

Punishment or Protest? Understanding European Parliament Elections

Simon Hix London School of Economics and Political Science
Michael Marsh Trinity College, Dublin

After six sets of European Parliament elections, do voters primarily use these elections to punish their national governments or to express their views on European issues? We answer this question by looking at all European elections (1979–2004) in all 25 EU states. We find that almost 40% of the volatility in party vote-shares in European elections compared to national elections is explained by the transfer of votes from large and governing parties to small and opposition parties. Nevertheless, anti-EU parties and green parties on average do better in European elections than in national elections. But these “European effects” are minor, and the position a party takes on Europe is largely irrelevant to its performance. Hence, despite the growing powers of the European Parliament, neither positions on matters regarding European integration, nor on matters regarding “normal” left-right policy, have much of an effect on electoral outcomes.

The standard theory of European Parliament elections is that they are mid-term contests in the battle to win national government office, and so voters primarily use these elections to punish governing parties. Nevertheless, this is not the impression of the establishment in Brussels or the media in many national capitals, who identify falling turnout and support for anti-European parties as indicators of protest against the EU.¹ Which side is right has implications for the debate about the democratic accountability of the EU, in that if European Parliament elections are simply about punishing national governments and have little to do with EU politics and policies, then increasing the powers of the European Parliament has not increased the connection between European voters and EU governance.

In this paper we try to resolve this argument by looking closely at the empirical evidence. In the next section we review the existing claims about how to understand aggregate outcomes in European elections. We then explain our method: We apply a series of statistical models to estimate the amount of votes

parties gain or lose in each European election relative to the previous national election. Our data set covers all six European elections since 1979 and includes parties in all 25 member states. The empirical results are then presented.

Existing Research On European Parliament Elections

Most existing research on European Parliament elections supports the view that these are primarily national rather than European contests. Nevertheless, there is some evidence to suggest that parties' positions towards the EU influence which parties gain or lose votes in these elections.

The Classic View: Second-Order National Contests

The classic view of European elections, repeated in many textbooks on EU politics, is that these elections

¹As Thomas Fuller and Katrin Bennhold wrote on June 15, 2004 in the *International Herald Tribune* following the 2004 elections: “An election that was meant to be a symbol of the joyous reunification of the Continent only six weeks ago became a reminder of how detached Europeans feel from the EU.” On the same day, Raphael Minder and George Parker wrote in *The Financial Times*: “Europe was in handwringing mode yesterday as the political elite surveyed the wreckage of Sunday’s European election results: a scene of voter apathy, government-bashing and anti-European Union sentiment.”

are “second-order national contests” (Reif and Schmitt 1980; van der Eijk and Franklin 1996). This phrase captures two elements: They are secondary to the main (national) electoral contest, and they are “national” contests rather than “European” contests.

The theoretical logic behind this is as follows. The primary motivation of politicians and parties is to win, and hold on to, national government office. The main political battle in all European countries, then, is the national election, which has a direct influence on the make-up of national government. All other elections—be they European elections, regional elections or local elections—are fought in the shadow of these “first-order” contests. Hence, European Parliament elections are similar to mid-term U.S. Congressional elections, German *Landtagswahlen*, British House of Commons by-elections, and local elections throughout the democratic world (Anderson and Ward 1996; Tufte 1975).

The second-order nature of European elections has two main empirical effects. First, there is lower turnout in European than national elections. This is because parties devote fewer resources to these campaigns, and there are lower incentives for people to vote in these contests. While this may affect the fortunes of some parties more than others, existing analyses are inconclusive as to whether government parties in particular lose out because of this (Franklin, van der Eijk, and Oppenhuis 1996; Schmitt and Mannheimer 1991).

Second, although European Parliament elections do not have a direct impact on the formation of national government, they can be used by voters to influence the next national election or the policies of the current government. Hence, the people who do participate in European elections may vote differently than they would have done if a national election were held at the same time. European elections give citizens an opportunity to vote sincerely rather than strategically (“vote with the heart”): for parties that are closer to their ideal preferences, rather than for larger parties that are further away but have a greater chance of forming government (Oppenhuis, van der Eijk, and Franklin 1996). Large parties, whether in government or opposition, lose votes to smaller parties. European elections also allow people to express their dissatisfaction with the party or parties in government (“put the boot in”): to signal policy preferences or demonstrate dissatisfaction with policies of the current party/parties in government. Hence, governing parties lose votes to opposition parties, whether small or large.

The final element of the second-order-national-contests theory is that the size of these possible

turnout and “switching” effects depends on the timing of a European election relative to the national election cycle (Reif 1984). If a European election is held shortly after a national election, the party or parties in government will be in a honeymoon period. At this point in the cycle, turnout might be lower than in the previous national election, but support for the governing parties may rise as voters switch support to the winners of the previous election. Alternatively, if a European election is held in the build-up to a new national election, parties will be motivated to spend a lot of time and money in the campaign, and citizens will be motivated to vote, to try to influence the up-coming national election. At the other extreme, if a European election is held in the middle of a national election cycle, the party or parties in government are likely to be at their most unpopular (Alt 1979; Miller and Mackie 1973; Mueller 1970; Tufte 1975).

In sum, the classic second-order elections theory predicts three aggregate outcomes in European elections: (1) parties in government at the time of a European Parliament election will receive a smaller share of the vote than they did in the previous national election; (2) the larger a political party, in terms of its vote-share in the previous national election, the more votes it will lose in the subsequent European election; and (3) the timing of a European election in a national election cycle will determine the size of the effects in (1) and (2).

An Alternative View: Europe Still Matters, Through Party Policy Positions

Despite the standard view that European elections have very little to do with Europe, there is a widespread perception that “Europe matters” in these elections, and increasingly so. This seems to be based on a selective viewing of the evidence. For example, falling turnout seems to go hand-in-hand with declining support for European integration. There appeared to be a “green tide” across Europe in the 1989 elections, as voters demanded that environmental issues should be tackled at the European level (Curtice 1989). Anti-European movements have emerged suddenly in European elections in Denmark, France, the United Kingdom, and Sweden. Existing parties on the extreme right and left with anti-European policies, furthermore, seem to do better in European elections than in national elections. Surely all of these seemingly European-related outcomes cannot be explained away by the second-order model?

