
ARTICLE

Explaining Low Turnout in European Elections: The Role of Issue Salience and Institutional Perceptions in Elections to the European Parliament

NICHOLAS CLARK

Department of Political Science, Susquehanna University, Selinsgrove, PA, USA

ABSTRACT Elections to the European Parliament have been unable to capture the public's interest— turnout remains far lower than most national elections and many who do vote appear more concerned with sending messages of approval to national political parties than electing representatives at the EU level. This paper seeks to explain why the public does not take these elections seriously. A common explanation is that the public simply does not care about EU politics. In addition to this 'issue-based' argument, this article considers where a lack of trust in the European Parliament itself may lead many individuals to abstain from EP elections. Using pre and post-election survey data, results suggest that perceptions of the EP indeed have a significant effect on the decision to vote in EP elections.

KEY WORDS: Voter turnout, EP elections, second-order theory, issue salience

Elections to the European Parliament (EP) do not appear to be working as instruments of democratic accountability at the European level. Turnout remains low by the standards of most national elections, and has declined in every EP election since 1979. EP campaigns largely emphasize national politics (Franklin 2001, Weber 2007) and receive little attention from the

Correspondence Address: Nicholas Clark, Susquehanna University, Department of Political Science, 514 University Avenue, Selinsgrove, PA 17870-1164, USA. Email: clarkn@susqu.edu

The author thanks Robert Rohrschneider, Tim Hellwig, Jae-Jae Spoon, Nick D'Amico, Jean-Bertrand Ribat, Janice Duchene, and Mark Franklin for their comments on earlier versions of this paper. The author claims full responsibility for any remaining errors.

media (de Vreese *et al.* 2006). Many EP voters use these elections simply to send messages of displeasure to national political parties (Reif and Schmitt 1980, Marsh 1998, Ferrara and Weishaupt 2004, van der Brug, van der Eijk, and Franklin 2007, Hix and Marsh 2007). The ‘second-order’ elections literature offers a clear explanation for this phenomenon—most Europeans perceive EP elections as inconsequential. Yet, it remains unclear why exactly voter discount EP elections.

This paper examines two potential explanations for voter apathy at the European level. First, individuals may disregard EP elections due to the low salience of issues that fall under the jurisdiction of the European Union; voters do not perceive EU politics as relevant to their own lives. This possibility is consistent with Andrew Moravcsik’s (2002) argument that the public does not care about the issues governed at the EU level. Second, the decision to abstain may be affected by a lack of faith in the European Parliament itself. Europeans may stay at home during EP elections because they doubt whether the European Parliament represents their interests within EU decision-making.

The paper also examines how the broader national context affects Europeans’ decision to participate in EP elections. While recent contributions have examined the individual-level considerations that influence participation in EP elections (Clark and Rohrschneider 2009, Hobolt, Spoon, and Tilley 2009); few have considered the effects of macro-level political conditions on these considerations. The quality of political institutions at the national level may have countervailing effects on voter turnout in EP elections. On one hand, more responsive and transparent institutions at the national level may foster a greater sense of efficacy and interest in the political process, both of which may translate into higher rates of political participation at all levels of governance. On the other, such an environment may also call greater attention to any real or imagined deficiencies in the EU institutions. The European Parliament, for instance, may look distant and indifferent in comparison with national institutions that respond to public input. This paper examines both possibilities to develop a more precise understanding of the relationship between national politics and behaviour at the European level.

The following analyses contribute to the debate over the so-called democracy deficit. Scholars have identified two issues with EU democracy: a lack of accountability on the part of EU institutions and a weak European public sphere (Schmitter 2000, Siedentop 2000). If doubts about the European Parliament explain the low turnout in EP elections, then the problem may well be that the EU requires further institutional reforms to improve democratic accountability. In contrast, low issue salience at the European level would suggest that the problem lies within the public sphere. In addressing both possibilities, this paper establishes a clearer link between empirical research on EP elections and the broader debate about EU democracy.

This paper also builds on our understanding of political behaviour in multi-level political systems. We have yet to empirically investigate assumptions about why voters behave differently at the European level. To the

extent that voters are indifferent to issues outside of the national arena, this problem is likely not unique to the European Union. However, if low participation in EP elections is due more to doubts about the European Parliament, these problems may not be endemic to multi-level contexts.

Voting Behaviour in European Elections

Much of the American-based research on turnout examines the demographic and psychological correlates of voting. Older, better-educated, higher-earning individuals are more likely to vote (Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde 2011), as are individuals invested with a sense of political efficacy or civic duty (Lewis-Beck *et al.* 2008). The comparative research then focuses on macro-level explanations, finding that turnout is affected by the proportionality of electoral institutions, compulsory voting laws, group mobilization and trust in political institutions (Nie, Verba, and Petrocik 1976, Powell 1986, Jackman 1987, Lijphart 1997, Gray and Caul 2000). This body of work explains much of the variation in turnout at the national level, but does not suggest why turnout would be significantly lower in European elections than in national elections. The research on voting behaviour in EP elections offers some potential clues to that puzzle.

First established by Reif and Schmitt (1980), the second-order elections theory argues that voters behave differently in national and European elections because the results of European elections are of little consequence to the electorate. Consequently, some individuals take EP elections as an opportunity to vote sincerely, defecting from the large, centrist party that they supported in the last national election to a smaller, less-competitive party with which they more closely identify. Others behave strategically, voting against the party that they normally support in order to send a message of disapproval with that party's performance since the last national election. As evidence of this theory, larger parties tend to suffer disproportionately larger losses and smaller, niche parties tend to receive a greater percentage of the vote in EP elections than in national elections (Marsh 1998, Schmitt 2005).

