

Still second-order? Can the European Parliament elections still be classified as second-order elections?

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Still second-order? - Can the European Parliament elections still be classified as second-order elections?

Abstract

Since 2019, the largest national parties in the European Parliament (EP) are Eurosceptic parties. This is one of the developments that has led scholars to question, whether European Parliament elections are still of second-order character or are now determined by *European* issues. This paper uses data from the ParlGov database and a variety of quantitative methods to show that the 2019 EP elections are still second-order national elections. A change from national to transnational lists might inspire a change in voter behaviour.

1. Are EP elections becoming more European?¹

At the 2019 European Parliament (EP) elections, four out of the five largest national parties can be classified as at least moderately Eurosceptic (See Fig. 1). The European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) and the Identity and Democracy (ID) political groups, which have been titled as “soft Eurosceptic” (Brack and Startin, 2015: 240; Usherwood and Startin, 2013: 5) and “hard Eurosceptic” (Servent and Panning, 2021: 88) respectively, fill 137 of the parliament’s 705 seats (19.4%). Compared to the 2014 elections, when out of the ten largest parties, only the Great-British UKIP and the French FN could be classified as Eurosceptics (when applying the 2019 standard to: Polk et al., 2017), a clear rise of Euroscepticism as a political force in the parliament has to be noted. The issue of *Europe* is becoming more salient in EU-politics.

This may come as a surprise to early scholars of European politics: Reif and Schmitt (1980) studied the first EP elections in 1979 and found that the results were mostly determined by the respective national political cleavages. Thus, they claimed that EP elections were second-order national elections. Though, parties positioning themselves on strictly European issues would suggest that something has changed in the European party competition. Therefore, this paper will try to

¹ I am very grateful for the advice that Konstantin Griep, Dunja Gabriel, Marlene Hopsch and Leah Fischer-Swierzynski gave to this manuscript.

evaluate, whether EP elections, the 2019 elections specifically, can still be classified as second-order elections (SOE).

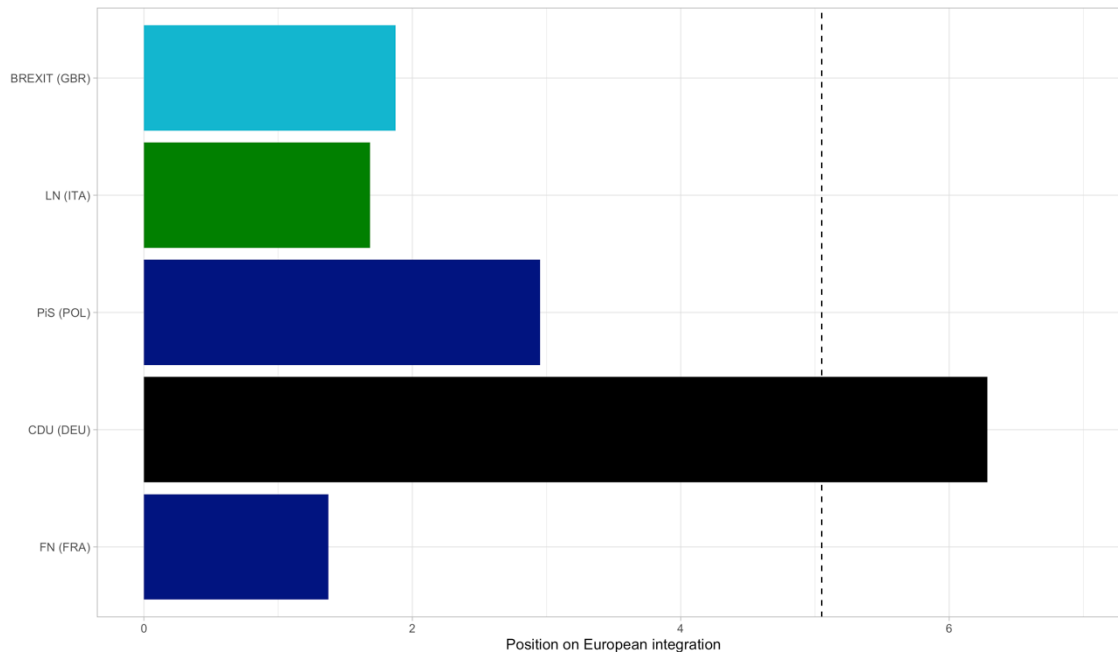


Fig. 1: Overall orientation of the respective parties' leaderships towards European integration. A score of one means the leadership is strongly opposed to European integration, while a score of seven means that the leadership is strongly in favor of European integration. The dashed line represents the mean of all parties that participated in the 2019 EP Elections in the CHES-Database. Data source: Bakker et al. (2020).

