

**The salience of EU issues:
Explaining political behavior in European
Parliament elections**

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Much of the scholarly literature on democracy in the European Union (EU) assumes that national publics are apathetic toward EU affairs (Moravcsik 2002, Habermas 2001, Hoskyns and Newman 2000, Schmitter 2000, Siedentop 2000). This literature relies on the elections to the European Parliament (EP) as evidence for such claims. Average EU voter turnout has steadily declined since 1979.¹ However, national publics have demonstrated an interest in EU governance. Both the Danish and Irish publics stalled integration through failed referendums on the Treaty on the European Union (1992) and the Treaty of Nice (2000). The recent French and Dutch public referendums halted efforts to create a European Constitution. These referendums inspired much higher turnout than the EP elections. If public apathy explained the problems with EP elections, then voters should also have stayed home during these referendums.

Several studies suggest that EP elections serve as second-order contests. Voters utilize these elections to rate the performance of national governments. National parties rely on these elections to determine their levels of public support. Campaigns focus on conflicts and issues relevant to the national arena. The elections become forums for national issues and lose any relevance for EU governance. This argument assumes that the public remains apathetic toward the EU. Voters either neglect the EU altogether or subordinate EU concerns to national agendas. Empirical studies of this argument neglect the motivations behind voter choices. While the second-order theory makes assumptions about voters' motivations, the existing evidence only demonstrates patterns in voting behavior. Voters may support alternative parties in EP elections because of different concerns and agendas at the EU level. They may defect to send signals to national

¹ Turnout was 63% in '79, 61% in '84, 58.5% in '89, 56.8% in '94, 49.8% in '99 and 45.7% in '04 (EOS Gallup Europe 2004).

governments on their performance at the European level. These expectations lead to the central question of this paper: What motivates voter choices in EP elections?

This paper hypothesizes that both national and supranational politics influence the voters' choices in EP elections. The EU has varying effects on the politics and governance in the member states. Some member states have had to adopt extensive reforms to uphold the legal and institutional requirements of EU membership. National elections should thus address European matters. Indeed, Schmitter (2003) argues that voters utilize national elections to pressure national governments on European issues. National elections emphasize both national and European issues. EP elections should exhibit a similar pattern. National concerns should not exclusively dictate EP election results. Voters will use their votes to evaluate government performance on both national and European issues. Both dimensions should exert influence on voter choices in EP elections.

The argument has several implications for EU studies. At the micro level, it demonstrates a public interest in the EU and disputes the conventional wisdom that the public neither cares nor understands the European Union. Citizens may utilize EP elections to send cues to national parties, but they also possess an interest in EU affairs. Public apathy does not explain the low voter turnout in EP elections. At the macro level, it indicates a basic problem with EU democracy. Several scholars argue that elites have a "permissive consensus" to make decisions at the EU level. EU critics maintain that the EU lacks such legitimacy and suffers from a 'democracy deficit.' This paper confirms some of the assumptions behind the deficit argument. Publics take an interest in the EU and thus require forums to participate in EU governance and to facilitate government

accountability. EP elections serve none of the traditional functions of elections if they serve solely as barometers on national issues. Additionally, if voters use EP elections to signal displeasure with national governments for their actions at the European level, then elites should not assume they have a permissive consensus.

This paper builds on the EP election literature by exploring the motivations behind EP voters. It also contributes to the growing body of literature on multi-level governance. Several scholars examine the effect of interactions between local, regional, national and supranational levels of governance on EU governance. This paper indicates the relationship between multi-level governance and elections, as national governments must perform at multiple levels in order to secure popular support.

Second-Order Elections

Reif and Schmitt (1980) first classified elections according to their importance to voters. They classified national-level elections as first-order and local-level elections as second-order. Both publics and parties interpret second-order elections as inconsequential compared to first-order elections. This perceived irrelevance has many consequences for second-order elections. First, the apparent insignificance of these elections will reduce the expected benefits from participation. As such, second-order elections will suffer from dramatically lower turnout than first-order elections. Second, as the public devotes substantially more attention to issues from first-order elections, these issues will dominate second-order elections. Finally, second-order may become barometers of support for national governments. National governments remain intact despite the results of second-order elections. Supporters of national governments may then vote for different parties as their choice will not ultimately damage the capabilities of the government.

