

# European Parliament elections and EU governance

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## Abstract

The decision to establish direct elections to the European Parliament was intended by many to establish a direct link between the individual citizen and decision making at the European level. Elections were meant to help to establish a common identity among the peoples of Europe, to legitimise policy through the normal electoral processes and provide a public space within which Europeans could exert a more direct control over their collective future. Critics disagreed, arguing that direct elections to the European Parliament would further undermine the sovereignty of member states, and may not deliver on the promise that so many were making on behalf of that process. In particular, some wondered whether elections alone could mobilise European publics to take a much greater interest in European matters, with the possibility of European elections being contested simply on national matters. Evaluating these divergent views, the subject of this article is to review the literature on direct elections to the European Parliament in the context of the role these elections play in governance of the European Union. The seminal work by Reif and Schmitt serves as the starting point of our review. These authors were the first to discuss elections to the European Parliament as second-order national elections. Results of second-order elections are influenced not only by second-order factors, but also by the situation in the first-order arena at the time of the second-order election. In the 30 years and six more sets of European Parliament elections since the publication of their work, the concept has become the dominant one in any academic discussion of European elections. In this article we review that work in order to assess the continuing value of the second-order national election concept today, and to consider some of the more fruitful areas for research which might build on the advance made by Reif and Schmitt. While the concept has proven useful in studies of a range of elections beyond just those for the European Parliament, including those for regional and local assemblies as well as referendums, this review will concentrate solely on EP elections. Concluding that Reif and Schmitt's characterisation remains broadly valid today, the article allows that while this does not mean there is necessarily a democratic deficit within the EU, there may be changes that could be made to encourage a more effective electoral process.

**Keywords:** European elections, methodological issues, participation, political parties, political representation, protest, public opinion, economic performance, accountability, European Parliament

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# Contents

<b>1</b>	<b>Background and original expectations regarding direct elections to the EP</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>The second-order model</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>Patterns</b>	<b>9</b>
3.1	Turnout . . . . .	9
3.2	Winners and losers . . . . .	9
<b>4</b>	<b>Mechanisms</b>	<b>10</b>
4.1	Turnout . . . . .	10
4.2	Vote switching . . . . .	11
4.2.1	Government losses . . . . .	11
4.2.2	European issues . . . . .	13
4.3	Where and when . . . . .	15
<b>5</b>	<b>Where next?</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>7</b>	<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>19</b>
	<b>References</b>	<b>20</b>



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## 1 Background and original expectations regarding direct elections to the EP

The political system that is the European Union could be seen to have two rather different characters. The first, and the oldest, is primarily intergovernmental. The Union was established by governments for the manifest purpose of regulating policy in a number of areas vital to economic progress, but with the latent purpose of joining states and nations more closely together so as to prevent any reoccurrence of the violent conflicts that marked the first half of the twentieth century. This new union, formed by the Treaty of Rome, set up a regulatory commission as well as institutions through which the ministers of the several states could debate the policies proposed by that commission. A court was established to adjudicate on matters pertaining to the Treaty and the implementations (and non-implementation) of policies pursuant to it. The new institutions were relatively low key initially, but have become far more prominent in the half-century or more since their foundation. Even so, this aspect of the EU is manifestly multinational, an association of (now) 27 separate countries, each of which has clear boundaries dividing one from another and each of which claims sovereignty over its own affairs.

The second character of the Union is very different and is manifested most clearly in the European Parliament (EP) that, since 1979, has been elected directly by the voters of member states and organises its business not via national blocs, but through transnational political parties. This aspect of the Union cuts across national boundaries and seems to exemplify a political authority that is at odds with the notion of national sovereignty.

The ‘governance’ of the Union, the rules, processes and behaviours (in the words of the Commission’s 2001 White Paper) that describe how powers are exercised at the European level (European Commission 2001), have been much criticised for lacking full legitimacy (for discussion see Schmitt and Thomassen 1999; Thomassen 2009a). In common parlance there has been and is a ‘democratic deficit’. This is not a new complaint. The original Union was seen to rest on what Inglehart (1971) termed a ‘permissive consensus’, an acquiescence by the public that allowed policies to be developed and implemented through the institutions of the Union in the belief that the European Union – then the Common Market – was basically a ‘good thing’, a view broadly expressed by publics in Eurobarometer polls from the start of the 1970s. However, it was argued that something more than acquiescence was required if the European Community was to develop in the manner that many of its founders hoped it would. The possibility that the support for greater authority would flow naturally from the observable consequences of common policies in a process the neo-functionalists called ‘spillover’ was based more on wishful thinking than firm evidence, and more direct institutional changes were advocated by those wanting to promote more integration.

The decision to establish direct elections to the EP was intended by many to establish a direct link between the individual citizen and decision making at the European level. Of course there was always a parliament, but this formerly comprised members elected by national parliaments in a process that was almost invisible to national electorates. Ministers attending meetings of the various councils also represented national electorates, but once again this was hardly visible, and the process of decision making within the Council was never transparent.

Direct elections to the EP carried high expectations. Leo Tindemans told the EP in July 1975 that: “The election of your Assembly by universal suffrage would undoubtedly set the seal on the authority of Community democracy. Such an assembly would undeniably be in a position to express the desire of the European nations increasingly committed to a common destiny” (Tindemans 1975), and another speaker suggested that “A directly elected European Parliament would be a catalyst that would activate the European people and set the whole system of Community institutions in motion” (Bertrand 1975). Elections would help to establish a common identity among the peoples of Europe, would legitimise policy through the normal electoral processes and help to provide a public space within which Europeans could exert a more direct control over their

collective future. Elections were seen by some advocates as the means through which to involve the average citizen to a degree that had not happened before. The President of the EEC Commission François-Xavier Ortoli (Ortoli 1975a) claimed “Europe was moving forward to a new institutional balance based on democracy” and that direct elections “represented a commitment to build a new democratic institutional system in Europe”. He went on to argue that: “I do not think... we shall convince our peoples that Europe is necessary... unless they themselves feel more involved with the great work we are engaged in” (Ortoli 1975b).

However, not everyone was so enthusiastic. Naturally some saw these direct elections to the EP as further undermining the sovereignty of the member states, but there were also those who, while they may or may not have supported the principle, nevertheless warned that direct elections might not deliver on the promise that so many were making on behalf of that process. In particular some wondered whether elections alone could mobilise European publics to take a much greater interest in European matters.