To answer the question, first, past research on the topic will be presented to lay the foundation of the paper. Then, the ParlGov-Dataset (Döring and Manow, 2020) will be introduced, followed by an evaluation of the 2019 European Parliament elections, which will show that EP elections can still be classified as second-order elections. The conclusion will give an outlook on the implications of the findings, briefly introducing new concepts, that could change the second-order notion of EP elections.

2. Second-Order Elections

The groundwork of this paper, as well as most papers on the topic was built by Karlheinz Reif and Hermann Schmitt's (1980) work "*Nine Second-Order National Elections – a Conceptual Framework for the Analysis of European Election Results*". They give an in-depth explanation of how the elections for the first European Parliament were determined by domestic political cleavages. Reif

and Schmitt conclude that the European Parliament elections are better classified as national second-order elections, rather than purely European elections.

“First-order” elections (FOE) are national parliamentary elections in parliamentary systems and national presidential elections in presidential systems. Directly affecting different political arenas than FOE, many different types of second-order elections can be identified in most political systems: In Germany, for example, there are the *Landtagswahlen* (state parliament elections), which have been widely studied in the context of SOE (see: Dinkel, 1977; Hough and Jeffery, 2003; Müller and Debus, 2012), as well as various types of local elections. Reif and Schmitt (1980: 9) argue that the effects of SOE elections, although mostly felt on the arena that they directly affect, also influence the main arena of the political system. SOE therefore represent a case of delicate interplay between main-arena and subordinate-arena influences, which makes them very relevant to study.

Based on their observation of the 1979 EP elections, Reif and Schmitt developed a set of aggregate-level identifiers for second-order elections. First, Reif and Schmitt (1980: 9) postulate that second-order elections are often perceived as elections where less is at stake. Therefore, they expect levels of participation to be lower because voters might not consider SOE important enough to outweigh the costs associated with casting a ballot. This effect may be weakened or amplified by party elites, depending on the respective election’s importance to them. The efforts put in by the party leadership to mobilize voters is consequently also an important variable. National voting laws, such as requirements to vote (which exists in Luxembourg and Belgium) of course affect turnout as well.

Reif and Schmitt moreover expect voters whose true party preference lies with a small or new party, to give them their vote in SOE, while in FOE the risks associated with not voting for a large party are too high. Electoral results of small or new parties should consequently be better at SOE than at FOE. Large parties should thus lose vote share at SOE. The same is true for government parties, as dissatisfied voters may use the opportunity of SOE to voice their discontent with the government parties, while not risking a main-arena government change. Additionally, Reif and Schmitt proposed that electoral loss for cabinet parties shall be the greatest, the further the closest national FOE are away. If EP elections are held shortly after FOEs, Reif and Schmitt (1980: 10) expect an “over-

confirmation” of the government parties, which leads to them gaining vote share. This phase of the electoral cycle has also been described as “honeymoon period” by Hix and Marsh (2007: 496).

In an effort to prove their hypotheses on the micro-level, Hermann Schmitt and colleagues (2020) analyzed data from the 2004 and 2014 European Election Study. They found that most of their hypotheses that would explain the aggregate-level second-order effects turned out to be true. For example, differential abstention between FOE and SOE can be attributed to a lack of mobilization (Schmitt et al., 2020: 15). They could also prove that sincere (small party preference) and strategic (protest government) motives explained differential party choices between FOE and SOE.

