

The Federalist Perspective in Elections to the European Parliament*

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Abstract

The literature on elections to the European Parliament establishes that both national and EU-relevant considerations influence the decision to participate in EP elections as well as the likelihood that EP voters will switch their support between different parties. However, there have been relatively few efforts to identify the conditions that prompt individuals to consider the EU when deciding to participate or when casting a ballot. This article theorizes that individuals from decentralized political systems are more keenly aware of the distribution of functional responsibilities within the EU and are thus more likely to vote on EU-relevant concerns in EP elections. The results from analyses of survey data from the 2009 European Election Study, together with contextual measures of decentralization, suggest that individuals from decentralized systems are more likely to participate in EP elections and that vote-switchers are more likely to be motivated by evaluations of the EU's performance.

Introduction

Elections to the European Parliament (EP) function very differently from national elections. Fewer individuals choose to participate at the European level, and those that cast a vote often base their decision on national political agendas instead of issues pertinent to the European Union (Reif and Schmitt, 1980; Van der Brug *et al.*, 2007; Hix and Marsh, 2007). However, recent survey-based studies of European elections have shown that, under some circumstances, European voters are motivated as much by concerns about the EU as by national politics (Hobolt *et al.*, 2009; Clark and Rohrschneider, 2009). Efforts to identify the conditions that promote EU-conscious voting have largely focused on individual-level factors such as political knowledge or media exposure (De Vries *et al.*, 2011). This article complements that research by examining how the national political context influences voting behaviour in EP elections.

The central argument of this article is that individuals from decentralized political systems are more keenly aware of the distribution of functional responsibilities within multilevel systems such as the EU, more likely to understand that such a system requires citizens to monitor and respond to decisions at multiple levels of governance, and are thus more likely to vote on EU-relevant concerns in EP elections. To illustrate, individuals who have been socialized under a federal political system may recognize that policy jurisdictions can be divided between local, regional and national governments. As a consequence, these individuals may be more deliberate in assessing the performance of elected leaders

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according to the issues over which each leader has control; understanding that national leaders often cannot be blamed for poor waste management and local leaders cannot be held accountable for the decision to enter a military conflict. In contrast, individuals who have been socialized under a unitary system may perceive the national government as responsible for most areas of policy-making and thus focus exclusively on the performance of national actors when participating in the political process. Of course, the federal/unitary distinction is not the only method for measuring a national public's experience with multilevel governance. Some political systems operate on a model of decentralized policy-making, but are not classified as federal due to the absence of constitutionally protected local and state rights. Such systems may also serve to orient individuals to multilevel governance.

This article contributes to our understanding of European elections. Much of the research on EP elections examines the contextual correlates of EP election results (see Marsh, 1998) or the individual-level predictors of EP vote choices (see Weber, 2011). Few efforts have analyzed contextual variables together with survey data; the most prominent exception being research on the role of political information in promoting EU-conscious voting (De Vries *et al.*, 2011). This article broadens the scope of contextual variables studied to include institutional arrangements for decentralized policy-making, and in so doing provides a better idea of the effects of country-specific experiences on individual-level choices in the EU.

The findings of this article have larger implications for research on political behaviour in the EU. Critics of EU democracy have taken EP voting behaviour to be evidence of the public's apathy toward EU affairs (see Schmitter, 2000). An alternative explanation is that many individuals are still learning how to behave in the EU's more complex political environment. If those individuals accustomed to decentralized governance are indeed more likely to participate in EP elections and to vote on EU-relevant concerns, then the issue may lie with the broader public's ability to differentiate the purpose of national and European elections rather than indifference toward EU affairs.

To investigate this possibility, this paper relies on survey and contextual data provided by the 2009 European Election Study (EES). The paper proceeds as follows. First, I briefly review prior research on voting behavior in elections to the European Parliament and then develop the theoretical argument that experience with decentralized governance enables individuals to behave more competently in European elections. After drawing testable hypotheses from that theoretical discussion, I investigate the effects of decentralized institutional arrangements on participation in European elections. Using three different measures of decentralized decision-making, survey analyses show that prior experience with multi-level governance has a significant effect on the likelihood of participating in EP elections and, to a lesser extent, of casting a vote based on EU-relevant concerns.

I. Voting Behaviour in European Elections

The preponderance of research on EP elections falls under the umbrella of the second-order elections (SOE) theory. First developed by Reif and Schmitt (1980), the core argument of the theory is that most individuals do not attribute much importance to European elections and are thus free to behave differently than in national elections. Some

individuals cast a 'sincere' vote in support of a (often) smaller party that closely aligns with the individual's ideological preferences; a vote that would likely be considered wasted in national elections as the party is not competitive enough to secure a role in the government. Others cast a 'strategic' vote against the party with which they identify in order to register disapproval with that party's performance since the last national election. Individuals behave in this manner because, unlike national elections, the results of European elections do not have consequences for the formation of national governments and/or an effect on the issues that really matter to voters. As evidence in support of this theory, large parties and governing parties suffer disproportionately larger losses and smaller parties gain a greater percentage of the vote in European elections (Marsh, 1998; Schmitt, 2005).

