

Voting for Europe?

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ABSTRACT

By using micro data from the European Elections Survey this paper tests the different explanations for government party losses in the 2014 European Parliamentary (EP) elections. Using logistic regression, this paper finds support for all four tested theories, however, their dominance is geographically differentiated. Comparisons with earlier empirical studies point to the changing nature of EP elections over time. This finding suggests that future EP elections will be evaluated more as *sui generis* elections when its (perceived) importance further develops. The findings of this study contribute to voting behavior theory in EP elections and multi-level-governance in general.

Keywords

European Parliamentary elections, vote switching, voting behavior, survey research, multi-level-governance.

INTRODUCTION

From the very first EP elections in 1979 losses for national government parties were observed [1]. These losses were explained as a consequence of the second-order nature of EP elections, a term which denotes elections that are derivatives of national, or first-order, elections. This paper argues that the continuous consensus on this explanation in the literature [9] is puzzling for at least three reasons: The increased formal powers and policy scope of the EP [2], the increased importance of the EP in voters perception [3] and the increased politicisation of the EP, which makes it easier for voters to identify with parties on the European level [3].

Arguing that EP and European issues be increasingly important for voters, this paper expects voting in EP elections, and therefore vote switching, to be dominated by EU rather than national considerations. However, even most recent research explains government party losses by the subordinate nature of EP elections [4]

Recent critique points to the homogenous methodology of most of these studies, which are almost all aggregated studies [5]. Micro level causal inferences on the basis of aggregated data is prone to the methodological problems of ecological fallacy and observational equivalence. To avoid these problems, this study focusses on the micro level, thereby seeking to construct a more complete

explanation of government party losses in multi-level governance elections, thereby focussing specifically on the EP elections and its changing nature. Combined with the idea that government party losses are the consequence of vote switching¹ instead of strategic abstention [6], the central question of this paper is as follows:

What explains vote switching from government parties in national elections to opposition parties in the 2014 EP elections?

The 2014 EP election is an under researched case and a most likely case to find so-called *sui generis*² effects because it is the most important EP election following voter perception [3]. Taking geographical differentiation into account this paper analyses Western- and Eastern member states separately³.

WHAT THEORY TELLS US

The literature can broadly be divided in two perspectives: the barometer- and *sui generis* explanations. Four dominant theories can be derived from the current literature in these categories, respectively: referendum voting, economic voting, sincere voting and EU voting. The first two fall within the barometer perspective while the last two are denoted as *sui generis*. After discussing each theory briefly the derived hypotheses will be stated.

Barometer

Barometer elections are defined as: ‘[...] elections that reflect changes in citizens’ attitudes towards the government in response to changing political and economic conditions, in absence of the opportunity to install a new Executive’ [7]. The barometer concept therefore measures ‘pressure on the government’ [7]. The question, is then however: ‘does dissatisfaction with government parties [signified by a loss of popularity in EP elections] reflect a natural ‘cycle of popularity’ for regimes or a negative retrospective judgment of economic performance?’ [8]. These two competing explanations are embodied by the theories of referendum voting and economic voting.

(1) Referendum voting

The barometer nature of EP elections make them less important for voters, who are therefore voting more

¹ Vote switching is used to denote those people who participated in both the 2014 EP- and most near forgone national election, and who defected from a government party on the EU level. The group which switched the other way around is negligible and will not be discussed in this paper.

² Meaning ‘unique’ or ‘on its own’.

³ This conference paper is based on a bachelor thesis. Some simplifications have however been made, including the absence of other contextual variables like the original institutional effects.

expressively, leading to more protest and anti-government party votes [1]. EP elections in this sense serve as an outlet for public dissatisfaction on the national level, or as a referendum on government performance [9].

(2) Economic voting

The economic voter hypothesis explains government party losses in EP election by an asymmetrical evaluation of economic government performance, where government parties are only held responsible for bad economic performance and are not rewarded for good ones [10].

Sui generis

Moving in the sui generis explanations, vote switching is not explained by performance evaluations of government parties on the national level, but by the different preferences voters have on the national and EU level, thereby assuming that the EP election is considered to be *sui generis* by voters.

(3) Sincere voting

Sincere voting here simply means voting for the most preferred party, which is the opposite of strategic voting [9]. Turning the barometer logic upside down, sincere voting is more important in EP elections because voters are less constrained by strategical considerations [9].

(4) EU voting

Another explanation for vote switching is the fundamental difference between EP and national election issues [6]. People then switch vote because they have different preferences on EP and national issues. The on average more pro-European manifestos of government parties therefore explain the losses of these parties [11].