Some second-order scholars have identified institution-based motivations behind EP voting behaviour. Reif and Schmitt (1980), for example, contend that less is at stake in European elections because (at that time) it was the national governments—and not the European Parliament—that made most or all political decisions in the EU. Elaborating on this framework, Van der Eijk *et al.* (1996) theorize that national elections determine the allocation of seats within parliamentary bodies and who controls the government —'other elections are less important, precisely because they play no role in deciding who governs the country' (150). Carrubba and Timpone (2005) similarly argue that perceptions of the Parliament as weak contribute, in part, to the second-order effect.

Building on this line of reasoning, this paper theorizes that perceptions of the representative body at the centre of an election may influence turnout. Two perceptions, in particular, have the potential to adversely affect turnout: that a representative body is not able to effectively influence

decision-making and/or that it does not adequately represent the public's values and preferences.

The former may occur when decision-making authority is shared by multiple actors. In such an environment, individuals may observe the relationships between the different actors and assess the relative strengths of each. If an elected body is perceived as weak vis-à-vis other decision-making actors, then some individuals may conclude that it does not matter who holds power within that body and that elections to that body are thus not important. This is a strong possibility in multi-level systems where local, regional, and transnational bodies are often subordinate to national political actors and second-order elections have no effect on the composition of the national government.

The latter perception may ensue when there are doubts about whether elected representatives actually know the wants and needs of their constituents or doubts about the willingness of representatives to protect the public's well-being. If elected representatives are perceived as out-of-touch or dishonest, then some individuals may decide that elections are not worth their time or attention.

An alternative explanation is that individuals disregard EP elections because they do not attach as much importance to the question of European integration or the types of issues that are governed at the European level. In multi-level political systems, each level of government has jurisdiction over its own set of policy areas. From the public's point of view, not all policy areas are the same. Moravcsik (2002), for instance, argues that the EU largely performs functions that have little interest to the public (i.e. central banking and technical administration), while the high salience issues (health care, education, law and order, pension and social security policy, and taxation¹) are primarily legislated at the national level. If it appears that the results of an election may only affect issues that have little or no immediate effect on individuals' lives, then there is likely less incentive to participate. This possibility seems to be what is intended when some second-order scholars argue that EP elections are 'low salience contests' (see Schmitt 2005, Hix and Marsh 2011)² and is consistent with other accounts that the public remains apathetic about the EU (Schmitter 2000, Van der Eijk and Franklin 2004).

There are reasons to doubt claims about public apathy toward the EU. Using post-election survey data, more recent second-order research suggests that EP voters seek to punish or reward national political parties based on both national and European-level concerns. Government supporters, for instance, are more likely to vote for an opposition party in EP elections if they perceive themselves as more Eurosceptic than the government (Hobolt, Spoon, and Tilley 2009) or if they do not approve of the government's performance on EU issues (Clark and Rohrschneider 2009). Additionally, recent national referenda on European integration have generated substantial media and public interest and much higher turnout than in EP elections. These patterns suggest that many individuals take an interest in EU affairs.

Perceptions of the European Parliament

In line with the institution-based theory, EU critics have long held that the EP lacks the powers to ensure democratic accountability in the EU (Schmitter 2000, Siedentop 2000). While there was a much stronger basis for this critique 30 years ago than today, Europeans may still harbour doubts about whether the Parliament is able to effectively influence EU decision-making. Even with recent treaty revisions, the Parliament still lacks decision-making authority over a few important and visible areas such as justice and home affairs, revenue-raising aspects of budgetary policy, and the taxation of goods and capitals entering the single market from outside countries. Additionally, while the EU treaties provide it with oversight powers over the College of Commissioners, the Parliament does not have a seat on the Council's system of committees that approve Commission proposals for new rules and policies (Mauer 2007). Most notably, the Parliament does not have the same legislative initiative as many national parliaments; it can only request that the Commission draft a proposal for a new EU law. Depending on an individual's benchmark, the Parliament may still appear weak to many Europeans.

Perhaps more important, many individuals may not be aware of the extent of the Parliament's influence. National media outlets devote minimal coverage to EU politics (Meyer 2005, Peter, Semetko, and de Vreese 2003, Peter and de Vreese 2004). The Parliament receives particularly short-shrift, as the media focuses more on national level issues and actors even when covering EP elections (de Vreese *et al.* 2006). For their part, the EU institutions have not dedicated sufficient resources to overcoming media resistance to covering EU politics (Meyer 1999). Reviewing the Parliament's media communications, Anderson and McLeod (2004) find that the press units and national information offices are under-funded, under-staffed and lack any sort of coordinated media strategy. Given the lack of media attention, it is unclear if recent advances in the Parliament's power have actually been communicated to the public (Peter, Lauf, and Semetko 2004).

There may also be doubts about how much the Parliament represents the public's views, particularly as its business is conducted far away from most countries and it may thus seem distant to many individuals. Moreover, as the EP has assumed a greater role in EU decision-making, MEPs have had to devote more time to learning about policy and less to constituency work (EPRG 2006, Mauer 2007). To the extent that constituency work provides the public a sense of familiarity with their representative and the Parliament, these trends may have strained the public's connection with the EP. Altogether, these concerns with the Parliament (real or imagined) may mitigate the public's interest in EP elections.