While a large body of research supports the SOE theory (Anderson and Ward, 1996; Carrubba and Timpone, 2005; Koepke and Ringe, 2006; Marsh, 2007), this work largely relies on macro-level trends to test the micro-level assumptions of the theory. For example, positing that strategic voting is more likely the longer it has been since the last national election, some have pointed to the greater losses of governing parties at the midpoint in national election cycles as evidence for the second-order effect (Marsh, 1998; Hix and Marsh, 2011). Until recently, few scholars have examined the attitudes that actually shape voting in EP elections. Using post-election survey data to identify the motivations behind vote choices in European elections, more recent work finds that EU-relevant concerns can have an effect on EP voters. The supporters of governing parties are more likely to vote for an opposition party in EP elections if they perceive themselves as more Eurosceptic than the government (Hobolt *et al.*, 2009) or if they do not approve of the government's performance on EU issues (Clark and Rohrschneider, 2009). Moreover, greater levels of support for the EU correspond with an increased likelihood of participating in EP elections at both the individual and country levels (Mattila, 2003; Stockemer, 2012). This research does not dispute the primacy of national politics for EP voters, but demonstrates that EU politics also has a role in explaining EU-level voting behaviour.

In response to these findings, scholars have started to explore the conditions that promote EU-conscious voting. The extent of an individual's knowledge about the EU moderates the effect of EU affairs on their vote choices. The EU has a stronger effect on voting behaviour as EP political campaigns (Weber, 2007; Hobolt *et al.*, 2009) and the media (De Vries *et al.*, 2011) devote more time to these issues and as EP voters acquire more information about the positions of EP candidates on EU issues (Hobolt and Wittrock, 2011). Related to these findings, the extent to which the issue of European integration has been politicized within the national political arena also influences whether EP voters consider the EU when casting a ballot (Hobolt and Spoon, 2012). This body of research demonstrates that the information environment plays a significant role in explaining EU-conscious voting, but scholars have yet to consider other contextual variables that might direct voters to think more about EU affairs when casting a ballot. There is reason to suspect that institutional context affects vote choices, particularly as it has been found to influence voting behaviour in other contexts.

The literature on economic voting, for instance, examines the role of institutional arrangements in clarifying which political actors hold responsibility for economic outcomes. The central claim within this literature is that voters punish governing parties at the

ballot box for poor or worsening economic conditions. The subsequent *clarity of responsibility* theory asserts that the frequency of such retrospective voting decreases in countries where institutional arrangements disperse power across multiple actors and voters are consequently less able to attribute responsibility for policy outcomes (Powell and Whitten, 1993; Hellwig and Samuels, 2008). In particular, the larger number of political actors and more complex political arrangements of multiparty systems (Anderson, 2000) and federal systems (Arceneaux, 2006) obscure which political parties are to blame for policy failures. At the same time, voters are able to cope with this complexity by looking to different characteristics of their country's institutional arrangement for cues on where to attribute responsibility; characteristics include a party's status in the government or the opposition (Nadeau and Lewis-Beck, 2001), the size of the party, control of important ministries within the government, and a party's length of time in the governing coalition (Van der Brug *et al.*, 2007). This research offers evidence that institutions are indeed connected to vote choices, but focuses solely on the effects of economic conditions on national election results.

Seeking to extend the clarity of responsibility argument to other issue areas, De Vries *et al.* (2011) find that institutional arrangements affect the extent to which voters are able to hold national actors responsible for their policies toward the EU. The public has an easier task identifying the actors responsible for EU policy when and where the electoral rules favour proportional government, fewer parties compose the government and the opposition has fewer opportunities to influence policy. While demonstrating that institutional arrangements indeed promote EU-conscious voting, De Vries *et al.* (2011) only analyze behaviour at the national level and do not address the questions raised within the second-order literature. With that objective in mind, the following section outlines the potential links between institutions and voting behaviour in European elections.

II. Political Competence in Multilevel Settings

Before discussing the role of institutions, it is worthwhile to consider the preferred conduct of EP voters. In her study of the 1994 Norwegian referendum on EU membership, Hobolt (2007) offers a useful conceptual framework for evaluating behaviour: *competent voting*. The competent voter is one able to accomplish the task presented to them in their role as a democratic citizen. In the 1994 referendum, the task at hand was determining whether joining the EU was in the best interests of Norway. Instead, many Norwegians cast a vote based on their assessment of the government's economic performance. Such a choice may be rational in that voters are acting on reasoned preferences, but it is not competent because the vote does not actually address the issue under consideration. As Hobolt (2007, p. 156) argues, competent choices matter for the quality of democratic governance; 'governors can only respond appropriately to the expression of voter preferences if these expressions relate to the question posed'.

One obstacle to competent voting is the public's lack of familiarity with relevant political issues. For example, much of the Norwegian electorate appears to have lacked the necessary information to make an informed choice about EU membership (Hobolt, 2007). Some scholars argue that uninformed individuals can look to cues from trusted sources, such as political elites or the media, to make informed choices (Sniderman *et al.*, 1991; Lupia and McCubbins, 1998). Consistent with this expectation, Hobolt (2007) finds that

ill-informed voters were able to rely on party endorsements to cast a competent vote. This line of reasoning suggests that voters require issue-specific knowledge to act competently. As has also been demonstrated in the second-order literature, greater knowledge about EU affairs promotes EU-conscious voting. I argue that competent voting in non-national elections also requires that individuals understand and appreciate the institutional structure of their political system.