Contextual variable

Western- vs Eastern-Europe

The Eastern-European member states have less consolidated party systems which are characterised by higher levels of electoral volatility, less sustainable parties and less clear positions of parties around dominant social cleavages [12]. These less consolidated party systems make it harder to hold governments accountable [13], resulting in barometer effects being less and *sui generis* effects being more present [13].

Hypotheses

H1: The lower the perceived national government performance, the higher the chance of vote switching

H2: The lower the perceived national economic performance, the higher the chance of vote switching

H3: The more voters base their vote on sincere considerations, the higher the chance of vote switching

H4: The more voters base their vote on European considerations, the higher the chance of vote switching

H5: The negative barometer effects on vote switching are weaker for Eastern than for Western member states

H6: The positive sui generis effects on vote switching are stronger for Eastern than for Western member states

Taking stock

Figure I shows the discussed theoretical relations schematically. This paper takes a heuristic approach, arguing that the different theories do not exclude each other for three reasons: (1) Different voters can vote for different reasons, (2) certain voting behavior can be explained by a combination of the theories and (3) the explanatory power of the different theories depends on (here: geographical) contextual variables.

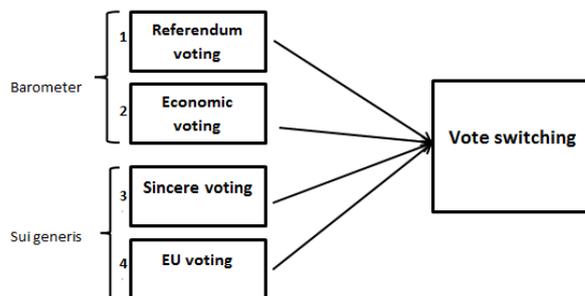


Figure I

DATA & METHODS

To explain government party losses in the 2014 EP elections from a micro perspective, Eurobarometer post-electoral survey data from 2014 is used. This paper is interested in those people who participated in both the latest national and 2014 EP election and who changed vote from a coalition party in national- to an opposition party in EP election. The dependent variable therefore has two categories: those who consistently voted for coalition parties and those who defect from coalition parties in the EP elections. All parties were coded 'coalition' or 'opposition' using the database 'Parties and Elections in Europe' [15]. Because of the dichotomous nominal dependent variable, logistic regression is used to calculate the effect of the different theoretical variables on the chance to belong to the 'coalition-opposition' group when using the 'coalition-coalition' group as reference category.

Country dummies are used to get a so-called fixed-effect model. Following conventions, the following variables are used as (socio-demographic) control variables: gender, age and social class [11]. A combination of (1) social-demographic-, (2) political- and (3) population size weights is used to get a representative sample for the average European voter in two pooled samples: Western- and Eastern EU member states.

Taking the retrospective, satisfying, performance evaluating voter as a starting point for the barometer explanations [16], government performance is operationalized as a dichotomous indicator, while economic performance was measured on a 5-point interval like scale. Following the hypotheses, both are expected to have statistically significant positive coefficients.

Sincere- and EU voting is understood in terms of the smallest distance hypothesis [6]. That is, voters rationally choose their most preferred party, with which they have the smallest ideological distance. Given that the left-right cleavage still dominates European party systems and

following conventions [6], sincere voting is understood as the objective left-right distance between a voters left-right self-rating and the perceived party rating for the party he voted for in EP elections. This results in a 10-point interval-like variable. The dichotomous EU distance is calculated subjectively using self-placement on EU-support compared with expert party coding on this issue retrieved from EUvox data. Following the hypotheses, both variables are expected to have statistically significant negative coefficients.

Finally, all member states which joined the EU from the 2004 enlargement on, with the exception of Malta and Cyprus, are regarded as Eastern European member states.

RESULTS

The descriptive analysis shows that vote switchers are a rather small group consisting of 8,6% of the voters who participated in both elections in the East and 13,2% in the West. Because the group of ‘opposition-coalition’ voters is negligible in number and additional analysis supports the view that lower turn-out in the 2014 EP elections is not disadvantageous for national coalition parties, it is concluded that vote switching rather than strategic abstention is the cause of government party losses in the 2014 EP elections.

Moving to the explanatory analysis, the bivariate findings show that all independent variables have statistically significant effects, which supports the heuristic stance of this paper. The more empirically rich multivariate analysis, presented in Table I, shows three models with model 1 including the two barometer variables, model 2 the two *sui generis* variables and model 3 all four theoretical variables. To ease interpretation the analysis is split for the Eastern and Western member states. Significance is indicated by asterisks and significant effects in line with the hypotheses by bold coefficients.

Interpreting model 1 learns that while government performance is statistically significant predicted in the expected direction in both the East and West, this is only the case for economic performance in the West. This indicates that when someone values the government and economic performance less, he or she is more likely to switch vote to an opposition party in EP elections, except for economic performance in the West. These effects can be theoretically explained by a general dissatisfaction with government parties or as a conscious punishment on economic or political performance.

