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EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS THEORIES

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Introduction

The objective of this chapter is to offer a concise overview on the state of the art of the European Parliament election literature. This will provide readers with the necessary conceptual tools to interpret the multifaceted aspects of the still rather hazy and unknown process of selecting representatives to the Parliamentary Assembly in Strasbourg and Brussels.

We will draw a brief outline of the two main theoretical frameworks on European elections that have hitherto emerged, notably the so-called Second-Order Election (SOE) and Europe Salience (ES) models. Pioneered by Karlheinz Reif and Hermann Schmitt, in their far-sighted article entitled ‘Nine Second-Order National Elections’ and published in 1980, a theoretical analysis of Euro-elections has been sketched out and later carried forward, developed, and tested by an increasing number of scholars (Reif and Schmitt, 1980).

During the last three decades, research on European Union elections has steadily grown and matured by trying to detect the core features of the EP electoral campaigns and contests, to unveil their complexity, and to explain voting behaviour in EU Member States. Comparative empirical appraisals of the EP contests have been undertaken by a transnational group of experts, under the coordination of the University of Mannheim, leading to the creation of the European Elections Studies (EES) series. Although Reif can be certainly regarded as its founder and promoter, he did not become an official member of this research team. Initiated in 1979, the project does not just focus on the dynamics of voters’ choices, but also extends to the evolution of the European Community/Union and to an assessment of its political performance.

In April 1987, at the Joint Sessions of Workshops of the European Consortium for Political Research in Amsterdam, Roland Cayrol, Cees van der Eijk, Mark N. Franklin, Manfred Kuechler, Renato Mannheimer, and Hermann Schmitt agreed to draft the 1989 European Election Study. Subsequently, other academics joined the project, such as Colette Ysmal, Pilar del Castillo, Erik Oppenhuis, and Michael Marsh.

Unlike the previous cases, the 2004 European Election Study was carried out and sponsored by national study directors and was partially supported by CONNEX, a network of excellence financed by the European Commission under the Sixth Framework Programme. Finally, in 2009 the European University Institute coordinated the European Election Study by framing it within a wider pilot project known as PIREDEU ‘Providing an Infrastructure for Research on

The three-year investigation largely drew on and benefitted from the model provided by the American National Election Study (ANES), a permanent research infrastructure that since 1948 has collected survey data on all US presidential and most mid-term congressional elections.

Alongside the wide-ranging European Election Studies, it is de rigueur to mention Juliet Lodge’s six successive edited volumes that offer excellent empirical country reviews on the EP electoral contests held from 1984 to 2009 (Lodge, 1986, 1990, 1995, 2001, 2005, 2010). The contents of these books have mainly revolved around party strategies in political campaigns, key electoral issues as well as final polling results which, after each election, have translated into a different number of parliamentary seats for the various national political parties, determined a new balance between political forces, and shaped a novel and distinctive European Parliament.

Further studies have tried to shed some light on specific aspects of the multifarious and compound mechanisms behind the EP ballot. In particular, Mikko Mattila has focussed on the effects of the timing of the EP electoral race within the national cycle and on whether it entailed weekend or compulsory voting, or voter participation (Mattila, 2003). Sara B. Hobolt, Jae-Jae Spoon and James R. Tilley have looked at age, social class, party identification, and policy distances of the electorate as factors capable of significantly affecting the likelihood of abstaining (Hobolt et al., 2009).

Yet, even in these predominantly empirical studies, the concept of ‘Second-Order Election’, which will be outlined below, has inevitably appeared, if only in the background. Thirty-four years after writing their seminal article, Reif and Schmitt’s theoretical interpretation remains pivotal and dominant in any academic debates as well as major investigations on European elections.