Additionally, the national political context may moderate the relationship between perceptions of the European Parliament and the decision to participate in European elections. Prior research finds that the quality of political representation at the national level—the performance of national bureaucracies and judiciaries in providing services and responding to public demands—shapes attitudes toward the European Union (Rohrschneider 2002). In countries with more responsive institutions, the public expects a

higher standard of representation and, comparing the EU with their own institutions, are more likely to perceive EU democracy as deficient. In countries with less responsive institutions, the EU looks more representative by comparison and the public is less likely to consider the EU's representational quality when developing positions on European integration.

Similarly, the European Parliament may appear unrepresentative in comparison with responsive national institutions. Where national institutions offer a higher degree of transparency and responsiveness, the public may expect the same level of procedural input from representative bodies at other levels of government. In these countries, individuals may feel compelled to abstain from EP elections if the European Parliament does not appear to meet the same standards. Conversely, unresponsive national institutions may lower the probability of abstentions from EP elections either because the European Parliament appears to function better than national institutions or because institutional quality does not have as strong an effect on prospective voters.

The strength of national parliaments may also condition the public's expectations of the European Parliament. Europe has produced a number of institutional arrangements that structure the relationship between parliaments and executives, some of which empower and others which weaken parliamentary bodies (Lijphart 1999, Andeweg 2007, Auel and Benz 2007). Given the greater visibility of strong parliaments, individuals from these countries may expect parliamentary bodies to have a clear and pronounced role in the political process. The perception of a weak European Parliament may then diminish turnout in European elections. In contrast, individuals accustomed to a weak national parliament may not attribute the same importance to parliamentary bodies or expect the European Parliament to have a prominent role in EU decision-making. These individuals may not consider institutional strength when deciding whether to participate in EP elections.

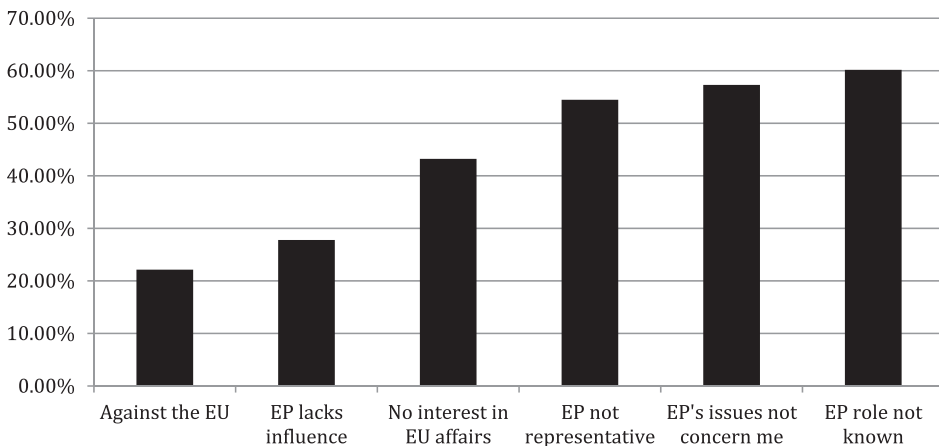
To summarize the argument thus far: turnout is substantially lower in European elections than in national elections and many EP voters appear to be more concerned with sending messages of disapproval to national political parties than with electing representatives at the European level. The research on European elections has yet to empirically determine the motivations for this apathy. Two possibilities are (1) a lack of interest in EU political affairs, and (2) doubts about the European Parliament as an influential and representative body. Such doubts are more likely to explain low turnout in countries with responsive political institutions and strong national parliaments. This discussion leads to three hypotheses:

- *Hypothesis 1*: Low interest in EU affairs prompts individuals to abstain from EP elections.
- *Hypothesis 2*: Perceptions of the EP as weak and/or unresponsive prompts individuals to abstain from EP elections.
- *Hypothesis 3*: Perceptions of the EP as weak and/or unresponsive have a stronger effect on turnout in countries with more responsive political institutions and strong national parliaments.

Data and Analysis

To test these hypotheses, I primarily rely on survey data from Eurobarometer 69.2 (Papacostas 2009)³ and the 2009 European Election Study (EES 2009).⁴ As the two surveys were conducted independently, using both allows me to better control for any design effects and to cross-verify the findings of each analysis. Additionally, there are short-comings in each survey. The EES does not include a measure of the perceived importance of the EP, while Eurobarometer 69.2 was conducted just prior to the 2009 EP elections and was thus only able to ask about vote intention.⁵ The two surveys together should allow me to develop a better picture of how issue salience and perceptions of the EP affected turnout in the last EP elections. To investigate the relationship between national institutions and perceptions of the EP, I use data from the Parliamentary Powers Index (Fish and Kroenig 1999), Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), and the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI) project (Kaufmann, Kraay, and Mastruzzi 2010).

To begin, Eurobarometer 69.2 offers a useful illustration of the considerations shaping participation in EP elections. Respondents who indicated that they did not plan to vote in the EP elections were asked, 'If you do not go to vote in the European elections of June 2009, will it be because...?' and were then provided a list with 13 possible reasons. The complete question wording and list of possible responses are included in Appendix A. Figure 1 presents the percentage of respondents who identified each of the most frequent responses to this question. This figure offers support for both the issue-based and the institution-induced theories. Around 43 per cent reply that they are not interested in EU politics, and over 57 per cent agree that the EP does not deal with problems that matter. While only 27 per



Notes: Black bars are based on the responses of 8,034 respondents who indicated they were not likely to vote in the next EP elections.