Moving to model 2 both the EU support and left-right distance have negative statistically significant coefficients in both the East and West, which is in line with the corresponding hypotheses. Both coefficients can be interpreted as follows: a higher distance between the view of a voter and the party voted for in EP elections makes switching from a coalition to an opposition party less likely. For the left-right distance this is theoretically explained as the result of the absence of strategic constraints on the EU level, while the effect of EU support is explained as the consequence of different issues and preferences on the national and EU level. Looking at the

Pseudo R² of both models what stands out is the higher explanatory power of the barometer variables in the West and the *sui generis* variables in the East, which is explained by the different levels of consolidation of the party systems. Model 3, controlling for all theoretical variables, subsequently supports the earlier findings. All effects stay statistically significant and are correct predicted with the exception of economic performance in the East. The higher pseudo R² in the East shows that vote switching is here somewhat better explained than in the West.

Table I

Independent Variable	Model 1 barometer		Model 2 <i>sui generis</i>		Model 3 total	
	East	West	East	West	East	West
Constant	-1,654 (1,145)	-1,063*** (,273)	,884 (2,039)	-,642 (,458)	,395 (2,317)	-2,449 (,542)
Government Performance	1,229*** (,314)	1,686*** (,097)			1,197** (,487)	1,759*** (,153)
Economic Performance	,059 (,189)	,237*** (,052)			-,218 (,306)	,326*** (,079)
EU support distance			-1,605*** (,460)	-1,135*** (,116)	-1,588*** (,491)	-,884*** (,130)
Left-Right distance			-,389*** (,096)	-,108*** (0,20)	-,371*** (,104)	-,091*** (,022)
Model Chi ²	43,793***	930,120***	74,899***	363,136***	77,270***	579,120***
Pseudo R (nagelkerke)	,172	,309	,375	,232	,419	,377
N	1610	3751	1376	2507	1264	2323

Significance=>.1>p>.05*, .05>p>.01**, p<.01***. Control variables and country dummies included but not shown. In the second and third model Malta and Cyprus were not included because they had no EU score. In all models Romania and Croatia were not included because of a lack of cases.

Reflection

Table II summarizes the results by showing that all hypotheses are supported except H2, which is only partly supported because economic voting was not present in the East.

Table II

	Barometer		Sui generis		East-West	
	H1	H2	H3	H4	H6	H7
Supported	X		X	X	X	X
Mixed evidence		x				
No evidence						

The findings of this paper are fundamentally different from the dominant view of EP elections as second-order elections, subordinate to national considerations. This difference is caused partly by the use of an alternative methodology. This paper argues however that the changing nature of EP elections over time forms another reason for these results. The scarce micro level empirical research of the EP elections of 1999, 2004 and 2009 shows that where the barometer effects stay important explanatory variables for vote switching, the *sui generis* effects became more important over time [6][11][13]. The

here discussed findings of the 2014 EP elections fit in this pattern and suggest that a continuous evolution of the EP will go along with EP elections being more and more characterized as *sui generis*, or, judged on their own.

CONCLUSION

The descriptive analysis showed that government party losses in the 2014 EP elections are caused by vote switching from government parties in national- to opposition parties in EP elections. In the explanatory analysis evidence was found for both theoretical perspectives and all four theories of vote switching, strengthening the believe in this paper's heuristic stance. The effects are however geographically differentiated because of the difference in consolidation of the party systems in the East and West. While in the West vote switching let itself be explained mostly by the barometer variables, the *sui generis* variables have a higher explanatory power in the East. It should be clear that these differentiated findings differ from the dominant explanation for vote switching in the literature. This paper explains these different results by the use of an alternative methodology and the changing nature of EP elections

Comparison with scarce micro empirical studies of other EP elections show the changing nature of EP elections over time, with EP elections becoming more evaluated on their own. Generalization of these results should be understood in a prospective instead of retrospective way, meaning that the findings of this paper say something about the shifting nature of EP elections and therefore upcoming elections instead of the nature of forgone elections. This evolutionary effect is likely to become even more important in future EP elections because vertical and horizontal policy integration in the EU is a continuous process [2] and the EP will become even more important in voter perception [3]. The EP is the only supranational parliament in its sort, however, there are good reasons to believe that this evolutionary logic holds true for multi-level-governance in general. That is, increasing (perceived) powers challenge the so-called second-order nature of these elections and make them be judged more on their own terms.

ROLE OF THE STUDENT

The presented research is based on a bachelor thesis which was part of a bachelor Political Science at Radboud University Nijmegen. The student conducted the research individually and autonomously, guided by a supervisor.

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