There is some evidence that attitudes towards European integration affect turnout in European elections. At an individual level, citizens who support European integration are more likely to vote in European elections than citizens who are opposed to the EU (Blondel, Sinnott, and Svensson 1997), although these effects are extremely small (van der Eijk and Schmitt 2007). At an aggregate level, member states who are net recipients from the EU budget or who have higher aggregate levels of support for EU membership tend to have higher levels of participation in European elections (Mattila 2003; Studlar, Flickinger, and Bennett 2003). If “Europe” influences who participates in these elections, then presumably Europe may affect party-choice in these elections.

Ferrara and Weishaupt (2004) consequently suggest that if some voters in European elections base their vote-choice on the positions parties take on the question of Europe this could affect outcomes in at least two ways. First, parties whose platforms give greater salience to European issues, either in a positive or negative way, are likely to do relatively well in European elections. Second, parties or movements that are strongly opposed to European integration are likely to do better in European elections than in national elections.

Related to the second of these propositions, some parties are more likely to be anti-European than others. Specifically, parties on both the extreme left and extreme right have policy preferences that cannot be achieved within the centrist “social market” EU policy regime. Extremist parties are consequently more anti-European than parties in the centre of the left-right spectrum (Ray 1999; Taggart 1998). Hence, if voters are motivated in European elections to protest against the established EU policy regime, extremist parties on both the left and right should do better in European elections than in national elections. However, extremist parties might also benefit as voters choose with the “heart” rather than the “head” and support parties less relevant to government formation but closer to their ideal positions.

Europe could also affect voters’ party choices in European elections in an indirect way. Carrubba and Timpone (2005) argue that citizens could have different but nonetheless sincere policy preferences for different levels of government. For example, because of the negative externalities of different environmental policies in different member states, it is better that these issues are tackled at the European level than at the national level. Also, green parties are closer to the median voters’ preferences on environmental issues than on many other issues. Hence, if voters express

their preferences in European elections on some of the main policy issues dealt with by the EU, green parties should do better in these elections than in national elections.

One caveat to both the second-order elections theory and the Europe matters view is that European elections in the new member states from Central and Eastern Europe may be different from European elections in the “old 15” states. In part this may reflect fundamental differences in the semantics and bases of party competition in postcommunist states (e.g., Kitschelt et al. 1999; Mair 1996). Difference may also result from the high levels of electoral volatility in many of these states.² It may also be because of the wide variance in anti-European sentiments and parties in these states, which have been thrown up in the process of preparing for EU accession (Taggart and Szczerbiak 2004). For example, if voters in the new member states chose to protest against the EU in the 2004 European elections, these votes could have gone to nationalist parties in some states, Christian democrat parties in others, agrarian parties in others, and even centrist parties in others.

These expectations about the role “Europe” might play in European elections can be summarized in the following aggregate predictions: (1) the more anti-European the policy position of a party, the more its vote-share will increase between the last national election and the subsequent European election; (2) the more extreme a party is, in terms of its distance on the left-right scale from the centre, the more votes it will gain between the previous national election and the subsequent European election; (3) green parties should receive a greater increase in their vote-share in a European election compared to other parties; and (4) anti-European parties should receive a greater increase in their vote-share in a European election compared to other parties.

Empirical Evidence So Far

Both sides of the debate can claim that existing evidence supports their argument. From the second-order national contests side, there is overwhelming evidence that in the five sets of European elections up to 1999, large parties did worse and small parties did better relative to their performance in the national election immediately prior to each European election

²Averaged across the previous six national elections, electoral volatility as measured by the Pederson index was 20 in the old15 states. In the new10, measured across the two previous general elections, it was 37 (cf. Tavits 2005).

(van der Eijk, Franklin, and Oppenhuis 1996; Ferrara and Weishaupt 2004; Kousser 2004; Marsh 1998, 2003, 2007; Reif 1984). There is some dispute, however, about whether governing parties lose and opposition parties gain (Ferrara and Weishaupt 2004; Marsh 1998; Oppenhuis, van der Eijk, and Franklin 1996).

Evidence of the effect of the timing of the European election in the national electoral cycle is also mixed. Kousser finds that “those who cast their ballot for a different party usually switch away from the government, with the number of defectors increasing as the time between domestic and EP contests grows” (2004, 17). However, Marsh qualifies this: “while government losses are greatest around mid-term, thereafter they tend to level off rather than diminish as the cycle continues” (1998, 606).

There are also some interesting corollaries to the standard second-order model. Marsh (1998) finds that the second-order effect is largest in those states where government alternation is the norm. Kousser (2004) finds that governments’ economic records explain a large proportion of the decline in support for governing parties in European elections (though see Marsh 2007). And Heath et al. (1999) find evidence in Britain that national electoral concerns, such as the popularity of the governing party, play a greater role in shaping voting behavior in European elections than in local elections (Heath et al. 1999).

Evidence in support of the “Europe matters” view is less voluminous and mainly unstructured. Reports on European election results in particular member states often emphasize the role Europe played, such as Worre (1996) and Nielsen (2001) on Denmark, Ysmal and Cayrol (1996) and Howarth (2001) on France, and Mather (2001) on Britain.

Using individual-level data from a 1994 Eurobarometer survey, Carrubba and Timpone find that voters who are most concerned about environmental issues and who feel that the European Parliament is an important institution are most likely to switch their vote to a green party in a European election. They hence conclude that: “At least some of the electorate is demonstrating a tendency to cast votes [in European elections] because of how the EP may influence policy outcomes in the future” (2005, 277). Furthermore, using data from the 1999 European Election Study, Marsh (2003, 2007) shows that voters who think that the pace of integration is too fast are more likely to defect from government parties (although they do not necessarily defect to more anti-European parties).

In a novel aggregate analysis Ferrara and Weishaupt add three variables that investigate the effect of the EU policies of parties: their absolute positions on

Europe, the salience parties place on Europe, and whether parties are internally divided on the issue. They find that neither the EU policy preferences nor the saliency of the issue matter. But, “parties experiencing deep Euro-divisions suffer substantial desertions in elections to the European Parliament” (2004, 301). In general they find no evidence that parties’ EU policies are related to their performance in European elections.³

The Problem of Observational Equivalence

One problem in trying to assess the relative importance of the second-order and Europe effects is that there is an observational equivalence of some of the empirical predictions of the two perspectives. This problem operates on several levels.

