

POLICY MEMO

**Voter Behaviour in the elections
to the European Parliament:
the role of electoral systems**

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Voter Behaviour in the elections to the European Parliament: the role of electoral systems

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Introduction and Background

The European Parliament (EP) is a transnational assembly that acts as the legislative branch of the European Union (EU). Each of the 28 member states contributes an allocated number of Members of the European Parliaments (MEPs) to this institution to debate legislation, check the power of the other European institutions, and direct the EU's actions. Each country elects a proportional number of Members of the European Parliament to the EP every 5 years, much like national elections. Every member state follows the electoral system and rules of their choice (European Parliament 2009, 17-18). The Parliament has grown significantly in a short period of time; from its origins as a weak, representative assembly in the first 1979 elections, it has developed into a fully-fledged legislature with significant oversight over the EU's budget, institutions, and policy.

Despite this expansion in power and membership, both the EU and the EP continue to face criticism from both states and citizens for the gap between the increasing power of the institution and the lack of direct accountability (The European University Institute 2009, 36). Even as the EU's powers and competences expand, participation in European elections continues to decline (European Parliament 2014, 1). Further, the number of "Eurosceptic" political parties in the European Parliament has substantially increased, particularly in the most recent 2014 election (European Parliament 2014, 1).

Recent events such as the 2009 Euro crisis and the 2015 migrant crisis also highlighted the EU's difficulty in coordinating responses among member states, further challenging the authority of its institutions and actions. The European Union is facing a serious challenge in terms of both its "input" and "output" legitimacy, which brings into question the ability of the EP to function as a body of accountability (Crombez 2003, 101-103). With this context in mind, it is useful to look more deeply into the European Parliament's electoral dynamics that may inhibit greater electoral partici-

pation, and subsequently greater accountability of the EU to its citizens. Specifically, this research sought to examine how electoral systems influenced voter behaviour in European Parliament elections between 1979 and 2014. This project sought to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors impacting European voters.

Methodology

1. The research drew upon two different bodies of literature to understand how European voters behave in European Parliament elections. The first was the crucial 1980 article by Reif and Schmitt (1980). The article argued that European elections were "second order" to national elections in the eyes of voters, resulting in unusual electoral results. The research question that the thesis sought to answer was: how do electoral systems influence voter behaviour in the European Parliament?
2. The thesis used case studies to examine how electoral systems influenced voter behaviour over time. It conducted a most-similar-systems comparison between the United Kingdom (UK) and France. These cases were selected due to their similar length of participation in the European elections, the fact that they both used proportional representation (PR) in the EP rather than their domestic electoral systems, and the similar adjustments that both states made in the late 1990s and early 2000s to adhere to new EU policies attempting to regulate electoral rules.
3. The thesis focused on two hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: The effects of second-order elections are experienced differently in states that use first-past-the-post than in those that use proportional representation in the European Parliament.

- The 1999 and 2004 adjustments in British and



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French electoral systems will lead to a change in how second-order elections effects, such as voter participation and the popular vote, manifest in the elections.

- The United Kingdom will have increased voter participation, but smaller and radical political parties will receive more of the popular vote.
- France will have higher voter participation due to its use of PR, but small political parties may receive less of the popular vote after constituency sizes are changed in 2004.

Hypothesis 2: Broader electoral system theories drawn from comparative literature regarding voter behaviour and adaptation to new electoral systems will also apply in the European Parliament.

- Voters will exhibit unusual voting behaviour after the United Kingdom switches to PR, according to Selb's (2012) prerequisites for voter adaptation.
- Voters will adapt to a new electoral adjustment more readily in France, as they are already used to PR.

The thesis charted both overall political participation and the success of political parties in each country over 40 years of European elections. Political parties with over .5% of the popular vote were categorized into ideological groups to chart the overall success of different kinds of political parties, rather than individual groups. New coalitions between political parties were categorized based on their resulting coalition platforms. This methodology allowed the research to reveal what kinds of political parties were succeeding in European elections without looking at political parties as individual units.