Later, Hix and Marsh tested Reif and Schmitt’s indicators against the growing perception that “Europe matters” (2007: 496). They stated four alternative hypotheses about the role of European influences: Firstly, they predict that the more anti-EU a party is, the more votes it should gain between national and EP elections. Anti-European parties should also receive a greater increase in vote share in European elections compared to other parties. The same holds true for green parties. Also, parties with large distances to the center of the left-right scale should do better in EP elections than in national elections (Hix and Marsh, 2007: 497). Hix and Marsh’s findings suggest that, while anti-EU and green parties on average perform better, the influence of these variables on electoral results is minor, compared to the influence of the second-order factors, those being party size, cabinet membership and timing of the election (Hix and Marsh, 2007: 506).

Approaching the SOE paradigm from a different perspective, Enrique Hernández and Hanspeter Kriesi (2016) use individual-level data from the European Election Study. They studied citizens that are disaffected with the EU and evaluated their likelihood of turning out to vote at EU elections and at their voting preferences. They find that in the presence of strong Eurosceptic parties, with similar orientations on the left-right scale, Eurosceptic voters often vote for them. Expanding on the work of Hix and Marsh, they suggest that Eurosceptic parties drive the “Europeanization of European politics” (Hernández and Kriesi, 2016: 9). Their work clearly shows that Europe *does* matter in the considerations of the electorate.

2.1 European elections today

As shown above, scholars have recently begun to question the SOE paradigm established by Reif and Schmitt. The European debt crisis at the end of the 2000s, the European migrant crisis in the mid-2010s and most recently the Coronavirus pandemic are all examples for issues that are not only salient nationally, but also on the European level (see: Hobolt and de Vries, 2016; Schmitt and Toygür, 2016). With the European Parliament gaining power in the European Union decision making process, it is time to test, if there really still is less at stake – or at least if voters perceive it to be that way.

The task at hand therefore is to look at the 2019 EP election results and evaluate whether the standard SOE identifiers are still present. The working hypotheses are the following:

- **H1:** Voter turnout will be lower at the 2019 EP elections than at the previous national elections.
- **H2:** Small parties will gain vote share relative to the previous FOE.
- **H3:** Large parties will lose vote share relative to the previous FOE.
- **H4:** Government parties will lose vote share relative to the previous FOE.
- **H5:** Losses of government parties will be dependent on the electoral cycle.
- **H6:** Government parties will perform better at EU elections, if the election takes place in the first fifth of the FOE cycle.

3. Data and Methodology

To test the hypotheses, data from the ParlGov Dataset (Döring and Manow, 2020), which provides information about most of the parties that contested the 2019 EP elections, will be analyzed. Information about the previous national elections and the cabinets was manually added to avoid data loss. As depicted in Figure 2, the sum of all parties does not always add up to 100%, meaning that some cases were still lost. Nevertheless, 288 parties from the 28 EU member countries are included, which is sufficient to draw statistically grounded conclusions about the elections.

