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Abstract

EP elections have so far been consistently characterized as "second-order". We hypothesize that key processes are emerging which undermine the appropriateness of this model. We argue that, as a consequence of EU policies trying to address the economic and financial crisis, a stronger politicization of Europe has emerged. Accordingly, the national consequences of EU policies have put Europe on the table of national electorates. Together, these processes may lead to an overall increase in saliency of EP elections, so we hypothesize, and to a homogenization of political competition across EU members. We explore this framework in the context of the 2009 and 2014 EP elections. In line with extant applications, we first attempt to assess the core predictions of the second-order model through tests on aggregate electoral results. We then investigate specific explanatory mechanisms for the 2014 EP elections, by relating party performance with party stance on political issues.

Keywords

Introduction

Despite recent interest in the creation of a transnational European party system (Bardi *et al.*, 2010) the latter still struggles with the transition from idea to reality. The "European party system" today largely constitutes a basket filled with national parties running politics in the member states. Thus, and rather unsurprisingly, campaigns preceding European Parliament elections have traditionally been dominated by national issues (de Vreese *et al.*, 2006). Political science has therefore adopted and shared what can be qualified as the classical view of European elections: they are *second order* contests (Reif and Schmitt, 1980; van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996). According to the original second order model, European elections are driven by domestic factors, they are characterized by low turnout, they offer a platform for new parties to emerge, they are favorable to small rather than large parties and finally they tend to result in electoral losses for governing parties. Since the first direct elections to the European Parliament in 1979, the conceptual and empirical validity of the second order model has been confirmed again and again.

More recently, however, scholars started to question some of the second order elements, above all trying to show the growing importance of supranational elements in EP elections (Bellucci *et al.*, 2010; Trechsel, 2010; Hix and Marsh, 2011; Shuck *et al.*, 2011; Hobolt and Spoon, 2012). For some of these authors, the 2009 EP elections have become much substantively more "European", and thus less second order, than previous contests. Besides both deeper and wider integration, the economic and financial crisis and the supranational reaction it has triggered are seen as key factors in the changing nature of EP elections. In this contribution, we support the argument of a "growing Europeanness of European elections" through empirical analyses aimed in two specific directions. By taking as a reference point the 2009 EP elections, we first demonstrate the diminishing relevance and predictive power of the second-order model for analyzing party performance. Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, we show that – compared to 2009 – party performance can be increasingly predicted by party stances on the *same* issues across the 28 EU countries, showing the first signs of the emergence of a *common* European debate, structured around a few key issues and producing effects in each of the member states; indeed testifying a Europeanization of EP elections.

In the following section we present the expanding literature in this field and derive our theoretical considerations. The third section of this paper describes our data and explains our measures. This is followed by the empirical analyses, where we tests our hypotheses on aggregate electoral results (from the 2009 and 2014 EP elections), in line with extant applications on earlier elections. Finally, a concluding section discusses the major implications of our results.

Beyond the second-order election model

When in 1979 the first citizen-elected European Parliament took up its work, its partisan composition was essentially a patchwork of national parties' representatives. Over thirty years later, the same observation still applies. While the process of European integration has led to profound changes in the competence structure between layers of government in Europe, with a gradual strengthening of the supranational institutions in almost all sectors of policy making, the same cannot be said for the process of representation and party competition. For sure, the elected members of the European Parliament started to connect to each other across the political spectrum and soon enough party groups emerged. Later on, even transnational European parties were founded, they were given institutional recognition and some financial resources that go with it. However, as important party groups have become to the exercise of power within the European Parliament, as largely irrelevant remain the European parties for electoral competition. They can be understood as platforms of weakly federated national parties, insufficiently developed for creating on their own a proper party system at European

level, understood here as a "system of interaction" (Sartori, 1976; Bardi and Mair, 2008). Clearly, as of today, no such European party system with comparable features shared by national systems has emerged (Bardi *et al.,* 2010). The absence of a party system directly conditions the party competition: the lack of stable supranational party cues means that cognitive heuristics usually entering public opinion formation remain largely national in form. Therefore, it can be argued that European election campaigns are fought first and foremost on the basis of national political concerns (de Vreese *et al.,* 2006). As Reif and Schmitt (1980) argue, the national arena remains the most important one in the eyes of both the parties and the electorate. Accordingly, EP elections should be conceived as second-order national elections, insofar as "there is less at stake as compared to first-order elections" (*ibid.*: 8). As a consequence, parties dedicate comparatively less time and resources to second-order elections (Franklin *et al.,* 1996; Franklin, 2001; Schmitt, 2005). This, in turn, negatively affects turnout in these elections. Regarding the substance of the campaigns, the second-order model emphasizes the lack of sufficient information on the position of parties regarding European issues. Given this information deficit, voters can only evaluate the competing parties on the basis of their performance and policy appeals at the national level. Yet another consequence of these elections being seen as less important than first-order elections is their propensity to serve as platforms for punishment of governments. They provide an opportunity for "sending a message to the rulers", for sanctioning the government in place, for a symbolic lesson to be taught to the governing elite. Thus, European elections often become a *referendum* on incumbent governments' performance (Lord, 2001) – a referendum where governments tend to be defeated. Clearly, such acts of "punishing of the incumbent" are made easier for voters who conceive of EP elections as elections where there is less at stake. It is most certainly cheaper and easier to send a warning to a governing party when the consequences remain relatively unimportant. In the same vein, because one can "throw away" one's vote more easily than in elections where the future of one's country may be at stake, voters are sometimes described as using *their hearts instead of their heads* in European elections, voting for parties and candidates that come closer to their 'real' political preferences and ideological outlook (Oppenhuis *et al.,* 1996). In turn, this tends to be problematic for larger parties (whether in government or opposition) as they lose votes to smaller parties.

