

## **Information Effects on Vote Choices in European Elections<sup>1</sup>**

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## Information effects

The impact of both specific and general political knowledge on voting behavior is ubiquitous. As pathbreaking research by Zaller (1992) demonstrated, well-informed citizens are *ceteris paribus* more likely to update their attitudes and political preferences according to new information than information underdogs. The former are far more likely to receive, comprehend in context, retain in memory, and, when needed, recall from there just about any information (see also Zaller 1996). But everything else is rarely equal: the more informed people are, the more previous knowledge prepares them to resist being swayed by any news. Hence, citizens' political attitudes and choices are intricately but clearly linked to their general political information level. In other words, political attitudes and choices are subject to information effects.

It is almost trivial to suggest that specific pieces of information may have an impact on citizens' political attitudes (for a recent demonstration see Sanbonmatsu 2003). Clearly, it takes at least a good chance of knowing who is responsible for government performance to credit or punish a party for the latter (Anderson 2000; Powell and Whitten 1993; Whitten and Palmer 1999; Wilkin *et al.* 1997). Issue voting, in its turn, seems to increase with knowledge both across contexts (Andersen *et al.* 2002; Gábor Tóka 2002) and across individuals (Goren 1997; Highton 2004; Lau and Erber 1985).

The effects tend to be complex, though: even when we would think that the same information will move nearly everyone much the same way – think of a revolting financial scandal –, cognitive biases strongly mediate the effect (Dimock and Jacobson 1995). For most of the time, information effects are differentiated by citizens' pre-existing preferences, as is the case when we learn about the position of a party on a controversial issue (Merrill *et al.* 2001). Not too surprisingly, then, even such ages-old, historically inherited determinants of party allegiances as religious denomination can affect vote choices in opposite ways among knowledgeable and uninformed voters (Bartels 1996).

Importantly, the political information level of citizens tends to be a one-dimensional phenomenon. Someone who – more or less correctly – “knows” one fact X of national or international politics is also likelier to know any other fact Y from the same domain than someone who was not aware of X (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Zaller 1986). In other words, however fragmented the electorate may be in terms of personal issue agendas, the horizontal differentiation of specialized issue publics tends to be very limited among citizens of the same country when it comes to factual knowledge about national and international politics. Rather, it is location on a single hierarchy from the poorly to the highly informed that systematically shapes political choices.<sup>2</sup> Determinants of vote choices are remarkably different depending on the general political sophistication of the citizen (Sniderman *et al.* 1990). For instance, the more knowledgeable the citizen, the larger the effect of personal values on vote choice (Heath and Tilley 2003). Knowledgeable citizens are not only more likely to rely on such sophisticated cues as party ideology, but also much better able than information underdogs to put any cognitive shortcut to a really good use in supplementing missing information (Lau and Redlawsk 2001). The degree of uncertainty about candidates reduces voting support for them, independently of what citizens' best guess is about the candidates' true profile. As a result, vote choices are less accurate reflections of political preferences among ignorant than among knowledgeable voters (Alvarez 1997; Bartels 1986). To be sure, plenty of simply cues assist the making of reasonable political choices with the

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<sup>2</sup> Some may argue that applying the term “information effects” to this phenomenon is misleading since it implies that possessing particular pieces of information, rather than general level of political knowledge makes a difference in attitudes and choices. However, while the use of this term in the literature may indeed cause some communication problems, the point is exactly that the knowledge, comprehension, retention, and recall of any single fact becomes more likely as general political knowledge increases.

inevitably imperfect information available to individual citizens (see e.g. Popkin 1991). Yet, the vote choices of otherwise identical individuals often seem to be significantly different depending on their general political information level, and at least some national election results are rather different than what they would have been if all citizens had successfully emulated fully informed voting behavior (Bartels 1996; Sekhon 2004; Tóka 2004).

Elections to the European Parliament are a particularly appropriate context to study information effects. It is hard to dispute that citizens tend to be less involved with European elections than with national ones (Heath *et al.* 1999). This fact in itself may make space for greater variation in voting behavior by political information level in the former. As a result, election results may be less representative of citizens' informed preferences in European than in national elections. Moreover, the European Election Study provide data about citizens' political knowledge level that are arguably more appropriate for cross-national comparison than any other readily available survey material. Yet, there have been few, if any efforts to study information effects on European election outcomes. The present paper tries to start filling this gap by developing a robust measure of general political knowledge from the EES data and demonstrating its usefulness for understanding second order elections better.

The plan of the paper is as follows. Section one discusses how the most influential theory of voting behavior in European elections can be further clarified by taking the notion of information effects into account. In the course of this, it offers competing information-based explanations for some previously observed empirical anomalies for the theory of second order elections. The competing theories are shown to have surprisingly different implications about how changes in the context of European election can influence the second order nature of these elections. Section two discusses the statistical models and the data. Section three tests the explanations developed in section one on data collected in 20 European countries shortly after the June 2004 elections. Section four concludes.

## **1. Second order elections and information effects**

The concept and theory of second order elections have been arguably the central contributions of and to the literature on European elections. There is no need to recite here the theory and its refinement over time. It is enough to stress the point where this paper refines previous conceptualizations.

From Reif and Schmitt (1980) on, second order elections theory expected voting behavior to vary across elections due to differential motivation, rather than differences in information level among citizens. It was within this general frame that different works attributed slightly different blends of expressive and instrumental motivations to citizens in European elections. Reif (1984) and Schmitt (1990), on the one end, talked of citizens "voting with the heart" in European elections, i.e. picking the parties that they abandon in national elections for tactical reasons, like awareness of their relative irrelevance for government composition. Oppenhuis *et al.* (1996), on the other extreme, put much stronger emphasis on the insincere, strategic-instrumental nature of vote choices in second order elections. The latter portrayed voters in EP elections as strategic actors entering a signaling game. The voters in this theory recognize that votes in second order elections do not directly influence the composition and acts of national governments. Yet, they also notice that media and politicians nonetheless pay careful attention to these election outcomes, and the latter have relevant political consequences. For instance, unpopular office-holders, coalition formulas, and policies are blamed for poor election results, and are subsequently replaced with newly emerging alternatives.