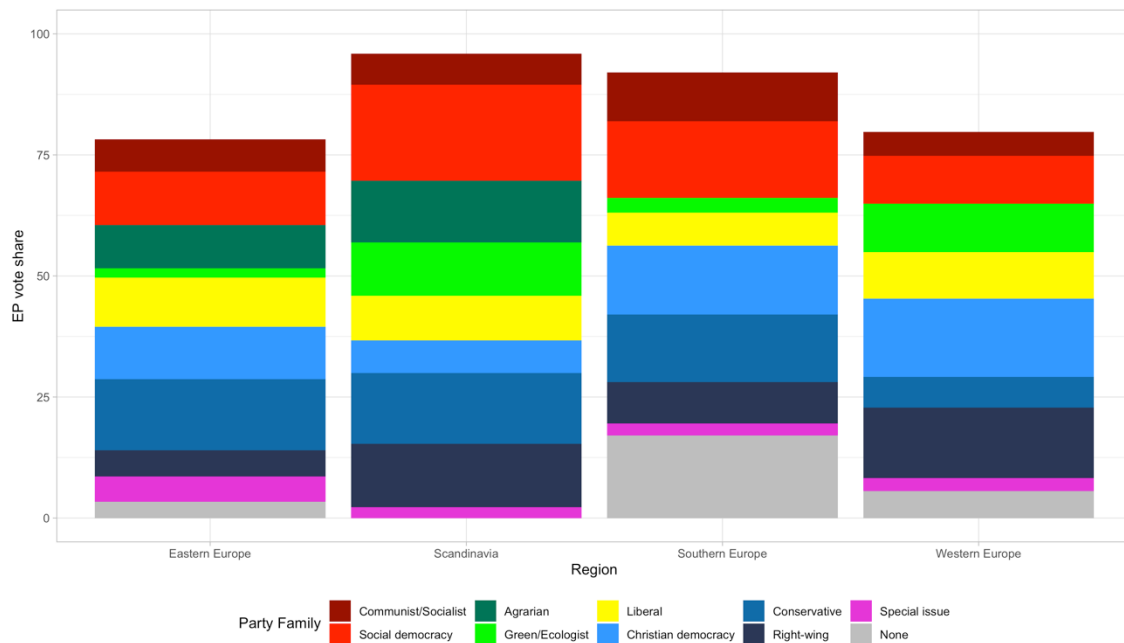


Fig. 2: EP election averaged over the European regions (See Appendix), by party family. Data source: Döring and Manow (2020).

To test the hypotheses posed above, a variety of tests will be conducted. H1, H4 and H6 will be verified or rejected by a simple comparison of means, verified by t-tests. H2 and H3 will be evaluated using a bivariate linear regression. As H5 is best modeled by a periodic cycle, a bivariate regression cannot be used here. Therefore, a local (LOESS) regression will be used to visualize the effect. To test H5 and H6, the time between the previous parliamentary election (the FOE) and the EP 2019 elections (the SOE) will be calculated and related to the overall length of the legislative term. The values for the position in the electoral cycle will be percentage values, with 0% and 100% meaning that FOE and SOE were held on the same day.

4. Findings

4.1 Less at stake – less turnout?

The first and in many cases most obvious identifier of a SOE is that, because less is at stake, electoral turnout is lower. Figure 3 graphs the difference in turnout across all 28 EU states. In all but four states turnout drops at the EP election compared to the previous parliamentary elections. In exactly half the countries, the difference in turnout is greater than 20 percentage points (%P). Table 1 shows the overall differences in turnout. On average, turnout was around 18%P lower at the SOE compared to the FOE. The result is statistically highly significant ($p <$

0.001), and Cohen's d (-.984) further proves the high strength of the effect. However, there are a few outliers. The following will attempt to explain some of them.