First, the absolute level of vote-switching may indicate either a second-order effect or a European effect. For example, if an election is purely about the performance of the government and the government is unpopular, many voters will switch votes in a European election, but the same could happen if the election is mainly about European rather than national concerns and so voters behave differently than if it were a general election. However, in this case we would not expect government parties to lose more votes than opposition parties. A further solution to this problem might be to look at the parties voters switch to in a European election. For example, if anti-European parties do better in European elections than in national elections, this could indicate a “European” reason for switching votes. This conclusion could be misleading to the extent that governing parties tend to be more pro-European than opposition parties (e.g., Sitter 2001; Taggart 1998), so it would be important to contrast the performance of parties according to their position on European issues.

Second, we should ask the question: What would a “truly European contest” look like? The powers of the European Parliament relate primarily to regulation of the single market, such as environmental or social standards. Not surprisingly, given the preferences of national and European-level parties on such regulatory issues, the main dimension of conflict in the European Parliament is the left-right one (Benoit and McElroy n.d.; Hix, Noury, and Roland 2005; Kreppel and Tsebelis 1999; Thomassen and Schmitt 1998). Related to this, differences in national party policies

³Oppenhuis, van der Eijk, and Franklin (1996) and van Egmond (2007) reach similar conclusions using a different logic, comparing European election results with a counterfactual concurrent general election rather than a previous general election.

on European integration are largely explained by different party families' preferences on socioeconomic issues (Hooghe, Marks, and Wilson 2003; Marks and Wilson 2000; Marks, Wilson, and Ray 2002). Carrubba (2001) and van der Eijk, Franklin, and van der Brug (1999) also find no gap between the European policies of national parties and the preferences on European issues of their supporters. In other words, if citizens vote in a European election because of their preferences about the socioeconomic policy outputs of the EU, they are likely to vote for the same parties that they vote for in national elections.

Despite these problems, there do seem to be ways of differentiating between the second-order and Europe effects in competitive tests. Unfortunately, individual-level data are not optimal in our case, although such data has been used (e.g., Carrubba and Timpone 2005; van der Eijk, Franklin, and van der Brug 1999; Marsh 2003, 2007). At the time of the analyses, three out of the six elections would have to be disregarded because of lack of data. Moreover, most of the individual-level data offer no good indicators for motivations of voters. Finally, analyses of changes in behavior relative to prior general elections must rely on each respondent's recall of past behavior, which is likely to understate change, particularly that from unpopular parties. In contrast, aggregate level appropriate information is available from all elections in terms of results while expert surveys may be used to characterize the parties.

Certainly, conflicting hypotheses can be resolved using aggregate data. For example, Kousser (2004) argues that government parties lose more support when their economic record is poor. This would indicate a second-order rather than a Europe effect. Alternatively, if particular party families (such as greens) do better or worse in European elections, regardless of their size or whether they are in government or opposition, then this suggests that voters are switching votes in European elections for specific policy reasons, which is not a second-order effect. Hence, adding the policy preferences of parties to the standard government status, size, and timing variables of the second-order theory, minimizes observational equivalence problems inherent when using aggregate-level data to investigate why voters switch parties in European elections.

Models and Variables

We use OLS regression to estimate a series of models of party performance in European elections. The basic

structure of these models is that the gains a party makes at a European election relative to the preceding national election is a function of its government status, its size (in vote-share), the timing of the European election, whether it is a new party, and the policy positions of the party.

The dependent variable, *Gain*, is the change in the vote-share of a party between the previous national election and the subsequent European election.⁴ The observations for this dependent variable include all parties in all six sets of European elections between 1979 and 2004 and all member states that took part in these elections. This gives us more than 500 observations.⁵

Government is a dummy variable that captures the effect of whether a party is in government at the time of a European election, and hence takes the value 1 if a party is in government and 0 if the party is in opposition.

Size captures the effect of the size of a party and is measured in terms of the vote-share a party received in the national election immediately prior to the European election. Previous research has found that the relationship between vote-share in the previous national election and vote-share in the subsequent European election is cubic: specifically, small parties gain votes, medium-sized parties remain stable, and large parties lose votes (Marsh 1998). We hence use a cubic polynomial to describe this relationship: *Size*, *Size*², and *Size*³. We also interact the *Government* and *Size* variables, to isolate the effect of European elections on large opposition parties.⁶

⁴Arguably, to the extent that the previous national election vote share represents "normal" party support in national elections, alternatives are possible. The notion of a normal vote is perhaps problematic in elections in much of Europe where the stability that has characterised U.S. elections is absent. In the United States, normal can be defined as something like an average of the past few elections, but this would, we think, not be acceptable in the context under analysis here. We have explored three alternatives. First, we set the benchmark by averaging the general election before the European election and the one that followed. Second we set the benchmark by assuming a linear trend between the previous and next general election and calculating a party's expected support at the point coincident to the timing of the European election (as used by Ferrara and Weishaupt 2004). We also reestimated model 9 in Table 3, operationalizing gains and losses as relative to the next election. For all formulations the results are similar, if less pronounced.

⁵Parties winning less than 1% of the vote in a European election and who did not win at least 1% in the previous national election are excluded.

⁶We did not interact *Government* with the full polynomial as the performance of such a model was inferior to the model in which the interaction was simply with *Size*.

Another variable captures the interaction between whether a party is in government at the time of a European election and the timing of the European election in the national election cycle. This variable, *Government*Early*, is the *Government* variable multiplied by a dummy variable which takes the value 1 if a European election was held in the first fifth of a national election cycle (which in most cases is the first year), and otherwise takes the value 0.⁷

New party is a single dummy variable that captures the emergence of new parties in European elections, which takes the value 1 if a party wins votes in a European election without winning any votes at the preceding national election and otherwise takes the value 0. Note that parties that contest European elections and not national elections are coded as new parties.

