically imperfect society in the direction of a democratic ideal. Elections in conditions of polyarchy, according to the researcher, are not a one-time event, but a path and movement (Dahl, 1957, p. 280).

It is important to note that elections are a temporal phenomenon, which, although unfolding within certain situational frameworks, reflects the political life of society in a certain historical perspective. In this regard, let us analyze the temporal aspects of the electoral chronotope.

Within the electoral process at the formal level, the following stages can be distinguished: preparatory, electoral, post-electoral. The first stage is the technical organization of the upcoming elections, namely the formation of constituencies, precinct election com-

missions, the compilation of voter lists, their verification and clarification, the nomination and registration of candidates, the conduct of election campaigning, which tactically consolidates the strategic positions of the party or candidate.

The second period is the electoral period (voting directly on election day). The electoral period is a marker of the political activity of voters, but does not represent all aspects of electoral behavior.

During the post-electoral phase, the ballots cast by voters are tallied, and the outcomes of the local elections are calculated and subsequently announced. Formally, according to the current legislation of Ukraine, the electoral process ends 15 days after the official publication of the results of local elections (Виборчий кодекс України, 2021). However, it is obvious that the resonant phenomena of the election results are not limited to this period.

It should be noted one more stage of the electoral process, pre-electoral, which is not directly identified at the legislative level, but is of great importance for understanding the content of electoral activity.

During this stage, the strategic directions of the activities of its participants are formed, political and economic platforms are created, public opinion is prepared, key problems of program messages are identified, various practices of public interactions are worked out, criteria for future choice, personal sympathies and political preferences are determined.

Accordingly, the vectors of behavior of the participants in this process depend on the temporal context and electoral tasks: activities in the field of preparing public opinion, developing tools for interaction, determining the power points of positions, etc.

## The concept of the electoral situation

The pre-electoral period passes into the preparatory period (the time of technical support of electoral procedures) and, in fact, the electoral situation. We use the concept of the electoral situation as a concept, that is, a concept with a mobile meaning, since neither in political science (research) nor in political (descriptive) discourse there is a fixed understanding of this term.

Traditionally, the electoral situation is viewed either as a general picture of public opinion on the assessment of the political situation in the country, or

as actual voting results (Hibbling, Alford, 1981). In our opinion, this term should be considered as an event frame isolated symbolically and normatively from the general spatio-temporal context.

This term refers us to the traditional concept of sociology – «social situation», that is, a set of factors that affect the behavior, feelings, ideas of an individual or community that arise at a certain point in time and in a certain space. According to the definition given by the Collins Dictionary, this is something that is directly related to «self» and implies involvement, an active attitude of the individual to what is happening around (Collins Dictionary).

The election situation, characterized by exceptional symbolic emphasis, unfolds itself as a separate story, has intrigue and plot twists. The dynamics of the electoral situation is determined by such vectors of political interaction as subject-subject, subject-environment, body-object, subject-technology, subject-thing, and others. Social situationality involves multiple actors in the space of interaction, whose intentions are concentrated around a single symbolic center: free will as a direct mechanism of democracy. Here, direct mechanical action is associated with the implementation of more complex human «projects» and practices, to a greater extent hidden from direct observation or not realized at the moment of the action itself.

Thus, in contrast to the concept of the electoral process, the concept of «electoral situation» represents a synchronous cut of the electoral event, creating a kind of «map» of the constellation of interests and the political forces expressing them.

In our opinion, the electoral situation represents several temporal realities, pulling them into the context of a single frame. The first temporal perspective that makes it possible to clarify what happens at the moment of a political choice is its prehistory. Any political will is not just prepared by its direct participants, it is aimed at realizing the political opportunities laid down by society and solving urgent problems.

How is the field of political choice formed, and how are political alternatives laid down? The main motive for the electoral activity of citizens is integration into the community and participation in effective decision-making, or at least a sense of participation in decision-making. Political thinking in the mode of «common good», «we-unity» and «illusion of participation in awareness» (K. Jaspers) is mythological

in nature. Political mythology, especially devoid of critical thinking, considers even individual choice in the context of collective responsibility. The specific features of the mythological consciousness are the dualistic picture of the world (good-evil, friend-foe), the creation of the image of a hero (and, accordingly, an anti-hero) and the absence of genuine historicity. The electoral situation requires participation and actions from its actor, determined by an ideologically justified prehistory, which always features a challenge (a real or constructed problem-conflict), a struggle (a history of unsuccessful attempts to solving the problem) and the hero who volunteered to solve the problem. However, the mythological hero always needs helpers. Voters act as such assistants, whose visible and tangible participation is seen as a guarantee of overcoming the conflict. For comparison, we can recall the famous story of the ancient Egyptian religion: non-participation in universal prayer can lead to the fact that the sun will not rise tomorrow. That is why the electoral situation is an extremely ritualized event: its procedures are designed not only to comply with the necessary legal regulations, but also to demonstrate the idea of everyone's involvement in a common cause.

Obviously, within the temporal dimension of the electoral situation, an essential vector is the focus on the future. The connection of the present, which is happening directly «here and now» with the future, is carried out due to two moments. The first is a sense of belonging to the common good and its implementation in the future, which should arise from a participant in the electoral ritual. The second is the pathos of the implementation of social projects, the so-called «expert appropriation of problems».

The essence of democracy as a polyarchy, according to R. Dahl, is the expansion of representative participation in government and broad access of the population to effective political decision-making. In essence, effective political decisions are the choice of the best alternative, backed by guarantees that the chosen alternative will be successfully implemented in society. In this regard, elections appear to the mass consciousness as a kind of transitional reality from the uncertain present to the future, where the conflict will be eliminated and problems will be solved.