The research on senate and gubernatorial elections in the United States identifies such behaviour as the *federalist perspective* (Stein, 1990; Atkeson and Partin, 1995), which asserts that 'the level of government at which an election is held defines the content of voter evaluations' (Stein, 1990, p. 32). Voters can only evaluate political candidates according to issues associated with policy jurisdictions at the relevant level of governance. If an individual's vote choice is motivated by issues outside the scope of a candidate's potential authority, then there is less chance that the individual's preferences will be reflected in decision-making. Following this line of reasoning, voters should not punish (or reward) local leaders for actions related to national defence or national leaders for performance on traditionally local issues such as crime rates. This research has largely focused on the role of the federalist perspective for both retrospective and prospective economic voting, arguing that voters should be able to differentiate the functions of each level of government in order to punish the decision-makers actually responsible for poor economic performance and bring about a change in the relevant government (see also Brown, 2010). The federalist perspective adds an additional layer to the theory of competent voting, whereby voters should take into account the policy jurisdictions at the centre of a particular election.

In the EU's multilevel system, national governments hold exclusive responsibility for some policy jurisdictions and share responsibility with the EU institutions over other jurisdictions. Many of the shared policy jurisdictions have a real and immediate effect on the lives of European citizens, as illustrated by recent economic crises in the eurozone. And in these shared areas, the EU can override the wishes of individual Member States and thus act as the dominant partner. The federalist perspective fits with the EU's institutional arrangement as the public elects representatives at each level to govern over different policy jurisdictions. EU-conscious voting may thus be prompted by two motivations: concern about EU issues and/or an appreciation of the distribution of functional responsibilities between national governments and the EU institutions.

In all likelihood, the latter motivation does not have the same effect across Europe. Voting behaviour in EP elections may be affected by the extent of decentralized authority within each EU Member State. Applying the work of Gerring and Thacker (2008), the term 'decentralized authority' refers to political systems in which subnational governments are independent of the national government and a power-sharing arrangement has been established between the subnational and national governments. While such arrangements can be created within a constitution, 'this sharing of responsibilities takes a variety of forms and is not always formally prescribed' (Gerring and Thacker, 2008, p. 88). 'Centralized authority' refers to systems in which sole authority rests with the national government and where few efforts have been made to delegate power to subnational units, with these units being subject to national supervision and oversight.

The type of institutional arrangement under which an individual is socialized may affect their available modes of behaviour. For instance, some of the research on EU

support suggests that national institutions constrain attitudes toward the European Union; that the quality of political representation (meaning the extent of corruption within the political process and the responsiveness of political actors to public demands) influences how individuals perceive the EU (Sanchez-Cuenca, 2000; Rohrschneider and Loveless, 2010). Those individuals who are accustomed to more responsive national institutions have developed a higher standard for evaluating democratic institutions and are thus more likely to view the EU as suffering from a democracy deficit. In contrast, the EU appears more democratic when compared with less responsive national institutions and, consequently, individuals are less likely to be influenced by a perceived democracy deficit when developing positions on the EU (Rohrschneider, 2002). Similarly, an individual's experiences with national institutions may condition whether and how he or she perceives the multilevel nature of the EU and their own role within that multilevel system. More specifically, those individuals accustomed to decentralized governance may be better oriented to the federalist perspective and consequently more likely to recognize the EU's authority in shared policy areas, to participate in European elections out of an interest in EU affairs and to make a vote choice in EP elections based on EU issues.

Such individuals will likely have experienced relatively autonomous and empowered political bodies at the local and/or regional levels. Through any number of activities (such as paying trash collection fees or collecting disability insurance), individuals interact with these bodies and may be made aware of the powers designated to local and regional governments. Many individuals will also have participated in subnational elections and possibly been exposed to discourse that indicates the division of policy-making responsibilities across levels of governance, particularly when incumbents seek to avoid blame for poor outcomes. Furthermore, public schools may require students to take government courses that outline the structure of the political system. There are a number of possible opportunities for those living under federal (or otherwise decentralized) arrangements to learn about multilevel governance.

An awareness of multilevel governance may then affect voting behaviour. Individuals are more likely to recognize that voting competently increases the odds of influencing decision-making; that ineffective local and regional policies are less likely to change if these elections are merely referenda on the performance of national political actors. Moreover, individuals may identify with a sense of democratic citizenship that entails genuinely participating at all levels of governance. In fact, fulfilling one's civic duty might start with efforts to address social, economic and political issues at the local level. This mentality may contribute to more active participation at the European level. Based on their experience with multilevel governance, these individuals may be more likely to recognize that the EU has jurisdiction over a unique bundle of issues and to participate in EP elections with these issues in mind.

In contrast, individuals living under more centralized forms of government may not be primed to recognize the division of policy-making responsibilities within the EU. In these systems, the national government holds jurisdiction over most domestic and foreign policy areas. Local and regional bodies may exist, but are more likely to act as agents of the national government with little independent authority. As a result, political elites may be less likely to invoke federalist ideals in their rhetoric and any civics-based education may be less likely to address the concept of decentralized authority. In other words, the public does not have the same exposure to the federalist perspective as in decentralized

systems. Additionally, the public may not have incentives to follow local and regional politics. As authority ultimately rests at the national level, focusing on subnational actors is an ineffective strategy for influencing government or holding decision-makers accountable for poor outcomes. These possibilities could then weaken EU-conscious voting, for those inexperienced with multilevel governance may assume that (as with local and regional actors) the EU institutions are merely the instruments for national authorities.