These voters would intend for such defections to send messages of dissatisfaction to national parties. Reif and Schmitt attribute many of the perceived failings of EP elections to their second-order status.

Several scholars concur with this reasoning. Franklin (2001) argues that national parties regard EP elections as opportunities to gauge public opinion on national issues or to mobilize voters. He relies on survey data to demonstrate that EP voters would have supported different parties in national elections. Hix (1997) asserts that “national party leaders, particularly in opposition, will use European elections as a chance to voice a protest against governing parties” (4). Candidates promote national issues, opponents rarely express differences on European issues and campaigns neglect Euro-issues. Schmitter (2000) asserts that this environment produces elections in which “voters are simply not offered an opportunity to choose between rival partisan elites presenting alternative programs at that level of aggregation” (7). While these scholars largely conjecture on EP elections, several studies have employed empirical methodology to build on Reif and Schmitt’s argument.

Anderson and Ward (1996) develop a framework to investigate the conditions for government performance in barometer elections. They assume that parties in power will lose support in such election and seek to explain variations in such losses. Their framework incorporates variables for economic performance, executive popularity, partisanship in the electorate, prior performance of the parties in power and time. They find that the timing of barometer elections determines the extent of government losses. Governments perform better the further the elections are from the midpoint of the electoral cycle. Additionally, while economic variables appear irrelevant, political

variable influence outcomes of barometer elections. Thus, such elections “are much more popularity contests and reflections of the political mood of the moment than opportunities to reward and punish incumbent governments for economic performance” (457).

Hug and Sciarini (2000) examine the effect of institutions on voting behavior in referendums on European integration. They discover that voters act according to the expected consequences for the party in power. Government supporters defect from their party line only if they believe such a defection will not harm their party. Both of these studies support the barometer theory. However, neither study indicates that these barometers neglect EU concerns. Hug and Sciarini suggest that European concerns motivate voters in their choices in referendums. Anderson and Ward argue government popularity does not rely on performance in a particular policy area. Thus, these elections may serve equally as barometers for government agendas at the European and national levels.

Marsh (1998) conducted a study of EP elections between 1979 and 1994. He confirms that governments lose more support in EP elections than in general elections. This trend especially typifies those countries with more frequent alternation of parties in government. He concludes that “European Parliament elections take place within a wider political context and that their results can be understood in such terms” (606). While Marsh believes this conclusion belies Reif and Schmitt’s claims, it actually indicates a potentially erroneous assumption in the second-order theory. The second-order theory presumes that the national context dominates the entirety of European politics. However, if one envisions European elections in a wider political context, then the concerns at any level of governance may influence outcomes at another level of governance. National

issues may influence EP election outcomes, but European issues may also influence national election outcomes. Further, concerns at both levels of governance may interact to determine outcomes in both national and EP elections.

Analysis of the Second-Order Theory

It is important to note the conceptual foundations of Reif and Schmitt's argument. EU observers might contend that EP elections suffer from low turnout because of the institutional balance of power in the EU. The European Parliament has gained decision-making powers over the last two decades, but it remains the most insignificant of the three EU institutions (Nugent 2005). Additionally, Simon Hix (2002) has demonstrated that national party positions dictate the voting behavior of members of the European Parliament (MEP). The EP may not possess the autonomy to effectively represent the public interest. Thus, negative perceptions of the EP could explain the low turnout. If the public interprets the EP as an irrelevant institution, then they might abstain from the EU election process. Such perceptions may also explain the second-order status of EP elections. If the public interprets the EP as a powerless institution, then they may utilize EP elections as barometers for national political parties. Neither of these hypotheses conforms to Reif and Schmitt's argument. Reif and Schmitt contend that the level of governance (local, national or supranational) determines the public interest in the elections, rather than the characteristics of the institutions at any of the levels. Thus, the EP could possess more powers, but the voters would still focus on national-level concerns in European elections.