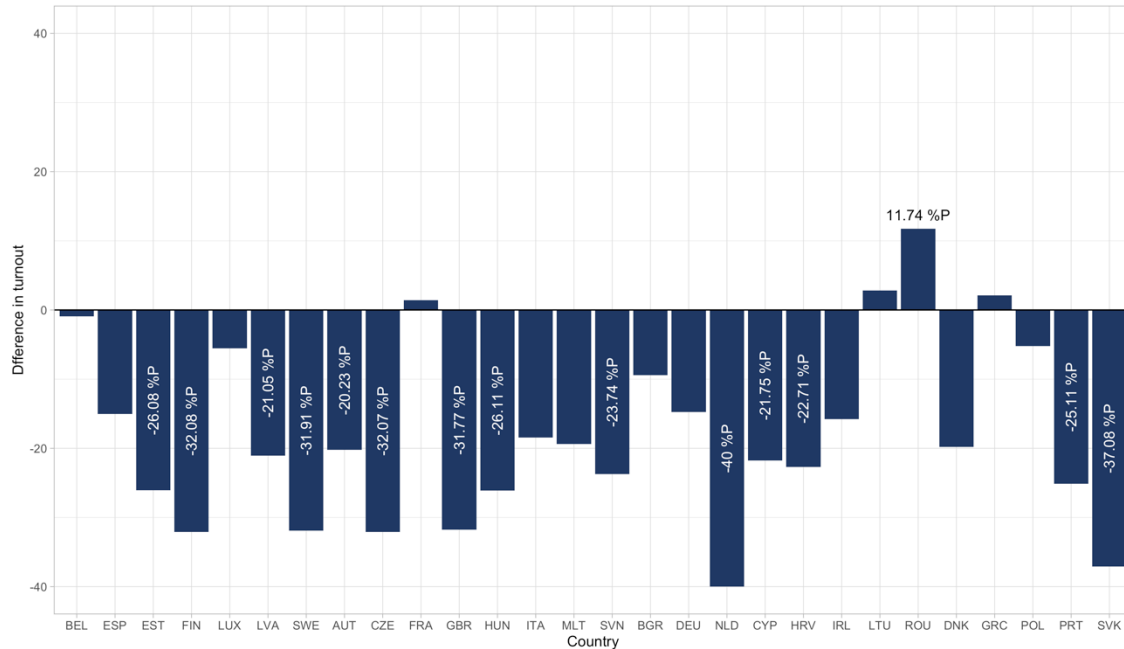


Fig. 3: Change in turnout in the 28 EU countries in percentage points (%P). Data source: Döring and Manow (2020).

Belgium, which has the smallest drop in turnout, held national parliamentary elections on the same day as the EP elections. In France, turnout increased slightly in respect to the 2017 parliamentary elections and significantly in respect to the 2014 EP elections (Ministère de l'Intérieur, 2014). This could be attributed to the prominence of the *gilet jaunes* movement. Its supporters largely backed the *Rassemblement national* list (Teinturier, 2019), which, in turn received a record number of European votes (Boichot, 2019). The largest increase in turnout is found in Romania. Here, the 2019 EP election presented the first opportunity for the electorate to voice its dissatisfaction with the social democratic (PSD) lead government. A corruption scandal had given rise to the country's largest protest in a quarter of a century (Gillet, 2017; The New York Times, 2018).

| | FOE | | SOE | | T | p | Cohen's d |
|---------|--------|--------|--------|--------|-------|------|-------------|
| | M | SD | M | SD | | | |
| Turnout | 66.554 | 15.089 | 48.771 | 16.524 | -4.21 | .000 | -.984 |

Tab. 1: Comparison of means (M) in election turnout. $N = 28$. Data source: Döring and Manow (2020).

All of the examples above represent cases, where the “main-arena political change” and “social and cultural change” dimensions outweighed the “less at stake” dimension (Reif and Schmitt, 1980: 14f). They are the exceptions that prove the rule. H1 will therefore be accepted.

4.2 The Effect of Party Size on SOE Results

H2 and H3 are two sides of the same theory and will thus be tested together using a bivariate linear regression. The dependent variable of the model is the aggregated change in vote share between FOE and SOE of national parties. The independent variable is the size of the parties, operationalized by the FOE vote share.

| Effect | Estimate | SE | F | p |
|----------------|----------|------|---------|------|
| Intercept | 2.814 | .568 | 4.9513 | .000 |
| FOE vote share | -.271 | .036 | -7.5187 | .000 |

Tab. 2: Linear model estimating the effect of FOE vote share on the difference in vote share between FOE and SOE. N = 222, adj. R² = 0.201, p = 1.39E⁻¹². Data source: Döring and Manow (2020).

The results of the regression are noted in table 2 and figure 4. It proves both H2 and H3, as it predicts that small parties (below 10.38% FOE vote share) will gain vote share at SOE and parties above that will progressively lose vote share. Both the intercept and the coefficient are highly significant (p < .001) and so is the entire model, although the explained variance is moderate (Adj. R² = .201). H2 and H3 will therefore also be accepted.