Adapting the work of Hobolt and Spoon (2012), three types of behaviour in EP elections are examined: *partisanship*, in which a voter supports the same party in national and European elections; *switching*, in which an EP voter changes their vote from the last national election to either support or oppose a party in government; and *abstaining*, in which a voter only participates in national elections. The federalist perspective would encourage voters to participate at both levels and to vote in European elections based on concerns relevant to the EU. The argument advanced in this article is that individuals from decentralized political systems are more likely to adopt the federalist perspective, leading to the following hypotheses.

H1: The more decentralized a political system, the greater the likelihood that EP vote switchers are to base their decision on concerns about the EU (as opposed to concerns about national politics).

H2: The more decentralized a political system, the greater the likelihood that individuals choose to participate in EP elections.

Hobolt and Spoon's (2012) method builds on earlier work by including both voters and abstainers in the sample, but overlooks potential differences in behaviour toward governing and opposition parties. The second-order research distinguishes governing parties as suffering disproportionately larger losses in EP elections due to protest voting (Marsh, 1998). To allow for that possibility, this article follows up with analyses that isolate vote switching between governing and opposition parties. The next section details the data and methods of analysis.

III. Data and Methods

Much of the data analyzed is drawn from the 2009 EES and Contextual Dataset. The EES was administered during the four weeks prior to the 2009 EP elections with approximately 1,000 respondents from each of the 27 Member States.¹ The Contextual Dataset includes a number of political, economic and institutional indicators for each country as measured in the year 2009. Additionally, I use Gerring and Thacker's (2008) data on levels of unitarism (centralization) in the Member States.

As described above, the dependent variable is whether an individual who voted in the last national election (1) maintained support for either a governing party or an opposition party in the 2009 EP elections, (2) switched their support from a governing party to an opposition party (or vice versa), or (3) abstained. This variable is constructed using questions asking about vote choice in the national and European elections. Most individuals either support

¹ The EES was conducted through phone interviews, except in seven east European countries where representative phone sampling was not feasible. In these countries, 70 per cent of respondents were administered the survey through face-to-face interviews and the other 30 per cent were administered through phone interviews.

the same party or stay at home during EP elections. Only 10.5 per cent of respondents switched their vote between a party in government and a party in the opposition,² with less than 5 per cent of voters switching in Italy and Slovakia and over 20 per cent in Estonia and Ireland. 60.3 per cent fall in the partisan category, ranging from 43 per cent in Lithuania and Slovakia to over 80 per cent in Italy, Malta, and Belgium. 29.2 per cent of respondents voted in national elections and then abstained from the EP elections. The country percentages vary from under 2 per cent in Belgium to around 10 per cent in Denmark and Luxembourg to over 50 per cent in Lithuania and Slovakia.

To determine the relative influence of national and EU considerations, each model includes measures of performance evaluations at both levels. At the national level, the government is assessed with a dichotomous approval measure coded as (0) approval and (1) disapproval of the government's performance. At the EU level, respondents indicate their confidence in EU decision-making along a scale ranging from (1) high confidence to (4) low confidence. Additionally, the effects of left/right ideological preferences (capturing issues governed more at the national level) are analyzed using a set of questions asking respondents to place themselves and the party they supported in the last national election on a scale ranging from (0) left to (10) right. The absolute difference between self-placements and party placements is used as a measure of perceived ideological divisions. To analyze the effects of EU preferences, I use a similar set of questions asking for self-placements and party placements on a scale that varies between (0) 'unification has already gone too far' and (10) 'unification should be pushed further'.

The following analyses use three distinct variables to test for the effects of decentralized governance.³ First, the EES Contextual Study includes a dichotomous measure of federalism (coded '1' for federal systems) based upon definitions contained within each national constitution. Only three EU members are coded as such: Austria, Belgium and Germany. Fortunately, the Contextual Study also offers a measure of fiscal decentralization, estimated by taking the combined local and regional tax revenue as a percentage of total tax revenue within each Member State.⁴ While not a direct measure of local and regional power, those subnational governments with a higher percentage of revenues are likely to have jurisdiction over a greater number of policy areas. The values on this second measure range from 0 to 34.52 per cent, with a mean score of 12.6 per cent. The three highest-scoring countries on this measure are Spain, Germany and Sweden, while the lowest-scoring countries are Malta, the Netherlands and Greece.

The third variable is drawn from Gerring and Thacker (2008), whose unitarism variable combines elements of federalism and bicameralism. The federalism dimension recognizes that semi-federal arrangements may exist without constitutional provision, coded '0' for elected subnational governments with constitutionally-protected authority, '1' for

² Hobolt and Spoon (2012) find a higher percentage of switchers at 20 per cent, presumably because they code any change of vote between national and European elections as switching. For the measure used in this article, a voter has to defect to or from a party in government to a party in opposition to be counted as a switcher. This coding is consistent with earlier second-order research that argues that voters use EP elections to sanction or reward governing parties for their performance at the national level.