1 The Second-Order Election model

In 1971 Michael Steed anticipated that convening an election to a relatively powerless European Parliament would be the equivalent of organizing a sort of plebiscite on the performance of national governments (Steed, 1971). Four years later, the French MEP Christian de la Malène warned that issues raised during the campaign for the European elections would be based on domestic policy, and that these contests would not depend on European Union affairs. He also expressed his concern about citizens’ participation in an electoral race where the representatives were perceived as very distant figures without a distinct ideological identity (de la Malène, 1975). Similarly, the British peer Lord Watson, sceptical about the idea that direct elections to the EP would promote a Europe-wide debate, predicted a low turnout, even lower than that achieved in local elections, and in terms of outcome envisaged a protest vote against any sitting government, with the result that the majority of MEPs would belong to parties in opposition to their national governments (Watson, 1975).

As Reif and Schmitt stressed, the first direct Euro-elections by universal suffrage – held in June 1979 – proved that such predictions were, to a large extent, true and accurate (Reif and Schmitt, 1980). These electoral contests appeared to be rather different from the national legislative ones, mostly due to the subordination of the European Parliament to other institutions within the European Community and the irrelevance of the choice of MEPs to the distribution of power amongst political parties within the Member States. For the purpose of their analysis, Reif and Schmitt drew an important distinction between what they named Hauptwahlen, first-order elections, referring to general elections in parliamentary systems and elections of the head of state in presidential systems and Nebenwahlen, second-order elections, corresponding to less
Influential electoral contests at regional, municipal, and local levels in parliamentary systems as well as to legislative elections in presidential systems, especially congressional mid-term elections in the United States, and more blatantly to all by-elections (Reif and Schmitt, 1980).

In this context, EP electoral races seemed to fit rather well within the second category by displaying the following features: (1) low turnout; (2) a focus on national rather than European issues; (3) the defeat of government parties; (4) losses by major parties; and (5) the impact of timing of EP contests within the domestic electoral cycle on the results for ruling and big parties. We will discuss each of these features in turn.

First, Euro-elections are strongly marked by high defection rates, partly based on citizens’ perceptions that less is at stake, although this tendency is deemed to affect the supporters of government parties more than those of the opposition. On the other hand, low turnout could also be ascribed to a party mobilization deficit. In fact, despite the growing influence exercised by the European Parliament on EU policy-making, these electoral contests remain out of the central mechanisms of distribution of political offices at the national level, and thus are inevitably labelled as ‘second-rate’ (Weber, 2007, 531). This is an evident sign of the institutional failure to provide individuals with real political power, especially among voters who have not had the opportunity to gain partisan loyalties, either because they are young or because they live in countries where party systems have been in flux, making creation of such loyalties a difficult matter (Franklin, 2014).

The second aspect foresees that citizens vote with an eye to the national political arena rather than to express a true choice for the candidates they believe to be most suited to represent their views on the EP stage. As such, parties enter the electoral campaign by trying to mobilize voters through the refinement of their usual national policy strategies. They do not draft alternative manifestos over EU policies, but prefer to mitigate their differences on these matters. Questions inherent to the future construction and organization of the European Union play a very limited role in either the strategies adopted by political parties or citizens’ voting behaviour. By and large, EP elections are characterized by a lack of European content and political parties regard these contests as valuable only to the extent that they serve as indicators of their national strength. Since the polling results largely stem from the popularity of national parties, EP elections appear more ‘national’ than ‘European’ (Oppenhuis et al., 1996; Ferrara and Weishaupt, 2004).

The third feature closely relates to the decline in popular support for government parties competing for the EP electoral podium, which echoes the losses seen by presidential parties in congressional mid-term elections in the US. According to the ‘surge and decline’ theory, this phenomenon is believed to occur because, during presidential election years, voters are usually more prone to back the congressional candidate who is affiliated to their preferred candidate for the White House (Campbell, 1960). By contrast, two years later at mid-term, when such a link no longer exists, partisanship prevails with people favouring the candidate closer to their own personal political views and, as a result, presidential parties suffer a remarkable setback. At the EU level, the ‘decline’ of national government parties – and the ‘surge’ of their rivals sitting on the opposition benches – offers a provisional shelter for those disaffected by their respective cabinet’s political performance in the various Member States (Norris, 1997, 112).