What is common to these sincere-expressive and the strategic-instrumental accounts of voter behavior in second order elections is the assumption that the specific stakes - or rather, the dearth of stakes - directly influence citizens' motivation in EP election. This altered

motivation, in turn, is said to be responsible for such empirical regularities as the vote losses of government parties and more generally of big parties in European Parliament elections.

In contrast, one could equally well construe an alternative explanation of the same regularities with reference to strategic reaction to the different stakes in EP elections among politicians, but not among citizens (see Kousser 2004) for a similar reasoning). Citizens' behavior in EP elections is then no different than in first order elections, except that it responds to a different information environment. It is the differences in the information made available to citizens by strategic politicians, rather than an altered motivation of citizens, which explains such familiar second order election staples as a reduced turnout, lower support for government parties, and higher support for small parties.

The starting point for an information-based account can be that politicians have much lower stakes in European than in national elections. The reason for this is not necessarily that no executive power is at stakes in European elections – in fact, European politicians by now should be able to see at least some link between government formation at the European level and the outcome of European elections. Rather, the stakes of EP elections are low for politicians partly because the jurisdiction of the European parliament – measured with the percentage of European GPD allocated by it - is rather limited compared to that of national parliaments. In addition, much fewer appointments, and especially fewer patronage appointments are effected by EP elections than national election outcomes. As a result, politicians show less - and much less credible - campaign effort in European elections than in non-concurrent national elections, and this is what explains the well-known differences in popular mobilization and turnout.

Similarly, vote gains for small parties and losses for government can be explained by the different information flows from politicians and media to citizens at the time of European than in national elections, rather than by citizens' direct reaction to the different stakes in European elections. At first sight, the distinction between the two accounts may seem to be an irrelevant and overtly pedant embellishment, but as I will argue later, their implications are rather different about how turnout, constitutional rules, and campaign intensity may enhance or reduce the second order characteristics of European elections.

Consider the vote losses of governments first. Since incumbents presumably value the prizes in national elections higher than those in European elections, they presumably aim at timing policy announcements of varying popularity as well as any special vote-boosting efforts during their term in office so that they maximize their electoral support at the time of the next national election. Because of tradeoffs with the less important goal of remaining popular throughout the term, success in this attempt should generate a cycle whereby government popularity will reach bottom shortly after mid-term in the national legislative cycle, and pick up from then on. If so, then strategic responses among politicians to the differential stakes in European and national elections is the factor that generates the oft-observed relationship between the size of vote losses for governments between national and European elections on the one hand, and the exact time when the EP election occurs during the electoral cycle on the other.

Kousser (2004) presented empirical evidence that macroeconomic conditions can indeed account for the variation in the electoral performance of government parties in European elections well enough to make references to election timing – and thus to strategic voter behavior - largely superfluous. This finding also explains why Oppenhuis *et al.* (1996) found no evidence that government parties would collect more votes in simultaneous national elections if they had been held on the same day as EP elections occurred. Strategic politicians would have surely arranged things differently if they had really expected such a coincidence. But, given that government vote losses in non-concurrent EP elections are a function of actual performance problems, it is no wonder that national voting intentions at the same time make

similarly bleak reading for governments – albeit this similarity seems to contradict the motivational account of voting behavior in second order elections.

Incidentally, the information-based account of government vote losses is consistent with another observed regularity too. As Marsh (1998) observed, the familiar second order pattern of government vote losses varying with the timing of EP elections is less pronounced in those member states where, due to the complexity of coalition politics, government composition is actually not so directly dependent on national election outcomes. In such countries, strategically acting politicians should be less concerned with popularity cycles, and thus be less active in generating that ebb and flow of good and bad news that may elsewhere be responsible for government popularity bottoming around midterm. Note that the motivational theory of second order election can also explain why these governments may experience smaller losses in EP elections than other national governments: because the motivation of citizens is not so radically different between types of elections in countries where neither national nor European elections are seen to regulate access to executive power. However, this motivational account seems to lack a coherent explanation for why the vote losses of the incumbents in second order elections depends less on the electoral cycle in some countries than in others.

Thus, the information-based account is consistent with a broader set of observations than the conventional, motivational account of second order election effects. A further example of this is a recently discovered anomaly for motivation-based second order election theory. As Schmitt (2004) observed, government vote losses across the new Eastern members of the union in the June 2004 EP elections were unrelated to the timing of the vote within the national legislative cycle. As Table 1 shows, an information-based account of regularities in second order elections can readily explain why. Apparently, the incumbents of these new democracies are less successful than their EU-15 counterparts in getting their popularity curve fit the electoral calendar. Probably the lesser experience of incumbents in new democracies can explain this failure. Be that as it may, the result is that dissatisfaction with government performance is not only generally more widespread in the East than in old EU member states, but it also tends to be unrelated to the number of months passed since the last national election. This stands in clear contrast to the pattern showed for the other member states in Table 1.

Table 1 about here

Consider now the vote gains of small parties – to be precise, of parties that are neither big, nor very small Marsh (1998). Several scholars argued before that at least a part of this reflects the direct reaction of citizens to the often more proportional electoral systems at place in European than in national elections (see e.g. Kousser 2004; Oppenhuis *et al.* 1996). An information-based account has no problem with accommodating the finding that the gains of these parties in EP elections are larger when the mechanics of the electoral system are more favorable for them in European than national elections. However, it eliminates the need for the rather unrealistic assumption that a purely voter-motivation based account of this regularity has to make about citizens' understanding of subtle details of electoral legislation. Rather, the information-based account would expect that these vote gains occur to the extent that strategic politicians invest in exploiting the opportunities that a more permissive electoral system offers for them.