³ I also considered using the Regional Authority Index (RAI) as a measure of decentralized governance, but that data only covered European countries through 2006 at the time of writing this article (Hooghe *et al.*, 2010).

⁴ The Contextual Study takes both variables from Armingeon *et al.* (2010). The federalism variable is based on constitutional definitions summarized in the Comparative Political Dataset III, while the fiscal data comes from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development and Eurostat.

elected subnational governments without constitutional protections and '2' for subnational governments, if they exist, with minimal independence or authority. Gerring and Thacker (2008) conceptualize bicameralism as part of unitarism because subnational governments may be able to exert influence over the national government through the upper chamber of the legislative branch. This dimension is coded '0' for a strong upper chamber with formal veto power, '1' for a weaker upper chamber with some effective veto power and '2' for no upper chamber or one with no effective influence. To construct the unitarism variable, the scores on both dimensions are averaged together for each Member State, producing a five-point scale. The mean score is 1.69 and the EU countries skew toward the high end of the unitarism measure. Germany and Belgium fall in the two lowest categories, Italy and Spain score in the middle category and the rest of the EU countries rank in the top two categories.

While the measures of federalism and unitarism are strongly correlated (0.70), the latter permits slightly more variation as it expands upon the strict criterion that decentralized government requires constitutional provisions. The measure of fiscal decentralization is more weakly correlated with federalism (0.4) and unitarism (0.48), possibly due to the fiscal measure capturing aspects of decentralized governance concerning the distribution of policy competences. I examine the effects of all three variables, both to check the robustness of the results and to allow for different interpretations of the conditions that define multilevel governance.⁵

Several control variables are also included in these analyses. As knowledge has been found to influence voting behaviour (De Vries *et al.*, 2011; Hobolt and Wittrock, 2011), I include an additive knowledge variable that sums the number of correct responses to seven true/false questions about national and EU politics. As the media may also influence turnout (De Vreese and Boomgaarden, 2006), I control for media exposure using the question that asks respondents how many days a week they follow the news. As increasing levels of education and wealth have been associated with higher turnout in national elections (Lewis-Beck *et al.*, 2008), the following models include measures of education and income. Education is constructed with four categories (higher categories corresponding with greater education), based on the age at which the respondent stopped full-time education.⁶ Income is measured along a seven-point scale, ranging from '1' poor family to '7' rich family. Two additional individual-level controls are also included in these analyses.⁷ Age is constructed with four categories, based on the reported year of birth, with higher categories corresponding to older ages.⁸ Gender is coded '0' for males and '1' for females.

⁵ Given the relatively strong intercorrelations of the three measures of decentralized governance and the possibility of inflated results due to multicollinearity, each of the three measures are analyzed separately.

⁶ The question used for the education measure asks 'how old were you when you stopped full-time education?'. Respondents were grouped into four categories: those who replied between the ages of 0 and 17 (1), between the ages of 18 and 22 (2), between the ages of 23 and 25 (3), and 26 years of age or older (4). Current age is substituted for those respondents who replied that they are still pursuing a full-time education.

⁷ One common control not included in these analyses is partisanship. To use the EES question on partisanship (Question 89) would entail cutting the sample size by more than half, as half of respondents to this question are coded as 'nap'. To ensure that omitting partisanship does not alter the results, I ran the models from Table 1 with the partisanship measure included. With the exception that the federalism variable loses significance in the analysis of turnout, the effects of the multilevel predictors are unchanged by the addition of a partisanship measure.

⁸ The question used for the age measure asks 'what year were you born?'. Respondents were grouped into four categories: those who fall in the range between 0 and 18 years old (1), between 19 and 29 years old (2), between 30 and 55 years old (3), and over 56 years of age (4).

These models also include a number of contextual controls. As compulsory voting is likely to have a strong effect on turnout, I include a dichotomous measure that codes states with compulsory voting as '1' and all others as '0'. Prior second-order research suggests that the timing of European elections may influence the extent of switching with greater losses for governing parties when EP elections are scheduled closer to the mid-point of the national election cycle (Marsh, 1998). Thus, states are coded '1' if the last national election was more than a year prior to the EP elections and '0' if national and European elections fall within the same 12-month period. Finally, as past research suggests that younger democracies produce lower levels of turnout, I code the states that transitioned to democracy in the early-1990s '1' and all others '0'. The descriptive statistics for all of the independent variables can be found in the Appendix.

To better account for the effects of both the individual- and the country-level variables, I rely on multilevel modeling. Such an approach avoids issues related to mis-estimating standard errors within nested data (Raudenbush and Bryk, 2002) and allows an analysis of variation in voting behaviour both within and across the EU members. As with Hobolt and Spoon (2012), the multinomial dependent variable requires a generalized linear model using the logit link function.

IV. Results

The baseline for these multinomial models is the likelihood of supporting a party in government (or in opposition) across national and EP elections. To begin, the effects of the individual-level predictors on switching and abstaining (as presented in the first and fourth columns of Table 1) largely confirm earlier findings that both national and EU level considerations influence EP voting behaviour (see Hobolt and Spoon, 2012). The greater the perceived distance between a respondent's left/right position and the position of the party he or she supported in the last national election, the more likely they are to switch support in the EP elections. Larger perceived differences over the pace of European integration and decreasing confidence in EU decision-making both are also associated with a higher likelihood of switching. The measure of government approval does not reach significance.⁹ Turning to the controls: consistent with earlier second-order research, wealthier, better-educated and younger respondents are more likely to switch their vote in EP elections. All of these results are significant at the 95 per cent level or higher.

