

The fading power of national politics to structure voting
behavior in elections to the European Parliament

by

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ABSTRACT

Voting differently in European Parliament elections than they would have voted in a national election held on the same day would be natural for European voters if European Parliament elections brought to bear stimuli and concerns that differentiated them from general elections in the member states. They do not. Consequently, the increasing tendency of voters to vote differently in EP elections than in national elections (as experience with EP elections increases) presents us with something of a puzzle. In this paper, a first attempt is made to grapple with the problem, helped by preliminary analyses of the 2004 European Election Study data.

1. The second-order election model

The most important theoretical concept to gain prominence from studies of elections to the European Parliament (EP) has been that of second order national elections (Reif and Schmitt 1980; Reif 1985; Schmitt and Mannheimer 1992; van der Eijk and Franklin 1996; Marsh and Norris 1997; Schmitt and Thommassen 1999; van der Brug and van der Eijk 2005). Elections to the EP have as their primary characteristic what might be called a "displacement of content." Ostensibly these are occasions for electing Members of the EP (MEPs) who will occupy themselves in overseeing the work of the European Commission and, as co-decisionmakers with the Council of Ministers, with the details of EU legislation. Elections to the EP play an important role in determining the political complexion of the EP and hence the concerns that will have prominence in EP co-decisionmaking and oversight. The second order election model, however, implies that voters are hardly aware of this aspect of their role, seeing the elections, rather, as opportunities to manifest their solidarity with other supporters of the national political parties with which they identify and which (except in Denmark) are the only parties competing for their votes in these elections.

Electoral campaigning in these elections has the primary effect of reminding voters of their political allegiances and of the need to "show the flag" for their parties by supporting them in these tests of strength (Franklin 1992). As second order national elections, elections to the EP are opportunities for parties to gain bragging rights, or to prevent other parties from doing so. Since the parties that compete in these elections do not often differ from each other in terms of the European policies they propose to support, and seldom even put forward any such policies, the subject of European Unification, and the policies supported and opposed in regard to this topic, hardly figure in European Election campaigns and have virtually no influence on the results of EP

elections (van der Eijk and Franklin 1996; van der Brug and van der Eijk 2005; Franklin 2005).

So most voters at EP elections vote just as they would have done in national elections held on the same day. National elections can thus be said to have a structuring effect on party choice in EP elections (and presumably in other second order elections). Still, not all voters vote as they would in national elections. Although virtually no-one votes on the basis of European issues and concerns, many do vote differently in EP elections than they would have done in concurrent national elections, as will be explained in the next section of the paper. One question that has not been addressed in previous work is what determines the number of people voting differently in EP elections than in first order elections.

In this paper I present a theoretical basis for expecting the number of those voting differently in EP elections to increase with the passage of time, and I test this expectation with data from the 2004 election to the European Parliament. The theory will be set out in Section 3 below, after I have explained why some people vote differently in EP elections.

2. Quasi-switching in EP elections: why some vote differently

The way we know that elections to the EP are second order national elections is partly because of the lack of European content that these elections show,¹ and partly the high

¹ A longstanding theme in the literature of EP elections has been that the low turnout in those elections demonstrates lack of support for the European project and a disdain for European institutions (see especially Blondel, Sinnott and Svensson 1998). However, it has repeatedly been pointed out that this view of turnout in EP elections derives from specification errors in the models employed for investigating turnout in those elections (van der Eijk and Schmitt 1990; Schmitt and Mannheimer 1992; Franklin, van der Eijk and Oppenheim 1996; Franklin 2004; van der Eijk 2005). There is a syndrome of alienation from democratic institutions in general which is associated with failure to turn out in any elections, national or European. Those who express disdain for European electoral institutions also express disdain for national electoral institutions, and would be the first to abstain in low turnout national elections. Indeed the reason for low turnout in EP elections is exactly the same as the reason for low turnout in certain national elections (such as those in Switzerland and the United States) where turnout is equally low (Franklin 2004).

degree of national content that they show. Indeed, the extent to which these elections are structured by baseline forces relevant to national elections is striking and gives rise to their suitability as windows onto national political processes. The behavior of voters at EP elections is largely uncontaminated by the particularities of high profile candidacies and campaign hype that can make it hard to identify baseline forces in studies of national elections themselves (van der Eijk and Franklin 1996; van der Brug, van der Eijk and Franklin 2006).

Yet the national orientations manifested in the behavior of voters faced with an EP election is not always the same as the orientations manifested in national elections themselves, and not just because of the lack of idiosyncratic campaign tactics and high profile candidacies. Exactly because voters are so strongly oriented towards their national political systems, many of them are quite aware that they are voting in an election that is not "real" in that national political power is not at stake (nor is European political power at stake in these elections, in the sense that they do not lead to a process of government formation as "real" elections do). Thus an important consideration that colors party choice in "real" elections is missing in elections to the European Parliament. Voters who are aware of this difference between EP elections and real elections are often motivated to vote differently in EP elections than they would have done in national parliament elections (and many of those who are aware of the difference are not motivated to vote at all).² Indeed, van der Eijk and Franklin (1996) discovered three "modes" of voting in EP elections which they characterized as "voting with the head," "voting with the heart," and "voting with the boot." It should be stressed, however, that all three of these modes of

² See footnote 1, above. But, equally, one motivation to vote in these elections is a motivation that is missing in national elections: the motivation to express by their vote national political concerns that cannot readily be expressed in national elections for reasons that we will now explain. By implication, turnout in EP elections may be higher than it would be if the opportunity they offer for expressive behavior were absent.

voting are oriented towards national politics: none of them have any relevance to the European arena in which the elections ostensibly take place.