Doing so the information based account can easily explain why, for instance, support for extra-parliamentary small parties in Hungary fell to a previously unprecedented low level in the June 2004 European elections, while the smaller parliamentary parties recorded a major surge in their support. In fact, the Hungarian electoral system for EP elections is far more

proportional than the one used for national elections, but both feature a five percent legal threshold. Hence, for the very small parties the EP electoral system was hardly better than the one used in national elections. For the two just slightly bigger parliamentary parties, the SZDSZ and the MDF, the EP election offered an excellent opportunity to test and prove their widely questioned ability to pass the five percent threshold in future national elections without joining an electoral alliance with their bigger allies. They promptly responded to this challenge with an enormous concentration of resources, activities, and political imagination. In contrast, the extra-parliamentary parties, most notably the Workers' Party and MIÉP, run, for some idiosyncratic reason, the most lackluster and least visible campaigns in their whole history in 2004. As a result, the vote for the extra-parliamentary parties hit an all time low in June 2004, while support for SZDSZ and MDF surged to a level considerably above their respective popularity at the time of the last national election, when MDF run merely as part of an electoral alliance, and SZDSZ polled just above five percent of the vote.

As the example suggest, electorates respond not directly to the electoral system but to party behavior, and the latter is not simply a mechanical, automatically faithful reflection of the incentives present in the electoral system. Indeed, it is highly implausible that direct electoral responses to the difference between EP and national electoral systems could explain the differences either in the extra-parliamentary parties' or in the MDF-SZDSZ share of the vote. With the same breath and more generally, the information-based account, stressing the crucial intermediating role of strategic politicians, might explain why previous analyses found that some vote gains of small parties in EP elections could not be explained simply with the different mechanics of the electoral system used (Kousser 2004; Oppenhuis *et al.* 1996).

A further theoretical possibility inherent in the information-based account is to argue that EP election results differ from national outcomes simply because the less intense campaigning by politicians with low stakes in EP elections leaves the electorate acting in a less informed way than they do in national elections. Hence, votes end up more randomly distributed among parties, which implies a vote transfer from the normally bigger to the smaller parties. This explanation would also account for the observation that small party gains in EP elections appear to be higher at midterm in the national electoral cycle (see Marsh 1998). Indeed, previous studies of British, Canadian, Mexican and US voting behavior demonstrated that the information level of the electorate is higher in the months before and after first-order elections than at midterm, and that there is less variation in electoral behavior by political information level in first-order elections than at midterm (see Andersen and Heath 2000; Andersen *et al.* 2005; Fournier 1999; Sekhon 2004). What these findings seem to imply is that mid-term voting intentions are based on a more superfluous and haphazard aggregation of less of the available information than choices made at the time of first-order elections. If so, then mid-term voting behavior must have a stronger random component, especially among the politically less involved and knowledgeable citizens. Greater randomness implies, of course, a more even distribution of the vote among the parties, i.e. a vote transfer between national and European elections from the bigger to the smaller parties. Note that this explanation deviates, at a critical point, from the one referring to different, rather than less information reaching citizens at the time of second-order elections. Namely, a greater randomness of the vote would imply that vote gains are strictly linearly related to the size of the party: the smaller it is, the relatively bigger the increase in its vote will be in second order elections. In contrast, the "different, rather than less information" account allows not-so-small small parties like the Hungarian SZDSZ to register relatively bigger gains in second-order elections than very small parties do.

Both the less-information and the different-information are quite different from the motivational account of small party gains in second order elections. The latter stress that since no executive office is at stake in EP elections, voters feel free to support those small parties

that they abandon in national elections, where they feel compelled to vote strategically for a probably less sympathetic, but bigger and hence politically more relevant party. This theory finds it hard to explain why small party gains in EP elections are bigger near midterm in the cycle without referring back to the education effort of strategic politicians as the factor that actually creates strategic voting in the electorate. If it does make that reference, however, then the underlying theory really shifts from a motivation-based to an information-based account of the differences between EP and national election outcomes.

It would thus seem then that voter information could offer a richer, more realistic, and more comprehensive account of many regularities observed in European elections than does the voter motivation presupposed in conventional expositions of second order elections theory. The crucial point is not even whether the information-based account was missing from previous expositions of second order elections theory. Rather, the key point is that it leads to different implications about what factors could increase or reduce the second-order nature of elections to the European Parliament. Under the standard version of the theory, the fate of the European executive would need to depend on the outcome of the election in order to make the latter look and operate like a first order election. Under the information-based account, whatever could make European elections more salient for politicians – like an increase in the jurisdiction of the European level of government – would directly impact the supply of campaign information to the citizens, and could make European elections function like genuine first order elections.

There seems to be two straightforward empirical tests of whether the motivational or the information-based account of small party gains – if any - is closer to the truth. First, the motivational account suggests that citizens are less likely to pick their most favored party in national than in European elections. We should observe the exact opposite, however, if motivations are the same in the two elections, but decision-making errors and poor voter information are more apparent in second order elections. While no test of this proposition is offered in the present draft, such a test would in principle be possible through a comparison between EES data on the one hand, and, on the other hand, such national election study data – like the Dutch or the Irish – that include vote probability questions.

The problem with this test is not only that it could only be carried out for a limited number of countries. Even more importantly, the theory underlying this test seems to mix up the distinction between motivational and information-based accounts with that between expressive and instrumental accounts. It should be clear that these distinctions do not overlap at all. In fact, under a motivational account of the differences between first and second order elections it would be perfectly possible for citizens to vote more often for a smaller party than their first preference in second order than in first order elections. For instance, some instrumental voters could, in a less consequential election, deliberately experiment with giving a chance to a small party to put some pressure on a bigger party that is their first preference. Therefore, this above test cannot do justice to the theoretical issue highlighted in this paper.