The predictors of abstaining from EP elections are slightly different. Perceived left/right differences and confidence in EU decision-making each have the same effects as on switching, whereby greater ideological distance from the party one supported in the last national elections and less confidence corresponds with a higher likelihood of abstaining. However, neither the measure of EU ideology nor government approval reaches statistical significance. The control variables affect abstentions in a manner consistent with the research on turnout (Lewis-Beck *et al.*, 2008; Abramson *et al.*, 2011): more knowledgeable and media-aware, better-educated, older and wealthier respondents are more likely to vote in EP elections. Moreover, the likelihood of abstaining increases in the newer EU democracies.

⁹ This finding may be due to the construction of the dependent variable, which combines switching to and from government parties. To investigate that possibility, in an unreported analysis, I analyze defections from opposition and government parties separately. Indeed, when the dependent variable is constructed in this manner, government approval has a significant effect on defections to and from government parties.

While informative, these findings do not address the potential influence of the federalist perspective on voting behaviour in EP elections. Toward that end, Table 1 also presents the results of a series of models that incorporate the three measures of decentralized governance. To account for the possibility that decentralized governance conditions EU-conscious voting, each model includes an interaction term capturing the relationship between decentralization and the individual-level measure of confidence in EU decision-making. As shown in the second column, neither the dichotomous federalism variable nor the federalism interaction term has an effect on vote-switching, casting some doubt on *H1*. None of the results differ from the baseline (in the first column).

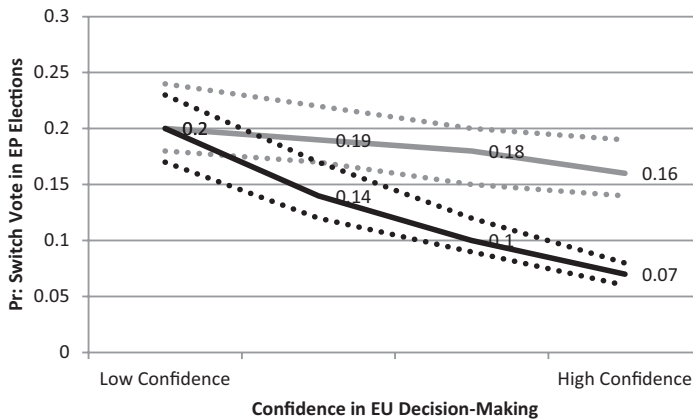
However, the analysis of fiscal decentralization (depicted in the third column of Table 1) offers some support for *H1*. The results of this model suggest that greater levels of local and regional tax revenues correspond with a decreased likelihood of switching. The interaction term also reaches significance, suggesting that the extent of decentralization conditions the effects of confidence in the EU. In this model, the measure of EU confidence loses significance (likely due to the interaction term). The effects of the control variables are the same as in earlier models.

The fourth model of switching includes the Gerring and Thacker (2008) measure of unitarism. The positive and statistically significant coefficient for the unitarism measure indicates that greater degrees of centralized governance correspond with a higher likelihood of switching, providing additional evidence in favour of *H1*. Moreover, the extent of centralized governance appears to interact with confidence in the EU to affect the probability of switching. All of the other predictors have the same effects as with the baseline. While the second model suggests that purely federal arrangements do not have an effect on switching, the results of the third and fourth models are perhaps most noteworthy as fiscal decentralization and unitarism offer more nuanced measures of multilevel governance and may thus better account for the types of decentralized arrangements that promote the federalist perspective.

Next, the same models are analyzed with the likelihood of voting in national elections and abstaining in EP elections. As summarized in the sixth column of Table 1, individuals from the three federal states are more likely to vote in EP elections. The interaction term is also significant, suggesting that federalism moderates the effects of confidence in the EU institutions. The other two measures of decentralization produce similar results. Greater fiscal decentralization reduces the likelihood of abstaining from EP elections, although there does not appear to be any interactive effect with EU confidence in this model. Likewise, stronger unitarism (meaning greater centralization) corresponds with a higher likelihood of abstaining and conditions the effects of EU confidence. With the exception of the fiscal decentralization interaction term, all of these results are significant at the 95 per cent level or higher. The direction of the coefficients and significance levels of the individual-level predictors are all the same as in the baseline. These results uphold *H2*, suggesting that a decentralized institutional context may indeed socialize individuals to the federalist perspective.

To better understand how decentralized arrangements affect voting behaviour, I next compare the effect of confidence in the EU institutions on the probability of abstaining from EP elections (as opposed to supporting the same party in national and EP elections) under both federal and non-federal systems. To estimate this difference, EU confidence is increased from the lowest to the highest value under both types of system, while holding

Figure 1: Conditional Effects of Fiscal Decentralization on Switching in EP Elections



Source: European Election Study (2009).