One MEP warned that “electoral issues will in fact be based on domestic policy, and the elections will thus not depend on European policies, but on difference of domestic policy... Will it then be possible to encourage participation from our peoples, who are already subjected to more than enough elections, in an election where the representatives are very distant figures and where they cannot see any difference among the various candidates?” (de la Malène 1975). A British peer, Lord Watson, also poured very cold water on the idea that these elections would promote Europe-wide debate: “we shall find the percentage vote in the elections for the European Parliament will be even lower than it is in the local election; and that it will frequently be a protest vote against the government of the day, with the result that the majority of members of the European Parliament will belong to parties in opposition to their national governments. Both those facts will weaken the power of the European Parliament and the esteem in which its members are held” (Watson 1975).

To what extent these various prophecies have proved to be correct is the subject of this review. With seven sets of direct elections to the EP now completed there has been ample opportunity for researchers to assess how far these have delivered on the hopes or realised the fears expressed above. The Treaty on the European Union and the Lisbon Treaty state in Article 10A that the “functioning of the Union shall be founded on representative democracy” and “citizens are directly represented at Union level in the European Parliament” and that “political parties at European level contribute to forming European political awareness and to expressing the will of citizens of the Union” (Mair and Thomassen 2010: 22). A populist view on representative democracy conceptualises it as a form of government conducted in accordance with people’s preferences (Dahl 1971). This political system is effective when preferences of voters are translated into specific policy outputs (Hyland 1995). (In the liberal theory of democracy a less rigid link is stipulated through a basic division of labour between the electorate and their representatives, e.g. Riker 1982; Thomassen 1994). The responsible party model (or party government model) is often accepted as a valid model of political representation in member states of the European Union due to the prevalence of a high degree of party discipline essential for the survival of governments in EU states (Thomassen 1994: 250). At the same time, popular sovereignty in a representative democracy can only be achieved through party democracy or party government (Thomassen 2009b). Drawing on Schumpeter’s (1943) theory of democracy, the party government model was systematically presented in Schattschneider (1950). The model characterises the process of political representation as containing voters and political parties where the elections become the instrument of linkage under certain requirements (Schmitt and Thomassen 1999; Thomassen 1994, 2009b): elections are meaningful only when political parties present voters with serious policy alternatives; internal party discipline allows parties to realise promises made during the campaign; voters base their voting decision on policy preferences, and vote for the party whose programme is closest to their own policy preferences; and the party or coalition of parties that won the elections subsequently takes over the government. The final

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requirement is that policy programmes of political parties and policy preferences of the electorate are constrained by a single ideological dimension. Thomassen (1994) suggests that political parties offer voters a package deal, hence a voter is forced to vote for the whole package. Aggregating individual preferences at the level of the political system results in the Ostrogorski paradox (Rae and Daudt 1976): the absence of a logical relationship between the electoral majority and policy majority on any specific issue. The election reveals the first preferences of voters among candidates, and the majority of first preferences among candidates may not be equivalent to the revelation of first preferences for a specific policy (Dahl 1956). The solution to the paradox is the assumption that both parties drafting programmes and voters choosing a party at the elections are constrained by the same unidimensional ideology, thus conforming to the basic Downsian model (Thomassen 1994: 254).

Thomassen (2009b) argues that at the European level the ‘democratic deficit’ becomes obvious when we consider that no European government is formed as the outcome of European elections. Moving beyond executive-legislative relations in the current institutional setting of the EU, European elections can still be an effective instrument of linkage in the party government model if the remaining conditions are met (Thomassen 2009c). Thus, while there are no available policy alternatives as the basis of voting decision in EP elections since there are no pan-European political parties competing for the votes of a pan-European electorate, Thomassen (2009b: 14) suggests that focusing on the *feasibility* of an effective party government model, the relevant question becomes whether “national party systems can be aggregated into distinct and cohesive European party groups”. McElroy and Benoit (2010) analyse the determinants of EP party group affiliation and show that party group choice is largely driven by policy congruence, while the organisation of and switching between EP party groups is determined largely by decisions to minimise the incongruence between the national and European levels. This suggests that even if the electorate makes decisions in the EP elections based on national issues and votes for parties based on their positions on national issues, this may serve the function of a good informational shortcut for voters. Rasmussen (2008) provides similar evidence on the level of individual MEPs who exhibit strong links to both their national parties and EP party groups. A key requirement for the development of a European representational system is that voters base their decisions on policy considerations structured on one dimension, with political parties also competing on the same dimension. The left-right dimension has been most often identified as the dominant dimension of political competition both on the national and European levels, thus serving as a necessary link between these two levels. While the meaning of left-right dimension may differ across countries (Benoit and Laver 2006), van der Brug, Franklin, Popescu, and Toka (2009a) find that the same left-right dimension structures electoral behaviour both of voters and parties in EP elections. Furthermore, EP party groups are structured along the same national left-right dimension (Hix, Noury, and Roland 2006). Overall, it appears that the remaining requirements of the party government model are surprisingly well met, thus supporting the linkage role of European elections in the party government model of representative democracy (Mair and Thomassen 2010; Thomassen 2009c).

However, it must be emphasised that elections are only one mechanism among many that can encourage good governance. For some scholars indeed, direct elections may create more problems than they solve. Observers such as Moravcsik (e.g. Moravcsik 2002) have argued that the procedures of the EU are in accord with the prevailing norms within member states for dealing with a wide range of policy matters. The powers of the EU are constrained by treaty and within those powers, largely ones over low salience policy areas, the EU operates largely by consensus. More “democracy” would undermine that consensus and in fact threaten the position of minorities. Moravcsik also suggests that the democratic standards set by critics for the EU are ‘over idealised’ (2002: 622) and do not reflect the way member states govern their own affairs. We will return to this argument later. Similarly, Coultrap (1999) argues that much of the ‘democratic deficit’ critique is based on the parliamentary model of democracy, which may be irrelevant to the EU due

to its supranational character and context. Coultrap suggests that the US ‘pluralist’ model that centres on societal interests and fragmented governmental structure may be more suitable for the supranational nature of democratic decision making in the EU.