Source: Eurobarometer 69.2.

Figure 1. Considerations leading to likely abstention in 2009 EP elections

cent raise concerns about the EP's influence, nearly 55 per cent respond that the Parliament does not represent their views. Over 60 per cent of respondents reply that they do not have sufficient information about the Parliament's role, suggesting that a knowledge deficit may best explain the low levels of interest in EP elections. There are not any significant regional differences, other than individuals from Eastern Europe are far less likely to abstain because of outright opposition to European integration (15 per cent in the East, 28 per cent in the West).

Next, using multi-level linear regression, I model the hypothesized individual-level and contextual predictors of the intention to vote in the 2009 EP elections. Table 1 presents the results of four different analyses. All of the measures in Table 1 are documented in Appendix A. The first model investigates the effects of the public's perceptions of the European Parliament together with established predictors of turnout (political efficacy and knowledge) and standard demographic indicators (education, sex, age, and a proxy for income).

In line with my expectations, perceiving the European Parliament as representative or as influential (both are dichotomous measures) increases the odds than an individual plans to vote in the next EP elections; the former improves the likelihood of voting by .76 (on a 1–10 measure), the latter by 1.01. While this result may not surprise many observers, it has not previously been tested in the research on EP elections. Consistent with earlier research on turnout in national elections (Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde 2011), the likelihood of voting in EP elections increases along with a sense of efficacy, political knowledge, age, income, education, and political knowledge.

To examine the effects of the national political environment, this article relies on three data sources: the Parliamentary Powers Index (PPI), the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), and the Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI) project. Each of these is explained in greater detail in Appendix A. The second model in Table 1 incorporates the PPI measure and an interaction term that captures the relationship between the PPI and perceptions that the Parliament holds influence over EU decision-making. The third and fourth models include the CPI and WGI measures along with interaction terms that capture the relationship between each of those and perceptions of the EP as representative. None of the contextual measures or interaction terms achieves statistical significance, suggesting that experiences at the national level do not moderate perceptions of the European Parliament.

Of note, the coefficients for the PPI and WGI indicators and the interaction terms reach statistical significance when modeling these variables together with a measure of trust in the European institutions. These results suggest that the national political context may have a stronger effect on broader attitudes toward the EU than perceptions of specific European institutions.

Next, I turn to the European Election Study to verify these findings with data collected after the 2009 EP elections. To measure turnout, I use the EES question: 'A lot of people abstained in the European Parliament elections of June 4, while others voted. Did you cast your vote?' Table 2

Table 1. Predictors of intent to vote in EP elections

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
<i>Individual level variables</i>				
MEPs represent my views	.76** (.06)	.75** (.06)	.75** (.06)	.76** (.06)
European Parliament important	1.01** (.07)	.99** (.07)	1.003** (.07)	1.01** (.07)
Political efficacy	.76** (.05)	.78** (.06)	.76** (.05)	.76** (.05)
Knowledge about the EU	.3** (.02)	.29** (.02)	.3** (.02)	.3** (.02)
Education	.06** (.005)	.06** (.004)	.06** (.004)	.06** (.004)
Sex	.15** (.04)	.14** (.04)	.15** (.04)	.15** (.04)
Age	.02** (.001)	.02** (.001)	.02** (.001)	.02** (.001)
Able to pay bills	.27** (.02)	.27** (.02)	.27** (.02)	.27** (.02)
Constant	2.27** (.19)	2.26** (.19)	2.27** (.19)	2.28** (.19)
<i>Contextual level variables</i>				
Parliamentary Power Index		-2.56 (1.55)		
Corruption Perception Index			-.005 (.06)	
Voice/Accountability Ratings				
Interaction Term 1 (PPI*EP Importance)		1.47 (1.01)		.11 (.37)
Interaction Term 2 (CPI*EP Represents)			.05 (.03)	
Interaction Term 3 (V&A*EP Represents)				.04 (.16)
<i>Variance components</i>				
Random intercept between countries	.3 (.09)	.28 (.08)	.3 (.09)	.3 (.09)
Wald chi(2) statistic	2292.11**	2222.01**	2295.60**	2292.41**
N obs contextual level	27	25	27	27
N obs individual level	19,133	18,491	19,133	19,133

Notes: Cells report coefficients with standard errors in parentheses from a series of multi-level linear regression models (using the xtmixed command). The dependent variable is the likelihood of voting in the next EP elections, measured by self-placements on a 1–10 continuous scale. * and ** denote significance at the .05 and .01 level.

Source: Eurobarometer 69.2.

Table 2. Predictors of abstaining in EP elections

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
<i>Individual level variables</i>				
Salience of EU issues	-.1* (.04)	-.06 (.04)	-.08 (.04)	-.08 (.04)
MEPs represent my views	-.16** (.02)	-.16** (.02)	-.16** (.02)	-.16** (.02)
Knowledge about the EU	-.2** (.02)	-.22** (.02)	-.21** (.02)	-.21** (.02)
Education	-.02** (.003)	-.02** (.004)	-.02** (.004)	-.02** (.004)
Sex	-.05 (.04)	-.04 (.04)	-.05 (.04)	-.05 (.04)
Age	-.03** (.001)	-.03** (.001)	-.03** (.001)	-.03** (.001)
Income	-.15** (.02)	-.15** (.02)	-.14** (.02)	-.14** (.02)
Constant	2.12** (.19)	2.23** (.19)	2.1** (.18)	2.1** (.18)
<i>Contextual level Variables</i>				
Parliamentary Power Index		1.17 (1.72)		
Corruption Perception Index			-.17 (.09)	
Voice/Accountability Ratings				-1.36** (.53)
Interaction Term 1 (PPI*EU Demo)				
Interaction Term 2 (CPI*EU Demo)		-22 (.2)	.002 (.01)	
Interaction Term 3 (V&A*EU Demo)				.05 (.07)
<i>Variance components</i>				
Random intercept between countries	.53 (.15)	.49 (.15)	.47 (.14)	.44 (.12)
Wald chi(2) statistic	973.60**	927.30**	942.22**	944.71**
N obs contextual level	27	24	26	26
N obs individual level	17,254	15,584	16,795	16,795