Summing up, according to the second order model: (1) there is lower turnout in European elections than in national parliamentary elections; (2) voters behave differently according to the type of election: some of them switch their vote from supporting a government party in national elections to punishing the latter in the second order election. The motivation for such a punishment can be twofold: either voters truly want to express their disappointment with the incumbents' performance or they have voted for the governing party in the national elections due to some strategic calculus instead of voting for one's closest party in terms of political preferences. In this latter case, European elections offer such strategic voters an arena for translating their "true" party preference into a corresponding vote. As a result, (3) larger as well as governing parties tend to lose votes in European elections, while smaller and opposition parties tend to win at the polls.

Building and expanding on the second order model, it has been argued that parties' fortunes in European elections also depend on the national electoral cycle. Depending on when EP elections take place within the national electoral cycle, citizens will show different patterns of voting behavior (Reif, 1984; Marsh, 1998; Weber, 2007, 2011). Governments facing European elections during the *honeymoon* with their electorate (i.e., within their first year of tenure) are most likely to register minor losses or even none at all (Hix and Marsh, 2007). The swing away from voting for government parties is much more present when European elections take place in the middle of the national cycle, that is, when government parties' popularity tends to be at its lowest. It is also at this moment that opposition parties tend to underline most strongly that the European vote should serve as a test for government performance. When European elections are held shortly before national elections, citizens have stronger incentives to act strategically, in order to influence upcoming national elections. Although there is always the opportunity to punish governing parties, the latter tend to lose less than they would

if the elections were held at the mid-point of the electoral cycle. In other words, governing parties lose votes anyway (as postulated by *the second order model*), but they lose *less* if the European election is held at the beginning, or at the end, of the national electoral cycle.

Challenging this classical view on European elections, a growing body of literature has contended – albeit with varying degrees of success – that Europe matters, and that its influence on voting might have even increased over time due to the continuous strengthening of the EP's powers (Schmitt, 2005) and a somewhat greater visibility of European issues during the campaign (de Vreese *et al.,* 2006; Trechsel, 2010). With the sudden rise of parties opposing the European integration process in the 1994 EP elections, scholars started to look into euroscepticism as a potential explanatory factor of electoral outcomes (Lodge, 1996; Taggart, 1998). Early individual-level analyses showed that voters opposing further integration were more likely to defect from government parties, although not necessarily giving their votes to eurosceptic parties (Marsh, 2003, 2007). At the aggregate level, Ferrara and Weishaupt (2004) hypothesized that parties opposing European integration were likely to perform well in EP elections. Although this hypothesis did not hold true empirically, they found that parties that "did not get their act together" on EU integration, i.e., those who have ambiguous views on Europe, systematically performed worse. Partial confirmation of the "anti-EU-leads-to-electoral-gains" thesis comes a few years later: in their pooled analysis of EP election results held between 1979 and 2004, Hix and Marsh (2007: 506) find indeed that "even when size and government status are held constant, anti-EU parties do much better than average". However, the authors also characterize these effects as "minor" especially in light of the fact that anti-EU parties were "relatively rare" by 2004. As they conclude, "Europe remains at best a minor element in these elections in most cases" (*ibid.*). In a later analysis, Hix and Marsh (2011) attempt to quantify this effect. As it appears, anti-EU parties gained in average 6.7 percentage points (as compared to the previous national election). However, "more than a half of the gains in votes for anti-European parties in European Parliament elections can be explained by the fact that these parties tend to be small or new opposition parties" (Hix and Marsh, 2011: 8).

Against this background, our study departs from an overarching research question: if the trend towards "Europe starts to matter in European elections" continued to intensify, could the 2014 EP elections mark a turning point and be considered the first genuinely European elections? We have two reasons to believe this to be the case: first, it might well be that the attempt of "presidentialising" EP elections through the so called race between *spitzenkandidaten* could have fostered interest in the elections and therefore mobilized parts of the electorate that would have otherwise preferred to stay away from the ballot box (Schmitt *et al.,* 2015). Indeed, five *spitzenkandidaten* were chosen by the major political groups and started touring Europe in quest of voters. To cut a long story short: the expected effect on turnout did not take place. Initial analyses (Hobolt, 2014; Schmitt *et al.,* 2015) show that there was a significant effect of "recognition" on mobilization: turnout was higher among those who recognized both Jean-Claude Juncker and Martin Schulz as being the respective *spitzenkandidaten* of the EPP and the S&D groups, respectively. However, this research also shows that the absolute level of "recognition" was poor, therefore preventing any tangible effect on overall turnout. Although the EPP candidate Juncker was appointed to the Presidency of the European Commission, the college of Commissioners is composed of members of four different party groups, jointly representing a grand-coalition *à la Suisse* rather than a proper party government. In other words, the electoral consequences of the, 2014 EP elections for the composition of the Commission remain weak, a fact that casts a doubt on positive turnout effects in the future.