We consider four continuous measures of a party's policy position: its absolute location on the left-right dimension; how extremist it is on this dimension; its absolute location on a pro-/anti-Europe dimension; and how extremist it is on this dimension. The data for these variables are taken from two expert judgment surveys: one by Marks and Steenbergen (1999), which we use for the 1979–99 elections, and the other by Benoit and Laver (2006), which we use for the 2004 elections. Because the two data sets use different scales, we rescale the Marks and Steenbergen data to the 20-point scale used by Benoit and Laver.

The variable *Left-Right* measures the absolute position of a party on the left-right scale, ranging from –9.5 (most left) to +9.5 (most right), and the variable *LR Extremism* measures the relative extremism of a party on a 20-point left-right scale, which is calculated by taking the square of the value of the difference between the left-right position of the party and the center of the scale. The variable *Anti/Pro-EU* measures how favorable a party is towards the EU, on a 20-point scale from –9.5 (most anti-EU) to +9.5 (most pro-EU); and the variable *EU Extremism* measures the relative extremism of a party on the issue of Europe, which is calculated by taking the square of the value of the difference between the position of the party and the center of the 20-point anti/pro-EU scale.⁸

⁷Other specifications that model government losses as reaching a nadir around mid-term, or increasing through the term, or being smaller early and late in the term, did not prove significant. Following Marsh (1998), all cases of simultaneous European and national elections have been excluded from the analysis.

⁸We do not include a variable for the extent of the internal divisions of a party on Europe. This is because the data for this variable, collected by Marks and Steenbergen (1999) for earlier elections, do not exist for the 2004 elections.

We also use the “party family” affiliation of a party as a measure of its general policy preferences. We include all the main European party families: *Socialist*, *Christian Democrat*, *Conservative*, *Liberal*, *Radical Left*, *Green*, *Regional*, *Extreme Right*, and *Anti-EU*.⁹ Here we use a series of dummy variables that take the value 1 if a party belongs to a particular party family, and otherwise takes the value 0. When these variables are included, the socialist family is the reference category, as this party family on average performs least well in European elections and is also very large.¹⁰

Estimating these models with OLS is somewhat problematic. First, the dependent variable is limited in range. There are solutions to this problem, advanced for dealing with variations in (multi) party performance across electoral districts (Tomz, Tucker, and Wittenberg 2002).¹¹ However, the fact that party systems vary so much across “districts” (countries in this case) and that there are so many parties makes such suggestions impractical here. We could use party family rather than party as the unit of analysis, but we have judged that such a solution would be more problematic than the issue of limited dependent variables.

Second, the data are not as independent as they should be. In any one election, one party's losses are another party's gains. We address this problem by computing clustered standard errors, where the specific election in a specific country is taken as the cluster.

Results

Table 1 shows the average gain/loss in all European elections of governing and opposition parties and the

⁹These are the main *familles spirituelles* as defined in the parties and party systems literature (e.g., von Beyme 1985). The exception is the “Anti-EU” family, which includes parties with a variety of socioeconomic and sociopolitical positions. Following Hix and Lord (1997), we treat these parties as a separate party family because they are defined primarily by their attitudes towards the territorial allocation of power in Europe between the nation-states and the EU level and because they sit together as a separate political group in the European Parliament.

¹⁰While these families are not completely homogeneous, the variation within them is not usually excessive. Family explains 75% of the variance in left-right position of party in the old states and 56% in the new ones; 53% of variance in EU position in old states and 46% in new ones. With respect to left-right position the standard deviation is typically less than a third of the mean, though greater for the anti-EU and regional parties in the old states. On Europe, the *Radical Left*, *Extreme Right* and *Anti-EU* variables have a coefficient of variability greater than this, as do *Radical Left* and *Extreme Right* in the new member states.

¹¹An earlier and more computationally intensive solution is offered by Katz and King (1999).

TABLE 1 Average Gains and Losses in European Elections

	Old 15 States			New 10 States		
	Average gain	Standard error	N	Average gain	Standard error	N
Governing	-3.0	.49	162	-5.2	2.25	24
Opposition	1.2	.21	420	2.5	.97	58
Anti-EU	9.50	1.39	22	3.30	2.45	3
Extreme Right	.39	.60	46	2.53	2.98	9
Radical Left	.73	.30	88	-2.53	1.66	6
Green	2.75	.34	67	1.63	4.20	3
Conservative	-1.90	.87	65	.58	1.25	25
Regional	.46	.28	43	2.90	.90	2
Socialist	-3.05	.67	97	-1.23	5.29	12
Christian Democrat	-.04	.43	69	2.03	2.85	7
Liberal	-.93	.41	85	-1.65	2.00	15
Total	-.01	.22	582	.21	1.02	82

different party families. On average, governing parties in both the old and new member states lost votes and opposition parties gained votes, as the second-order model predicts. Nevertheless, the standard error in the performance of governing parties is much larger in the new member states. The party families are sorted from the top to the bottom of the table in increasing order of their positive attitudes towards the EU: hence the anti-EU family is the most anti-European and the liberal family is the most pro-European. In the old 15 states, while the major winners are in the top half (relatively anti-European) and the major losers in the bottom half (relatively pro-European), most party families neither gain nor lose to any important degree. In the new 10 states, there is no clear pattern of change from anti- to pro-EU, and gains and losses are all small relative to the standard errors. Clearly there is a lot of variability within each family.

Predictive Power of the Second-Order National Elections Theory

Table 2 presents the estimates from a series of models that test the three basic claims of the second-order model: that governing parties lose, large parties lose, and timing matters.¹² The first three models test these propositions on all six European elections in the old 15 states and the last three test the propositions in the 2004 elections in the new 10 states.

¹²We have chosen not to include *Government* as a dummy along with *Size*Government* in any model. This is because the *Government* coefficient would then measure the impact on the dependent variable of *Government* when *Size* was zero, an event that did not happen as no governing party won zero votes at the previous general election.

Several results are worth highlighting. First, starting with the old 15 states, governing parties certainly lose. Nevertheless, the results from models 2 and 3 reveal that large governing parties lose more than small parties in government. Second, the results on the variables that capture the cubic effect of party size reveal that larger parties lose votes, while small parties gain votes and medium-sized parties remain stable, regardless of whether these parties are in government or opposition. Third, we find a relationship between the timing of a European election in a national electoral cycle and the extent of government losses. More precisely, there is a “honeymoon effect,” such that governing parties gain votes in European elections when these are held shortly after a national election, as was the case in Britain in 1979 and in Spain and Greece in 2004.