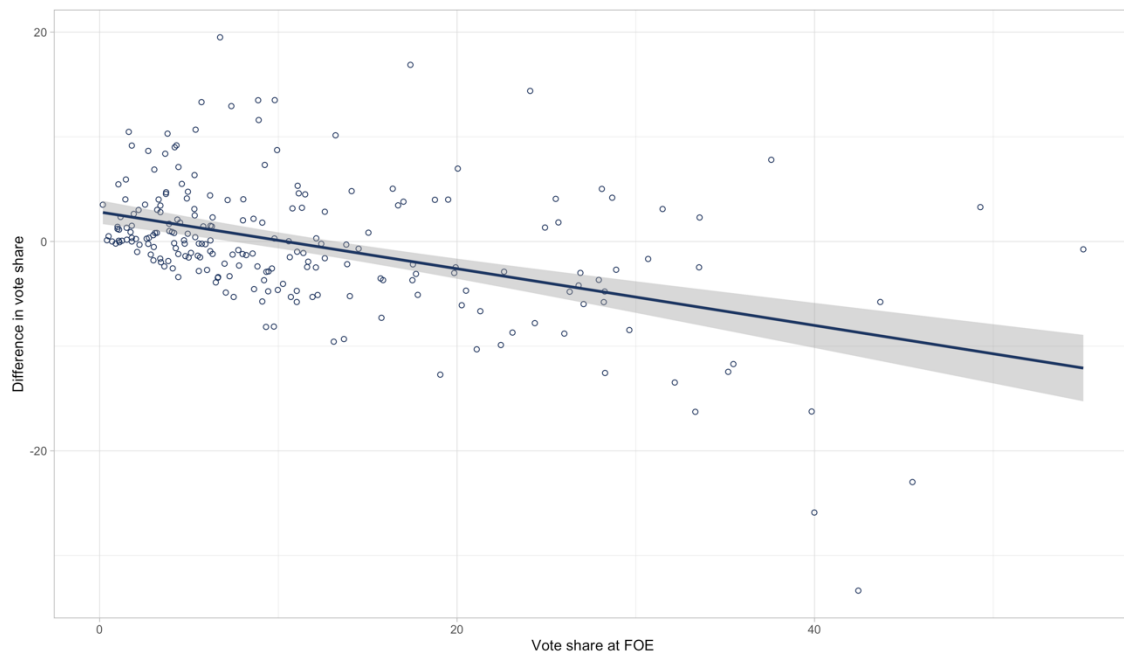


Fig. 4: The effect of party size on SOE election results. Data source: Döring and Manow (2020).

4.3 The Effect of Cabinet Membership on SOE Results

H4 states that government or cabinet parties will lose vote share at SOE in comparison with their FOE results. Table 3 shows that, on average, government parties lost 2.4%P in vote share at SOE, while opposition parties gained .4 %P. Again, the result is statistically significant ($p < .01$). Cohen's d (.435) indicates a small to medium effect of cabinet membership. H4 will also be accepted.

| | GOV | | OPP | | T | p | Cohen's d |
|-----------|--------|-------|------|-------|-------|------|-------------|
| | M | SD | M | SD | | | |
| Vote Diff | -2.392 | 8.349 | .385 | 5.382 | 2.892 | .002 | .435 |

Tab. 3: Comparison of means (M) in difference in vote share for the groups government parties (GOV) and opposition parties (OPP). $N = 222$. Data source: Döring and Manow (2020).

4.4 The Electoral Cycle Effect

At the center of Reif and Schmitts theory lies the assumption, that the SOE results are to a degree “popularity curve based” (Reif and Schmitt, 1980: 13). This cyclical effect is difficult to grasp through regular statistical tools. Therefore, a locally estimated scatterplot smoothing (LOESS) regression will be used to examine the effect.