European publics prioritize national politics because they neither understand nor take an interest in the EU. The second-order theory thus conforms to prevalent

assumptions about public apathy toward the EU. The EU decision-making process includes a multitude of actors and procedures. Schmitter (2000) argues that “the existing rules are virtually unintelligible even to experts, much less citizens” (81). Andrew Moravcsik (2002) contends that the EU governs policy areas that fail to stimulate public interest. Monetary policy and trade harmonization lack the visibility of education, social welfare and national defense. As such, he claims that the “lack of salience, not lack of opportunity, explains why European citizens fail to exploit even the limited opportunities they have to participate” (616). These arguments reinforce Reif and Schmitt’s explanation for low turnout. Publics disregard EU issues and either abstain from EP elections or utilize these elections to focus on national agendas. However, a growing body of research disputes this line of reasoning.

Carruba (2001) maintains that the appearance of public disinterest merely indicates that policy-makers are adhering to public preferences on the EU. Gabel (2000) claims “as integration has progressed, these policies have increasingly involved issues of high salience to EU citizens” (55). As citizens increasingly observe the consequences of the single currency, common defense initiatives and immigration policies, the EU could witness a shift in perceptions that it is a distant and trivial body. The recent referendums verify such a shift and other studies conclude the public has begun to form opinions on EU issues and European integration. Schmitter (2003) observes that the EU increasingly influences national elections and popular support for national parties. Ferrara and Weishaupt (2004) conclude that both national and European parties suffer if they fail to articulate positions on the EU. Tillmann (2004) argues that these positions affect popular support: “increasing distance between a citizen and a party on the question of EU

membership decreases the likelihood of the citizen voting for that party” (591). This literature provides reasons to assume EU issues have relevance in EP elections.

Second-order arguments may have overlooked this argument because it neglects to analyze voter motivations at the individual level. The second-order literature has established that large parties and parties in power lose support in EP elections and re-gain support in general elections. However, these studies rarely move beyond this initial step to examine the motivations behind EP voter choice and thus explain such patterns. Hix and Schmitter only conjecture on trends in EP elections. Reif and Schmitt’s model does not address individual choices. Franklin establishes this pattern, but does not employ empirical evidence to demonstrate his explanation. Marsh examines changes in party support as a function of time intervals between EP and general elections.

EP elections may serve as barometers, but this function does not define EP elections as second-order. The EU represents a multi-level system of governance. It is feasible that voters would hold a government accountable for its actions at multiple levels. This possibility seems likely with national governments in EP elections, as national governments undertake many actions at the transnational level. Such an environment, where voters direct their attention at national parties rather than European actors, would produce the appearance of second-order EP elections. However, voters would not actually be subordinating European concerns to national agendas. To establish EP elections as second-order, the literature must determine that European concerns bear minimal influence on voter choices. Anderson and Ward actually incorporate several variables (economic performance, executive approval and partisan support) that could

determine voter motivations. However, these variables do not distinguish between evaluations of government support at the national and European levels.

Hypotheses

To test the multi-level model, this paper hypothesizes: *evaluations of party performance at both the national and European levels influences the total support for those parties across EP and national elections* (H1). To test the assumptions of second-order barometer theories, this paper hypothesizes: *negative evaluations of government performance at the national level most influence voters' decisions to defect in European elections* (H2). To test the EU's effect on such defections, this paper hypothesizes: *negative evaluations of government performance at the EU level most influence voters' decisions to defect in EP elections* (H3). Following the logic that both national and European concerns influence voter choices, declining evaluations of government performance at both the national and European levels decline should lead to more voter defections. Such findings would refute the assumption of the second-order literature that voters act exclusively on national concerns in EP elections.