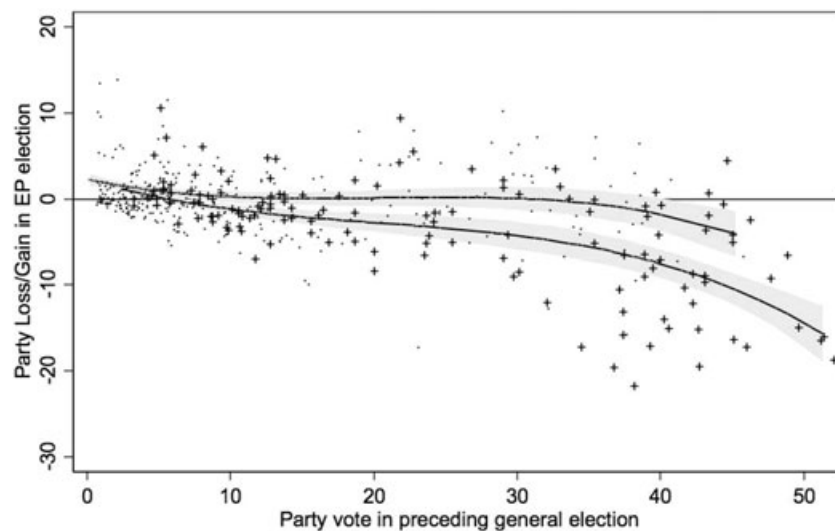
The second-order model is most clearly assessed when there is a constant party system across the two elections. This *New party* variable, which identifies those parties that did not fight in the previous national election, allows us to track significant deviations from this situation. The average net change in the vote shares of parties between national and European elections is about 12%, using a Pedersen index to measure such change. As the size of the coefficient on the *New party* variable reveals, the emergence of “new” parties in European elections explains a significant proportion of this switch in votes. A change in the party system itself thus accounts for almost half of the losses of large and governing parties. However, without knowing the policy positions of these new parties, we cannot tell whether the success of new parties is driven by domestic policy concerns or European-level policy concerns. We return to this point in the next section.

TABLE 2 The Basic Second-Order National Elections Theory

	Old 15 States			New 10 States		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Government	-1.7513** (.5138)					-3.3195 (2.8510)
Size	-.3208** (.1033)	-.3386** (.0991)	-.3619** (.0997)	.5521 (.4161)	-.1843 (.0941)	-.3122* (.1061)
Size ²	.0172** (.0058)	.0178** (.0057)	.0188** (.0057)	-.0548* (.0217)		
Size ³	-.0003** (.0001)	-.0003** (.0001)	-.0003** (.0001)	.0009* (.0003)		
Size*Government		-.1214** (.0312)	-.1432** (.0322)	-.2679 (.1196)	-.2634 (.1325)	
Early			-.3935 (.4063)			
Government*Early			2.9884** (1.0448)			
New party	5.7107** (1.3248)	5.6615** (1.3676)	5.6340** (1.3653)	4.8075 (2.3470)	3.2259 (2.7165)	2.2175 (2.7948)
Constant	2.1726** (.3627)	2.1088** (.3586)	2.1617** (.3527)	1.8925 (1.3763)	3.4741* (1.0817)	4.4825* (1.4241)
Observations	509	509	509	82	82	82
Adjusted R ²	.39	.41	.42	.37	.32	.28
SEE	4.17	4.11	4.08	7.34	7.64	7.83

Note: Dependent variable: Gain. OLS estimation. Clustered (for country and election) standard errors in parentheses. *significant at .05 level; **significant at .01 level.

FIGURE 1 EP Election Performance and Party Size



Note: The upper line represents the predicted vote-shares in European elections for opposition parties and the lower line represents the predicted vote-shares in European elections for governing parties (Model 1, new parties = 0). The 95% confidence intervals are shaded.

Figure 1 illustrates the predicted vote-share gains and losses for governing and opposition parties using the results in model 3 from Table 2. The upper line in the figure is the pattern for opposition parties and the

lower line is the pattern for governing parties. As the shape of the two lines show, small parties, those who win less than 10% of the vote, gain the most votes in European elections, whether in government or

opposition. The difference in the performance of government and opposition parties increases as the size of a party increases. For example, a party that won 40% of the vote in a national election and then entered government can expect to win about 32% of the vote in the next European election, while a party that won 40% of the vote in a national election but went into opposition can expect to win about 38% of the vote in the next European election.

However, models 4–6 reveal that the second-order model does not explain party performance in European elections in the 10 states that joined the EU in May 2004 as well as it does for the old 15 states.¹³ In the new states, as in the old states, larger government parties did worse than smaller government parties in the 2004 elections. However, the general effect of size on party performance was different for the new states. Specifically, the new states do not follow the same cubic model of the relationship between the size of a party and its performance in a European election. This is a finding we will discuss below.

How Much Does Europe Matter? The Effect of Adding Party Policy Positions

Table 3 investigates the effect of adding party policy positions to the basic second-order national elections model, with the aim of assessing whether voters switch votes from large and governing parties for domestic or European-based policy concerns. In one sense, the continuous measures are better measures of parties' policy profiles than party family measures, as there is considerable variance on each of these dimensions within each party family. On the other hand, which party family a party belongs to is a signal of a party's position on a large number of policy issues, including these two issues. We consequently enter the continuous variables and party family variables in separate models and then enter them together, which captures the effect of policy variation within each party family.

The first result to note is that adding party family, European policy positions, and left-right positions to the mix does not change the main results of the second-order elections model as it applies in the old 15 member states. Basically, large governing parties lose votes in European elections (if the election is not held

immediately after a national election), regardless of their party family, whether they are pro-European or anti-European, or whether they are on the left, the right or at the extremes. This result is robust across all specifications. In other words, big parties tend to lose regardless of their policy stances, a finding that supports the second order explanation over the Europe-matters explanation, with voters following their hearts rather than heads.