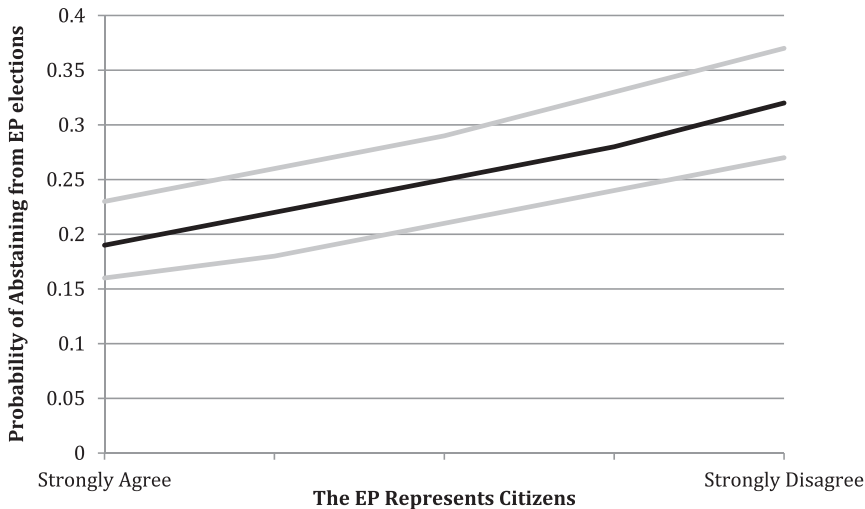
Notes: Cells report coefficients with standard errors in parentheses from multi-level non-linear regression models with binary logit link function. The dependent variable is reported abstentions from the last EP elections, using a dichotomous measure (0 = voted, 1 = abstained). * and ** denote significance at the .05 and .01 level.

Source: 2009 European Election Study.

summarizes the results from a series of multi-level logistic analyses modeling the predictors of abstaining from the EP elections (the construction of these predictors is described in Appendix A).

The first model, which focuses solely on the individual-level predictors of abstentions, supports both the institution and issue-based hypotheses. The measure of EU issue salience is statistically significant, suggesting that those individuals who believe the EU institutions deal with the most important problem facing society are less likely to abstain from EP elections. However, the perception that the EP takes the public's concerns into consideration appears to have an even stronger mitigating effect on the probability of abstaining than the measure of EU issue salience. Each of the demographic measures has the same effect as in my earlier analysis of Eurobarometer 69.2: younger, less educated, less knowledgeable, less interested, poorer individuals are more likely to abstain from EP elections.

Figure 2 illustrates the substantive effects of institutional perceptions on participation in EP elections, plotting the predicted probability of abstaining from EP elections against different perceptions of the EP's representativeness. Holding the other individual-level predictors constant at their mean, those who strongly disagree with the statement that the MEPs take into considerations the concerns of European citizens are 13 per cent more likely to abstain than those who strongly agree with that statement. In contrast, believing that the EU has jurisdiction over important issues only reduces the odds of abstaining by 1.7 per cent. Admittedly, the dichotomous scale of the salience measure likely limits the measurable effect. Yet, it appears that institutional perceptions have a slightly larger role than issue salience in explaining turnout in EP elections.



Notes: The black line represents the predicted probability that a respondent abstained from the 2009 EP elections, given different perceptions of the EP's representativeness. The horizontal axis varies from (5) strong agree to (1) strongly disagree.

Source: 2009 European Election Study.

Figure 2. Perceptions of the EP and abstentions from the 2009 EP elections

Finally, I examine how the contextual indicators interact with perceptions of the Parliament to shape participation in EP elections. To review, I expect that individuals are more likely to abstain when the European Parliament appears unfavourable in comparison with empowered national parliaments and transparent political institutions. The last three models in Table 2 incorporate the PPI, CPI, and WGI indicators with the individual-level predictors. Of these three, only the WGI indicator appears to be significantly correlated with the decision to vote. However, none of the interaction terms reach statistical significance. Additionally, plotting the predicted probability of abstaining against different values of the WGI reveals a confidence interval wide enough to question whether national institutions have much of a substantive effect.

Altogether, the results of these analyses support both the institution and issue-based hypotheses with slightly greater support for the latter. While low issue salience explains why some individuals choose to abstain from EP election, doubts about the influence and the representativeness of the Parliament are a much stronger predictor of the decision to participate. However, there is little evidence that national institutions condition the effects of how individuals perceive the European Parliament.