The second test coming to mind seems more suitable in this respect. Here, the key test variable is the information level of citizens. The motivational account seems to suggest that the vote gains of small parties in European elections are concentrated among highly informed voters, because that is where their support reservoir, which remains untapped in national elections, is located. The reason is the combination of two contradictory effects on highly informed voters in national elections. On the one hand, small parties always suffer from lesser familiarity to voters, which creates higher uncertainty about their offering and lowers electoral support for them – presumably among poorly informed citizens, above all (Alvarez 1997). As a result, small parties are *ceteris paribus* more popular among highly informed citizens than among information underdogs. However, the same election buffs are also the

most likely to possess that extra information which is required from voters to abandon strategically their first preference in national elections because of some complicated calculus about how their vote will actually yield higher returns in the hands of a bigger party. This extra knowledge may involve relatively recent information about the relative standing of each party, a sound judgment about how trustworthy this information is, an understanding of the electoral system and the system of alliances between the parties, the rules of government formation, and so forth. In other words, strategic behavior of this kind must occur more frequently among politically aware than among relatively ignorant citizens. As a result, the support reservoir of the small parties, which, under the motivational account of second order election effects, is tapped in European elections, must be concentrated among highly informed regular voters.

In contrast, an information-based account could suggest that the vote gains of small parties in European elections stem either from errors in decision-making and misinformation among citizens, or from the relatively greater campaign effort by small vis-à-vis big parties in EP elections. The first possibility refers to the less-campaign-information explanation, and the second to the different-campaign-information account. Under the less-campaign-information explanation, small party gains must be concentrated among politically less aware citizens – at any rate among somewhat less knowledgeable citizens than those whom these parties attract in national elections. Under the different-information account, small party gains in EP elections are not systematically concentrated among relatively uninformed voters, but occur more or less evenly across the board. In fact, vote gains for small parties may even be concentrated among highly informed citizens who are most likely to be reached by such relatively esoteric political information as what small parties do.

It may seem that this possibility undermines our ability to distinguish between motivational and different-information accounts of small party gains in EP elections. However, under all information-based accounts we should see a direct spillover of any small party gains among the highly informed to current national level voting intentions. Under this theory, it is only to be expected that the negative effect of political awareness on small party support in national elections is not the direct result of a different electoral context, but of the different campaign information that, shortly before national elections, effectively reminds voters these strategic concerns in the actual event of a national election, but is not present at the time of a European election. In contrast, under the motivational account, this spillover must not occur, or at least not to the same extent, since small party support among highly informed citizens must be weakened by awareness of the strategic incentives to abandon small parties in national elections. Moreover, under this different-campaign-information account, small party gains in EP elections must occur as a function of campaign efforts by the parties in EP elections. In later versions of this paper, this possibility will be tested with data about campaign intensity in 2004 collected by Jean Blondel and Federica Bicchì. For the time being, I can only examine whether spillovers from EP vote choices to simultaneous national voting intentions occur or not.

Before concluding this section, two points need to be stressed. First, the motivational and information-based accounts are not mutually exclusive. Above, they were presented a little bit like that for the sake of conceptual clarity, and their black-or-white juxtaposition will help below too in sorting out their implications for the future gains of small parties in European elections. However, the mechanisms anticipated by the two explanations may well work side by side. Inconclusive results of the above mentioned tests might hint at such a more complicated reality.

Second, while the differences between the two accounts may seem modest, some of their practical implications are strikingly different. If the motivational account were correct, then small party gains in European elections would *ceteris paribus* increase if campaign

intensity – and thus voters’ information level – would increase. However, a higher turnout, everything else being equal, would add some less involved citizens to the active electorate, and thus reduce small party gains. Changing the actual stakes in European elections to include the composition of an executive as important as national governments are would, in its turn, eliminate small party gains altogether.

If the less-campaign-information version of the informational account were correct, though, then such constitutional reforms would have no direct effect apart from their indirect effect on citizens through politicians’ behavior. A higher turnout would *ceteris paribus* bring more weakly involved and poorly informed people to the polls, and thus further increase small party gains. Higher campaign intensity, however, would presumably reduce small party gains, since it will probably make voting decisions better informed and less haphazard, and thus reduce random errors in voting decisions.

Finally, the different-campaign-information version of the informational account would also expect that small party gains increase with turnout. This is because higher turnout brings more people with weak party attachments to the polls. Less involved voters should be more easily swayed by parties currently going up in the polls because of the present information flows in the electorate. Hence, as long as small parties are making gains in EP elections because of different campaign information, higher turnout should just multiply these gains. In contrast, generally greater campaign intensity, as long as it means a stronger campaign by the bigger parties, above all, may reduce small party gains or may even turn them into losses. Constitutional reforms, in their turn, would probably not have any direct on EP votes, albeit making the stakes in EP and national elections more similar should reduce the observed differences in campaign information.

Figures 1 to 3 summarize these differences between the three theories. Note that the implications are largely the same for hypothesis 2 (the less-campaign-information theory) and hypothesis 3 (the different-campaign information theory), and are almost the exact opposite for hypothesis 1, the conventional motivational account of second order effects.

## **2. Data and tests**

The test of the above hypotheses is relatively straightforward. The size of the party that the respondents voted for in the last national election, in the European Parliament election, as well as in a hypothetical current national election will be regressed on citizens’ level of political knowledge. The size of the party that the respondent supported in the last (national and/or European) election as well as whatever other control variables can be added to the equations where appropriate. Hypothesis 1 will be supported if the size of the party supported drops with (i.e. is negatively affected by) political knowledge more in European than in either past or hypothetical current national elections. Hypothesis 2 will be supported if the size of the party supported is more negatively affected by political knowledge in European than in either past or hypothetical current national elections. Hypothesis 3 will be supported if the size of the party supported is more negatively affected by political knowledge in European elections and hypothetical current national elections than in the last actual national election.

The data in the analysis come from the 2004 European Election Study. The construction of a measure of respondents’ political information level is the only technically complex bit of the present analysis, and therefore it deserves a separate discussion. My preferred measure responds to the advice of the recent literature that measures of “chronic” political information – such as basic civics knowledge about the rules of the game – probably capture knowledge acquired in a relatively distant past, and therefore may inadequately reflect knowledge of current political affairs (Jerit *et al.* 2004; Zaller 1992: 336-7). In fact, some may argue that due to the way the measure is constructed, it measures interest in politics and exposure to political communications at least as much as knowledge. While I think that this

concern is exaggerated, in the present context this is, in fact, beside the point. If the informational account of second order election effects is correct, then they imply much the same relationship between vote choice on the one hand, and interest in politics or attentiveness to political information on the other, as between knowledge of current political affairs and vote.

