

Introduction

Understanding the European Parliament elections of 2019

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Understanding an election to the European Parliament (EP) – any election to the EP – is not straightforward. The elections are treated as being akin to a parliamentary election, but whereas parliamentary elections in EU member states lead to the formation of a government pledged to carry out policies on which its member parties campaigned in the run-up to the election, an EP election leads to no government being formed, much less one pledged to certain policies supported by voters. Indeed it is not clear to most of those voters what is the purpose of these elections or what is the point of voting in them. The most common appeal by national parties is that their supporters should vote out of loyalty to those parties. Consequently those without established party loyalties (particularly younger citizens) are especially unlikely to vote and turnout seldom reaches even 50 percent. Some people also vote to register dissatisfaction with government policies or to support policies that they feel are being neglected. As a result, government parties (often larger parties) regularly lose votes at these elections whereas parties espousing ideas with limited appeal (mostly small parties) do well. For reasons explained later in the book these phenomena accord with what is known as Second Order Election (SOE) theory.

In the first three decades of EP elections (1979 to 2009) these elections, despite their ostensive purpose to elect a European parliament, had very little focus on European matters. Instead they presented a distorted mirror of national political concerns. In 2014 for the first time, these elections were clearly "about Europe" but it has been argued that they were still just displaying a distorted reflection of national political concerns which, in the aftermath of the Great Recession and the economic stringency that ensued in many EU countries, had also become "about Europe". In 2019 it was widely expected that the European content of the EP elections that year would be even greater than in 2014. That does not seem to have occurred to any notable extent; although there are signs of a possibly different process – not specifically related to EU issues – leading to some Europeanization of this EP election.

This is a book about those elections. In it a large group of scholars explore the nature of these elections both within each of the 28 countries that participated and also taking a comparative cross-national perspective. It tries to shed light on why these elections were important and in what ways they may even have been pathbreaking, perhaps initiating a new era in which EP elections have palpable consequences that may even bring more European citizens to the polls. Certainly, from a turnout perspective, the 2019 EP elections were quite remarkable: the first such elec-

tion in decades to exceed 50% turnout (the increase was of 8.4 percentage points with respect to 2004). This increase was observed in 21 of the 28 member countries.

Along with the increase in turnout, these elections can be considered a first for other reasons. They are the first to test the institutionalization of a 2014 innovation that sought to link EP elections to the choice between candidates for President of the European Commission – the so-called *Spitzenkandidaten*. In 2014 the candidate from the European party group winning most votes did go on to become President of the EU Commission, but will that happen again in 2019? That election also may be the first to exhibit a common dynamic across all of the EU in swings of vote shares between party groups – a "Europeanization" of EP voting.

The overall effort of this book is to provide a comprehensive and overarching, yet systematic and detailed analysis of the election outcome. This goal is achieved by explaining the outcome and the implications of the elections both in a wide-ranging perspective – the first part of the book –, and within each country separately – the second part of the book, in which experts from each EU member country describe the elections there in detail.

The first part of the book is composed of five chapters.

Chapter One, *Much ado about nothing? The EP elections in comparative perspective* (by Angelucci, Carrieri and Franklin), takes a close look at the EP groups. The authors find overall a higher level of fragmentation in the mainstream camp, compared to 2014, and some consolidation in the Eurosceptic group. Also, more remarkably, they show that aggregate change moves in the same direction as average change for every EP party group. This finding suggests that these elections might be exceptional in that, for what is probably the first time, it is possible to observe an EU-wide dynamic of common variation across party groups.

In Chapter Two, *Party system dynamics, and potential new cleavages?* (by Emanuele and Marino), the analysis covers all EP elections to date and focuses on three goals: (1) to explain the patterns of electoral instability, (2) to compare these patterns (and their variation) between national and EP elections, and (3) to explicate the underlying dimensions of competition and cleavage structures in the 28 European party systems. They find that party swing is quite similar at the national and at European elections within each country (with the exception of 1999 and 2009), and that class cleavages are steadily declining.