Resultss

The results of the case studies demonstrated that the electoral system used in European Parliament elections had a notable impact on both the number of participants and the kinds of political parties that voters chose. France, having introduced PR in 1979, demonstrates consistent characteristics of second order elections. Communist, green, and eventually far-right political parties all received a greater share of the popular vote in EU elections than they did in national elections. Subsequent adjustments to the electoral procedures were relatively minor and did not disrupt voter behaviour, as the electorate appears to have adapted successfully to PR from the very first 1979 election.

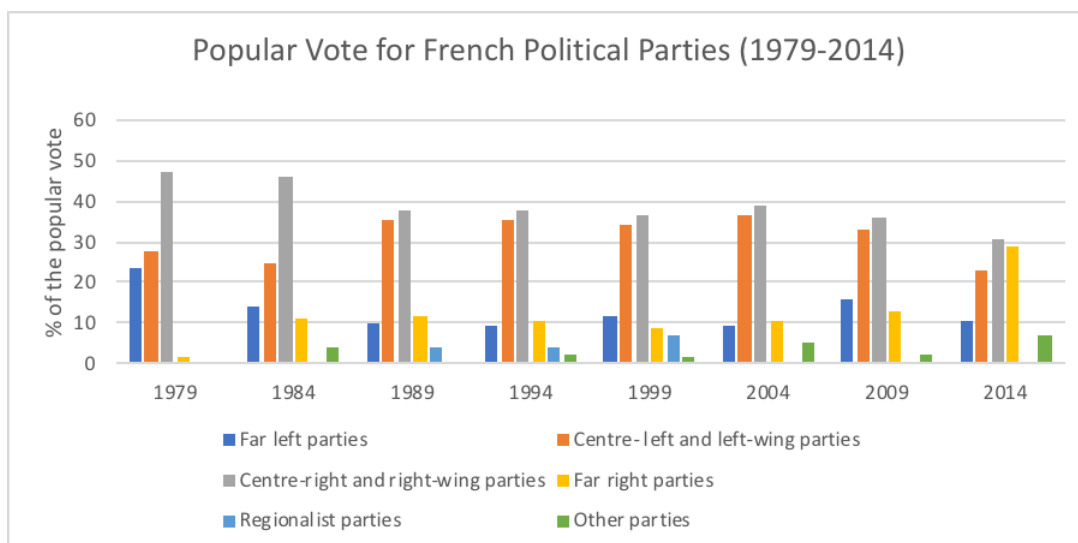


Figure 1: The popular vote of French political parties in European Parliament elections, 1979- 2014. Adapted from France Politique. "Election Européenne 2004," 2014. <http://www.france-politique.fr/elections-europeennes-2004.htm> and European Parliament. "Results of the 2014 European Elections - Results by Country - France - European Parliament." Results of the 2014 European elections - Results by country - France - European Parliament, 2014. <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/elections2014-results/en/country-results-fr-2014.html>