## 2 The second-order model

Echoing some of the predictions made before the first set of elections, Reif and Schmitt characterised elections to the EP as second-order national elections (Reif and Schmitt 1980). In a later work, Reif proposed an operational definition of such second-order elections: “All elections (except the one that fills the most important political office of the entire system and therefore is the first-order election) are ‘national second-order elections’, irrespective of whether they take place in the entire, or only in a part of, the country” (Reif 1997: 117). Results of second-order elections are influenced not only by second-order factors, but also by the situation in the first-order arena at the time of the second-order election (Reif 1985: 8–9). In the 30 years and six more sets of EP elections since the publication of their seminal work, the concept has become the dominant one in any academic discussion of European elections (e.g. van der Brug and van der Eijk 2007; van der Eijk and Franklin 1996). The objective of this article is to review that work in order to assess the continuing value of the second-order national election concept today, and to consider some of the more fruitful areas for research that might build on the advance made by Reif and Schmitt. While the concept has proved to be useful in studies of a range of elections beyond just those of the EP, including those of regional and local councils as well as referendums, this review will concentrate just on EP elections.

In their ideal form, second-order elections are contested within the same party system that characterizes the first-order arena. If all contesting parties in EP elections were different from those participating in national elections, we would not know if the elections manifested second-order symptoms, as there would be nothing to compare them to, because different parties would fight national elections.

Although the definition put forward above seems to place all non-first-order elections on the same footing, it has been shown in the analysis of almost coincidental local and EU elections in Britain that EP elections statistically fit the second-order model better (Heath, McLean, Taylor, and Curtice 1999; Rallings and Thrasher 2005), with further differences between local and European elections discussed in Skrinis and Teperoglou (2008). Compared to first-order elections, a second-order election is characterized by the fact that there is less at stake. In a first-order election the government is at stake. This prompts the electorate to cast their votes for the single large party closest to their views. In a second-order election far less is at stake, hence voters can decide to support a small or new party. In fact, an operational definition of second-order elections can be drawn from the answer to the question of how much is at stake, since not all first-order elections are equally important and not all second-order elections are equally unimportant (van der Eijk, Franklin, and Marsh 1996a). This means that any potential explanation of European elections using a second-order model will necessarily involve more than a simple dichotomization between general and European elections. Such an explanation would involve an analysis of the contextual features of both party choice and turnout (van der Eijk *et al.* 1996a).

The EU has changed over time, growing in scale – particularly with the latest round of enlargement (Schmitt 2005) – and scope, and with successive sets of elections there has also been an opportunity for voters to learn more about the competences of the Union and the role of the EP. In 1979 there were only 9 member states. The applicability of second-order election theory in “new” member states, particularly those joining in 2004, may not be as straightforward as it is in “old” member states. Those from Central and Eastern Europe are often characterized by differences in the nature of party competition (Kitschelt, Mansfeldova, Markowski, and Tóka 1999;



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Mair 1997: Ch. 8); high electoral volatility (Tavits 2005), and anti-EU sentiment present during the accession process (Elgün and Tillman 2007; Taggart and Szczerbiak 2004). These factors may affect the fit of a second-order model in “new” member states more than to “old” member states. It is also possible that EP elections might become less second-order over time, as the EU grows more powerful relative to national governments. It is even possible that voters might learn more about EP elections, though it is far from certain whether they might come to realize how important the EP currently is or how they might exert more influence over their national government by strategic behaviour in EP elections.

Reif and Schmitt (1980) offer three broad propositions to characterize differences between the aggregate results of EP elections and previous (and subsequent) national elections. These are based on general characteristics of second-order elections. Firstly, the turnout in EP elections is lower than in national elections. Secondly, larger parties will do worse and smaller parties will do better in EP elections. Thirdly, national governing parties will suffer losses in EP elections. It was also suggested that the timing of the election within the national election cycle could exaggerate or suppress these tendencies.

## 3 Patterns

### 3.1 Turnout

Observed patterns of change in turnout in EP elections compared to national elections can be explained on the basis of the key distinction that the former are less important than the latter. If voters perceive that there is less at stake in EP elections and political actors and the media share this perception, then the benefits of voting decrease for individual voters while costs of gathering the required information increase, in turn decreasing the mobilisation effects of elections. This leads to lower turnout in EP elections as compared to first-order elections.

### 3.2 Winners and losers

The second pattern relates to the effect of second-order elections on political parties and their electoral performance. Large parties, both in government and opposition, tend to lose votes in EP elections relative to their performance in national elections, with governing parties losing more than opposition parties, while small parties tend to gain votes (Bellucci 2010; Curtice 1989; Ferrara and Weishaupt 2004; Kousser 2004; Marsh 1996, 1998, 2003, 2007; Marsh and Franklin 1996; Reif 1985; van der Eijk, Franklin, and Oppenhuis 1996b). Pacek and Radcliff (2003) focus on the party performance in the “low turnout” environment of European elections over time. They argue that in this specific environment left-leaning parties tend to perform better in European elections with higher turnout compared to EP elections with relatively lower turnout. A more fine-grained picture of this pattern depicts small parties with electoral support under 10 per cent being more successful, while large parties that have over 25 per cent electoral support show differential performance: governing parties lose votes and opposition parties marginally gain votes (Marsh 2005). Generally, analysis over several EP elections shows that very small parties with no more than 4 per cent of electoral support tend to gain votes; parties with between 4 per cent and 30 per cent in the previous national election do not differ much in their performance; and parties with over 30 per cent increasingly lose votes in proportion to the size of the party (Marsh 1998: 602). Moreover, governing parties, regardless of their size, are expected to lose votes, while only large opposition parties should brace themselves for the same fate (Marsh 2005).

Reif (1985) suggests that more extreme parties tend to gain support at the expense of more centrist parties and that new parties are well placed to perform well in EP elections. Marsh (1998) finds no evidence of a particularly successful pattern of performance among extreme parties.

Extremist parties on both the left and right often take a more anti-European stance than centrist parties (Cutts, Ford, and Goodwin 2010; de Vries and Edwards 2009; Ray 1999; Taggart 1998). Hix and Marsh (2007) find that, leaving aside the success of some parties that only contest EP elections, anti-EU parties on average do much better in European than in national elections. These results are also supported in Manow and Doering's (2008) analysis of the ideological composition of the EP and Council. Curtice (1989: 227) suggests that Green parties consistently perform better in EP elections than would be expected of other small parties. Marsh (1998), however, finds only modest evidence supporting such particular behaviour among Green voters, at least in countries with political alternation in government. This finding is supported in a later and more extensive analysis in Hix and Marsh (2007).