This leaves us with the second factor that could have contributed to making the, 2014 exercise of pan-European democracy particularly interesting to voters: their saliency in political terms. As we have seen, one of – if not *the* most fundamental factors leading to the characterization of European Parliamentary elections being second-order events is their relative irrelevance. The European Parliament had few powers when the citizens of the nine member states first elected its members in, 1979. This has drastically changed since: over the past three decades, the European Parliament has

become a very powerful legislator (Hix *et al.,* 2007; Fossum and Menéndez, 2012). Most recently, the Lisbon Treaty has expanded co-decision to almost all legislation at the EU level. Also, together with its increased formal powers, the EP has arguably emancipated itself politically over time, holding the Commission accountable for its doings with ever-stronger levels of self-confidence. Maybe more importantly, though, the recent economic and financial crisis had profound effects on supranational governance. From Greece to Ireland, from the Euro to the breakdowns in the banking sector, this crisis has triggered European responses of unforeseeable depth. An impressive sequence of common binding economic measures (among others: the two-pack, the six-pack, and the fiscal compact) have shown to Europe's voters just how powerful the EU has become – if not as a unitary actor, then at least as a locus of interaction between member states' governments – in a variety of policy domains (significantly affecting the everyday life of European citizens) that used to be traditionally controlled by national governments. If Europe starts so visibly to matter on policy, one can expect that this will lead to an increasing importance of policy issues (and of the issue stances of political parties) for determining electoral performance in EP Elections; and – perhaps even more importantly – that a *synchronization* of such issues might take place, with the *same* issues becoming relevant across multiple countries. This would correspond to the emergence of the first signs of a common European debate, effectively testifying an increased Europeanization of EP elections. Furthermore, we would obviously expect that the EU integration process itself should appear among these common issues, with political forces competing on the very issue of how much Europe one needs when regulating the economy, and how much of a European Union one needs for overcoming the crisis. As a consequence of EU policies trying to address the economic and financial crisis, we argue then that a stronger politicization of Europe might be emerging, leading to a further erosion of the "permissive consensus" towards EU institutions and policies. Accordingly, the domestic consequences of EU policies have put Europe on the table of voters in the member states, thus reinforcing a polarization process on the pro-/anti-Europe dimension.

In other words, the combined effect of the overall strengthening of EP powers – both in absolute and relative terms – and the visibility of EU measures in the management of the economic and financial crisis leads us to believe that European Parliamentary elections may start to matter, becoming an electoral battlefield where something is at stake.
As a result of our aforementioned considerations, we finally identify three hypotheses to be empirically tested:

H1: For predicting electoral performance in EP elections, the second order model has *less* predictive power and less clear effects in 2014, compared to 2009;

H2: Still for predicting electoral performance, issue stances of political parties have more predictive power in 2014 compared to 2009, even when estimating a common model for all EU-28 countries;

H3: Among the relevant issue stances, the party stances on EU integration increases its importance in 2014 (compared to 2009) as a predictor of electoral performance.

Data and measures

In line with a long-standing analytical approach (e.g., Schmitt, 2005; Hix and Marsh, 2007; 2011; Schmitt and Toygur; 2016) we rely on aggregate-level data to test conflicting hypotheses about

European elections and investigate why citizens switch votes from national to European elections.[1] We thus focus on individual parties in a given election as our unit of analysis.[2] The dependent variable is for each party the difference between the percentage of valid votes polled in the EP elections and that obtained at the previous national parliamentary elections held in the country.[3] Relying on across-election changes in *vote* rather than *seat* shares has the noteworthy advantage of allowing straightforward comparison between large parties (which are more likely to gain representation) as compared to smaller ones.

The main independent variables that operationalize the second order model are as follows:

- *Size* is the percentage of votes for each party in the last national election. This variable also serves as baseline to calculate the vote-share gap between national and the European elections;

- *Government* is a dummy variable scoring '1' for all parties included in the national government at the time of the EP elections and '0' for all others;

- *Early* is a dummy variable, which is intended to capture the relationship between sitting in government and the national electoral cycle. Following Hix and Marsh (2007) it takes the value of '1' if the EP election under consideration took place during the "honeymoon period", i.e. during the first twelve months following the national elections, and '0' otherwise;

- *New party* is also a dummy variable that assigns a value of '1' to parties that are running for the first time in the EP elections under consideration and '0' to all others.

The coding of parties' position on the issues comes from the EU Profiler (2009) and **eu**and**i** (2014) projects. Whereas previous works (e.g., Hix and Marsh, 2007) resorted to expert survey data to place parties in the political space, our operational measures are derived from an *iterative* approach to party placement closely connected to the development of Internet-based Voting Advice Applications (VAAs). Both the 2009 EU Profiler and 2014 **eu**and**i** VAA projects placed parties making use of such method, which consists in a combination of expert judgement and party self-placement (Trechsel and Mair, 2011; Garzia *et al.,* 2015). The iterative method attempts to maximize the strengths of a combination of consolidated methodologies while at the same time trying to counterbalance the respective weaknesses. Expert coding and party self-placement take place independently, but the respective results are then compared in order to introduce a control mechanism. A major advantage of using these datasets lies in the large number of policy issues covered, in its emphasis on actual policy statements rather than on a generic classification on dimensions of political conflict, along with its immediate availability in the aftermath of the EP elections[4].

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[1] As a matter of fact, electoral outcomes in terms of aggregate measures of party success are not marred by the problem befalling individual-level data that "must rely on each respondent's recall of past [voting] behavior, which is likely to understate change, particularly that from unpopular parties" (Hix and Marsh, 2007: 499).

[2] In the analysis we included all parties already represented in either the national or the European parliament at the time of the EP election under analysis as well as parties standing a reasonable chance (on the basis of available pre-electoral polls) to gain representation in that given election. Based on these criteria, the total number of parties included in the analysis ranges between 228 in 2009 and 234 in 2014.

[3] Take as an example the Italian *Partito Democratico*: with 27.4 percent of valid votes polled at the 2013 Italian parliamentary election and 40.8 percent at the 2014 EP election, its value on the dependent variable is 13.4 (measured in percentage points).

[4] The latter two reasons, in turn, led us to rule out data from the CHES project – which rather relies on expert classification on general conflict dimensions, rather than on specific policy statements – and from the Euromanifesto project, whose data is still not available at the time of writing.