Be that as it may, the knowledge measure used here is based on how smartly the respondents placed various political parties on two ten-point scales, one running from “left” to “right”, and one running from “[thinking that European] unification has already gone too far” to “[thinking that European] unification 'should be pushed further’”. Having determined how much political knowledge different responses to these questions implied, I simply summed up the “truth-value” of all responses given by the respondents regarding all the parties they were asked about: fourteen parties in total in Italy, four each in Britain,<sup>3</sup> Cyprus, and Slovenia, and some intermediate number of parties in the other 16 countries in the analysis.

I reckon that different respondents probably have different “anchor points” on the same scale. For instance, a left-wing respondent may place left-wing parties closer, and right-wing parties further away from the perceived mid-point of the left-right scale than a right-wing respondents does (see e.g. Kitschelt 1995). Similarly, two equally highly informed respondents may give more or less widely scattered responses about the position of different parties on the same scale depending on minor differences in how they interpret the endpoints of the issue scales, or whether they think that the parties in their country generally offer too little choice or ways too polarized positions on relevant issues. How far someone places a party on a scale from what seems to be the best response category may say something about how knowledgeable the respondent is, but also speaks volumes about the general ideological perspective or partisanship of the person. There appears to be no way of telling apart the valid information about knowledge from the information about political views.

Given that the purpose of my analysis is an analysis of the direction of relationships between political knowledge and voting preferences, it seemed more important to minimize the systematic error variance on the knowledge variable than to minimize its random error variance. Thus, the absolute party placements on the two ten-point scales were replaced with relative placements involving pairs of parties, and all responses regarding each pairs were recoded into just four categories: (1) party A is to the left of (or, on the other scale, less pro-integration than) party B; (2) party A is to the right of (or more pro-integration than) party B; (3) party A and party B have the same position; or (4) the respondent did not answer the question, or responded with a “do not know”. This simplification of the responses most probably involved the loss of some valuable information about political knowledge, but almost certainly made the resulting knowledge variable less polluted with systematic biases towards a specific political perspective. Note, however, that this simplification of placement codes comes together with a significant increase in the number of variables, and thus a lot of the details in the original responses are nonetheless retained in the subsequent analysis. For instance, for a country where four parties were placed on the two scales, altogether 12 relative party placements were obtained this way. In Italy, on the other extreme, the 28 original variables showing the absolute placement of 14 parties on the two scales were replaced with 182 relative placement variables.

The crux of the matter is defining what really is a knowledgeable answer regarding these relative party placements. Obviously, in everyday political discourse these are eminently disputable questions, so we should not believe that there is a single right answer to the respective questionnaire items and that all other responses are simply and equally wrong. Rather, the truth-value of each answer is a matter of degree, and some comparisons – for

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<sup>3</sup> The placements of the Scottish Nationalist Party and Plaid Cymru were ignored because these were only available for small regional subsets of the UK sample.

instance where everyone gives the same answer, or the distribution of answers is the same for generally knowledgeable and for generally respondents – are simply worthless for the construction of a good measure of general political knowledge. Heeding concerns voiced in some of the previous literature, I allow for the possibility that “do not know” or missing answers to such questions may not always represent less knowledge than some other responses do (see Berinsky 2002; Mondak 2000, 2001; Mondak and Canache 2004).

One solution that is often used in the literature is to identify the true position of parties and candidates with their mean or median placement in a citizen sample (see e.g. Eijk *et al.* 1996; Listhaug *et al.* 1990; Macdonald *et al.* 1991; Macdonald and Rabinowitz 1997; Macdonald *et al.* 1997, 1998, 2001; Rabinowitz and Macdonald 1989; Rabinowitz *et al.* 1991). Given how poorly informed the average citizen usually is, both procedures seem to be inadequate. Surely, once one made the assumption that not all answers are just about equally correct about party positions, the true position cannot be mixed up with the perception of the majority and the like: the perception of the most knowledgeable should reflect it instead.

The usual solution along these lines in the scholarly literature is to content analyze party manifestos or to carry out an expert survey to identify the objective position of the parties. The drawback of both strategies is that citizen responses regarding the same issue scales may not refer to the same semantic universe as the language used by scholars and other experts. Thus, the differences between citizen responses and the objective party positions determined with the above methods may not say too much about how citizens compare with each other in how knowledgeable they are.

Given the above considerations, I defined the “truth-value” of each relative party placements by determining how much more likely a maximally informed respondent was to give that response than a maximally uninformed respondent was. This can be estimated by regressing relative party placements on indicators of the capability, motivation, and opportunity (henceforth CMO) to learn about new political facts as they emerge. The previous literature identified the CMO triad as the key determinants of individual differences in political knowledge (see Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Luskin 1987, 1990; Smith 1989). Differences between respondents scoring very high and very low on CMO variables should thus be fairly similar to the differences that would obtain between the most and least knowledgeable respondents, had we been able to identify them beforehand.

In the dataset at hand, years of education seemed to be the only available indicator of capability, but given its direct association with social status – and hence possibly with political preferences -, I decided not to consider it among my CMO indicators. Instead, the analysis relied only on six indicators of motivation and opportunity to learn about political facts. These were interest in politics; interest in the EP election campaign; frequency of watching news on television; frequency of reading newspapers; frequency of reading about the EP election in newspapers; and frequency of talking to friends and family about the EP election (see Appendix A on question wording and coding).

Clearly, socio-demographic background variables may simultaneously influence both political preferences and individual scores on the CMO variables. The simultaneous dependence of both on socio-demographic background may create spurious correlations between the CMO variables and certain patterns of relative party placements, which really reflect just a particular political perspective shared by individuals who, because of their socio-demographic background, are likely to score high on the CMO variables. To filter out these spurious correlations from the process of determining the “truth-value” of each relative party placement, the multinomial logit analyses that were carried out for each pairwise comparison of parties on either of the two issue scales also included among the independent variables the socio-demographic background variables listed in Appendix A.