## 4 Mechanisms

The evidence that the results of EP elections typically reflect the expectations initially developed by Reif and Schmitt is overwhelming. Of course there are variations around the mean result, and these may require some explanation, but the overall pattern is undeniable. What is more problematic is our understanding of how this pattern comes to light. Reif and Schmitt do not offer an explicit theory of a European voter. Their work is essentially an aggregate-level one. Aggregate patterns, however, require an explanation in terms of individual choice. The basis for that choice probably fits most easily with a Downsian approach (Downs 1957) where choice is driven primarily by the proximity of parties and voters with respect to issue preference or ideology, but it is not necessarily incompatible with approaches that have adapted the proximity criterion, although this has not been sufficiently analysed in the literature to date.

### 4.1 Turnout

Turnout in EP elections is affected by the saliency of these elections, the perception by the electorate of how much is at stake (Franklin 2004; Franklin and Hobolt 2010). Franklin (2001) successfully models turnout in European elections as a function of whether a country has compulsory voting, if a country is holding its first EP election, and the place of EP elections in the national electoral cycle. These findings have also been substantiated by Schmitt in a later and extended analysis of the 2004 European elections (Schmitt 2005). Franklin (2007a,b) analyses the structural level causes of abstention in EP elections and argues that some of the decline in turnout over time is due to the structural properties of new accession countries as the EU expands (rather than decreased interest in, or legitimacy of the EU), with the first European election usually having higher turnout. These analyses discount the influence of what we might call 'European' factors. However, countries that are net beneficiaries of EU budgetary transfers, structural funds or host a major EU institution tend to have higher turnout rates at an aggregate level in EP elections (Jesuit 2003; Mattila 2003; Studlar, Flickinger, and Bennett 2003). For the 2004 set of elections, Flickinger and Studlar (2007) find that for the "old" EU member states higher aggregate levels of support for EU membership correlate to higher turnout rates. At the same time, turnout in the new member states can be explained in terms of national factors (e.g. trust in government, satisfaction with democracy, party attachment). On the regional level Fauvelle-Aymar and Stegmaier (2008) show that turnout in new member states is inversely related to regional unemployment rates. Schmitt (2005) shows that abstentions in European elections in "new" member states are partly driven by EU skepticism, while the same does not hold in "old" member states. Flickinger and Studlar (2007) show that the single most important determinant of turnout that is consistent across "old" and "new" member states is the level of turnout in previous national elections. This suggests the importance of habitual voting in explanations of turnout (Franklin 2004; Franklin and Hobolt 2010). A note of dissent has been sounded in some individual studies (Blondel, Sinnott, and Svensson 1997, 1998) where it has

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been suggested that attitudes toward the EU do influence turnout, but a later and more extensive analysis has demonstrated that these effects, while significant in statistical terms, are extremely small (Schmitt and van der Eijk 2007).

A major critique of the second-order explanation of the lower turnout in European elections has been mounted by Blondel *et al.* (1997). They question the argument that turnout is lower because less is at stake (a contention that also underpins some explanations for vote switching). Using a set of scales asking people how much it matters who wins a European and a general election, they argue that the difference in most people's assessment is slight. Moreover, they conclude, this difference does not explain adequately the failure to vote in a European election of those who report voting in a national election. Oddly, this substantial critique has not been subject to further evaluation in the 10 years since the original study. There are reasons to question Blondel, Sinnott and Svensson's interpretation. The concept of whether an election 'matters' could repay further consideration to discover: does it matter for policy making, or for a party's fortunes in national and EU arenas. It is also the case that those most aware of the difference between the two types of elections are those who are also most likely to vote: the better educated, more informed, more middle class electors. Orford, Rallings, Thrasher, and Borisyuk (2009), in a case study of one London borough over three types of elections (national, European and local) and over a twenty year period, investigate the hypothesis that the costs of voting (travel distance to a polling station) in low salience elections are perceived to be higher than the same costs in high salience elections, thus deterring turnout. Using detailed geographical data the authors show that for second-order elections (both European and local) longer distances people have to travel to polling stations lower the turnout compared to districts with shorter average distances, even after controlling for socio-economic factors. This supports the original propositions of the 'less is at stake' explanations of turnout in EP elections.

Blondel, Sinnott and Svensson's analysis highlights the role played by agencies of mobilization. If they are right, and the fall-off in turnout is not a consequence of individual motivations, then perhaps the lack of activity by the parties and the media may be more crucial. There is little doubt that the media find European elections less interesting than national general elections (de Vreese, Banducci, Semetko, and Boomgaarden 2006; de Vreese 2003) and also little doubt that most of the parties expend much fewer resources on European elections than they do on general elections (van der Eijk and Franklin 1996). The implication that the explanation may be a top-down rather than bottom-up one is not confined to turnout. As we see later, a similar critique has been levelled at the simple second-order explanation of vote change.

## 4.2 Vote switching

### 4.2.1 Government losses

Two contextual factors determine the observed change in party choice between national elections and EP elections. The first is that EP elections do not result in a choice of government. The second is the timing of EP elections within a national election cycle. Each contextual factor may determine the shift between what we might call a "sincere" and an "insincere" vote. This results in a vote for a party that may differ from the party chosen in the first-order election.

The classic case is a switch from "insincere" to "sincere". Since the vote in EP elections does not result in any process of government formation, voters are less concerned with the strategic outcomes of their vote. In first-order elections a voter may choose a party that is perceived as being more suitable for government, possibly due to the reputation of that party, its size or its general coalition potential. Parties that are deemed by a voter to be optimally suitable for government may not be those that voters would have preferred on ideological grounds. A vote for a party based on strategic calculations can be termed "insincere" voting and is usually characteristic of national elections. On the other hand, since no government is at stake in EP elections, voters can express their true preferences and cast a sincere vote. Thus EP elections provide an opportunity for voters

to vote “with their heart”. Reif and Schmitt describe this type of sincere voting as “expressive”. Larger parties are expected to benefit from “insincere” voting in national elections, and so would be expected to lose support in EP elections as a result of a shift to “sincere” voting. Small and relatively insignificant parties are expected to benefit from such a shift to “expressive” voting.