Results

Table 1 presents the results of our empirical test of the second-order model for the 2009 and 2014 EP elections, with separate tests for Western and Central Eastern Europe. Our analysis takes into account what the literature has clearly highlighted, that is, the presence of *geographical heterogeneities*: the second-order model was documented to convincingly explain election outcomes in Western Europe, while it was seen as less powerful in the context of Central and Eastern Europe (Schmitt, 2005; Hix and Marsh, 2007, 2011; Rohrschneider and Whitefield, 2012). In order to keep comparability with previous scholarship on the topic, we separately assess model dynamics for these two geographical areas.

Results for Western Europe (Table 1, top pane) in 2009 present a typical second-order scenario. In bivariate terms (model 1), party size negatively affects electoral performance, meaning that larger parties tend to lose more than smaller parties. However, this size effect becomes non-significant as soon as the party's government/opposition status is taken into account. When introduced (together with the appropriate main effect, see model 2), the interaction between party size and government status proves negative and significant, also making the main effect of size non-significant. In other words, it is large *government* parties that lose more, not large parties *per se*. This finding is in line with the predictions of the second-order model, and is confirmed even when taking into account the effects of the electoral cycle, modeled here in terms of a dummy variable, coding whether the EP election took place during the "honeymoon" period of the first twelve months after the last general election. The interaction of our "honeymoon" dummy with the governmental position is positive and significant, confirming how parties in office tend to do better than other parties when EP elections are held shortly after the general elections they just won. This is yet another confirmation of the (expanded) second-order model. However, the situation in 2014 appears slightly changed, and several elements emerge that suggest the appropriateness of the second-order model to have weakened. First, in terms of sheer predictive power: our R-squared decreases in the period under consideration from .39 to .33 for the fully specified second-order model. Second, and more importantly, we observe an important change in terms of the dynamics related to party size. The model estimation for Western Europe in 2014 sees the disappearance of one of the key characteristics of the second-order model: the conditionality of party size effects on the parties' government status. In other words, large parties are theoretically expected to experience larger losses than smaller parties only when they hold a government position. However, in 2014 the negative effect of party size (model 4) keeps its significance even when introducing its interaction with the party's governmental position (model 5), which even results not significant in 2014. Thus, in 2014, large parties experience larger losses than small parties *in general and regardless* of their government status. The effect of government status is, however, still visible in its interaction with the electoral cycle. Moreover, electoral cycle effects show an even stronger punishment for parties in government. Compared to 2009, the effect of the electoral cycle has the same direction (parties in office tend to do better during the "honeymoon" year following national elections); however, the overall effect is slightly different. While this "honeymoon effect" allowed for a sheer "honeymoon bonus" in 2009 (compared to other parties), and no effect after the honeymoon, the situation in 2014 shows that the honeymoon allows parties in government to be somewhat protected from expected losses. Indeed, they do not suffer more than other parties (no significant effect), while after the honeymoon they suffer from a negative "cost of governing". In this regard, a second-order dynamic is still visible, although the overall level of support for governing parties appears to decrease regardless of the electoral cycle.

The pattern differs substantially when moving to Central and Eastern Europe (Table 1, bottom pane). In 2009, no strong second-order dynamics were detectable; apart from a significant, bivariate negative effect of party size (disappearing when introducing other second-order related predictors), no other significant effects, i.e., of office status and electoral cycle, emerge. Also, the predictive ability of the second-order model appears remarkably lower than in Western Europe. Indeed, our analysis

witnesses the very same pattern with regard to 2014 where we continue to observe an absence of strong second-order dynamics. Note also that the new parties, running for the first time in EP elections only have an advantage over established parties in the CEE region and only for the 2014 elections. In all other contexts, this aspect of the second order model seems to be negligible.

Table 1: Reassessing the second-order model: Western Europe

	2009			2014		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Size	-0.221***	-0.113	-0.111	-0.251***	-0.136**	-0.140*
	(0.050)	(0.073)	(0.073)	(0.060)	(0.046)	(0.048)
Government	-	2.184	1.966	-	-0.111	-1.927
		(1.217)	(1.183)		(1.459)	(1.801)
Size*Government	-	-0.209*	-0.219**	-	-0.154	-0.132
		(0.074)	(0.072)		(0.099)	(0.099)
Early	-	-	-3.560***	-	-	-1.556
			(0.334)			(0.768)
Early*Government	-	-	8.123***	-	-	4.903*
			(0.972)			(1.909)
New Party	-0.021	0.572	0.442	1.427	1.782	1.610
	(0.876)	(0.928)	(0.929)	(1.367)	(1.250)	(1.233)
Constant	2.234***	1.641*	1.770*	2.349**	1.993**	2.405**
	(0.547)	(0.651)	(0.643)	(0.616)	(0.604)	(0.645)
Observations	153	153	153	148	148	148
R^2	0.315	0.370	0.392	0.264	0.303	0.331

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses. $^*p < 0.05$, $^{**}p < 0.01$, $^{***}p < 0.001$

Table 1 (ctd.): Reassessing the second-order model: Central and Eastern Europe

	2009			2014		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Size	-0.213[**]	-0.033	-0.029	-0.204[*]	-0.126	-0.125
	(0.065)	(0.167)	(0.169)	(0.066)	(0.069)	(0.069)
Government	-	2.091	1.694	-	2.464	1.918
		(2.170)	(3.586)		(2.762)	(3.047)
Size*Government	-	-0.281	-0.268	-	-0.161	-0.173
		(0.267)	(0.276)		(0.184)	(0.164)
Early	-	-	1.359	-	-	-0.382
			(1.332)			(0.698)
Early*Government	-	-	-0.281	-	-	4.191
			(3.746)			(5.399)
New Party	5.782	6.736[*]	7.058[*]	3.808[**]	4.426[**]	4.386[**]
	(2.713)	(2.912)	(2.989)	(1.198)	(1.099)	(1.258)
Constant	1.397	0.210	-0.339	3.271[***]	1.915[*]	1.143
	(0.986)	(1.446)	(1.633)	(0.607)	(0.831)	(0.768)
Observations	75	75	75	86	86	86
R^2	0.232	0.280	0.286	0.215	0.255	0.269