Voting with the head corresponds to the behavior that occurs in national elections, when voters take account of strategic considerations such as a concern not to "waste" their vote on a party that is unlikely to be a viable contender for government office, or not to vote for a party that might have a destabilizing effect in the Parliament. Voting with the heart corresponds to an unvarnished opinion poll or "beauty contest" in which voters cast their ballot for the party they most prefer, without taking strategic considerations into account. Voting with the boot (the term is taken from the lexicon of British football hooliganism) is expressive (often protest) voting, in which voters cast their ballot for a party they would not vote for in a real election in order to send a message of distaste for the programs or candidates of the party they would normally vote for, or to indicate support for a policy (often a policy new to the political scene) that has not been taken on board by the party they would normally support.

Most voters in EP elections vote with the head, just as they would in national elections. They act as though they were unaware of the fact that power is not at stake, presumably because they have acquired the habit of voting for the party concerned or because they would have voted for that party in any case, strategic considerations or no. Such voters characteristically report that they voted in the EP election as they would have done in a national election that was held on the same day (a 'concurrent' national election). The number who vote with heart or boot varies from country to country, depending on many things including the timing of the election within the national election cycle for each country, as explained in Oppenhuis, van der Eijk and Franklin (1996).³ To the extent that such voters vote differently than they would have done in a

³ Voting with the heart (also known as 'sincere voting') occurs mainly in the immediate aftermath of a national election, when the election has least chance of being taken seriously by politicians and

concurrent national election they have been characterized as being engaged in 'quasi-switching' (Oppenhuis, van der Eijk and Franklin 1996) in that their EP vote is switched from what it would have been had the election been a real one.

3. Why quasi-switching should increase with the passage of time

Voting is a habit that people acquire (or not) over the first few elections at which they are old enough to vote (Plutzer 2002). Extensive analysis (Franklin 2004) has shown that, after the first few elections, the habit of voting (or not) becomes quite strongly ingrained and few individuals switch from being habitual voters to being habitual non-voters (though occasional non-voting is common even among habitual voters). Although this has not been definitively proved on the basis of empirical research, it seems reasonable to assume that the same is true for party support. Party identification presumably is strengthened by repeated re-affirmation of a partisan preference as long ago suggested by Butler and Stokes (1969; 1975). Indeed, this supposition is supported by the well-known tendency for younger voters to be those most likely to provide the support for new political parties (van der Land 2004). Because those who are established in the habit of voting for a particular party are "locked down" into that behavior pattern and are likely to vote for that party under almost any circumstances, it follows that those who change the party they vote for, for whatever reason, are likely to be those who are not locked down. But the very fact that such voters are provided with an opportunity to ignore the partisanship that they would have displayed in a national election will itself affect their political socialization.

commentators. Voting with the head (which contains at least an element of strategic voting) happens later in the national election cycle, as does voting with the boot (often involving what is generally referred to as protest voting). This is because, as a national election approaches, politicians and commentators are more likely to take note of the results as 'markers' or 'barometers' of what would happen in a real election, and many voters are evidently aware of this, using this knowledge quite cleverly on occasion to send messages that they would be less likely to send in a real election.

Exactly how the socialization of new voters will be affected by the experience of voting differently in EP elections cannot be definitively stated on theoretical grounds. It is possible that the experience of voting differently will affect electoral socialization across the board and delay or even prevent the acquisition of strong national partisanship.⁴ Alternatively it is possible that the different socializing experiences of these young voters will only affect their behavior in EP elections, building an awareness that EP elections are different even while allowing them to acquire just as strong a partisanship in national elections as earlier cohorts of voters did. In either event, we should observe increasing levels of quasi-switching as the passage of time allows voters to leave the electorate (through death and infirmity) who had learned a more rigid habit of voting, and as the number of voters who experienced EP elections during their formative years increases.

4. Method and data

The data for this study come from the 2004 European Election Study (EES 2004) which was conducted in 23 countries of the European Union in June/July 2004 following elections to the European Parliament in that year. Though 25 countries participated in these elections it was not found possible to conduct election studies in Lithuania or Malta. The data for this preliminary version of the paper, however, come from an early version of the pooled dataset from which a number of additional countries are missing.