But there are also reasons for expecting some switching from “sincere” to “insincere”. A voter may express a “sincere” preference in a national election and subsequently change that preference in an EP election in order to send a message to her party, expressing (temporary) dissatisfaction with it (Reif 1985: 8–9). Reif and Schmitt suggest that the swing against government parties can be explained either by the loss of discontented supporters, who switch support to other parties or even abstain from voting, as a show of protest against their government, or by the loss of the discontented supporters who change party preference and vote for another party.<sup>1</sup> This type of voting change has been referred to as “instrumental” (Heath *et al.* 1999; Oppenhuis, van der Eijk, and Franklin 1996). A swing against the government in a protest vote has also been referred to as voting “with the boot” (Oppenhuis *et al.* 1996).

Reif and Schmitt also suggest that the timing of a European election within the cycle of national elections will have consequences for the extent of government losses because of the typical cycle of popularity of national government. The general motivation of discontent applies particularly to government parties of any size, and echoes what has been termed the ‘referendum’ explanation of US mid-term elections (see Tufte 1975), a process in which dissatisfaction with the president follows a downward cycle that reaches a nadir around mid-term. The timing of EP elections within the cycle of national elections becomes an important factor in the performance of governing parties (e.g. Bellucci 2010). A post-electoral honeymoon is usually followed by disenchantment that forces disappointed supporters of governing parties to switch votes (Hix and Marsh 2007). Defections from government parties increase during the time between national elections and EP elections (Kousser 2004: 17). Disappointment with the government is greatest around mid-term (Marsh 1998: 606). Reif suggests that voters tend to make a more sober assessment of possible alternative governments closer to the next national elections. The losses of governing parties appear to level off after mid-term, with some parties registering gains (Marsh 1998, 2005).

Popularity cycles have been identified in Tufte (1975) and Miller and Mackie (1973). General loss of support by governing parties may be explained in terms of the costs of governing (Paldam 1986) with coalitions of minorities being upset (Mueller 1970), resulting in lost support. It has been argued that governing parties tend to regain support towards the end of the national electoral cycle, possibly due to the political business cycle (Alt 1979), but popularity cycles are far from being universal (van der Eijk 1987). Kousser (2004) explains the typical decline in electoral fortunes of governing parties in EP elections in terms of the performance of the economy, particularly a government’s record in reducing unemployment. However, given results shown in the retrospective voting literature (Fiorina 1978, 1981; Kiewiet 1983), it is not very clear why unemployment plays an important role while economic growth and inflation do not. Marsh (2003, 2007) does not find that the current performance of the economy affects swings against the government in EP elections. The result is upheld even in the analysis of new member states (Marsh 2005). Economic voting models often utilise subjective evaluations of the economy that may be inherently endogenous thus biasing the analysis (van der Eijk, Franklin, Demant, and van der Brug 2007). Accounting for this potential endogeneity Tilley, Garry, and Bold (2008), in their analysis of the 2004 EP elections in 23 countries, find limited evidence of the effects of the economy when conditioned on voter sophistication and clarity of responsibility for economic policy. They show that only politically sophisticated voters ground their subjective evaluations on objective economic conditions, with the effect on voting observable only in single party governments with clear attribution of responsibility

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<sup>1</sup> Also, they note by the loss of tactical supporters who vote for government parties only in national elections. The last could be expected to happen whenever EP elections take place. The other two could be expected to vary within the national election cycles.

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for economic policy. This further supports the thesis that the second-order model works better in countries with alternation.

Although it is possible to view it as an extension of the mechanism of government popularity cycles, a different mechanism might characterize the swing against government as a protest dimension. This mechanism could be much more strategic. Hence disambiguation of these two separate mechanisms can only facilitate the analysis (similar logic is followed in [Koepke and Ringe 2006](#)). The key insight into protest mechanisms stems from the fact that popularity cycles are not inevitable ([Oppenhuis \*et al.\* 1996](#)). However, approaching national elections could be seen to raise the importance of EP elections in the minds of politicians as pointers to the next national elections ([Anderson and Ward 1996](#); [Oppenhuis \*et al.\* 1996](#)), thus increasing the incentive for the electorate to defect tactically. EP elections take on the role of a signalling device to government. In this case, what happens in EP elections would be a function of the time elapsed from the last national election and time remaining to the next national election. The EP election passes almost unnoticed when it is simultaneous with a national election or follows very closely after. Turnout is particularly low in elections that follow closely after national elections and voting with the “heart” dominates. On the other hand, the importance of an EP election grows when it is held on the eve of a national election. In this situation an EP election can be viewed as a sign of what will happen in the forthcoming national election. Turnout in such a set up is higher relative to other second-order elections. Voters can then sensibly use the opportunity to signal their discontent with a particular party or government. The contextual location of this element is determined by the timing of the EP election in the national election cycle, rather than by the levels of dissatisfaction with the government or economic trends.

This process element has not been extensively explored in the literature in a systematic way. From the small amount that is available, it appears that until 1994 voters increasingly used EP elections as a simple opportunity to retaliate against government; beyond that election, no further increase in the tendency is evident ([Marsh 2005](#)). The protest mechanism appears to perform differently in “new” member states, where voting “with the boot” is underutilized by the electorate ([Koepke and Ringe 2006](#)). Instead, voters tend to vote sincerely, possibly believing that their protest voice will not be heard.

#### 4.2.2 European issues

An alternative to any switch between “sincere” and “insincere” voting is a switch in which both votes remain “sincere”. What changes is the issue or set of issues on which the voter decides. We may see this in simple Downsian terms as the extension of the issue space in which voters and parties are located, or as a recalibration of the issue space in the different context. Alternatively, we may see it in less Downsian terms as a consequence of a different salience of issues in the two types of elections. In either case, the premise that voters have different preferences at different levels of government ([Carrubba and Timpono 2005](#)) is a challenge to the second-order model. The essence of the second-order interpretation is that the issues themselves remain the same across both elections. It is important to stress that the second-order model does not preclude a potential influence of European issues on national elections (see, e.g. [de Vries 2007, 2009, 2010](#); [Markowski and Tucker 2010](#); [Tillman 2004](#)), but it does suggest a strong, if not dominant, role for non-European issues. Of course, if “European” issues become more important in national elections, they will also be important in those for the EP. A more pertinent question is whether European issues play a greater role in European Parliament elections than in national elections.