Notes: The lighter line tracks the change in probabilities for EU Member States that score the lowest on the measure of fiscal decentralization; the darker line tracks the change in probabilities for EU Member States that score the highest on this measure. The horizontal axis moves from the lowest value to the highest value of confidence in EU decision-making. The vertical axis indicates the probability that an EP voter will switch their vote between a governing and an opposition party in EP elections (as opposed to consistently supporting a governing or opposition party across elections).

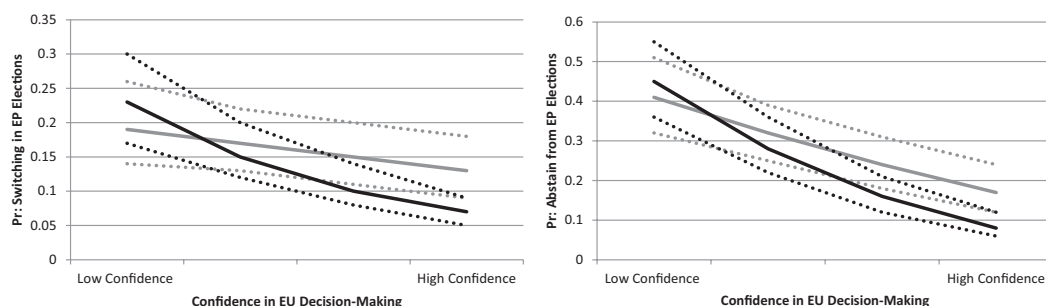
constant all of the other variables.¹⁰ In non-federal systems, the probability of abstaining for those with the least confidence is 41 per cent compared to 17 per cent for those with the highest confidence. In federal systems, the probability shifts from 40 per cent for those at the lowest end to 8 per cent for those at the highest end. The difference in moving from the lowest to the highest value of EU confidence is 24 per cent in non-federal systems and 33 per cent in federal systems. These findings suggest that confidence in the EU and experience with decentralized governance promote greater participation in EP elections, and that the latter slightly conditions the effects of the former.

Figure 1 plots the conditional effects of fiscal decentralization on the relationship between EU confidence and vote-switching.¹¹ Moving from left to right in Figure 1, greater levels of confidence in the EU and higher degrees of fiscal decentralization clearly correspond with a lower probability of individuals switching their vote between national and European elections. Moreover, fiscal decentralization moderates the effects of EU confidence. The difference in the probability of switching at the lowest and at the highest

¹⁰ Left/right distance is held constant at the value of 2, which is the mean perceived distance on the left/right scale between each respondent and the party they voted for in the last national elections. EU distance is held constant at 2.5, which is also the mean perceived distance. The government approval variable is held constant at disapproval (1), the opinion held by a majority of respondents. Knowledge is held constant at 4 because a plurality of respondents correctly answered three questions. Media exposure is held constant at 7 as the vast majority of respondents reply that they watch the news seven days a week. Education is held constant at 2, as a plurality of individuals report stopping their full-time education between the ages of 18 and 22. Sex is held constant for females (1), a majority of the respondents. Age is held constant at 3, as a plurality of individuals fall between the ages of 30 and 55. Income is held constant at 4, the mean level of self-reported wealth. Compulsory voting is held constant at 0, as well over a majority of countries do not require voting. Midterm is held constant at 1, as most countries held their last national election more than 12 months prior to European elections. New democracy is held constant at 0, as a majority of countries are older democracies.

¹¹ The models depicted in Figures 1 and 2 were chosen as these were the ones in which the interaction terms reached statistical significance.

Figures 2(a) and 2(b): Conditional Effects of Unitarism on Abstaining/Switching in EP Elections



Source: European Election Study (2009).

Notes: The lighter lines track the change in probabilities for EU Member States that score the highest on the Gerring and Thacker (2008) measure of unitarism (meaning those countries with the lowest levels of decentralization); the darker lines track the change in probabilities for EU Member States that score the lowest on this measure. The horizontal axis moves from the lowest value to the highest value of confidence in EU decision-making. The vertical axis indicates the probability that an EP voter will abstain from EP elections (as opposed to consistently supporting a governing or opposition party across national and European elections).

values of EU confidence is 4 per cent in political systems with low levels of fiscal decentralization. That difference widens to 13 per cent in political systems with high levels of decentralization. The larger confidence intervals at the low end of the scale suggest that decentralization has a greater moderating effect on individuals with increasing levels of confidence in the EU.

Turning to participation in EP elections, the extent of fiscal decentralization also has a direct effect¹² on the decision of whether or not to abstain. Holding constant the other variables, moving from the lowest to the highest levels of fiscal decentralization decreases the odds of abstaining by 11 per cent (from 0.36 to 0.25).

Figures 2a and 2b illustrate how the unitarism measure conditions the relationship between EU confidence and switching/abstaining from EP elections. As depicted in the upper-right side of Figure 2a, those individuals with low confidence in the EU, coming from highly centralized systems are 19 per cent more likely to switch their vote in EP elections rather than maintain support for the same party. Those individuals with a great deal of confidence in the EU, coming from highly decentralized systems are only 7 per cent more likely to switch in EP elections. The effect of EU confidence on the probability of switching increases from 6 per cent under centralized governance to 16 per cent under decentralized governance. Moving to Figure 2b, the influence of EU confidence on the probability of abstaining increases from 24 per cent under centralized governance to 37 per cent under decentralized governance. Here again, given the larger confidence intervals on the left-hand side of these two figures, the effects of living under more centralized arrangements are clearer on those with greater confidence in the EU. Altogether, these results provide some evidence that the federalist perspective indeed filters the effects of EU-relevant concerns on behaviour in European elections.