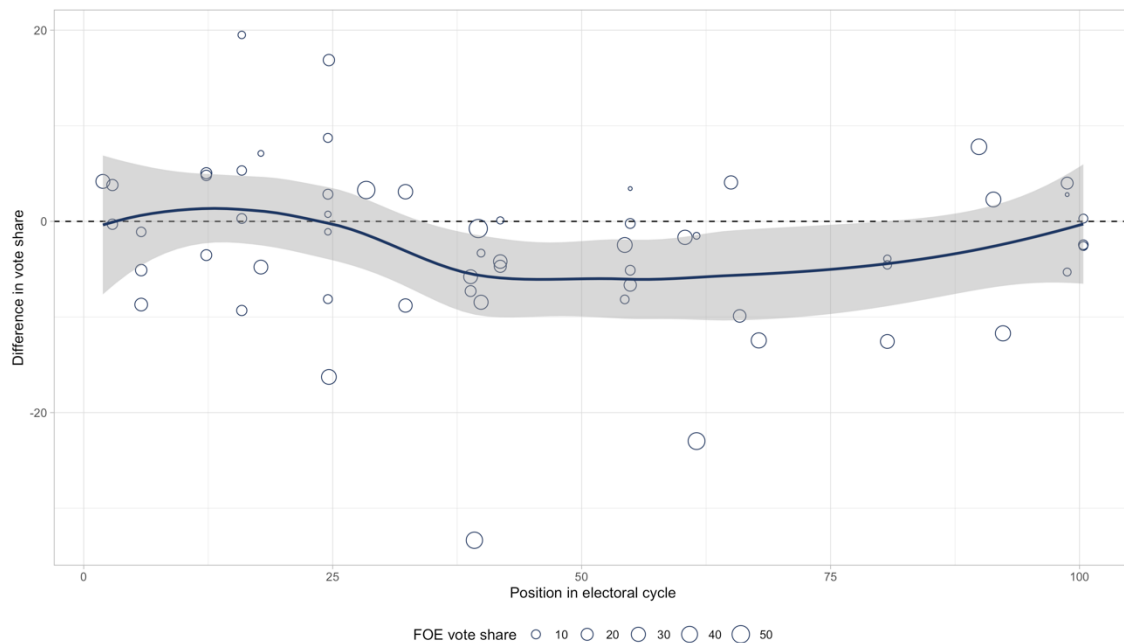


Fig. 5: Visualizing the electoral cycle effect through a LOESS-regression. Data source: Döring and Manow (2020).

The hypothesis H5 states that government parties will gain vote share if the SOE comes shortly after the FOE, then lose popularity - and in consequence vote share - if the SOE is further removed from the FOE. Losses should be greatest, if the SOE falls in the middle of the FOE cycle. To the end of the cycle, losses should again approach zero, as FOE are right around the corner and their logic also affects the SOE. Any change observed at the end of the FOE cycle is probably “real”, main-arena change. The results can be seen in Figure 5: On average, government parties gain slightly in the first quarter of the electoral cycle, while they lose vote share during the rest of the cycle. Losses are greatest around the middle and at the end they approach zero. H5 is also proven to be true.

| | First Fifth | | Rest | | T | p | Cohen's d |
|-------------------|-------------|------|-------|------|--------|------|-------------|
| | M | SD | M | SD | | | |
| Vote Diff for GOV | 1.15 | 7.29 | -3.63 | 8.42 | -1.954 | .028 | .572 |

Tab. 4: Comparison of means (M) in difference in vote share for GOV parties in the first fifth of the FOE cycle versus the rest of the cycle. $N = 58$. Data source: Döring and Manow (2020).

H6 directly relates to H5, as it aims to prove the “honeymoon effect”. The results of a t-test verified means comparison, seen in table 4, show that government parties do significantly ($p < .05$) better in the first fifth of the electoral cycle than in the rest. We can therefore accept H6.

5. Still second-order?

Recent literature has attempted to prove that the second-order effects, that project the domestic political cleavages onto the European Parliament, are fading and *European* policy aspects are becoming more important. While there is evidence that supports this stance, the present analysis of the 2019 European Parliament elections shows that second-order effects still play a large role.

Most evidently, the decrease in turnout between first-order national elections and second-order elections shows that there seems to be less at stake. The exceptions in this case validate the rule: In France and Romania, where people were dissatisfied with the government i.e., there was something at stake, they used the EP elections to voice their opinion about national politics.

All other tested hypotheses similarly point towards the popularity-curve based change in vote share: Small parties gain vote share, while large parties and cabinet parties lose. The losses are greatest in the middle of the election cycle, while at the beginning of the cycle government parties are over-confirmed, resulting in the honeymoon effect. One can thus confidently claim that the 2019 EP elections were still second-order national elections.

This is not surprising, as EP elections campaigns are still contested nationally. The recent development towards the nomination of so-called *Spitzenkandidatinnen* might have the potential to Europeanize the elections. The same could be true for transnational party lists, that would allow fewer national issues to be pushed on to the agenda and force the parties to focus on *European* issues instead. But until this does not change, the premise of Reif and Schmitt's work remains true: "As long as the national political systems decide most of what there is to be decided politically, and everything really important, European elections are additional national second-order elections" (Reif and Schmitt, 1980: 1).

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Appendix

| Region | Countries |
|-----------------|---|
| Western Europe | Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, Netherlands, United Kingdom |
| Southern Europe | Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Malta, Portugal, Spain |
| Eastern Europe | Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia |
| Scandinavia | Denmark, Finland, Sweden |

App. 1: Groupings of EU member states into four regions.