This question has been explored both at the aggregate and individual levels. At the aggregate level, [van der Eijk and Franklin \(1991\)](#) and a later more extensive study by [Hix and Marsh \(2007\)](#) show that, although EP elections have various components affecting the outcome, European issues still constitute a minor element. Moreover, Hix and Marsh show that this finding is true

for European elections in 2004, just as it was true for the 1979 elections. In a series of survey experiments in the UK, [Tilley and Wlezién \(2008\)](#) show that although Europe is not an issue of particular importance to the voters who are little informed about it, the electorate still considers it to be nontrivial. Focusing on the issue of the European Constitution in the the 2004 EP elections, [Arnold and Pennings \(2009\)](#) highlight that the presence of EU issues is different across member states and political parties strategically manipulate the salience of these issues in EP campaigns. Individual level analyses have also shown that concerns about the EU have been relevant to voters in EP elections ([Mather 2001](#); [Nielsen 2001](#); [Worre 1996](#); [Ysmal and Cayrol 1996](#)) with preferences seeming to be structured, at least to some extent, by such concerns ([Hobolt, Spoon, and Tilley 2009](#); [Rohrschneider and Clark 2008](#); [van der Brug, van der Eijk, and Franklin 2007a](#); [van der Brug, van der Eijk, Schmitt, Marsh, Franklin, Thomassen, Semetko, and Bartolini 2007b](#)). [van der Brug and van der Eijk \(1999\)](#) show that voters have little knowledge of the position of political parties on EU issues, partly because political parties do not take a clear stand on these issues.

There is relatively little evidence on vote switching between national and EP elections using survey data. However, a few studies have suggested that this can be explained, at least in part, by voters' stances on the European issue. Marsh suggests that the choice of the "other party" in the process of vote switching in European elections is not determined by the closeness of the "other party" to the voter on "European" issues. The mechanism works rather through the closeness of "Europe" to government, and dissatisfaction with government means dissatisfaction with Europe ([Marsh 2003, 2007](#)). [Hobolt et al. \(2009\)](#) show that voters who are more Eurosceptic than the governing parties are more likely to defect from these parties in EP elections. [Carrubba and Timpone \(2005\)](#) show that environmentally minded voters who perceive the EP to be important are likely to switch to a Green party in the European election, thus linking potential policy impact to party choice at the EU level. [Sanz \(2008\)](#), looking at concurrent national, regional and European elections, finds that different motivational factors weigh differently at different electoral levels, with split-ticket voting in EP elections being based more on ideological grounds than straight-ticket voting, while local elections are based more on personal interests and regional elections on regional interests. Ideology becomes a more important determinant of voting the further the government moves away from the voter in terms of scale. Finally, [Ferrara and Weishaupt \(2004\)](#) suggest that the electoral success of parties is directly affected by the cohesiveness of their stance on the European issue. Cohesiveness regarding the EU positively affects vote share, and more divided parties seem to perform worse, i.e. parties that "have their act together on Europe" do better in EP elections ([Ferrara and Weishaupt 2004](#)). The authors, however, find no empirical support for the notion that positions of political parties on the EU or the salience parties place on the EU has a significant effect on those parties' performance in EP elections.

A stimulating critique of the conventional explanations of government losses has been offered by [Weber \(2007\)](#). This critique begins by pointing out that the notion of protest is really quite separate from the second-order model, which is built essentially on salience. Weber goes on to try and explain government losses in terms of salience. He does so by claiming that parties mount much weaker campaigns in second-order elections, and that this results in the voters themselves having less information. As [Eisinga, Franses, and van Dijk \(1998\)](#) show in an analysis of Dutch data, voters in first- and second-order elections have different vote commitment schedules. Significantly the proportion of the electorate that remains undecided decreases as the election is imminent and increases again after the elections. Voters in national elections begin to make up their minds nine weeks before the election. In European elections, the decisions start being made four weeks before, but the decrease in the number undecided is minimal. The low information environment affects larger parties more than small ones because small ones tend to have a clearer message to put over and suffer less from a quiet campaign. Government parties then suffer because of being in government, especially around mid-term when there has been insufficient opportunity to work through its programme, it is harder to highlight distinctive positions, whereas opposition parties

are much more free to do so. Government parties are thus less well able to mobilize those it won support from the last time, and suffer more defections, both temporary and permanent. This is an appealing argument in that it does try to stay within the original terms of second-order elections. The explanation offered is very much a top-down one, echoing recent work suggesting that voting patterns in EU elections do reflect what parties are doing (e.g. Ferrara and Weishaupt 2004) as well as the critique suggested above of the second-order explanation of turnout. Weber's analysis is supportive up to a point, but like most analyses of individual change, it is handicapped by the absence of panel data that would identify more reliably those who change their vote both between national and EP elections as well as between national elections. In the same vein, Toka (2007) argues that it is politicians rather than voters who react to the second-order status of EP elections. Governments do relatively poorly because they manage their programme to provide maximum impact at the next general election, not the European one. More generally, voters simply have less information, with the consequence being that votes are distributed more randomly across parties.

These explanations echo the “surge and decline” explanation for why the parties of US Presidents lost votes in mid-term elections. The classic statement is Campbell (1960) with a revision in Campbell (1997). For an application of this to EP elections see Marsh (2007). The argument advanced by Campbell (1960) saw the source as the lower level of mobilization in midterm elections, with the benefit going naturally to the ‘opposition’ party who lost most from high mobilization two years before. Individual level analysis was never able to demonstrate that this told the whole story, and it is conventional now to rely to a greater degree on the ‘referendum’ element of the mid-term election. However, this combined theory provides a less elegant explanation.

There is also a difference in electoral rules in first-order and second-order arenas, and this could account for changes in parties' electoral fortunes in EP elections when compared to national elections. EP elections are sometimes more proportional, giving an advantage to smaller parties, while in systems with higher thresholds these smaller parties do less well (Kousser 2004). For Toka (2007), such institutional changes create opportunities that strategic politicians exploit, underlining the alternative elite-based explanation of second-order elections as against a voter-based mechanism. The difference in electoral rules in two arenas may also have an effect on turnout, as voters may be unfamiliar with a new electoral system (Franklin 2007a).

### 4.3 Where and when

Another set of research questions focus on the universality of the second-order model through time and space. Does it hold as well now as it did in 1979? Does it hold as well in the states that have joined after 1979, and in particular does it hold in the states joining in 2004, most of them post-communist?