The fourth variable affects major parties, whether in government or opposition, which tend to lose votes to the benefit of minor ones. In this perspective, party size seems to be inversely proportional to the gain achieved in Euro-elections (Ferrara and Weishaupt, 2004). Subsequently, as Reif has cunningly noticed, citizens do not just privilege small parties but also radical, protest, and populist movements, which do particularly well in less crucial elections such as those of the European Parliament. Undeniably, the ability of these parties to attract a larger number of supporters can be ascribed, to a certain extent, to the greater visibility that they often achieve through media coverage (Reif, 1984, 1997).
The fifth tenet underlines that the political weight of an EP electoral contest is partially determined by its temporal location in the national electoral cycle. If this occurs immediately after a legislative election, the governing party, which is in its ‘honeymoon’ period, is still very popular in voters’ eyes. On the contrary, if it takes place at the mid-point of the national election cycle, according to Karlheinz Reif (1984), or rather at its end, according to Erik Oppenhuis, Cees van der Eijk, and Mark N. Franklin (1996), it reaches the lowest level of public support for the governing party. EP electoral campaigns held shortly before legislative elections are expected to be more intense than those that follow just on the trail of general electoral races when a sort of ‘euphoria’ prevails. In cyclical patterns, governing parties experience a fall in support as voters treat Euro-elections as battlefields to win national government office and as opportunities to reward or punish political parties on the basis of their performance. As a result, a different composition is likely to distinguish the European Parliament from the Council of Ministers, with an ever-increasing number of members from peripheral parties – including radicals and Eurosceptics – sitting in the Strasbourg and Brussels Assembly in contrast to their rather limited presence amongst the representatives in EU Member States’ governments.

Mark N. Franklin and Till Weber agree that the extent of vote-switching between national and EU elections depends on their actual timing (Franklin and Weber, 2010). Whilst EP electoral contests are regularly held every five years, national parliamentary elections do not follow the same cycle in all Member States, except in Luxembourg. Indeed, general elections usually take place more often, as prescribed by law or convention, and may even be convened prior to the completion of the legislature as result of political instability.

Based on the assumption that Euro-elections exert a limited impact on the national political arena, citizens may choose to vote sincerely rather than strategically by supporting opposition parties or single-issue movements, which focus their attention on topical questions such as the environment or immigration. And yet, it should not be overlooked or ignored that, in most cases, this decision stems from people’s growing disaffection and disappointment with government.

Against this background, three types of voting can be detected: (1) strategic, instrumental, or ‘voting with the head’, when citizens choose parties or candidates with a better chance of winning rather than their preferred ones for fear of wasting their vote (Cox, 1997; Pasquino, 2003; Koepke and Ringe, 2006); (2) sincere, expressive, or ‘voting with the heart’, when individuals support the party that reflects their own genuine ideological preference (Reif and Schmitt, 1980; Marsh, 1998; Reif, 1984, 1985; van der Eijk and Franklin, 1991, 1996; Pasquino, 2003; Carrubba and Timpone, 2005); and (3) protest or ‘voting with the boot’, when citizens convey their temporary discontent with the government party at the national level, by sending a warning message to their politicians without altering the cabinet’s composition (Oppenhuis et al., 1996).