Nevertheless, differences in the performance of parties in European elections are not only explicable in terms of the second-order national elections framework. There is some evidence that a party's position on the EU matters. In fact, extreme anti-EU parties gain almost 4 percentage points more than those who are neutral (scoring -0.5 or $+0.5$ on the anti/pro scale), while those who are extremely positive gain almost a point more than those who are neutral. When a control is introduced for party family (in model 9) extreme parties gain more equally. The advantage is almost 2 points for the most pro and almost 3 for the most anti-EU parties relative to those parties in the centre of the scale. This result supports the intuition of Ferrara and Weishaupt (2004), one that they could not confirm with their data set. Parties with strong positions on EU issues do better in European elections. Moreover, anti-European parties and green parties do better than those from other party families in European elections even after we control for size and government status (models 8 and 9). This is also consistent only with the Europe matters approach.

New parties still perform well, regardless of their EU position: in fact, the coefficient of 6.0 in Table 3 (model 7) exceeds that of 5.6 in Table 2 (model 3). However, when party family is introduced, the new party gain is considerably less, suggesting that a significant part of that performance is down to the fact that some of these new parties are anti-EU. (In fact, almost 60% of new parties fall into the anti-EU family and the mean position of new parties on the pro/anti EU scale are -3 as against the average of $+3$ for other parties. This again supports the Europe matters thesis, although the impact is not large).

In contrast to the EU dimension, the general policy preferences of a party, in terms of its absolute location on the left-right dimension or its relative position on this dimension, does not have a significant effect. There is no significant sign of gains by left parties or right parties (or by parties on the extreme left and right). Analysis of the residuals from model 9 in Table 3 reveals that the fit of the model is reasonably uniform across all the old 15 states (see Table A1 in the appendix).

¹³The *Early* and *Government*Early* variables are not included because the 2004 European election did not take place in the early part of the national election cycle in any of the new member states. (The coefficients for model 3 remain almost unchanged when estimated for the sample that excludes the new 10 and elections taking place early in the cycle.)

TABLE 3 The Effect of Party Policy Position

	Old 15 States			New 10 States		
	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)
Government				−4.8026 (3.2213)	1.7332 (4.9684)	−4.2714 (3.1649)
Size	−.3889** (.1052)	−.2720* (.1073)	−.3098* (.1177)	−.3215* (.1184)	−.1798 (.1103)	−.3720* (.1317)
Size ²	.0200** (.0058)	.0162** (.0059)	.0166** (.0062)			
Size ³	−.0003** (.0001)	−.0003** (.0001)	−.0003** (.0001)			
Size*Government	−.1461** (.0321)	−.1399** (.0324)	−.1411** (.0324)			
Early	−.4119 (.4102)	−.3239 (.3677)	−.3184 (.4159)			
Government*Early	3.0976** (1.0991)	3.0708** (.9732)	2.9264** (1.0793)			
Left-Right	−.0304 (.0344)		−.1288* (.0637)	.2819 (.2219)		.9508 (.4327)
LR Extremism	−.0069 (.0087)		−.0038 (.0097)	−.0324 (.0436)		−.1316 (.0820)
Anti/Pro-EU	−.1403** (.0467)		−.0577 (.0534)	.1351 (.1703)		.1156 (.4710)
EU Extremism	.0256** (.0081)		.0250** (.0073)	.0168 (.0402)		.0244 (.0620)
Anti-EU		7.1996** (1.2190)	6.4022** (1.3575)		−.8389 (1.9511)	.4951 (4.8341)
Extreme Right		.3826 (.6642)	1.4421 (1.0632)		1.8446 (3.9776)	2.5450 (7.2639)
Radical Left		1.0609* (.5166)	.5047 (.7016)		−.3569 (1.7328)	15.9434 (7.3021)
Green		2.6530** (.6666)	2.4136** (.7188)		.9190 (3.7658)	2.0628 (3.1322)
Conservative		1.3178 (.9014)	2.7292** (.9737)		1.3806 (1.3793)	2.9509 (2.3400)
Regional		.1572 (.5127)	−.0734 (.5150)		3.1394 (1.4093)	3.1511 (1.9813)
Socialist		−.0758 (.8589)	−.0530 (.9301)		3.3857 (5.1254)	6.0357 (5.7757)
Christian Democrat		1.5994* (.6809)	2.2096** (.6815)		2.5088 (3.6089)	2.9689 (4.4144)
New Party	6.0504** (1.2641)	3.3752** (1.1046)	3.7002** (1.0976)	1.0980 (2.2082)	3.2969 (3.0402)	1.2637 (2.7339)
Constant	1.9358** (0.5540)	0.6387 (0.5600)	0.2316 (0.6820)	4.5711 (2.0808)	1.9589 (1.7062)	2.5899 (2.9296)
Observations	491	509	491	68	82	68
Adjusted R-squared	.44	.48	.49	.29	.25	.23
SEE	4.05	3.87	3.86	7.95	7.99	8.21

Note: Dependent variable: Gain. OLS estimation. Clustered (for country and election) standard errors in parentheses; *significant at .05 level; **significant at .01 level.

The results appear to be somewhat different in the new 10 states (in models 10–12). Too much should not be made of these differences on the basis of the one set of observations we have to date. There are election by election differences in the old 15. However, in the new 10 the effect of party size is not independent from the effect of party family, as the party size variable is no longer significant once the party family variables are entered. Second, whereas anti-European parties and green parties gain most in the old 15 states, regionalist parties gain most in the new member states. Third, EU position, whether pro versus anti or extreme versus moderate, does not affect performance.

The Effect of Context

Thus far, our models work reasonably well in the old 15 states, but seem less applicable in the new 10 states, at least to date. In this section we test the generality of these models more explicitly, by investigating how European elections work in different contexts. A number of plausible hypothesis are examined here that can further help to evaluate the two major interpretations that are explored in this analysis. There are good reasons to expect the second-order theory to be more applicable in some situations than in others, and other reasons why a Europe matters approach might be more apt in particular locations. From a second-order perspective we might expect that the second-order model would work most clearly where strategic considerations are most strong in national elections. This would be where there was a clear link between government formation and election, and where electoral thresholds are relatively high. Governing parties and large parties in general should lose more in systems where there is a tradition of government alternation (e.g., Marsh 1998; see also Reif 1984), as should such parties where there are high thresholds in general elections (Kousser 2004). From a Europe matters perspective, European policy concerns should also be more pronounced in states where there is greater polarization of views on the EU. In addition, the respective weight of the second-order and policy effects might be different in more recent European elections than in earlier European elections, as both opposition to the EU and the salience of the EU has grown over time.