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses. [*] $p < 0.05$, [**] $p < 0.01$, [***] $p < 0.001$

To strengthen these findings, we plotted all marginal effects for Western Europe as well as for Central and Eastern Europe separately. Figure 1 presents the marginal effects of party size, conditional on government position. In the West the classic second-order effect becomes visible only in 2009: size has a statistically significant (negative) effect only for parties in office. However, such an effect is substituted in 2014 by a sheer size effect: large parties lose whether in office or not. As for member states in the CEE region, size does not appear to bear any effect, regardless of parties' governing status and EP elections under analysis.

Figure 1 – Marginal effects of party size, conditional on government position

a. Western Europe, 2009   *b. Western Europe, 2014*

c. Central and Eastern Europe, 2009   *d. Central and Eastern Europe, 2014*
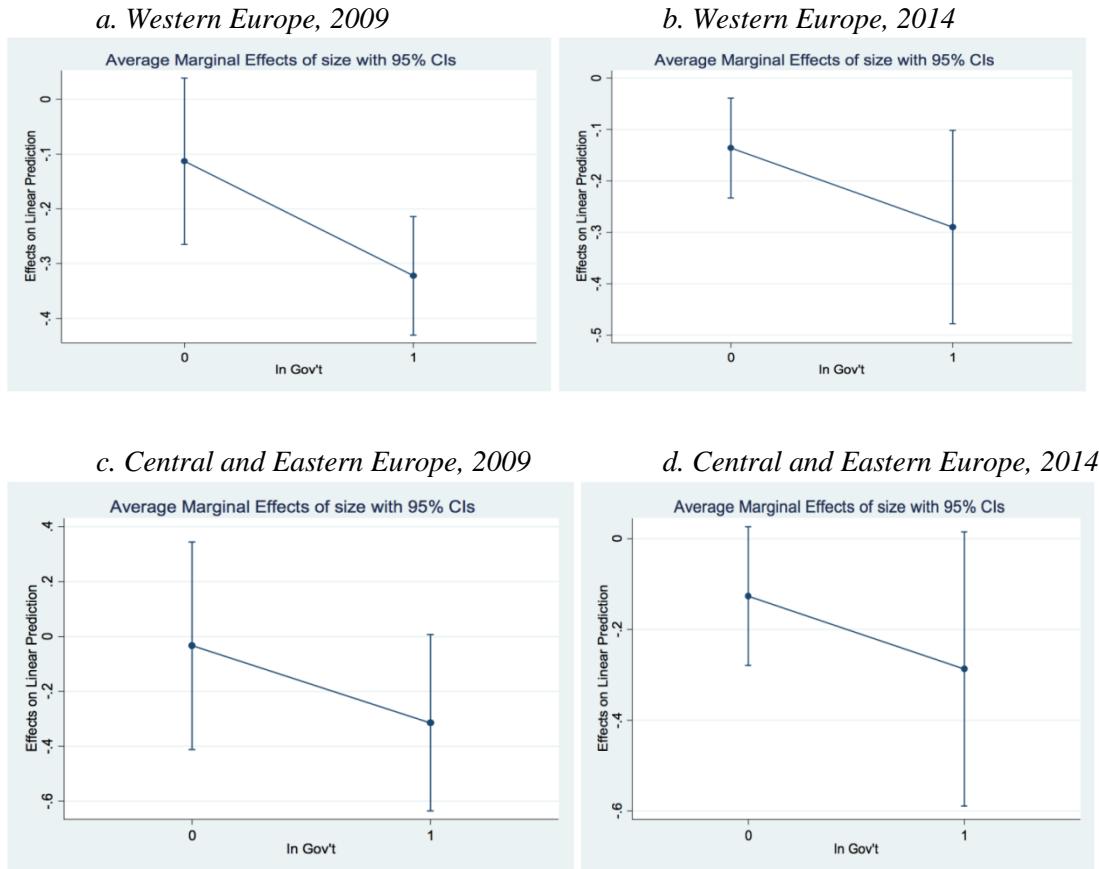
In Figure 2, we plot the marginal effects of government position, conditional on cycle effects (i.e., our "honeymoon" dummy). In the West, a classic second-order effect appears for both 2009 and 2014. As to the former, we find a positive effect on electoral outcomes when a governing party is in its "honeymoon". In 2014, however, there is an overall negative effect for parties in office (i.e., significantly negative after honeymoon, simply not losing when in honeymoon). With regard to CEE, no corresponding significant effect can be detected.