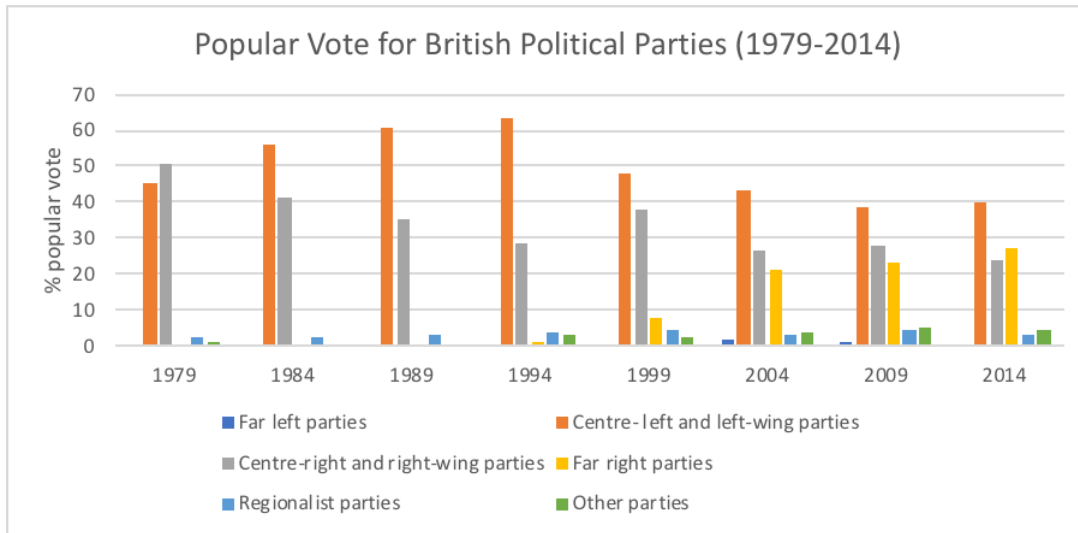


Figure 2: Popular support for political parties in the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland in the European Parliament, 1979-2014. Political parties are grouped by their position on the political spectrum. Adapted from BBC News. "Vote 2004 | UK European Election Result," 2004. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/bsp/hi/vote2004/euro_uk/html/front.stm; European Parliament. "Turnout 2014 - European Parliament." Turnout 2014 - European Parliament, 2014. <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/elections2014-results/en/turnout.html>; Cracknell, Richard, and Bryn Morgan. "European Parliament Elections - 1979 to 1994." Research Paper. House of Commons Library, February 6, 1999.

Once proportional representation was implemented in the UK, the 1999 and 2004 elections demonstrated that voters required an adjustment period to adapt to new electoral systems and rules, even in elections that are considered "second order." Introducing PR increased voter turnout to record highs, confirming that some of these broader theories about electoral rules and voter participation can also be applied to European politics. Similarly, large and incumbent parties, such as the Labour and Conservative parties, lost a significant share of the popular vote to green and far-right parties. A striking pattern of far-right party success for the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) and the British National Party (BNP) demonstrated a new dynamic; voters were using PR to express Eurosceptic views. The 2014 wave of support for UKIP in the EP was enabled and encouraged by a switch to proportional voting; without these new electoral rules, it would have been unlikely for the party to build this kind of backing without a favourable opportunity structure.

Recommendations

These findings both reinforce some aspects of second order elections theory and introduce aspects of other academic literature. The applicability of broader comparative elections dynamics, such as Blais and Carty (1992) and Selb (2012) demonstrate that there is a place for comparison between EU politics and the national dynamics of sovereign states. Perhaps the most significant contribution of this research is a recommendation for academic nuance when analysing the EU. European integration literature has numerous unique, compelling theories developed specifically for an unusual political institution. However, it is important to continually test and reconsider these theories over time, particularly as the European Union continues to develop. Treating the EU as dynamic, rather than path dependent, is crucial to understanding how it may develop, change, and grow over time. It is crucial to examine theories such as second order elections periodically and from numerous perspectives, particularly as the itself EU adjusts to the ever-changing political world.

From a policy perspective, this research illustrates the necessity of careful consideration when adjusting electoral rules and formulas. Introducing PR increased the sheer number of voters involved in European elections, thus better representing the views of its citizens. It also allowed smaller political parties to win greater seat shares, some of which challenge the continued existence of the EU itself. The goal of the research was not to normatively decide whether plurality or proportional electoral systems were better or worse; it was to achieve a greater understanding of how they influence voter behaviour, so that decision-makers and policy analysts are capable of making judgements of what system works better for their particular political context.

Reflections

Heading into the 2019 European elections, the EU is in a state of challenge and transition. The uncertainty of Brexit and the overall tension surrounding the next election poses a critical juncture for both the European Parliament and the union as a whole. More than ever before, the discourse surrounding the European elections is an intense debate which seems to actually centre around a “European political discourse.” It presents an opportunity for European voters to change how they interact with the European Parliament. It will be interesting to see if the 2019 election functions as a true debate over European issues, or whether it is just another “second order election” in a series of disappointing EU elections. Both time and the election results will tell if voters take the initiative to vote as European citizens, rather than based on national politics.

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