The second-order model has been shown to fit particularly well with the pattern of government performance in the 2004 EP elections, while on the party level there is little difference in the fit across parliaments (Marsh 2005). However, there is a discernible difference in the fit of the model between “old” member states and new members of the 2004 enlargement round (Schmitt 2005), although for a contrasting view see van der Brug *et al.* (2009a) and van der Brug, Franklin, and Toka (2008). Van der Brug, Hobolt, and de Vreese (2009b) also find that individual and contextual religiosity effects in EP elections are the same in the “old” and new member states. Similarly Stefanova (2008) shows that European elections in the newest member states (Bulgaria and Romania) also fit the second-order model characteristics. Lyons and Linek (2010) focus on the comparison of turnout and vote switching in national and EP elections in Czech Republic. They find that the electoral dynamics in this new member state are well captured by the tenets of the second-order model. Hix and Marsh (2007) show that, for the EP elections, the effect of party size on electoral fortunes was significant only for government parties, although the issue of “Europe”

did not play a major role in new member states; nor did parties' assumed European stance policies matter to their electoral success.

However, the literature on electoral behaviour shows that not all governments are equally likely to be held responsible and punished for perceived inadequacies (Anderson 1995; Lewis-Beck 1988; Nannestad and Paldam 2002; Powell and Whitten 1993; Tilley *et al.* 2008). Some political systems are characterized by the fact that the relationship between election results and government formation is rather turbid. This means the relationship between national elections and EP elections can be expected to differ between countries with different types of political systems. Differential importance in European elections relates to the fact that not all second-order elections are equally unimportant and not all first-order elections are equally important (van der Eijk *et al.* 1996a). Observable implications of second-order election theory are particularly noticeable in countries with bi-polar party systems (Reif 1985: 13) or countries with genuine alternation of parties in government (Marsh 1998: 597). This generalization would certainly repay further analysis to see how far it reflected the party size factor from second-order theory as against the clarity of responsibility highlighted by Powell and Whitten (1993).

A different issue is the way in which gains and losses, or switching is defined. Reif and Schmitt described patterns of change between the EP election and the previous general election in a country. An extension of this was to look also at the following general election (Marsh 1998), a comparison that often shows larger parties and those in government clawing back some of their EP losses. Sometimes, of course, they do not, because support has ebbed away for reasons that may be quite unrelated to the European election. Reif and Schmitt's strategy confused the long-term losses that a party might be suffering with the short-term ones prompted by the second-order election. One way to deal with this is to compare the EP result with some kind of expectation based on the adjoining general elections, typically a linear trend (see Ferrara and Weishaupt 2004). This has rather similar results to those obtained using the previous general election, although it seems possible that it may provide a different outcome applied in cases of high party system change, such as has been seen in several new accession states. When individual level analysis is being carried out, the parallel strategy is to look at change from the individual's vote in the previous general election, as obtained typically using a recall-based question. This is far from ideal because of the systematic errors associated with 'recall' questions, but in the absence of panel data is a reasonable strategy. An alternative used by several scholars is to compare behaviour in the EP election with that in a counterfactual general election, asking respondents how they would vote (if at all) in a general election if one were held tomorrow (Oppenhuis *et al.* 1996; van Egmond 2007). This strategy, looking not at vote switching but what is termed 'quasi switching', produces results that are less supportive of some expectations derived from the second-order model. In particular, this approach does not suggest that government parties do poorly; and while small parties do gain at the expense of larger ones, this is pronounced earlier in the election cycle and not later in the cycle. Most significantly perhaps, party ideology matters, with more extreme parties gaining at the expense of centre parties and – even more significantly – anti-integration parties benefiting at the expense of pro-integration parties. (These results were obtained for 1999, and using different methods the same pattern was found by Marsh 2007 and Hobolt *et al.* 2009). This was not true of 1989 and 1994 (Oppenhuis *et al.* 1996) a point discussed by van der Eijk and van der Brug (2007). Of course, turnout can be explored in the same way (van der Eijk and van Egmond 2007). Such analysis suggests that it was (quasi) vote switching rather than differential turnout that has the greatest impact on party vote shares (Oppenhuis *et al.* 1996; van Egmond 2007). Moreover, evidence on whether governing parties are particularly affected by poor turnout in European elections is inconclusive (Franklin, van der Eijk, and Oppenhuis 1996; Schmitt and Mannheim 1991). There is certainly more work to be done exploring the impact of using these different approaches. One criticism of the counterfactual method is that an opinion poll itself may have some of the characteristics of a second-order election, with people in particular voicing



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opposition for a government they may have voted for last time and will vote for again next time. Thus while some of the long-term change in party support is set aside, some aspects of short-term change are confused with the second-order selection in the EP election. Certainly, however, the counterfactual operationalisation can separate the European aspect of the election from the opinion poll element, but typically both may manifest anti-government sentiment. Panel surveys would enable some of the biases in recall data to be set aside and at the same time allow us to assess the extent to which a mid-term opinion poll overstates the likelihood of a shift in general election vote choice. To date, few analyses of EP elections using panels have been published. An exception is [Heath \*et al.\* \(1999\)](#) who does show how some government losses at mid-term prove permanent.

Most of the work on second-order elections has focused on election results and election-related survey data. However, there are also bodies of work that give a better picture of the context surrounding the result or the actual choice. The most important such focus is the media. Central to the second-order interpretation is that the national arena provides the dominant frame of reference for all other elections. This means that the media will view an EP election in national terms, asking questions like ‘what consequences will this outcome have for national politics’, and will generally give much less attention to a European election than it would a general election. Existing evidence supports these expectations. It shows that EP elections generally enjoy low levels of coverage and are highly domesticised (as opposed to Europeanised) in terms of the news “frame” ([Belluati and Bobba 2010](#); [de Vreese, Lauf, and Peter 2007b](#); [Lusoli and Ward 2005](#); [Peter 2007](#); [Schweitzer 2009](#)). In earlier elections, EU issues were generally absent from the debate before elections ([Irwin 1995](#)). However, disagreement on matters concerning European integration among the elites does contribute to the visibility of European elections ([de Vreese \*et al.\* 2007b](#): 140; [Peter, Lauf, and Semetko 2004](#)). After the latest enlargement, European elections were on average more visible in the “old” member states than in the “new” member states, with the negative coverage prevailing in the “old” member states and more mixed coverage in “new” member states ([de Vreese \*et al.\* 2006](#); [de Vreese, Banducci, Semetko, and Boomgaarden 2007a](#)).