Conclusions

The public clearly does not attach much value to EP elections. The average EU turnout rate has declined in every EP election since 1979. In every EU member state, turnout is significantly lower in EP elections than in national elections. Moreover, voters appear to use EP elections as referenda on the performance of national political parties rather than opportunities to influence EU politics. Some second-order scholars argue that the low salience of EU issues explains the lack of public interest in EP elections, but recent survey research demonstrates that concerns over both national and European politics influence voting behaviour in these elections (Hobolt, Spoon, and Tilley 2009, Clark and Rohrschneider 2009). This article advances an alternative explanation—that doubts about whether the European Parliament represents the public's views and whether the EP holds influence in EU decision-making—to explain public apathy toward EP elections. While some Europeans indeed abstain due to a lack of interest in European politics, the results suggest that doubts about the EP may slightly better explain the low levels of participation in European elections.

The prior research on EP elections may have overlooked this explanation because of too narrow a focus in the dependent variable. Most of this research either examines trends in EP election results or vote switching across national and European election. The former does not concern the public's attitudes and the latter concerns a small segment of the population—less than 13 per cent of actual EP voters in the 1994 elections (Carrubba and Timpone 2005) and less than 12 per cent in the 2009 elections. To better understand how the public perceives EP elections, we need to better account for the rest of the voting eligible population.

Rohrschneider (2002) theorizes that individuals use national institutions as benchmarks for evaluating EU institutions and, in this manner, national institutions affect the public's positions on European integration. I expected that national institutions similarly affect the public's behaviour in EP elections; that the European Parliament would look better by comparison in countries with weak national parliaments and unresponsive political institutions, and that prospective EP voters would not be as affected by doubts about the EP when deciding whether to vote. The results largely disconfirmed this possibility. Of course, Rohrschneider's argument may be better applied to broad positions on European integration rather than perceptions of specific institutions in the EU. If, as demonstrated in Figure 1, many individuals simply do not know much about the European Parliament, then there would be few instances in which the EP benefits or loses from a comparative assessment with national institutions.

Finally, this study has implications for discussions about democracy at the EU level. The critics of EU democracy often focus on the accountability of EU institutions and the public's lack of interest in EU politics. To the extent that low turnout in EP elections is due to perceived weaknesses of the European Parliament, the EU should consider investing more resources in educating the public on the expanded powers of the Parliament. The public may simply need to get up to speed on the powers of the EP in order to have more faith in their elected representatives (and the influence of their own views) at the EU level.

Notes

1. Citing survey data provided by Bonnie Meguid.
2. Low EU issue salience may be as much a consequence of the political environment as a cause of the second-order effect. For instance, Reif and Schmitt (1980) argue that EU issues will not be a factor in EP elections so long as national-based political parties manage both national and European elections.
3. Eurobarometer 69.2 was conducted in each of the 27 EU member states. This survey was administered through face-to-face interviews in each respondent's home, using the national language of the respondent's country. Except for Cyprus, Germany, Luxembourg, Malta, and the United Kingdom, there were approximately 1000 respondents from each EU country. There are approximately 500 respondents from the three smaller states, approximately 1300 respondents from the United Kingdom, and approximately 1500 respondents from Germany.
4. The EES was conducted in each of the 27 EU member states. The survey was administered 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 the survey through phone interviews. There are approximately 1000 respondents from each member state.
5. Later Eurobarometer surveys, conducted after the 2009 EP elections, do not include the same measures of the EP's importance

References

- Abramson, P.R., J.H. Aldrich, and D.W. Rohde. 2011. *Change and continuity in the 2008 and 2010 elections*. Washington, DC: CQ Press College.
- Anderson, P.J., and A. McLeod. 2004. The great non-communicator? The mass communication deficit of the European Parliament and its press directorate. *Journal of Common Market Studies* 42, no. 5: 897–917.

