

Realistic and unrealistic expectations about electoral democracy in the EU

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Electoral Democracy

Electoral democracy involves:

- Elections as a mechanism for citizens to determine the direction of public policy
 - *Outcome*: 'representation' of citizens' policy preferences in composition and decisions of representative institutions
 - *Process*: representation brought about by voters' choices
- Are elections for EP instruments of electoral democracy? (or, in H.G. Well's words: are elections a 'feast of democracy'?)

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A cold shower

- It is unrealistic to expect EP elections to be about Europe, the EU, or European integration
- It is unrealistic to see EP elections as 'real' elections, i.e., occasions where election outcomes have predictable consequences for the direction of policy making
- Rather, EP elections should be seen as *second-order national elections*
- EP elections are thus difficult to regard as instruments of electoral democracy in the EU

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Second-order elections

Voters' (and parties') behaviour determined by

- their political orientations towards their *national* political context
- but these orientations may lead to *different* voter choices than in national parliamentary elections because there are no direct consequences for government power (voters' strategic considerations are therefore different)

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Implications for EP elections

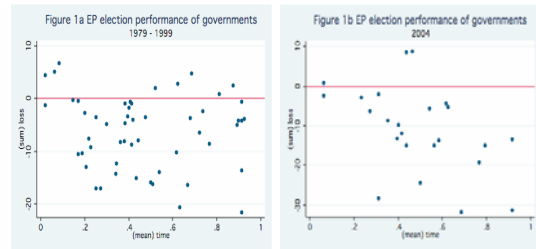
The second-order character of EP elections

- accounts for low turnout
- accounts for losses by government parties
- accounts for losses by larger parties

Contrary to often held beliefs, none of these patterns signifies any particular pro- or anti EU message

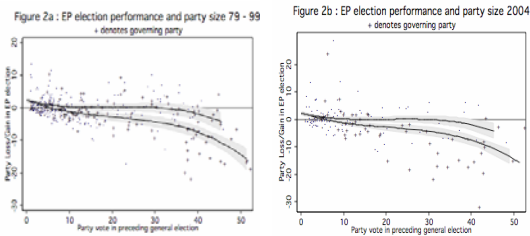
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Results for government parties



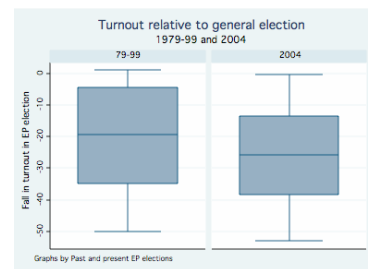
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Results for large and small parties



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Elections and Turnout



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Europe matters – indirectly

National politicisation of issues of European integration has clear consequences (but European integration is in most countries not or weakly politicised):

- turnout is affected by extent of national inter-party conflict about European integration
- parties that take a clear stand in such conflict enjoy an electoral 'bonus'

This fits within the second-order perspective of EP elections

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Consequences of enlargement?

- The second order perspective is in the 2004 EP elections relevant for both older and newer EU member states
- The (national) factors that drive voter behaviour are the same in older and newer member states:
 - 'closeness' to parties in broad policy terms: left/right orientations and major national issues
 - government approval
 - affiliation with politically relevant social groups

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The public sphere

Media pay little attention to EP elections

- EP elections more visible in the 'new' member states and on public broadcasting news compared to the 'old' member states and commercial news.
 - EU actors were generally invisible in the media
 - EP elections were labeled as 'boring' in the news and turnout was generally predicted to be low.
 - Political conflict was more present in the news in the 'old' member states than in the 'new.'

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Policy representation – indirectly

- Voters' choices are not based on parties' positions concerning issues debated in the EP
- Voters choose on the basis of parties' political positions in their national contexts
- Because of the ideological commensurability of the members of EP party groupings, and because of the cohesiveness of these groupings, voters' broad political preferences are nevertheless –indirectly– represented in EP policy making
- This representation does not include 'constitutional' issues relating to extent of integration or enlargement (on which national parties are often internally divided, but which are not comprised in the remit of the EP)

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Future..? Three scenarios

1. No change
little politicisation of integration issues, weak media attention to EP elections
Consequence: low, even falling turnout, continued pattern of government and large-party losses etc.
2. Politicisation of integration in EP election campaigns
Growing importance of integration issues in EP elections
Consequence: more media attention, higher turnout, less policy representation on issues debated by EP.
3. Politicisation of integration in national politics and NP elections
Growing importance of integration issues in EP elections
Consequence: more media attention, higher turnout, uncertain effects for policy representation on issues debated by EP.

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Future research: PIREDEU

- This is a pilot study for a infrastructural project that would ensure stability for long term study of electoral representation in EU
- It will allow continued study of these developments
- The 2009 study will encompass
 - A voter study in 27 countries
 - Studies of candidates, or MEPs
 - Analysis of the media and campaigns nationally
 - Analysis of party manifestos and party campaigning

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