## 5 Where next?

EP elections do not lead to the formation of the European executive. As a result, [Reif \(1984: 253\)](#) suggests that EP elections may become “third-order elections” with as little relevance as an opinion poll. However, polls do matter, particularly when politicians believe them. In individual countries the effect of European elections is clearly discernible and significant for the political actors involved ([Freire and Teperoglou 2007](#); [Kroh, van der Eijk, and van der Brug 2007](#); [van der Eijk and Franklin 1996](#); [van Egmond 2007](#)). On the aggregate level political parties have been shown to make up losses suffered in EP elections at subsequent national elections ([Marsh 1998: 604](#)), having made changes in policy approach or even leadership prompted by losses sustained in those elections. [Marsh \(1998\)](#) also shows that the swings are less pronounced between adjacent national elections than between national and EP elections.

Contrary to Reif’s pessimism, it may be that, with continuing integration, the EU is likely to become more politicized in the future – witness the increasing difficulty of persuading European publics to accept Treaty change in referendums – raising in its turn the potential saliency of EP elections. As we have seen, there is little indication that elections to the EP have lost their second-order nature, but European elections might well become more about “Europe” as “Europe” plays a bigger role in national political discourse ([Hobolt \*et al.\* 2009](#); [van der Brug \*et al.\* 2007b](#)). However, only if “European” issues are not broadly integrated with other dimensions of political competition is that likely to weaken the second-order nature of EP elections. There is a growing literature on the extent to which “European” and “National” cleavages reinforce or cut across one another ([Hix and Lord 1997](#); [Hooghe and Marks 1999](#); [van der Eijk and Franklin 2007](#)). There are some signs

that extreme parties on a left-right dimension are less favourable to the European project, although many of these are small. Nationally too, at least at the level of voters, the overlap between left-right and pro-anti European dimensions of opinion looks greater. Even so, a good case can be made that we would see changes in electoral outcomes if a greater weight was given by voters to the latter set of issues (van der Brug *et al.* 2007b).

As far as the development of our understanding of EP elections is concerned, we make two suggestions. The first is that more attention is given to the mechanism(s) that give rise to the second-order effects. In particular, there deserves to be more analysis of the conflicting validity of voter- and elite-based explanations, and more explicit consideration of how voters decide, and how the second-order approach fits with the conventional approaches, not only that of Downs. Secondly, we need better data. Given that the focus of the research is on change, it is regrettable that almost all the available data on voters is cross sectional. It is hoped that future European election studies will be able to build in a panel design that will help analysts to provide more reliable descriptions and explanations of change.

## 6 Conclusion

Given the strong case for accepting the broad validity of Reif and Schmitt's characterisation, it must be accepted that many of the fears of the sceptics expressed on the eve of direct elections to the EP have been realised, not simply in the first set of elections but also in subsequent ones. The elections have not engaged the people: turnout has been low and shows no signs of resisting a downward trend. Outcomes are determined largely by national political circumstances, and to the extent that 'European' issues have been salient, this largely reflects the growing importance of the EU in domestic politics. This final section offers some reflections of the significance of this failure to engage the public through a Europe-wide electoral process.

The argument was made earlier that as an essentially international organisation, the EU does not really need a vital electoral process to sustain and legitimise its activities. Moravcsik (and others) claim that the largely regulatory functions carried out by the EU are given to it in accord with democratic norms and carried out in a similar fashion to most national democratic practices. Indeed, the largely consensual style of activity, within firm legal constraint, probably provide outcomes that are more democratic – in the sense of taking all interests into account – than outcomes might be if driven more by the concerns of majorities. This viewpoint carries echoes of what was once seen as the 'revisionist' school of democratic theory that accepted (US) democracy as it was and argued that low turnout and widespread ignorance rendered classical ideals of democracy as unrealisable in a modern state. What was more important for 'democracy' was the rule of law and protections of individual rights and freedoms. Against this view those who wanted more participation asserted that, apart from such involvement being a value of its own, wider interest was necessary to ensure that the laws did meet the interests of all. Those who assert that the EU has shown a neo-Liberal policy bias that puts the interests of the rich and powerful ahead of the wider public justify more popular control for this reason, but this still requires a set of mechanisms that could realise such a goal.

Even in national political systems, elections disappoint those who aspire to more classical democratic ideals, so perhaps it is hardly surprising to find they do not measure up when run at a supranational level. Current thinking accepts that elections can, to some degree, fulfil at least two functions. One is broadly programmatic, dealing with agenda setting and broad policy directions. Parties each have a policy agenda and these are debated in election campaigns with the result that parties can be seen to receive popular endorsement for their plans at election time. In reality, and even where a party can hope to win a majority, this mandate model is at best a limited characterisation of elections at a very general level, but there is certainly strong evidence

of a link between broad policy parameters expressed by a party and public perceptions of what a party stands for. If the first function is clearly prospective, the second may be more retrospective: elections can hold parties accountable for what they have, or have not, done. Governments that have disappointed may be voted out of office. This is a minimal, but still very significant role for an electorate to play in policy making, as parties and governments have to anticipate how policy will play with the voters next time around. Hope about the positive role that direct elections to the EP could play tend to focus on the first of these roles. The second is, in any case, very problematic where policy responsibilities are very diffused. The failure of direct elections to fulfil the first role may be partial: there is some correspondence between the views of voters and the policy position of transnational party groups, but arguably this is not because voters are informed about such groups, but because they know about the positions of their national parties on one or two broad ideological dimensions (e.g. [McElroy and Benoit 2010](#); [Thomassen and Schmitt 1997](#); [van der Eijk and Franklin 1991](#)). But if elections are to play a more explicitly legitimising role, voters may need to be more conscious of the extent to which they are represented. [Føllesdal and Hix \(2006: 554\)](#) argue that this requires contestation over political leadership and policy in a manner that would address both policy made within the EU as well as what the EU is able to do: ‘politics *in*, not only *of*, the EU’. They suggest linking elections in one of several ways to the office of Commission President, thereby providing a more transnational focus for the elections and a means to politicise – and publicise – the EU agenda.

The evidence of EU elections to date obviously does not offer positive support for such an argument, but that is not to say that EU elections could not begin to play a role in EU policy making more in accord with the role played by elections in domestic policy making. What is clear is that the failure of direct elections to the EP to fulfil hopes expressed in 1979 does not signal the complete failure of the EU as a political system, nor does it firmly invalidate its own claims to be operating in a manner consistent with democratic norms. But it does mean that the procedure, which was intended to introduce a stronger popular transnational element in EU decision-making, has still to make much headway in doing so.

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