The results of these regressions are of no substantive interest here and cannot be reported for sheer reasons of space, given the large number of national samples and pairwise comparisons between parties for which the regression analyses had to be carried out separately, for both the left-right and the pro- vs. ant-integration scales. The relevant yield of these analyses was the predicted probability of each of the four response categories for two fictitious respondents: both exactly matching the national sample mean on the socio-demographic variables, but one showing the highest, and the other the lowest possible degree of interest in, and exposure to the campaign. Then, the truth-value of each response category was determined as the difference between its predicted probability for the maximally involved and the maximally uninvolved respondent.

Suppose now, for instance, that the fictitious Superinvolved respondent had a predicted probability of .2, .2, .4 and .2 to place party A to the left of Party B, to the right of Party B, to the same place as Party B, or fail to place at least one of the two parties on the left-right scale, respectively, while the same probabilities for the fictitious Superuninvolved respondent were .0, .3, .4 and .3, respectively. The modal answer for both – with a probability of .4 – is that the two parties have the same position. Maybe in some objective sense – such as in expert judgments – this is the “correct” answer to this particular placement problem. However, since this answer is equally frequently given by both people who are likely to be highly informed and those who are mostly likely uninformed, we cannot guess from these answers whether the person who gave it is from among the first or the second group. Thus, the contribution to such an answer to a good knowledge scale is exactly zero.

In contrast, the Superinvolved respondent has a twenty, while the Superuninvolved a zero percent probability to place Party A to the left of Party B. Clearly, this is a minority opinion, but the view of a sophisticated minority. Maybe it reflects some relatively new information, or a very subtle reading of the leaves, possibly relying on a different left-right semantics than what is most common in the electorate. Either way, if someone gives this answer, our best guess is that the person is probably rather knowledgeable. So, in constructing the knowledge scale, respondents should be given a plus .2 (.2 minus .0) score for this answer. Similarly, they should be given a negative -.1 score for either not placing both parties on the scale, or for placing Party A to the right of Party B, because these answers are ten percentage point more likely for a Superuninvolved than for a Superinvolved respondent.

This method of determining the relative truth-value of the responses has numerous advantages. It even allows for the possibility – however unlikely it is – that for some parties “do not know” may be the most informed response that any citizen can possibly give regarding their position on certain issues. In yet other instances there may be several equally good answers to the same party placement question, and if so, then this method is capable of discovering that. No matter how small a minority gives an answer, it can qualify as the best possible answer according to this method, provided that the probability difference between the Superinvolved and Superuninvolved respondents is higher for offering this response than for any other. The method gives a natural weighting of party pairs and scales for the building of the knowledge scale that can vary across countries as it seems appropriate, and which uses the same metric across the whole universe of between party comparisons and response categories. Summing up the respective “truth-value” of the individual responses is straightforward and yields a very nearly normal distribution of scores within most national samples in the EES 2004 data. To standardize the distribution across countries, the resulting knowledge variable was converted into normal scores constrained to fall in the 0 to 1 range, with a mean of approximately .5 and a standard deviation of approximately .16.

### 3. Empirical analysis

As it was already suggested above, the testing of the hypotheses involves a few simple OLS-regressions. The size of the party that the respondents voted for in the last national election, in the European Parliament election, as well as in a hypothetical current national election will be regressed on the their level of political knowledge. Control variables can be added to the equations where appropriate – for instance, all six models reported in Table 2 included 19 country dummies to control for country fixed effects on support for big parties, i.e. for country differences in vote fractionalization.

Hypothesis 1 will be supported if the size of the party supported drops with (i.e. is negatively affected by) political knowledge more in European than in either past or hypothetical current national elections. Hypothesis 2 will be supported if the size of the party supported is more negatively affected by political knowledge in European than in either past or hypothetical current national elections. Hypothesis 3 will be supported if the size of the party supported is more negatively affected by political knowledge in European elections and hypothetical current national elections than in the last actual national election.

For the purposes of this preliminary analysis the size of the party that the respondents supported on the different occasions was calculated from the EES 2004 survey data by calculating the percentage of all recalled votes reportedly cast for each party. The size of those small parties that were merely collapsed into a miscellaneous “other party” category, together with the “party size” of independent candidates was set as 1 percent.

Table 2 presents the relevant results. Note that in the estimation of these results, just as well as throughout the paper, Belgium, Luxembourg, Lithuania, and Sweden were excluded from the analysis because some of the variables required for the construction of the knowledge variable – or, in Luxembourg, separate measures of vote in the last national election and current national level voting intention - were missing. The cases in the analysis were weighted with the demographic weights available in the integrated EES 2004 data file. Only those respondents were included in the analysis reported in Table 2 who reported their vote choice (and thus claimed to have voted) in both the last national and the 2004 European Parliament elections, and who also named a party that they would vote for if there were a national election next week. The weighted number of cases was set equal across countries, with the total number of weighted cases in the pooled cross-national data equaling the actual number of unweighted cases in the analysis.

Table 2 about here

The results obtained with the first model are only interesting for establishing a baseline to evaluate subsequent results. In the last national election, knowledge had a positive, though insignificant effect on the size of the party that a voter supported. In other words, more knowledgeable people tended to vote for bigger parties, but the relationship – in spite of the rather large sample size in this 20-country pooled data set – was not statistically significant. In the second and third model, the size of the party supported in the EP election is shown to be significantly and negatively related to political knowledge. This definitely contradicts the less-campaign-information account of second order election effects, and is very much in line with the motivational account.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> It is well known that because of recall bias in self-reports of past votes, support for small parties in past election tends to be artificially understated in survey data (see e.g. {Himmelweit, 1978 #5058}). One may want to speculate that this bias may have distorted the results reported in the text. Yet, it is hard to imagine why this recall bias would be particularly strong for highly informed citizens. If, as I suspect, it is not stronger for them as for other respondents, then the relevant aspect of the reported findings is correct despite the presence of recall bias.