The distinction between ‘sincere’ and ‘protest’ voting still appears rather blurred, perhaps due to the fact that, in their original article, Reif and Schmitt had failed to address it clearly. Jason R. Koepke and Nils Ringe have tried to fill this lacuna by spelling out the nuances between these two concepts. In their eyes, ‘protest voting’ is commonly directed against incumbent governing parties or, more rarely, in defiance of whatever party citizens would opt for if national political power were at stake. Conversely, ‘sincere voting’ mainly affects large parties, which do not benefit from the wasted-vote mentality, thus leading to a sort of redistribution of consensus between parties that had been less successful in the previous national election (Koepke and Ringe, 2006). Oppenhuis, van der Eijk, and Franklin have introduced another classification between ‘marker-setting’ and ‘throw-away’ elections (Oppenhuis et al., 1996). The former takes place far from the preceding first-order election, when citizens engage in expressive or protest voting and such contests represent a real test of the level of popularity of parties once the indicator set by the earlier national election has faded away. As a result,
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‘marker-setting’ elections allow people to voice their relative support for the governing party, whilst the attention paid by politicians and the media is high, but without actually altering the composition of the cabinet. By contrast, ‘throw-away’ elections run parallel to – or immediately after – first-order elections, when contests appear insignificant as a source of information about the position of national parties and the people’s vote is sincere. Nevertheless, as Koepke and Ringe sharply observe, the term ‘throw-away election’ inevitably carries a rather negative connotation that does not appear justified, considering that voters truly back their favourite party. They therefore propose the alternative expression ‘pure preference election’, which instead maintains the essence of the above concept without any implicit normative judgement (Koepke and Ringe, 2006, 326).

Political parties may bring into play EP election results to seize crucial information about public preferences. In the case of an electoral demise they can, hence, adjust their policy strategies accordingly prior to the subsequent national electoral contest. In their empirical survey, based on the results of 14 EU Member States, Zeynep Somer-Topcu and Michelle E. Zar reveal that opposition parties draw on the EP vote to change their positions, more than ever if the turnout levels in both electoral contests are similar and when European elections are close in time to the upcoming national ones (Somer-Topcu and Zar, 2013).

2 Europe Salience theory

Whereas there is strong evidence of a national character in EP elections, new research shows that European integration is becoming a contentious issue in the unfolding of Euro-campaigns, and in the formulation of party strategies provided that, in a specific environment, it may well affect their final results. This literature does not repudiate the SOE model, but reveals that these elections have become more salient over the past decade (de Vries, 2007, 2010; de Vries et al., 2011; Gabel, 2000; Hobolt and Spoon, 2012; Hobolt et al., 2009; Hobolt and Wittrock, 2011; Tillman, 2004).

In his case study investigation focussed on Austria, Finland, and Sweden, Erik R. Tillman demonstrates that public attitudes towards the EU have affected voting behaviour in national elections before and after accession to the European Union, by highlighting a close link between people and parties over European matters (Tillman, 2004).

Cees van der Eijk and Mark N. Franklin noticeably address the interface between domestic and European elections in their book entitled Choosing Europe? The European Electorate and National Politics in the Face of Union (van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996). National underpinnings as well as the effects of European integration on such elections are further elaborated by Catherine de Vries, who defines the last variable as ‘European Union (EU) issue voting’ (de Vries, 2007). Subsequently, Sara B. Hobolt and Jill Wittrock examine the power of information on voting behaviour in Europe-wide elections. Their findings clearly confirm that citizens usually build their choices on domestic preferences, but after receiving further communication on European integration matters, they generally become more inclined to cast their votes also on these grounds (Hobolt and Wittrock, 2011).