We explored the effect of four different types of context, as follows: (1) cases where there is a prospect of a complete change of the parties in government in the next national election (government alternation)

compared to cases where this is almost unknown;¹⁴ (2) cases with a high threshold for winning seats compared to cases with a low threshold, using Lijphart's (1994) method for calculating the "effective threshold" (split at the median value);¹⁵ (3) cases of less versus more polarized public opinion in terms of support for the EU, measured by the percent who supported their member states' membership of the EU as revealed in the Eurobarometer survey immediately prior to the European election (split at the median value);¹⁶ and (4) elections for the earlier European Parliaments (1979–94) compared to elections for the later Parliaments (1999 and 2004). For each of the four we estimated a model which allowed for the effects of each factor to vary by context. We expect the first two contexts to affect the significance of the main second-order elections variables, and the second two contexts to affect the significance of EU policy concerns variables. Where this last contextual effect is concerned, the timing of the election captures the growth in the powers of the EU since the mid-1990s as well as the general decline in public support for the EU in almost all EU states and the growing salience of EU issues in domestic politics in the same period. We do see significant results in some contexts but not in others (Appendix A2).¹⁷ EU extremism is significant only in countries with alternation and in low-threshold countries. As expected, EU attitudes matter more where public support for the EU is low. The size coefficients also tend to be significant in alternation countries, and in high-threshold countries but not in their counterparts. There is no sign of a growth in the importance

¹⁴We counted the following as cases where "government alternation" was relatively likely at the next national election: all the European elections in Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy (post-1989), Lithuania, Malta, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom; plus the 2004 elections in Austria.

¹⁵The "effective threshold" is calculated as the higher value of (a) the formal threshold for winning European Parliament seats (such as 5% in Germany, 4% for Sweden, etc.) and (b) 75 divided by the average district magnitude plus 1—for example, the effective threshold for European elections in Great Britain was 37.5% ($75/[1+1]$) up to 1994, 8.7% ($75/[7.6+1]$) in 1999, and 9.3% ($75/[7.1+1]$) in 2004.

¹⁶We used data from the Eurobarometers (EB) 11, 21, 31, 41, 51, and 61 for the 1979–2004 elections, respectively, plus EB15 for the 1981 election in Greece, EB27 for the 1987 elections in Portugal and Spain, EB43.1 for the 1995 election in Sweden, and EB45.1 for the 1996 elections in Austria and Finland.

¹⁷Appendix A2 shows the basic model estimate separately within each pair of contexts. However, the tests in Table 4 are run on a set of single models with context interactions, as described in the text.

TABLE 4 Significance of Context Differences for EU Salience and Second-Order Election Model Parameters

	Government Alternation/ No Alternation	Electoral Threshold High/Low	Public Support for EU High/Low	European Parliament Election Pre/Post 1999
EU Salience and Policy Position	.003	.145	.856	.770
SOE: Size and Government	.005	.050	.099	.417
SOE: Early	.030	.868	.470	.236
All SOE	.007	.127	.144	.236
Constant	.647	.001	.974	.582

Note: Table shows *p*-values from Wald tests for differences between model coefficients in each pair of contexts. SOE = second-order election model.

of EU position on parties' performance in recent EU elections.¹⁸

However, the sample sizes are often different in each pair of groups and in order to establish difference we need to calculate whether or not these differences are themselves significant. Table 4 shows the significance of difference between the parameters of most interest (the results for each context are presented in Table A2 in the appendix).¹⁹ Only with respect to the degree of alternation are there significant differences by context in estimated coefficients. The full set of second-order effects are significantly different in alternation countries as compared with nonalternation countries. But a party's EU position is also significantly different (and greater) in such countries. The size of the threshold is related to the size and government coefficients. Yet the EU matters no more when public opinion is relatively pro than when it is anti, and matters no more in recent elections than earlier ones. In general, then, while some of the differences across context are consistent with a second-order election theory, the differences that would be consistent with a Europe matters argument simply do not exist.

Conclusion

We started by asking the rather simplistic question as to whether voters used European Parliament elections to punish governments or protest about Europe. As

our discussion made evident, voters could also use them to punish opposition parties, or indulge in the luxury of supporting smaller parties that might seem irrelevant in a national election where government formation was a salient issue. And even if voters choose to vote for a different party in a European election for reasons to do with the competences of the European Parliament, such an act may be a positive expression of their views on European integration rather than a protest against the EU.

However, the main story is that "party size" matters, as the second-order model predicts. Small parties gain and large parties lose, particularly large government parties once an initial honeymoon is over. This fairly mechanical formulation accounts for almost 40% of the apparent volatility we see in the performance of parties between national elections and European elections. We also found, nonetheless, that even when size and government status are held constant, anti-EU parties do much better than average. Green parties also perform relatively well, and socialist parties relatively poorly, although these differences are small. These outcomes do seem to be motivated by European concerns of voters. However, in substantive terms, these are minor effects. For example, anti-EU parties are relatively rare, and for the other party families, their European policy preferences hardly mark a difference.

Overall then, European Elections should not be seen as solely second-order national elections. However, "Europe" remains at best a minor element in these elections in most cases. While the EU itself has undergone very significant change since the first European Parliament elections in 1979, these general findings were as true in 2004 and they were in 1979.

However, there were some differences in the ten states that joined in 2004. In those, party size mattered in the 2004 elections, but only for government parties, and there is no sign that Europe mattered in any

¹⁸The EU had a very different set of members by the time of the 1999–2004 European Parliament, compared to the first European elections, in 1979. However, the general direction of change is similar when the composition is kept almost constant, by including just the Old 12 states.

¹⁹These are Wald tests of the form $b_1X_1 - b_2X_2 = 0$ where X_1 is a variable in one context and X_2 a variable in a different context. This estimation is done using interaction terms to identify context.

systematic way. While the concept of party family in the new accession states might not carry the same policy meaning and policy overtones with respect to Europe that it carries in the old 15, there is no sign that parties' policies mattered to their fortunes in the 2004 elections in the new 10 states.