Figure 2 - Marginal effects of government position, conditional on cycle effects

a. Western Europe, 2009

b. Western Europe, 2014

c. Central and Eastern Europe, 2009

d. Central and Eastern Europe, 2014
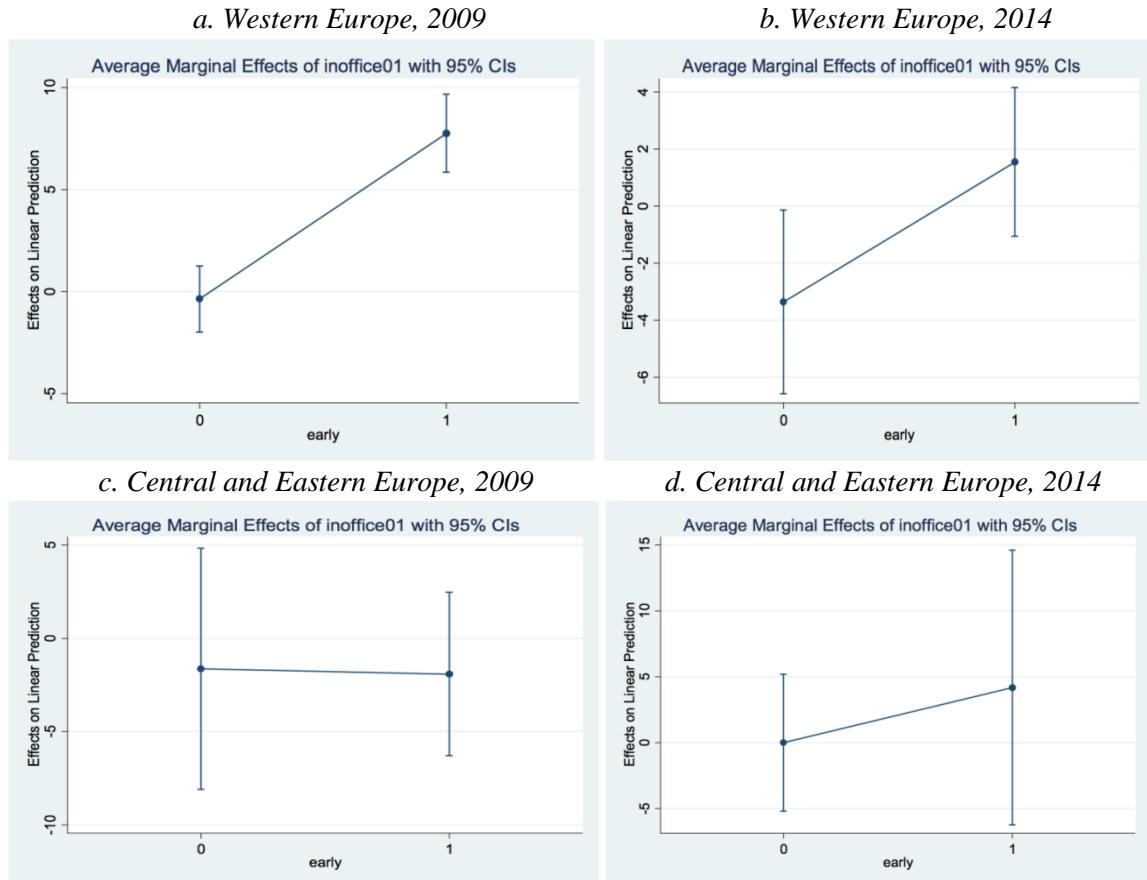
Overall, our first hypothesis is confirmed. Indeed, it appears that for explaining electoral success in EP elections, the second order model loses its explanatory power between 2009 and 2014. While in the CEE region the second order model has never performed well from the outset, the loss of explanatory ability of the model appears especially pronounced for the case for Western Europe in 2014. There, some key dynamics – i.e., the effect of party size in interaction with governmental status – would seem to be undermined as well.

We then proceed to testing of our second core hypothesis, i.e., that as a result of an emerging Europeanization of political dynamics, not only an overall trend of punishment of large, mainstream parties has taken place in 2014; but also, some form of EU-wide synchronization might be emerging in terms of which issue stances matter for electoral performance. According to our second hypothesis, electoral success at the polls should increasingly depend on the same issues across multiple countries. We then added to the model an additional set of variables, coding party issue stances on 17 issues on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "completely against" to "completely in favor" of a given issue statement (full wording is provided in Appendix). Most importantly, we proceeded to estimate a *fixed-effects model*, i.e., not allowing coefficient for issue stances to vary across countries. This reveals how demanding our test is, as it implicitly assumes that issues that emerge as significant are so in *all* the countries included in the test. This of course goes mostly against the *second-order* model, as by definition second-order elections should be contested only on genuinely national issues: thus, different countries should see explanations of party performance based on *different* issues. Any evidence of a relevant contribution of our issue-based predictors, both in terms of predictive power and of significant effects, signals that common dynamics are emerging across many countries, pointing in turn to a potential emergence of some kind of Europeanization of the political space.

The empirical test of this hypothesis is strongly connected to the availability of new data produced by the EU Profiler and **eu**and**i** research projects. As mentioned above, the distinctive feature of these projects is the collection of party positions on a *large set of policy issues*. The comparison of the two datasets allows for the first time an assessment of the Europeanization of public opinion in comparative perspective across time (2009-2014). This said, our strategy for empirical analysis is rather straightforward. We estimated OLS regression models of party performance in EP elections relative to their performance in the last general elections based on party issue stances, by controlling for all the structural predictors of the second-order election model. In other words, we are testing whether parties characterized by specific issue positions (e.g., by a anti-immigration attitude) are consistently (and significantly) better performing than in the last national elections. Of course, the inclusion of the typical second-order model predictors is necessary to avoid spurious effects that might simply be the product of the second-order dynamics. Model estimation results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 – Testing the full model of party performance in EP elections