- Andeweg, R.B. 2007. A comment on auel, benz, and maurer. In *Debating the democratic legitimacy of the european union*, eds. K-K. Beate and B. Rittberger, 102–110. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Auel, K., and A. Benz. 2007. Expanding national parliamentary control: does it enhance European democracy? In *Debating the democratic legitimacy of the European Union*, eds. B. Kohler-Koch and B. Rittberger, 57–74. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Carrubba, C., and R.J. Timpone. 2005. Explaining vote switching across first- and second-order elections. *Comparative Political Studies* 38, no. 3: 260–81.
- Clark, N., and R. Rohrschneider. 2009. Second-order elections versus first-order thinking: how voters perceive the representation process in a multi-layered system of governance. *Journal of European Integration* 31, no. 5: 645–64.
- Corruption Perceptions Index. 2008. Transparency international. www.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/cpi/2008 (accessed 31 August 2011).
- de Vreese, C.H., S.A. Banducci, H.A. Semetko, and H.G. Boomgaarden. 2006. The news coverage of the 2004 European Parliamentary election campaign in 25 countries. *European Union Politics* 7, no. 4: 477–504.
- de Vries, C.E., W. van der Brug, M.H. van Egmond, and C. van der Eijk. 2011. Individual and contextual variation in EU issue voting: the role of political information. *Electoral Studies* 30, no. 1: 16–28.
- European Election Study. 2009. European Parliament election study 2009, *Voter Study, Advance Release*, April 7. www.pired.eu (accessed 20 August 2011).
- European Political Research Group. 2006. Survey of members of the European Parliament. <http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/EPRG/survey.htm> (accessed 6 August 2008).
- Ferrara, F., and J. Timo Weishaupt. 2004. Get your act together: party performance in European Parliamentary Elections. *European Union Politics* 5, no. 3: 283–306.
- Fish, M. S., and M. Kroenig. 2009. *The handbook of national legislatures: a global survey*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Franklin, M. 2001. European elections and the European voter. In *European Union power and policy-making*, ed. J. Richardson, 201–16. London: Routledge.
- Gray, M., and M. Caul. 2000. Declining voter turnout in advanced industrial democracies, 1950 to 1997: The effects of declining group mobilization. *Comparative Political Studies* 33, no. 9: 1091–1122.
- Hix, S., and M. Marsh. 2007. Punishment or protest? Understanding European Parliament elections. *The Journal of Politics* 69, no. 2: 495–510.
- Hix, S., and M. Marsh. 2011. Second-order effects plus pan-European political swings: an analysis of European Parliament elections across time. *Electoral Studies*. 30, no. 1: 4–15.
- Hobolt, S. B., J.-J. Spoon, and J. Tilley. 2009. A vote against Europe? Explaining defection at the 1999 and 2004 European Parliament elections. *British Journal of Political Science* 39, no. 1: 93–115.
- Hobolt, S.B., and J. Wittrock. 2010. The second order election model revisited: an experimental test of vote choices in European Parliament elections. Paper presented at the 68th Annual MPSA National Conference, Chicago, IL, April 22–25.
- Hobolt, S.B., and J.-J. Spoon. 2012. Motivating the European voter: parties, issues and campaigns in European Parliament elections. *European Journal of Political Research* 51, no. 6: 701–27.
- Jackman, R.W. 1987. Political institutions and voter turnout in industrial democracies. *The American Political Science Review* 81, no. 2: 405–24.
- Kaufmann, D., A. Kraay, and M. Mastruzzi. 2010. The worldwide governance indicators. The World Bank Development Research Group. <http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/resources.htm> (accessed 31 August 2011).
- Lewis-Beck, M.S., W.G. Jacoby, H. Norpoth, and H.F. Weisberg. 2008. *The american voter revisited*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Lijphart, A. 1999. *Patterns of democracy: government forms and performance in thirty-six countries*. New Haven, CN: Yale University Press.
- Marsh, M. 1998. Testing the second-order election model after four European elections. *British Journal of Political Science* 28, no. 4: 591–607.
- Marsh, M. 2007. European Parliamentary elections and loss of governing parties. In *European elections and domestic politics*, eds. W. van der Brug and C. van der Eijk, 51–72. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.

- Mauer, A. 2007. The European Parliament between policy-making and control. In *Debating the democratic legitimacy of the European Union*, eds. B. Kohler-Koch and B. Rittberger, 75–101. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Meyer, C.O. 1999. Political legitimacy and the invisibility of politics: exploring the European Union's communication deficit. *Journal of Common Market Studies* 37, no. 4: 617–39.
- Meyer, C.O. 2005. The Europeanization of media discourse: a study of quality press coverage of economic policy co-ordination since Amsterdam. *Journal of Common Market Studies* 43, no. 1: 121–48.
- Moravcsik, A. 2002. In defence of the 'democratic deficit': reassessing legitimacy in the European Union. *Journal of Common Market Studies* 40, no. 4: 603–24.
- Nie, N.H., S. Verba, and J. Petrocik. 1976. *The changing american voter*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Papacostas, A. 2009. *Eurobarometer 69.2: national and European identity, European elections, European values, and climate change, March–May 2008* [Computer file]. ICPSR25021. Cologne, Germany: GESIS/Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributors].
- Peter, J., H. A. Semetko, and C. H. de Vreese. 2003. EU politics on television news: a cross-national comparative study. *European Union Politics* 4, no. 3: 305–27.
- Peter, J., E. Lauf, and H. A. Semetko. 2004. Television coverage of the 1999 European Parliamentary elections. *Political Communication* 21, no. 4: 415–33.
- Peter, J., and C.H. de Vreese. 2004. In search of Europe: a cross-national comparative study of the European Union in national television news. *The Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 9, no. 4: 3–24.
- Powell, G.B. Jr. 1986. American voter turnout in comparative perspective. *The American Political Science Review* 80, no. 1: 17–43.
- Reif, K., and H. Schmitt. 1980. Nine second order national elections: a conceptual framework for the analysis of European election results. *European Journal of Political Research* 8, no. 1: 3–44.
- Rohrschneider, R. 2002. The democracy deficit and mass support for an EU-wide government. *American Journal of Political Science* 46, no. 2: 463–75.
- Schmitt, H. 2005. The European Parliament elections of June 2004: still second order? *West European Politics* 28, no. 3: 650–79.
- Schmitter, P.C. 2000. *How to democratize the European Union... and why bother?* New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers.
- Siedentop, L. 2000. *Democracy in Europe*. London: Penguin Books.
- van der Brug, W., C. van der Eijk, and M. Franklin. 2007. *The economy and the vote: economic conditions in fifteen countries*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- van der Eijk, C., M. Franklin, and M. Marsh. 1996. What voters teach us about Europe-wide elections: what Europe-wide elections teach us about voters. *Electoral Studies* 15, no. 2: 149–66.
- van der Eijk, C., and M. Franklin. 2004. Potential for contestation on European matters at national elections in Europe. In *European integration and political conflict*, eds. G. Marks and M. Steenbergen. 32–50. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Weber, T. 2007. Campaign effects and second-order cycles: a top-down approach to European Parliament elections. *European Union Politics* 8, no. 4: 509–36.

Appendix A. Construction of Measures

Figure 1

'Can you tell me on a scale of 1 to 10 how likely it is that you would vote in the next European elections in June 2009? Please place yourself at a point on this scale where (1) indicates that you would definitely not vote, (10) indicates that you would definitely vote and the remaining numbers indicates something in between these two positions.'