## The electoral situation as a political landscape

The concept of the electoral situation can be correlated with the term «political landscape», which has only a partial relation to real geography, but, to a greater extent, to «the totality of the conditions of electoral competition (coordinate system) and the actors of this process themselves. It is also used to designate the structure of the political preferences of the electorate – «the system of electoral positions and preferences»», notes Yekhnich. According to the researcher, the study of the electoral landscape allows us to see and explore its following aspects:

- «a dynamic process of bringing the political attitudes and orientations of the participants in the electoral competition into line with the positions proposed for their choice;
- concentrated expression of the political market;
- the structure of voters' expectations, which is realized in the election process» (Єхніч, 2008). That is, according to Yekhnich, the electoral space is both a «process», a «structure», and an arrangement of forces participating in a political event.

It seems to us that the main components of the electoral process, taken from a «spatial» perspective (the ratio of political forces and their influence, the geography of voters' political preferences, electoral «intentions» and «moods», the «distance» from the voter to the candidate for office, etc.), reveal the substantive aspect of the election phenomenon.

From the point of view of A. Bentley and F. Truman, political configurations are set not by individuals or their associations, but by the interests of groups and communities. Since society consists of dynamic associations that arise and exist around certain «pain points» of social life, the electoral situation is also a kind of topology. The electoral activity of citizens may indicate the nature and degree of social integration, the content and competition of interests, as well as the mechanisms of interaction between various groups of the population (Bentley, 1908, p. 202).

The organizing principles of the democratic electoral situation build political interaction in a «horizontal» perspective. Formal legal equality of election participants ensures equality in guarantees of their participation and awareness. Among the key points

that equalize the «distances» of actors in relation to the set political goal are observance of the principles of electoral law, prohibition of interference in the electoral process, political pluralism and openness, freedom of election campaigning, impartiality of executive authorities in relation to the results of elections, information transparency and other. The normative-legal aspect of elections is an axiomatic framework that, on the one hand, legalizes the actions of participants in the process, and on the other hand, determines the parameters of a political ritual in which informal factors of electoral behavior (values, hopes, interests, beliefs, fears, sympathies) are formalized and acquire the strength of centripetal, integrative forces of electoral interaction. An important condition for the effectiveness of such integration is the legitimacy of the norms that are perceived by the participants in the interaction as the rules of the game and do not contradict their chosen role and position.

Due to the fact that democracy, «inside» is the sphere of activity of experts, and «outside» – a mechanism for realizing the interests of ordinary citizens, the technologies of balancing between the «internal» and «external» dimensions become extremely important.

One of these is the creation of «interest groups», which turn into a machine for constructing the «will of the people».

The concept of «the will of the people» is one of the central ideologemes of the philosophical and political thought of the Enlightenment, which retains its driving potential to this day. It is inappropriate to reduce the socio-political potential of this dynamic system solely to the levers of manipulating the voter's choice. In our opinion, it is the term «construction of reality» that reflects the content of the work of this machinery: constructing a problem situation, adjusting the angles of its coverage, forming public opinion on this situation, creating a methodology for representing and resolving issues – all this is aimed at overcoming the lack of a sense of political power among potential voters' participation» (Schumpeter, 1951). Such practices testify not so much to a change in democratic principles or mechanisms, but to the urgent need to legitimize public participation in processes that are actually regulated by professionals.

## Conclusion

The concept of elections as a political chronotope offers a valuable framework for understanding the intricate interplay of temporal and spatial dimensions within the mechanisms of democracy. The exploration of this concept highlights the complex nature of the electoral process and the dynamics of the electoral situation, shedding light on the multifaceted ways in which political choices are formed and implemented.

The notion of a chronotope, as applied to elections, emphasizes the essential interconnectedness of time and space within which citizens' political choices take shape. It underscores that the act of voting is not simply a momentary decision but rather a culmination of historical, social, and individual factors that converge at a specific juncture. This conceptualization underscores the significance of the electoral process as a continuous, structured sequence of stages, each contributing to the final outcome. From the pre-electoral phase of strategic positioning to the post-electoral phase of results interpretation, the chronotope framework underscores the inherently dynamic nature of elections.

In dissecting the electoral situation, the concept of a political landscape emerges, portraying the intricate spatial configuration of political forces, interests, and preferences. This landscape encompasses the intricate interplay of diverse actors, each seeking to influence the outcome and occupy advantageous positions. Just as a geographic landscape is shaped by natural features and human interventions, the political landscape is a product of intricate power dynamics, strategic maneuvers, and ideological battles. Understanding this landscape is vital for comprehending how political choices are framed and contested within a complex web of interests and allegiances.

The framework of actor-network theory and frame analysis offers a lens through which to examine the constituents and dynamics of the electoral situation. By considering both material and semiotic dimensions, this approach reveals the intricate network of interactions between political actors, institutions, and symbolic representations. The role of frames within the electoral situation further illuminates the diverse interpretations and perceptions that participants bring to the process. These interpretive frames, be they visions of a game, ritual, or spectacle, shape how individ-

uals engage with the electoral process and understand its significance.

As political landscapes evolve and societies navigate the complexities of democratic governance, the notion of elections as a political chronotope remains a valuable framework for analysis. It reminds us that democracy is not static but rather a continuous journey through time and space, where citizens engage with the past, act in the present, and shape the future. The study of the electoral situation within this framework provides insights into the dynamics of political behavior, the construction of reality, and the complex interplay of temporal and spatial dimensions that define the democratic process.

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