¹² As the interaction term for fiscal decentralization and EU confidence does not reach significance in the abstention model in Table 1, I do not plot the conditional effects as part of the post-estimation.

Conclusions

Elections to the European Parliament undoubtedly fail to mobilize as much interest or participation as most national elections, but there are reasons to be optimistic about the development of a European electorate. While earlier research suggests that EP voters are largely motivated by concerns about national politics (Reif and Schmitt, 1980; Marsh, 1998), more recent contributions suggest that both European and national affairs influence vote choices in EP elections (Hobolt *et al.*, 2009). The question, then, is what conditions prompt individuals to participate in EP elections and vote based on EU issues? We know that the amount of EU information available for public consumption and the public's understanding of EU affairs affect the extent to which voters act on EU concerns (Weber, 2007; De Vries *et al.*, 2011; Hobolt and Wittrock, 2011; Hobolt and Spoon, 2012). This article argues that an individual's experience with decentralized governance may also motivate greater interest in EP elections and prompt EU-conscious voting. The above analyses of EES survey data offer some evidence for these expectations. Each of the three measures of decentralized governance has the expected effect on the likelihood of voting, generally by significant margins. In other words, individuals from more decentralized political systems are more likely to participate in EP elections. The results also suggest that experience with decentralized governance conditions the criteria used by EP voters when deciding whether to defect from the party they supported in the last national elections. In countries where local and regional governments have greater fiscal autonomy, perceptions of the EU weigh more on the minds of EP voters.

These findings offer some lessons for the literature on EP elections and on political behaviour more broadly. An established body of research demonstrates that national institutions affect attitudes toward the EU (Sanchez-Cuenca, 2000; Rohrschneider, 2002; Rohrschneider and Loveless, 2010). This article indicates that such research can be extended to examine other types of political behaviour at the European level. More specifically, scholars might consider political context when seeking to explain EP voting behaviour. Beyond the information environment and the balance of power between subnational and national governments, one can imagine a number of contextual variables that may influence the decision to participate in EP elections. Mattila (2003) finds that compulsory voting and weekend voting increase turnout in EP elections; national electoral institutions might also have indirect effects on the decision to participate in EP elections. While some variables (such as the information environment) may directly affect the relevance of EU concerns, others may help or hinder turnout by instilling certain behavioural norms in potential European voters. For instance, electoral institutions that dampen turnout at the national level by demobilizing interest in the political process (Jackman, 1987) may well have a similar effect at the European level. Thus, contextual variables may complement or interact with the standard individual-level predictors of turnout in EP elections.

This article also demonstrates the value in refining our understanding of political knowledge. The preferred voter is not only knowledgeable – able to recall and rely on factual knowledge about the political system – but also competent. The competent voter casts a ballot in response to the question at the centre of an election rather than unrelated or irrelevant considerations. While distinct, the two concepts are related: greater knowledge appears to increase the odds of an individual making competent choices. Hobolt (2007), for example, finds that voters are more likely to act on relevant concerns when

given information about the issue in question. This article extends that conceptual framework further by theorizing that, in multilevel settings, voters must also recognize the principle of differentiated governance to behave competently. The results of the above analyses suggest that individuals from decentralized political systems are better equipped to adopt the federalist perspective. Efforts to create a more EU-focused electorate might then focus on engendering an appreciation of multilevel governance (particularly in centralized political systems) as well as providing information about the EU institutions.

Finally, this article has implications for the debate over the vitality of democracy within the EU. Some scholars argue that the EU lacks the necessary political community to develop into a functioning democratic system, often pointing to low turnout in EP elections as evidence of the non-existent European-level polity (Schmitter, 2000). However, if national context moderates behaviour in EP elections, then the problems with EU democracy may not be entirely due to public apathy toward EU affairs. Rather, many individuals may have yet to adapt to the unique demands of democratic citizenship in a multilevel political system. In which case, a more active sense of citizenship may yet emerge in EP elections.

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Appendix Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Independent Variables

	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Standard deviation</i>	<i>Minimum</i>	<i>Maximum</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>Individual level</i>					
Left/Right Distance	1.95	2.21	0	10	21,409
EU Distance	2.44	2.47	0	10	18,382
Government Approval	0.52	0.49	0	1	26,893
Confidence in EU	2.58	0.76	1	4	25,744
Knowledge	3.9	1.86	0	7	26,893
Media Exposure	5.96	1.84	0	7	26,893
Education	2.09	0.91	1	4	26,459
Sex	0.55	0.49	0	1 (female)	26,891
Age	3.26	0.7	1	4	26,589
Income	4.03	1.20	1	7	26,397
<i>Context level</i>					
Compulsory	0.14	0.35	0	1	26,891
Midterm Election	0.85	0.35	0	1	26,891
New Democracy	0.37	0.48	0	1	26,891
Federalism	0.11	0.31	0	1	26,891
Fiscal Decentralization	12.61	9.97	0	34.52	26,891
Unitary Measure	1.68	0.51	0	2	26,891

Source: Author's own calculations.

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