	West (2009)	West (2014)	CEE (2009)	CEE (2014)		West (2009)	West (2014)	CEE (2009)	CEE (2014)
						(0.789)	(0.937)	(1.203)	(1.255)
Size	-0.083	-0.146*	-0.035	-0.097	EU Taxing Powers	0.548	1.286	-0.287	0.987
	(0.067)	(0.052)	(0.192)	(0.066)		(0.543)	(1.055)	(2.397)	(1.420)
Government	2.446	-2.344	0.937	1.504	Less Workers' Regulation	-0.028	**2.169***	-2.052	0.607
	(1.683)	(2.181)	(4.540)	(3.781)		(0.645)	(0.856)	(0.947)	(1.225)
Size*Government	-0.229**	-0.101	-0.294	-0.210	Renewable Energies	-0.564	0.975	-2.102	-3.409
	(0.076)	(0.123)	(0.296)	(0.166)		(0.720)	(1.084)	(2.052)	(1.574)
Early	-5.279***	-0.509	1.875	-0.968	Public Transportation	-0.717	0.495	-0.676	1.892
	(0.629)	(1.250)	(2.592)	(1.685)		(0.626)	(0.300)	(1.082)	(0.968)
Early*Government	9.121***	5.574*	0.253	2.961	Harsher Sentences	-1.046	-0.086	0.281	-0.167
	(1.410)	(2.021)	(4.874)	(6.280)		(0.975)	(0.911)	(1.635)	(1.932)
New Party	0.350	1.106	7.035*	5.166***	EU Speaks w. One Voice	0.189	-0.748	0.994	-1.231
	(1.195)	(1.506)	(2.788)	(0.886)		(0.960)	(0.916)	(1.685)	(1.692)
Keep Welfare	-0.488	-0.606	1.273	-0.550	EU Defense Policy	-0.120	0.640	-1.185	0.644
	(0.691)	(0.873)	(1.326)	(1.247)		(0.587)	(0.823)	(2.329)	(1.406)
Cut Immigration	0.789	-1.050	2.403	-0.669	EU Integration Good	-0.978	**-2.331****	3.219	-0.788
	(0.813)	(0.765)	(1.468)	(1.222)		(0.892)	(0.783)	(1.688)	(1.246)
Immigrants accept values	**-1.216***	-0.295	0.736	0.084	Less Veto Power in EU	-0.266	0.592	-0.002	**4.346***
	(0.577)	(0.963)	(1.635)	(2.203)		(0.868)	(0.798)	(2.549)	(1.848)
Gay Marriage	-0.125	-0.392	0.206	-1.512	Referendums on EU Treaties	-0.379	0.120	-0.341	-2.507
	(0.577)	(0.607)	(2.051)	(1.460)		(0.511)	(0.797)	(2.710)	(2.204)
Soft Drugs	0.634	-0.190	0.813	-0.439	Constant	3.289*	4.292**	-2.735	2.825
	(0.691)	(0.971)	(1.424)	(0.790)		(1.329)	(1.269)	(4.019)	(1.731)
Euthanasia	-0.126	-1.054	-3.365	1.537	Observations	153	148	75	86
	(0.746)	(0.829)	(4.401)	(1.572)	R^2	0.464	0.408	0.405	0.461
Cut Spending	0.903	-0.459	0.552	0.379					

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

The first, simplest and clearest empirical test for our hypothesis emerges from the sheer comparison – between 2009 and 2014 – of the R-squared increase produced by the inclusion of issue stances. This measure expresses the extent to which issue stances provide increased legibility to electoral results (beyond the second-order model) in the two elections. In general, issue stances provide a significant increase in the predictive power of our models. In Western Europe this increase is .072 in 2009 (from .392 to .464) and .077 in 2014 (from .331 to .408), thus showing a significant importance of issue stances, albeit still less relevant than second-order dynamics. Conversely, Central and Eastern Europe sees a lower impact of second-order dynamics, and a much larger (and increasing) importance of issues. While the R-squared increase was already .119 in 2009 (from .286 to .405), in 2014 it reaches a .192 increase (from .269 to .461), actually providing additional predictive power that is virtually as large as the original predictive power of our second-order-related predictors. In short, evidence of electoral consequences of an increasingly synchronized issue relevance appears clearly from our findings.

Starting from Western Europe, already in 2009 there appeared an issue stance with a significant effect. All other issue stances being equal, parties supporting assimilative approaches to immigration, symbolized by the statement "immigrants should accept our culture and values", suffered larger electoral losses. However, in 2014 effects appear much stronger and readable. Two issue stances appear as significant (and bearing larger effects). The first is support for the free-market statement "less work regulations to fight unemployment": *ceteris paribus*, parties fully supporting this statement have consistently experienced better results that parties adopting the opposite position. The second significant issue stance is then, supporting now hypothesis 3, hostility to European integration. Parties supporting the statement "EU integration is a good thing" have systematically experienced worse performances than those opposing it. Likely as a result of the hot debate about economic policy in the Euro countries (with effects both within and outside the Eurozone), EU integration is not anymore perceived as a process with only positive, uncontroversial effects – an observation that is clearly matched by the success of Eurosceptic parties across Western European countries.

Finally, an even clearer scenario emerges in Central Eastern Europe. While in 2009 no issue stance showed any significant effect, in 2014 support for the statement "less veto power in EU institutions" appears to have significantly rewarded political parties. This last finding appears on the one hand as an additional empirical support for hypothesis 3; at the same time, it inevitably appears in partial contradiction with what we found for Western Europe. Albeit in different terms (this statement is obviously pro-integration, but much more about a pragmatic attitude towards integration, aimed at increasing decisional and institutional efficiency), explanations for this contradiction have to be hypothesized by taking into account the very different subjective position that CEE countries (compared to Western countries) have towards the EU, as they are essentially receiving large economic (and political) benefits from the EU, while not experiencing to the same degree the problems connected to the Euro membership; a very different situation compared to Western countries, which might well justify a much more favorable attitude towards European integration.