However, when we look at the results from the last three models, the motivational account appears untenable. Although the differences are never statistically significant, in terms of current national level voting intention small party support is even more strongly linked to high political knowledge than in the EP election itself. This is certainly inconsistent with the idea that citizens would directly react to differential stakes in national and EP elections by moving towards smaller parties in EP elections, but strategically returning to supporting big parties in national elections. Instead, it seems that there is something else than a recognition of the differential stakes that makes citizens – and highly informed citizens in particular - move towards smaller parties at the time of European elections: not only in the European electoral arena, but also in the national one. It may well be that when the actual time of a national election comes, the strategic considerations that reduce support for the small parties are once again activated by a change in the campaign information environment. This interpretation is consistent with the positive, though insignificant effect of knowledge that we can observe in the top row of Table 2 regarding the last national election.

The implication is that simply moving from the European to the first-order electoral arena does not really change highly informed citizens' support for small parties: the knowledge effect becomes no less negative. Unless we are prepared to believe that strategic voting is unrelated to political knowledge level, this finding undermines the plausibility of the motivational account of second order effects.

Rather, the results are fully consistent with the different-campaign-information version of the informational account of second order election effects. If so, then the implications of higher turnout, constitutional changes, and greater campaign intensity may be rather different for European elections than the conventional understanding of second order effects would lead us to expect.

#### **4. Conclusions**

TO BE ADDED ONCE THE MACRO-DATA ON CAMPAIGN INTENSITY WAS INCORPORATED IN THE ANALYSIS

**Appendix A: Independent variables in the multinomial regression analyses that determined the “truth-value” of each relative party placement on the left-right and anti-vs. pro-European integration scales:**

Six indicators of motivation and opportunity to learn about new political facts:

INTEREST IN POLITICS (variable VAR154): responses to “To what extent would you say you are interested in politics?”

INTEREST IN THE EP ELECTION CAMPAIGN (VAR110): responses to “Thinking back to just before the elections for the European Parliament were held, how interested were you in the campaign for those elections?”

FREQUENCY OF WATCHING NEWS ON TELEVISION (VAR034): responses to “Normally, how many days of the week do you watch the news on television?”

FREQUENCY OF READING NEWSPAPERS (VAR069): And how many days of the week do you read a newspaper?”

FREQUENCY OF READING ABOUT THE EP ELECTION IN NEWSPAPERS (VAR105): responses to “How often did you do any of the following during the three or four weeks before the European election? How often did you ... read about the election in a newspaper?”

FREQUENCY OF TALKING TO FRIENDS AND FAMILY ABOUT THE EP ELECTION (VAR107): responses to “How often did you do any of the following during the three or four weeks before the European election? How often did you ... talk to friends or family about the election?”

Socio-demographic background variables:

SEX: coded 2 for women and 1 for men.

AGE: for most national samples this equals 2004 minus the year when the respondent was born. Note that the variable was coded differently for France and completely missing for Luxembourg. Two obviously mistaken values (1856 and 1863) on the year of birth variable in the integrated file were recoded into 1956 and 1963, respectively.

AGE-SQUARED: squared value of the AGE variable.

IMMIGRANT: coded 1 for respondents born outside of their current country of citizenship and zero otherwise.

MINORITY STATUS 1: a dummy variable coded 1 for protestants in Austria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Ireland, the Netherlands and Slovakia; residents of Scotland in the UK; respondents interviewed in Russian in Estonia; muslims in France; Catholics in Germany, Latvia; residents of Catalunya in Spain; and zero for all else.

MINORITY STATUS 2: a dummy variable coded 1 for muslims, buddhists and hindu in the UK; residents of the Eastern states in Germany; respondents interviewed in Russian in Latvia; residents of the Pais Vasco in Spain; and zero for all else.

CHURCH ATTENDANCE: frequency of church attendance measured on a five-point scale.

CHURCH ATTENDANCE SQUARED: squared value of the CHURCH ATTENDANCE variable.

EDUCATION: school leaving age, with the „still in education” recoded into three plus the respondent’s age; and all valid values above 26 recoded to 26.

EDUCATION SQUARED: squared value of the EDUCATION variable.

RURAL: a dummy variable coded 1 for residents of „rural areas and villages” (NOTE EXCEPTIONS) and zero for all else.

SELF-EMPLOYED: a dummy variable coded 1 for self-employed respondents and zero for all else.

EMPLOYED: a dummy variable coded 1 for economically active respondents and zero for all else.

WORKS IN AGRICULTURE: a dummy variable coded 1 for respondents employed or self-employed in agriculture and zero for all else.

WORKS IN PUBLIC SECTOR: a dummy variable coded 1 for public sector workers and zero for all else.

INCOME: natural logarithm of household income per capita.

INCOME SQUARED: squared value of the INCOME variable.

TRADE UNION MEMBERSHIP: a dummy variable coded 1 for trade union members and zero for all else.

Note that missing values on the six motivation and opportunity variables as well as SEX, AGE, CHURCH ATTENDANCE, EDUCATION, and INCOME, as well as the squared versions of these variables, were replaced with the sample mean, and eleven separate dummy variables were created to show if the respondent originally had a missing value on each of these variables. These eleven dummy variables entered multinomial regressions alongside with the respective variables that they referred to.<sup>5</sup>

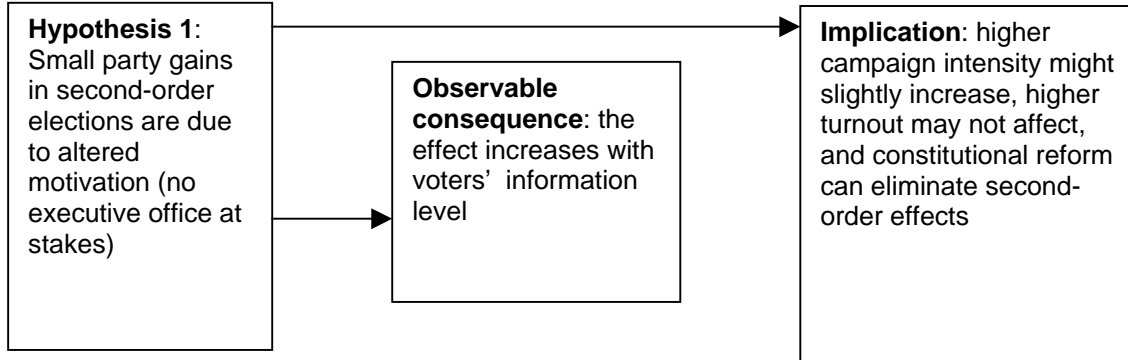
When a variable was completely missing or a constant for a country – as it was the case regarding age and age-squared for Luxembourg, self-employment for Germany, and one or both minority status variables in several countries -, then a random variable was generated to replace it. The random variable was taken from a Bernoulli distribution with a mean of .06, .15, and .15 for the self-employment and the two minority status variables, respectively. In the case of age, the random variable was taken from a uniform distribution with a minimum value of 18 and a maximum value of 88.