In fact, on the basis of their analysis in all 27 EU countries in the 2009 EP elections, Hobolt and Spoon (2012) demonstrate that the degree of politicization of the European Union in the national debate shapes the extent to which electors rely on European rather than domestic issues. Somer-Topcu and Zar explore the bearing of European Parliament election results on national party strategies. In particular, they focus on how opposition parties draw on these electoral outcomes in order to discern public opinion and change their left–right positions accordingly in their national election manifestos (Somer-Topcu and Zar, 2013).
Certainly, voters have started to take these contests more seriously and, as a result, political parties have to devote greater attention to the EP campaign by also investing additional financial resources. Although political parties still care less about their EP electoral manifestos and campaigns, these elections are gradually becoming more salient. To this avail, parties may even resort to their national-level information on public preferences to change their positions in their EU manifestos with the hope of increasing their vote shares in European elections. Moreover, if the polling outcome unambiguously denotes that public preferences have extensively diverged from parties’ policy positions, in order to narrow such a gap and reduce consequential losses, political parties have to decide whether or not they need to adjust their national policy stance. What is important to note is that shifting away from their traditional standpoint always represents a rather hazardous move for political parties, as they may lose supporters and donors who could accuse them of being opportunistic or even deceitful. Aware of these risks, political leaders are usually reluctant to undertake drastic policy changes, unless required for the sake of the party and only after a truly harsh electoral defeat. According to Somer-Topcu and Zar, the extent of the losses by parties in the European election, compared with the previous national one, reflects proportionally their willingness to change their left–right manifesto positions at the upcoming national electoral race (Somer-Topcu and Zar, 2013).

Although EP elections do not seem to offer a real platform over alternative approaches to European integration, nor do most voters care about expressing such a preference, EU-related issues increasingly have some bearing on the performance of political parties in this electoral contest. Indeed, studies carried out by John Curtice in 1989, Michael Marsh and Mark N. Franklin in 1996, Jean Blondel, Richard Sinnott, and Palle Svensson in 1997 and, finally, Simon Hix and Michael Marsh in 2007 and 2011, have shown that these elections are also about Europe and European issues.

As such, an alternative to the SOE model has been put forward, commonly referred to as Europe Salience (ES) theory, which entails the following predictions between the last national general election and the subsequent European election:

1. better performance of Green parties;
2. gain of extreme parties, either on the left or on the right of the political spectrum;
3. success of anti-European parties.

As to the first hypothesis regarding the increased voting share of the Greens, this may be due to the negative externalities of different environmental policies in the various Member States that trigger citizens’ decisions to support a common European action in this sensitive sector, based on the belief that these issues could only be tackled efficiently at the EU level (Hix and Marsh, 2007). Cliff Carrubba and Richard Timpone claim that this new Green politics dimension, overriding the traditional, authoritarian, and nationalist outlooks, represents the most powerful source of variation in voting behaviour (Carrubba and Timpone, 2005). As such, advocates of further European integration, who are also keen on environmental issues, tend to shift to Green parties.

Turning to the second hypothesis of the ES theory, voters who believe that the pace of European integration has advanced too quickly are likely to defect from mainstream ruling parties to extreme right-wing or left-wing lists which are critical towards the European Union project. In fact, it cannot be ignored that there is often a strong nexus between the party positioning on European integration and the conventional left–right division.

Federico Ferrara and Timo J. Weishaupt suggest that all parties with a well-defined and cohesive stance on the European Union, and which address European issues, usually fare better
in EP electoral contests (Ferrara and Weishaupt, 2004). By contrast, parties that face lacerating ‘Euro-divisions’ suffer large desertions at the EP ballot, to the extent that any ambivalence or ambiguity on European integration may well lead to significant vote losses. Even if citizens do not reward a specific position on the EU unification process, they systematically punish parties that do not have a clear vision on this matter. By using Ferrara and Weishaupt’s informal expression, those parties that have not ‘got their act together’ on Europe are deemed to perform worse in EP elections.

Furthermore, in their opinion, this pattern is slightly more pronounced for governing than opposition forces, whilst it is especially evident in countries where the European project is strongly polarized (Ferrara and Weishaupt, 2004). From an ES perspective, Euro-elections held in the new Member States from Central and Eastern Europe differ from those which take place in the old 15. Such idiosyncrasies may also be due to the high level of electoral volatility, embodying a typical feature of new democratic party systems that require time to reach a certain degree of stability.