In Chapter Three, *Spitzenkandidaten 2.0: From experiment to routine in European elections?* (by Thomas Christiansen and Michael Shackleton) the authors study the extent to which this 2014 innovation had become institutionalized by 2019, and explore ways in which the practice already shows signs of evolution, by discussing its impact on the inter-institutional dynamics between the European Parliament and Council.

Chapter Four, *Explaining the outcome* (by De Sio, Franklin, and Russo) focuses both on turnout and on party results. Normally turnout at EP elections is quite well predicted by structural factors (such as the electoral cycle and the prevalence of compulsory voting). Effects of these factors are confirmed over the past eight elections.

However, the analysis suggest that the turnout increase in 2019 cannot be attributed to any structural factor. This result is surprising, and further research will need to investigate this unexpected phenomenon. With regard to party results, the authors introduce theoretical and methodological innovations, linking the structural model of turnout evolution with the second order model of party choice. Findings demonstrate a previously undetected role of the electoral cycle in conditioning the way parties gain or lose support as compared with the most recent national election.

Chapter Five, *Impact of issues on party performance* (by Maggini, De Sio, Garzia, and Trechsel), builds on the previous chapter by testing whether there is some issue content to the results. The analysis of EP electoral gains/losses according to party issue stances (collected from EU 2019 expert survey), shows that there indeed are issue effects on party performance. When discounting second-order dynamics, some issue effects even appear significant EU-wide, although the most accurate picture is one that sees area-specific effect patterns, with environmentalist, pro-cultural integration, pro-welfare stances emerging from the North-West, and culturally conservative (and pro-market) stances emerging from Central Eastern Europe. This suggests that the 2019 EU elections might actually, perhaps for the first time, show some genuine issue content that is readable across multiple countries.

The second part of the book is composed of twenty-eight chapters: one for each country. These are detailed electoral reports in which one (or more) experts regarding each of the countries offer a detailed overview of the background and of the results.

The overall structure of the book reflects an effort which we already pioneered at the CISE (Centro Italiano Studi Elettorali) at Luiss in 2014, by offering – shortly after the election – an overview of election results for all countries, plus some contribution covering the result at the aggregate European level. For this book we can say that that the 2014 experiment was further enhanced. New, international co-editors joined the project, a partnership between Luiss and Maastricht University was established, the panel of country experts was, if possible, reinforced (leading to dedicated chapters for each of the 28 countries), and even the scientific content of the comparative chapters of the first part of the book saw an enrichment. However, this was done perhaps in an even shorter time span, which allowed us to publish this book within one month from EP elections. This was of course only possible thanks to all the authors of this book, who delivered interesting analyses and high-quality reports in an incredibly short span of time. The impressive list of authors, to whom our deepest thanks go, includes Davide Angelucci, Marcello Carammia, Luca Carrieri, Giorgos Charalambous, Henrik Serup Christensen, Thomas Christiansen, Mikołaj Czesnik, Lorenzo De Sio, Patrick Dumont, Piret Ehin, Vincenzo Emanuele, Marta Fraile, Mark N. Franklin, Diego Garzia, Heiko Giebler, Vlastimil Havlík, Andrija Henjak, Enrique Hernández, Louise Hoon, Jānis Iktens, Mažvydas Jastramskis, Raphaël Kies, Michał Kotnarowski, Sylvia Kritzinger, Simona Kustec, Romain Lachat, Irene Landini, Marco Lisi, Nicola Maggini, Bruno Marino, Michael Marsh, Julie Hassing Nielsen, Maria Oskarson, Roderick Pace, Aldo Paparo, Carolina Plescia, Luana Russo, Arjan H. Schakel, Dan Schmit, Michael Shackleton, Kaat Smets, Sorina Soare, Peter Spáč,

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