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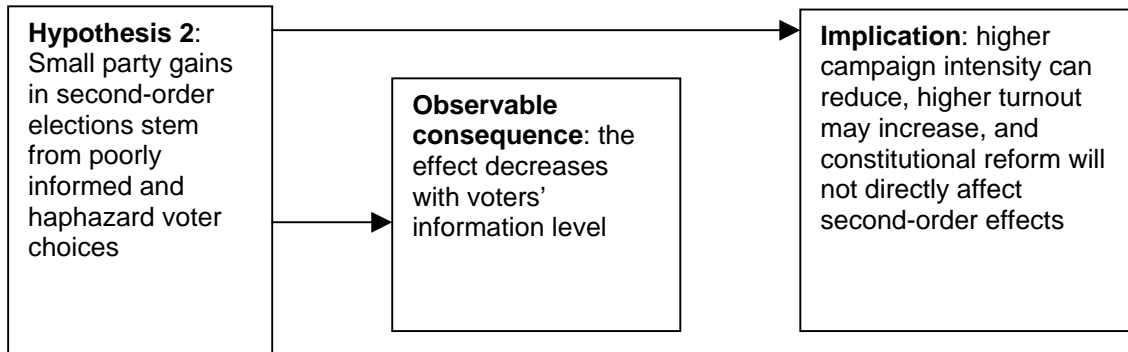
<sup>5</sup> From the perspective of methodological purism, a multiple imputation procedure may have been more appropriate than mean substitution. However, this method of missing data substitutions was not practical in the given situation because of the relatively small number of missing values on the independent variables and the very large number of multinomial regression equations estimated with the variables in questions – 364 equations for the Italian sample alone.

**Figure 1: Alternative hypotheses about the root of the small party gains in second order elections**

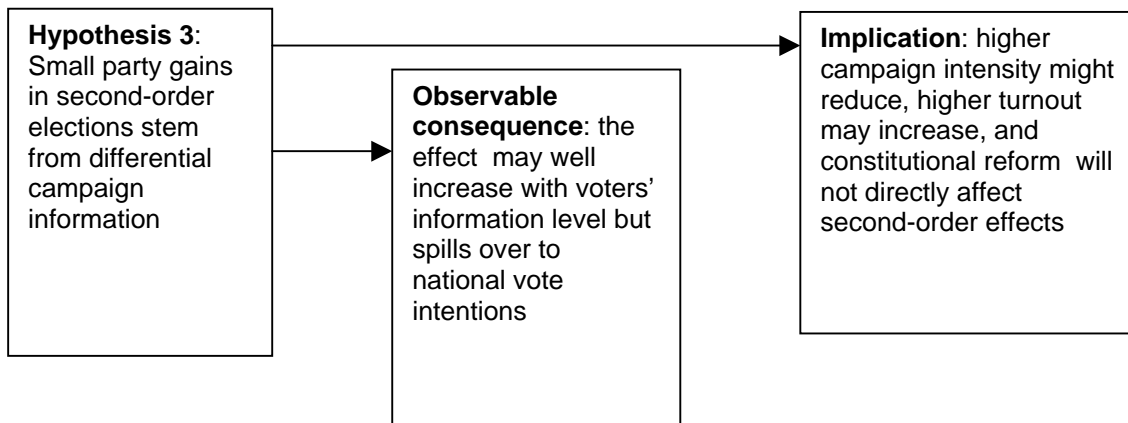
**A: Conventional motivational theory**



**B: Less-campaign-information theory**



**C: Different-campaign-information theory**



**Table 1: Percentage approving the performance of the national government by the number of months passed since last national election and the age of democracy**

		Older democracies	New (East Central European) democracies
Number of	3	77	-
months	15	79	30
passed	17	36	-
since	19	39	-
last	20	-	35
national	21	18	25
election	24	34	19
	26	-	52
	27	38	-
	31	56	-
	33	-	13
	37	43	-
	44	-	57
	60	68	-

Notes: table entries are the percentage of respondents who “approve” the record of the government in percentage of the respondents who either approved or disapproved the record.

**Table 2: Five regression models of the size of the party the respondents supported on different occasions on their level of political knowledge and control variables**

Independent variable:	POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE	SIZE OF SUPPORTED PARTY	
		IN LAST NATIONAL ELECTION	IN 2004 EP ELECTION
	b (s.e.)	b (s.e.)	b (s.e.)
Dependent variable:			
<b>SIZE OF SUPPORTED PARTY</b>			
- LAST NATIONAL ELECTION	.010 (.008)	-	-
<b>SIZE OF SUPPORTED PARTY</b>			
- 2004 EP ELECTION	-.018 (.007)	-	-
	-.022 (.006)	.405 (.007)	-
<b>SIZE OF SUPPORTED PARTY</b>			
- CURRENT NATIONAL-LEVEL VOTING INTENTION	-.020 (.008)	-	-
	-.025 (.006)	.499 (.007)	-
	-.011 (.005)	.240 (.006)	.639 (.007)

Notes: table entries are OLS regression coefficients (with standard errors in parenthesis). The intercepts and the impact of the 19 country dummies included in all reported equations are not shown. On the construction of the variables, see the main text.

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