'Among the following criteria, can you tell what would be the main element in your decision in view of the European elections? Firstly? the personality of the candidates (1), the positions of candidates on national issues

(2), the positions of candidates on European issues (3), the positions of the candidates' parties on European issues (4), the notoriety of the candidates (5), the experience of the candidates on European affairs (6), and the experience of the candidates at the national level (7)'. The third and fourth responses were combined in Figure 1.

Eurobarometer 69.2

Likely vote in EP elections: See above question used with Figure. 1

MEPs represent(s) my views: 'On European issues, my voice is listened to by the members of the European Parliament' Responses were coded as tend to disagree (0) and tend to agree (1).

European Parliament important: Respondents were asked if the European Parliament 'plays an important role or not in the life of the European Union?' Responses were coded as not important (0) or important (1).

Political efficacy: Respondents were asked if they 'tend to agree' (1) or 'tend to disagree' (0) with the following statements: 'My voice counts in the European Union' and 'My voice counts in (OUR COUNTRY)'. The responses to these two questions were summed to create a three-point index of political efficacy, ranging from no efficacy (0) to a sense of efficacy at both levels (2).

Knowledge about the EU: Respondents were asked to answer four true/false questions about the history and institutions of the EU. The number of correct responses was tallied for each respondent producing a range from no correct answers (0) to correctly answering all four questions (4).

Education: 'How old were you when you stopped full-time education?' Respondent's age was substituted for those who replied 'still studying'.

Sex: male (1), female (2)

Age: 'How old are you?'

Able to pay bills: 'Please tell me to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statement: You have difficulties paying all your bills at the end of the month'. Responses were coded as 'totally agree' (1), 'tend to agree' (2), 'tend to disagree' (3), and 'totally disagree' (4).

2009 European Election Study

Abstain from EP elections: Respondents were coded as reported voting in the last EP elections (0) and reported not voting in the last EP elections (1).

Salience of EU issues: Respondents were asked ‘what do you think is the most important problem facing <your country> today?’ and then ‘as of today, is <the most important problem> mainly dealt with by the regional, national, or European level political authorities?’ Respondents who indicated the European authorities were coded 1, and all others were coded 0. Nearly 25 per cent replied that European authorities dealt with the most important problem.

MEPs represent(s) my views: Respondents were asked if they agree or disagree that the European Parliament ‘takes into consideration the concerns of European citizens’. Responses were coded as ‘strongly disagree’ (1), ‘disagree’ (2), ‘neither agree nor disagree’ (3), ‘agree’ (4), and ‘strongly agree’ (5).

Political interest: ‘To what extent would you say you are interested in politics?’ Responses were coded as ‘very’ (1), ‘somewhat’ (2), ‘a little’ (3), or ‘not at all’ (4).

Knowledge about the EU: Each respondent was asked to answer four true/false questions about the history and institutions of the EU. The number of correct responses was tallied for each respondent producing a range from no correct answers (0) to correctly answering all four questions (4).

Education: ‘How old were you when you stopped full-time education?’ Respondent’s age was substituted for those who replied ‘still studying’.

Age: ‘What year were you born?’ Each respondent’s answer was subtracted from 2009 to estimate their actual age.

Sex: female (0), male (1)

Income: ‘Taking everything into account, at about what level is your family’s standard of living?’

If you think of a scale from 1 to 7, where 1 means a poor family, 7 a rich family, and the other numbers are for the positions in between, about where would you place your family?’

Contextual Data

Parliamentary Powers Index: The PPI scores each national parliament as ‘yes’ or ‘no’ on 32 different measures of parliamentary power, including ‘influence over the executive’, ‘institutional autonomy’, ‘specified powers’, and ‘institutional capacity’. Scores are estimated by dividing the number of powers in each parliament from the 32 possible in the index—a parliament receiving a score of .75 holds 24 of the 32 powers. Scores are based on the survey responses of country experts who participated in the Legislative Powers Survey and verified by checking national constitutions and secondary sources. The PPI includes all EU countries except Luxembourg and Malta. The mean score for these 25 countries is .73, with Cyprus (.41) and

France (.56) receiving the two lowest scores and Germany (.84) and Italy (.84) receiving the two highest scores.

Corruption Perceptions Index: The 2008 CPI aggregates the corruption rankings of 13 different sources, primarily expert rankings from risk agencies and country analysts and opinion surveys of local business communities, to develop scores for the perceived levels of corruption in each country's public sector. Each source is standardized through matching percentiles (in which a country's score is calculated based on its rank ordering within the overall distribution) and then performing a beta-transformation on the resulting scores for each country. All of the standardized values for each country are then averaged to create a composite score, ranging between high corruption (0) to low corruption (10).

Worldwide Governance Indicators: The WGI collects and aggregates data on perceptions of the quality of governance in 200 countries and territories from 31 different survey sources (including mass surveys and surveys targeting experts from the public, private, and NGO sectors). The data is organized into six clusters: Voice and Accountability, Political Stability and Absence of Violence/Terrorism, Government Effectiveness, Regulatory Quality, Rule of Law, and Control of Corruption. The WGI uses an Unobserved Components Model to standardize the data and construct composite indicators (the weighted average of all scores provided by the different data sources) for each of the six clusters. I use the indicators from the Voice and Accountability cluster (capturing perceptions of how well the public is able to influence their government), ranging from low accountability (−2.5) to high accountability (2.5).