Based on a survey undertaken in 21 countries, Joost van Spanje and Claes de Vreese argue that voting behaviour may be influenced by concerns about the ‘democratic deficit’ of the European Union, the absence of a European identity, the perceived low benefits of EU membership, or even by fierce opposition to European integration (van Spanje and de Vreese, 2011). Overall, parties that give salience to European Union politics, whether negative or positive, attract consensus. Nevertheless, it is widely recognized that Eurosceptic parties are due to outperform their opponents in Euro-elections, in accordance with the third tenet of the ES model.

In addition to the three above-mentioned predictions of the Europe Salience theory, a final aspect deserves some attention. This concerns the strict correlation between citizens’ propensity to go to the polls, their personal knowledge of EU institutions, and their country’s attitude towards European integration (Mattila, 2003; Ferrara and Weishaupt, 2004; Stockemer, 2011). According to Studlar et al. (2003), three main factors account for a higher turnout in EP elections, notably: (1) hosting a European institution; (2) a feeling of European identity; and (3) the presence of agricultural workers. In fact, citizens’ willingness to go to the electoral booth may depend, to a great extent, on their trust in the European Union and on their perception that the EU represents a ‘good thing’ (Blondel et al., 1998; Flickinger and Studlar, 2007). Voting would become ‘a symbolic act of showing one’s support for the idea of European integration’ (Irwin, 1995, 198).

This view implies the complementary proposition that abstention may be interpreted as an indication that voters are not really keen and driven to participate in the democratic governance of Europe, being either indifferent or disaffected towards the European project (Blondel et al., 1998). Hence, deserting the ballot box may well signify distrust of or dissatisfaction with the European Parliament whilst generally reflecting the rise of voters’ apathy and frustration with the inadequate functioning of the European Union (Sinnott, 2000). And yet, Mark N. Franklin and Sara B. Hobolt have criticized this specific tenet of the Europe Salience model, arguing and demonstrating empirically that it is the very nature of EP elections that is to blame for such a popular unconcern and detachment rather than the opposite (Franklin and Hobolt, 2011).

The next part of this volume offers a rich empirical picture, mostly drawn by native experts, on the Euro-elections in all EU Member States held since 1979 and in particular on the 2009 contest. This will be complemented by a short overview on the national parliamentary elections convened within the same time frame, thus enabling the authors to uncover the complex interface between domestic and European Union politics.

Each country chapter will include brief preliminary sections on the geographical position, historical background, geopolitical profile, political landscape, and political parties of the
various Member States, combined with their respective attitudes to the European Union, as well as public opinion on European integration, and will end with a brief account of the national and EP electoral systems.

Such an empirical picture will be instrumental in order to test the above-mentioned themes framed within either the SOE or SE models. Against this background, the authors will endeavour to recognize whether and which of these theories actually fits better with their own case and if any of the respective hypotheses of the two models may be either validated or refuted in all EP electoral waves, thus identifying constant as well as common trends.

Ultimately, the case studies will wind up by shedding some light on the complex conceptual dynamics of Euro-elections. They will try to detect and situate the key features outlined in this chapter by unveiling whether such electoral platforms continue to be dominated by the search for domestic political advantage or whether ‘European’ issues increasingly come to the fore.

Building on the work aptly carried out by the various authors, the last chapter of this handbook will be devoted to a cross-country comparison of all Euro-elections in the EU Member States, by also drawing some theoretical conclusions. To this end, tables will be sketched out on the basis of information collected as well as interpretations advanced by national experts, in particular on the character of the EP electoral campaigns across the EU as well as on the main hypotheses of the SOE and ES models. In fact, the authors’ perceptions on the applicability of the two theoretical models to the EP elections across the European Union will be summarized in tables in order to shed some light on this still rather overlooked, snubbed, or simply ignored political event.

In conclusion, the last chapter will draw an overall comparative framework where similarities and differences in the voting behaviour of European citizens across the European Union are highlighted. Set against this backdrop, it will therefore be possible as well as appropriate to assess whether EP elections have effectively attained some sort of mandate from EU citizens, by unveiling the principles that can open the door to democratic legitimacy.

References

Primary sources


Secondary sources

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