Data and Methods

This paper offers three models to investigate the influence of European concerns on voting behavior in national and European elections. All three analyses rely on survey data from the 1999 European Election Study². The first model examines the influence of

² The data utilized in this paper were originally collected for the European Election Study Workgroup, consisting of Cees van der Eijk, Klaus Schoenbach, Hermann Schmitt, Holli Semetko, Wouter van der Brug, Mark Franklin, Sören Holmberg, Renato Mannheimer, Jacques Thomassen and Berhanrd Wessels. Fieldwork was carried out by a consortium of European survey organizations, co-ordinated by IPSOS (Hamburg, GFR). This study has been made possible with grants from the University of Amsterdam, the Dutch National Science Foundation (NWO, the Netherlands), The Bundespresseamt (Bonn, GFR), the CIS (Madrid, Spain), the University of Mannheim, the ISPO Institute (Milan, Italy) and Trinity College (Hartford, Conn., USA). Neither the original collectors of the data nor their sponsors bear any

national and European concerns on voting tendencies in EP elections. The next two models study voters' motivations for maintaining support for the same party across national and EP elections.

The sample for the first model includes all of the respondents in the Election Study, with the exception of those cases that contain missing values for any of the relevant variables. For each country, the authors determined the 'governing parties,' those parties that were participating in national-level coalition governments at the time of the 1999 EP elections. Each individual was coded according to their support for governing parties in national and European elections. The independent variables are the respondents' national and European concerns. National concerns are measured by respondents' reported approval of their government's performance. The Election Study codes 'disapproval' as 1 and 'approval' as 2. The variable is recoded in the model as 0 for 'disapproval' and 1 for 'approval.' European concerns are measured by examining respondents' reported satisfaction with their government's policy on European integration. The Election Study asks respondents to classify their satisfaction on a four-point scale. It codes 'very dissatisfied' as 1, 'somewhat dissatisfied' as 2, 'somewhat satisfied' as 3 and 'very satisfied' as 4.

Results

The multi-level model expects that both national and European concerns influence the party support of respondents. Respondents that approve of government performance should support government parties in general elections and be more likely to support government parties in EP elections. Respondents that disapprove of government

performance should demonstrate the same tendencies for opposition parties. As evidence of European concerns, respondents should be more likely to support government parties as they become more satisfied with their government's policy toward the European Union. This analysis employs a probit analysis of the likelihood that the respondent will vote for the governing party in the EP election.

According to hypothesis 1, both levels of policy should have an impact on an individual's likelihood to vote for the government party. Our primary variables of interest are the respondent's approval of national policy and approval of European policy. A dummy variable for whether the respondent voted for the governing party as well as a set of dummy variables for country has been included as controls in the model. Even after controlling for these factors, both national approval and European approval have a positive, substantively and statistically significant effect on the likelihood that voters will choose to vote for the governing party in EU elections. Not surprisingly, the strongest predictor is whether the individual voted for the governing party in the previous national election. While the coefficient for European policy is less than half the size of the coefficient for national policy, it is important to note that that European policy varies from 1 to 4 while national policy varies from 0 to 1, so the size of the two measures' effects on the predicted probability are similar.

Table 1: Determinants of EU Vote for Governing Party

	Vote for Governing Party in EU Elections
Voted for Government Party in National Election	2.622** (0.053)
Approval of National Policy	0.168** (0.057)
Approval of European Policy	0.075* (0.036)
Belgium	0.324** (0.123)
Denmark	0.135 (0.094)
Germany	0.246** (0.092)
Greece	-0.120 (0.131)
Spain	0.022 (0.099)
France	0.445** (0.135)
Ireland	-0.281* (0.114)
Luxembourg	0.437** (0.166)
Netherlands	0.280** (0.101)
Portugal	0.264 (0.151)
United Kingdom	-0.039 (0.125)
Finland	0.035 (0.154)
Sweden	-0.051 (0.152)
Austria	0.207 (0.130)
Constant	-1.876** (0.094)
Observations	5740

Standard errors in parentheses
* significant at 5%; ** significant at 1%

The remaining two analyses split the sample in order to examine those who voted for governing parties separately from those who supported opposition parties. Table 2 models the factors that explain why voters who support the governing party in national elections choose to defect and support the opposition party in EP elections. The model shown in Table 2 most directly addresses the barometer conception of EP elections. Only those voters who supported the governing party in national elections are included in the sample. The dependent variable is whether the respondent said he or she would vote for the governing party in the EP elections (0=vote for governing party, 1=defect to opposition party). As in Table 1, the primary variables of interest are the respondent's approval of national and EU policy.