These results strongly confirm our second hypothesis: not only do we see an increasing importance of politics for electoral outcomes, i.e., positions on issues matter for EP elections, but there are signs of an emerging Europeanization of a common issue space. In line with our third hypothesis, it is European integration itself which provides for an important share of the common ground on which parties across all of Europe gain or lose votes. In Western Europe, it is opposing Europe that was, in 2014, the only issue stance that helped parties gaining votes across the board. The picture is more or less reversed for CEE countries, though. Here, it is the institutional development of the EU – through a weakening of the unanimity principle for EU decisions – that led to electoral success. It could not be underlined too much that in 2014 the European dimension was the only issue dimension that significantly contributed to parties' electoral fates at the polls both in the West and in the East. Clearly, this is a sign of a strong Europeanization of the 2014 EP elections.

Discussion and conclusions

The expectations of a higher saliency for EP elections have been at least marginally fulfilled. The analysis has shown indeed that the second-order model is far from an obsolete analytical tool. However, there is something new. On the one hand, second-order dynamics clearly appear weaker in 2014 compared to 2009. On the other hand, our analysis shows some kind of *synchronization* of issue importance across different countries, with a prominent role of European issues. This aspect of issue synchronization may sound auspicious to Euro-optimists, who might finally see the dawn of a long-awaited Europeanization of EP campaigns. However, this Europeanization of EP campaigns contrasts optimistic expectations in two ways. First, there are no single EU-wide dynamics, but rather two opposing dynamics in the West and in the East. Secondly, and ironically enough for Euro-optimists, such East-West differences precisely concern the *sign* of the effect:in the West, it paid off, in 2014 to campaign *against* Europe, while the inverse was true for parties in the CEE region. At least in Western Europe, if there is one common denominator to campaigns and results in different countries, it is the success of parties taking positions mostly *against* (further) European integration, with the prominent example of the striking *bleu Marine* success of the Front National.

Yet there is more to the picture, mainly because the rise of Euroscepticism appears to be emerging through a pattern that is much more complex than mostly suggested so far. According to conventional wisdom, anti-EU stances have been mostly championed by parties of the populist and Eurosceptic right, who have successfully politicized European issues — in a negative way and in terms of anti-system protest — taking advantage of the widespread discontent caused by austerity policies. This is typically the case of the UKIP (26.6%) in the United Kingdom, of the aforementioned Front National (24.9%) in France and of the Danish People's Party (26.6%) in Denmark. However, when looking across the 28 EU countries, the picture is much more varied. In fact, the conflict over EU integration has been politicized in different (and often conflicting) ways in different countries. First and foremost, in some countries (Spain being the most prominent example), no established party has actually taken anti-EU stances[5]. Secondly, while anti-EU stances have in general proved successful in many countries, this success has arrived through very different strategies. Syriza (26.6%) in Greece is a good example of a politicization of the issue in a *leftist* frame, focusing on EU-advocated austerity policies and on the *current direction* of the EU integration process, rather than on its very existence. The Five-Star Movement in Italy (21.1%) has adopted a similar focus, although with a stronger anti-establishment and anti-elite appeal. Finally, in other countries, it is even conservative mainstream parties that have been successful in "stealing" anti-EU issues from anti-establishment parties, thus limiting their electoral success. Prominent examples are those of the Finnish conservative party (KOK) and of *Fidesz* in Hungary, which have both succeeded – by playing this strategy – in containing the electoral advance of, respectively, the Finns Party and *Jobbik*.

In short, the above findings suggest that, if some kind of Europeanization of party competition in EP elections can be claimed for 2014, it has not been taking place according to a naïve, mechanic, uniform emergence and spill-over of European issues through public opinion and party competition in all EU countries. What we see, instead, is that the entry, framing, politicization and saliency of European issues at the country level still appear controlled and negotiated by political parties, with their specific strategic choices conditioned by the spatial structure and dynamics of the party system, as well as by the structure of electoral incentives and constraints. As a result, when comparing different countries, European issues appear with different saliencies, framed differently, politicized in different directions and by different types of parties. In other words, while we argue that common issue dynamics are emerging across a large number of countries in the 2014 elections, it is inevitable to observe that such dynamics express themselves differently in each party system.

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[5] At least by the 2014 elections. Moreover, anti-establishment parties like Podemos and Ciudadanos are apparently following a pattern close to the one adopted by Syriza: not anti-EU, but rather towards a change in the direction of the EU integration process.

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APPENDIX. Question wording of issue statements

KEEP WELFARE
Social programmes should be maintained even at the cost of higher taxes

CUT IMMIGRATION
Immigration [into your country] should be made more restrictive

IMMIGRANTS ACCEPT VALUES
Immigrants from outside Europe should be required to accept our culture and values

GAY MARRIAGE
The legalisation of same sex marriages is a good thing

SOFT DRUGS
The legalisation of the personal use of soft drugs is to be welcomed

EUTHANASIA
Euthanasia should be legalised

CUT SPENDING
Government spending should be reduced in order to lower taxes

EU TAXING POWER
The EU should acquire its own tax raising powers

LESS WORKERS' REGULATION
Governments should reduce workers' protection regulations in order to fight unemployment

RENEWABLE ENERGIES
Renewable sources of energy should be supported even if this means higher energy costs

PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION
The promotion of public transport should be fostered through green taxes (e.g. road taxing)

HARSHER SENTENCES
Criminals should be punished more severely

EU SPEAKS WITH ONE VOICE
On foreign policy issues the EU should speak with one voice

EU DEFENCE POLICY
The European Union should strengthen its security and defence policy

EU INTEGRATION GOOD
European integration is a good thing

LESS VETO POWER IN EU
Individual member states of the EU should have less veto power

REFERENDUMS ON EU TREATIES
Any new European Treaty should be subject to approval in a referendum in [your country]

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