Broadly speaking, then, our results point to "punishment against governments" rather than "protest against the EU" as a primary force making European elections different from national elections. The exceptions to this are perhaps just that, exceptions. While there are incidences of anti-EU surges, these remain exceptional rather than systematic. However, these exceptions raise the question of why they happen in some places rather than in others. We hence explored the importance of several contextual factors. Some institutional and political contexts, such as the norm of government-alternation, appear to amplify the punishment effect in European elections. However, we did not find the expected differences in the significance of European policy preferences between less and more anti-European publics, nor did we find second-order effects to be more pronounced where party system volatility is higher (as in the new 10 states).

In general, though, context was not a source of significant difference. If anything, we can have more

confidence in the generality of the second-order model within the old 15 as a result of these analyses. However, the results give little guidance in finding an explanation of the new 10's exceptionalism, beyond ruling out greater normal volatility and greater Euro-skepticism, both of which are higher in the new 10 than the old 15.

Turning to the bigger picture, there has been a dramatic increase in the power of the European Parliament in the last two decades, and there is growing evidence that politics inside this assembly is highly competitive and partisan (e.g., Hix, Noury, and Roland 2006). However, after six rounds of direct elections to this institution, the "electoral connection" between citizens and MEPs remains extremely weak. Citizens do not primarily use European Parliament elections to express their preferences on the policy issues on the EU agenda or to reward or punish the MEPs or the parties in the European Parliament for their performance in the EU. Put another way, European Parliament elections have failed to produce a democratic mandate for governance at the European level, and there are few signs that further increases in the powers of the European Parliament would be sufficient to change this situation.

Appendix

TABLE A1 Residuals by Election and Member State (Model 9)

	Mean deviation	Mean absolute deviation (MAD)	Standard deviation of MAD	Number of observations
Parliament				
1st (1979)	.2	2.5	2.8	58
2nd (1984)	.1	2.5	2.5	72
3rd (1989)	-.1	2.8	3.0	67
4th (1994)	.0	2.7	2.5	101
5th (1999)	-.2	3.1	2.4	95
6th (2004)	.1	2.9	2.5	98
Member state (ranked by mean deviation)				
Portugal	2.0	3.7	3.1	18
Finland	.8	2.6	1.8	20
Greece	.6	2.4	2.3	22
Austria	.5	2.3	1.6	17
Belgium	.4	1.5	1.4	51
Ireland	.2	2.3	1.6	29
Spain	.2	2.5	2.2	38
Sweden	.2	3.6	2.4	22
Germany	.1	2.6	2.4	35
Netherlands	.0	2.1	1.9	44
Great Britain	.0	3.9	3.9	38
Italy	-.3	2.0	1.8	56
France	-.8	3.8	3.2	43
Denmark	-1.1	3.8	3.1	58
Total	.0	2.8	2.6	491

TABLE A2 Context and the Estimates of Model 9 in the Old 15

	No government alternation	Government alternation	Low threshold	High threshold	High public support for EU	Low public support for EU	1979–1994 (EP1–EP4)	1999–2004 (EP5–EP6)
Anti/Pro-EU	.0425 (.0681)	–.1737** (.0575)	–.1453 (.0771)	–.0699 (.0462)	–.1313* (.0575)	–.1203 (.0771)	–.1092* (.0494)	–.1913 (.1029)
EU Extremism	–.0068 (.0063)	.0336** (.0100)	.0341** (.0107)	.0028 (.0117)	.0182 (.0100)	.0246* (.0115)	.0259* (.0117)	.0287* (.0127)
Left-Right	.0016 (.0416)	–.0278 (.0437)	–.0514 (.0342)	.0453 (.0661)	–.0377 (.0369)	.0002 (.0639)	–.0211 (.0364)	–.0252 (.0633)
LR Extremism	.0028 (.0113)	–.0065 (.0120)	–.0035 (.0125)	–.0136 (.0122)	–.0121 (.0090)	.0002 (.0147)	–.0291* (.0110)	–.0007 (.0172)
Size	–.3398 (.2202)	–.5019** (.1291)	–.1362 (.1324)	–.6429** (.1481)	–.4528* (.1860)	–.3531** (.1226)	–.3478 (.2497)	–.4352** (.1027)
Size ²	.0258 (.0155)	.0214** (.0072)	.0079 (.0081)	.0336** (.0081)	.0266* (.0101)	.0147* (.0066)	.0158 (.0145)	.0237** (.0054)
Size ³	–.0005 (.0003)	–.0003* (.0001)	–.0002 (.0001)	–.0005** (.0001)	–.0004** (.0002)	–.0002* (.0001)	–.0002 (.0002)	–.0004** (.0001)
Size*Government	–.1048 (.0513)	–.1901** (.0421)	–.1235* (.0457)	–.1773** (.0423)	–.1055* (.0493)	–.1821** (.0429)	–.2114** (.0537)	–.0996* (.0412)
Early	–.5929 (.4295)	–.4646 (.6785)	–.3481 (.4847)	–.6835 (1.1669)	.0456 (.4519)	–1.0524 (.8477)	.2041 (.7607)	–.7769 (.4258)
Government*Early	1.5424 (.7937)	5.4000* (2.1616)	2.5813* (1.1913)	4.0158 (2.9816)	1.8345 (1.2149)	4.5998* (2.1572)	3.3245 (2.0875)	3.0055* (1.1135)
New Party	5.9134** (.8708)	5.3463** (1.3887)	8.1874** (1.9299)	2.5862 (1.4012)	4.5590** (1.6569)	7.4480** (1.8997)	5.2344** (1.4761)	7.0653** (2.2464)
Constant	1.7456 (.8486)	2.2384** (.6897)	.4426 (.7023)	3.8789** (.6731)	2.0857** (.7436)	2.1209* (.7936)	2.5654* (.9615)	1.8389 (.9104)
Observations	153	336	288	203	249	242	298	193
SEE	2.64	4.45	3.94	4.15	3.49	4.47	3.97	4.16

Note: Clustered (for country and election) standard errors in parentheses; *significant at .05 level; **significant at .01 level.

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Simon Hix is professor of European and comparative politics, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, United Kingdom, WC2A 2AE. Michael Marsh is associate professor of political science, Trinity College Dublin, Dublin, Ireland.