The coefficients for national policy and European policy indicate that higher levels of approval are associated with a lower likelihood that the respondent will defect from the governing party. Unlike Table 1, the coefficient for national policy is small and statistically insignificant. The coefficient for European policy is strong and statistically significant. Given the fact that the coefficient for national policy is not statistically significant, the evidence in Table 2 does not support the idea that EP elections are second-order, barometer elections. Instead, the strongest indicator of whether a supporter of the governing party will support that party in EP elections is that respondent's degree of approval for EU policy.

Table 2: Likelihood of Defection among those who Voted for Government in National Election

	Probability of defection from National Vote
Approval of National Policy	-0.094 (0.091)
Approval of European Policy	-0.121* (0.056)
Belgium	-1.109** (0.313)
Denmark	-0.653** (0.160)
Germany	-0.834** (0.155)
Greece	-0.446* (0.186)
Spain	-0.448** (0.131)
France	-1.144** (0.227)
Ireland	0.121 (0.133)
Luxembourg	-0.653** (0.234)
Netherlands	-0.597** (0.146)
Portugal	-1.071** (0.260)
United Kingdom	-0.406* (0.185)
Finland	-0.402* (0.187)
Sweden	-0.264 (0.219)
Austria	-0.486** (0.162)
Constant	-0.389* (0.157)
Observations	2277
Standard errors in parentheses	
* significant at 5%; ** significant at 1%	

The third model is similar to that shown in Table 2, but it is performed on the sample excluded in Table 2. Instead of modeling the behavior of those who support the governing party in national elections, the sample is restricted to those who voted for the opposition in national elections, and the focus is on the factors that cause voters who voted for the opposition in national elections to vote for governing parties in EP elections. Therefore, defections are votes for the governing party.

Interestingly, the results shown in Table 3 are the opposite of those shown in Table 2. While European policy was most important in predicting defections from governing parties in national elections to opposition parties in EP elections, national policy approval is the most important variable for explaining defections from opposition parties in national elections to governing parties in EP elections. The positive and statistically significant coefficient for approval of national policy indicates that those who approve of national policy are more likely to defect from opposition parties and vote for governing parties in EP elections. The coefficient for approval of national policy is very small and statistically insignificant.

Table 3: Likelihood of Defection among those who Voted for Opposition in National Election

	Probability of Defection from National Vote
Approval of National Policy	0.214** (0.075)
Approval of European Policy	0.047 (0.049)
Belgium	-0.026 (0.149)
Denmark	-0.221 (0.125)
Germany	-0.209 (0.133)
Greece	-0.810** (0.276)
Spain	-0.458** (0.176)
France	-0.246 (0.241)
Ireland	-0.192 (0.186)
Luxembourg	0.280 (0.223)
Netherlands	0.031 (0.139)
Portugal	-0.795* (0.387)
United Kingdom	-0.424* (0.189)
Finland	-0.412 (0.322)
Sweden	-0.296 (0.213)
Austria	-0.010 (0.217)
Constant	-1.607** (0.120)
Observations	3463

Standard errors in parentheses

* significant at 5%; ** significant at 1%

The second analysis determines the conditions under which EP elections serve as barometers on the performance of parties in power. The sample is comprised of those EP voters who reported they would vote for the governing party if elections to their national parliament were held the following day. The governing party is defined as the party in power at the time of the 1999 EP elections. Election Study codes for the parties in power were used to identify and disaggregate supporters of such parties. The resulting sample size is approximately 2000 cases.