Although the full election study was not conducted in all countries, among the questions that were asked everywhere were questions regarding vote in the European Parliament elections (whether the respondent voted and, of so, for which party) and how

⁴ It has already been established that the experience of voting in low turnout EP elections affects the socialization of European voters in terms of making them less likely to turn out in national elections (Franklin 2003).

they would have voted in concurrent national elections. These provide the basis for our measure of quasi-switching.⁵

The EP elections of 2004 provide an almost perfect venue for testing the proposition that quasi-switching should increase with the length of time that a country has been participating in EP elections. This is because the election of 2004 provides us with a quasi-experiment in which different sets of countries had experienced different numbers of EP elections: 10 countries having experienced 6 elections, 2 countries having experienced 5 elections, 2 countries having experienced 3 elections and 8 countries having experienced only a single EP election. Moreover, the findings from this quasi-experiment can be matched up with findings from previous EP election studies conducted in 1989, 1994 and 1999 when the same questions were asked of samples of voters in first 12 and, later, 15 countries that were members of the EC/EU at the time of each of those elections. The findings from those analyses were reported in Franklin (1996, 2001), where a steady increase in the amount of quasi-switching from election to election was observed.

The test that will be conducted in this paper must be viewed as preliminary. A critical test would require an analysis of the generational basis of quasi-switching, which has yet to be conducted. Even as it stands, however, the analysis we conduct in this paper does enable us to test for one possible alternative interpretation of the development. The steady increase in the amount of quasi-switching found in previous studies might have been due to a period effect influencing voters in all countries, rather than to the socializing effect of the experience of EP elections themselves. The fact that we now have eight countries with no previous experience of EP elections allows us to see whether

⁵ Voters who did not vote in the EP elections were excluded from the analysis, as were those who voted for a party that was not expected to achieve representation in one election or the other and hence was not included in the list of parties about which respondents were questioned.

such a period effect remains plausible.

5 Findings

Table 1 shows the extent of quasi-switching in those countries for which we had data at the end of January 2005 (the table will be updated when the full dataset is available).

Table 1 Voting differently (%) in European Parliament elections by country*

(a) Established EU members						(b) New members	
Country	Year of parliament				Average	Country	Year
	1989	1994	1999	2004*	'89 -'04		2004*
Austria ^d			13.4	19.4	11.4	Cyprus	18.0
Belgium ^d	12.6	18.5	16.6		15.9	Czechia	14.1
Denmark	35.4	42.9	39.8	27.7	36.5	Estonia	25.4
Finland ^d			17.7	13.2	12.2	Hungary	4.0
France	27.2	40.8	25.4	23.4	29.2	Latvia	
Germany	11.8	14.2	16.9	10.9	11.8	Lituania	
Great Britain	13.0	16.0	22.3	25.2	15.4	Malta	
Greece	8.1	12.4	9.6	8.6	8.9	Poland	24.2
Ireland	28.7	23.8	32.3	41.1	31.5	Slovakia	
Italy	19.7	20.7	32.0	29.8	23.6	Slovenia	17.8
Luxembourg	15.0	14.3	15.5		14.9		
Netherlands	12.4	19.6	13.9		15.3		
Portugal	9.7	12.7	7.5	42.8	11.8		
Spain	22.2	12.5	15.5	10.8	14.0		
Sweden			24.2		24.2		
Average*	18.0	20.7	20.2	23.0	18.9	Average*	17.3
N*	12	12	15	11	79	N*	6

- At the time of writing, the necessary matching of European and National parties for the election of 2004 had not yet been finalized, so figures for 2004 are provisional and incomplete.

As is evident, the amount of quasi-switching is considerable, and can involve more than 40% of those voting (at the 1994 elections in France and Denmark, and at the 2004 election in Ireland and Portugal). Note, however, that this total amount of ‘quasi-switching’ involves a great many contrary movements that cancel out in aggregate, leaving net effects of much lower magnitude (seldom more than 6%, see van der Eijk and Franklin 1996; Franklin 2001, 2005). More important from the point of view of the present investigation is the increase observed in particular

countries as their experience of European Parliament elections increases.

It seems that, with some experience of EP elections behind them, voters are increasingly likely to vote for different parties in European than in national elections. Other analyses (not shown) indicate that the effect on turnout of time until the next election is going up. Though any trend is not marked, and our data for 2004 are incomplete, these changes imply that experience of EP elections acts to liberate voters from their normal party loyalties when they vote in European Parliament elections. The fact that quasi-switching among new member countries occurs at very nearly the same rate (if anything, slightly lower) than we saw for established members in 1989 reinforces this implication.

6. Discussion

A more in-depth analysis at the level of electoral cohorts is needed in order to discover whether this finding is due to generalized learning among the electorates of EU member countries or whether it is a cohort effect, due to the impact on young voters of having during their formative years, the experience of being called upon to vote in elections as pointless as those for the European Parliament. In this way, the study of EP elections promises to continue to enhance our understanding of the mainsprings of electoral socialization and mobilization.

From the point of view of the elections themselves, the findings are depressing. It is bad enough to have second order elections that reflect national rather than European political processes. How much worse to have elections for the European Parliament that increasingly do not even properly reflect national processes. To the extent that national party leaders and commentators take the outcomes of these elections as markers for the standing of their parties and programs (the primary political function that these elections appear to perform in the minds of these leaders and commentators) they will be increasingly misled as EP election outcomes increasingly fail to mirror the political situation in the only arena that appears to interest them.

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