There are several reasons to limit the sample in this manner. While it would be useful to examine defections from opposition parties, the Election Study does not assess public satisfaction with the agendas of such parties. Additionally, the role of opposition parties differs between the EU and national politics. At the national level, opposition parties may significantly influence public support for the government and the party system. At the EU-level, opposition parties only exercise influence through the EP. Governments, in contrast, participate in the European Council, the Council of Ministers and the EP and appoint the members of the College of Commissioners. The capabilities and strategies of governing parties should more substantially influence public satisfaction with government performance at the EU level. Finally, Reif and Schmitt, as well as Marsh, theorize that parties in power suffer the most losses in second-order elections. Supporters of opposition parties encounter different consequences for defections and are thus less likely to rely on such a strategy.

The dependent variable is defined as the likelihood that respondents supported a party other than the governing party in the 1999 elections. The Election Study invites respondents to identify the party they voted for in the 1999 EP elections and the party

they would vote for if elections to their country's parliament were held the next day.

Defections are thus input as a dichotomous variable: respondents who reportedly defected from the party in power in the EP elections were entered as 1, while respondents who maintained support for the party in power were entered as 0.

Both analyses rely on the same measures of European and national concerns for independent variables. The second analysis also controls for partisanship. Respondents indicated if they felt close to a particular party and then qualified the strength of that connection. The control variable is coded with a 0 for no connection, a 1 for 'merely a sympathizer,' a 2 for 'fairly close,' and a 3 for 'very close.' The paper relies on a probit analysis to determine the effects of each of these three variables on the probability that a voter will defect in the EP elections.

Barometer theories would expect dissatisfaction with the government to produce defections. Second-order arguments stipulate that such defections occur because of dissatisfaction at the national level. The multi-level model, in contrast, predicts that defections result from dissatisfaction with policies at both the national and European levels. Thus, as respondents indicate less satisfaction with both European and national policies, they should be more likely to defect in EP elections. If perceptions of the EP lead to defections, then the likelihood of defections should increase with declining support for the EU.

Conclusions

The results of the analyses indicate that the public takes an interest in governance at the EU level. Government policies on the EU factor into the decisions of EP voters. While these results may have limited application, as they only concern individuals that

participate in EP elections, they demonstrate an EU aspect to voter choices in European elections. This evidence refutes claims that European citizens remain apathetic toward the EU, regardless of their participation in EP elections. Second-order theory presumes that low turnout in EP elections results from the EU's negligible appeal to the public. To effectively investigate this claim, future research will also have to analyze attitudes of individuals who abstain from EP elections. However, as EU issues are not simply 'second-order' for EP voters, there is reason to suspect some other cause of the low voter turnout in EP elections.

This paper investigates an alternative explanation for low turnout: perceived irrelevance of the EP. To determine attitudes toward the EP, the analysis relies on a measure of opinions on EU membership. Unfortunately, the European Election Study does not include a question that might reliably capture perceptions of the EP. Thus, while the analysis indicates an insignificant relationship between this variable and defections, it does not offer confirmation that the powers of the EP have influenced voter choices. Future studies should incorporate a more reliable measure of EP perceptions and, again, should determine such perceptions for the voting and non-voting publics.

The different analyses lead to mixed conclusions on the role of national issues in EP elections. The first analysis demonstrates that national concerns influence voter choices more than EU concerns. The second analysis does not find a significant relationship between national concerns and voter defections. One explanation is that whereas the first analysis undertakes a broader examination of choices across national and EP elections, the second analysis focuses on defections in EP elections. As this second analysis exclusively examines EU-level behavior, one might expect national

concerns to play a smaller role in voter choices. However, these results may simply result from the nature of the national variable. Prior studies confirm the first analysis; national concerns influence voter choices.

This paper demonstrates that the EU also influences voter choices. EU issues interact with national concerns to influence election outcomes. This interaction should increasingly shape elections as the public continues to scrutinize EU activities. The EU has become a more visible entity over the last 20 years, as it has assumed control over policy areas that have direct effects on the lives of the European publics. While it may be entering another period of stalled integration, its recent advances will likely continue to be subject to public inquiry. Indeed, the failures of referendums on the EU Constitution may be due to public concern over the pace of European integration. As such, the EU will likely effect national elections and national factors will exert pressure on EU-level politics. Scholarship on EP elections will require models that account for interactions between national and European levels of governance.

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