Motivating the European voter: Parties, issues and campaigns in European Parliament elections

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Abstract. Voters behave differently in European Parliament (EP) elections compared to national elections because less is at stake in these 'second-order' elections. While this explains the primary characteristic of EP elections, it has often led to a conflation of distinct motivations for changing behaviour – namely sincere and protest voting. By distinguishing these motivations, this article addresses the question of when and why voters alter their behaviour in EP elections. In addition, it argues that the degree of politicisation of the EU in the domestic debate shapes the extent to which voters rely on EU, rather than national, considerations. These propositions are tested in a multilevel analysis in 27 countries in the 2009 EP elections. The findings have important implications for understanding why voters change their behaviour between different types of elections.

Keywords: European Parliament; second-order elections; voter behaviour; politicisation

In the European Parliament (EP) elections in June 2009, citizens across all 27 Member States voted to elect representatives to this law-making body of the European Union (EU). The choice of parties was almost identical to that of national parliamentary elections, yet almost half of voters abandoned their national party choice by either switching to another party or abstaining. This resulted in many smaller parties doing better than they had in recent national elections, and governing parties generally performing worse. In Britain, for example, a party without national representation – the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) – won 13 of 72 seats in the EP. This phenomenon raises the question of why voters change their behaviour between different types of elections, such as national and EP elections.

The most prominent explanation in the literature on EP elections is the so-called 'second-order national election' theory, pioneered by Reif and Schmitt (1980), which has its roots in theories of midterm elections in the United States (Campbell 1960; Tufte 1975; Fiorina 1981). At the heart of this theory is the proposition that people vote differently in 'second-order' EP elections because less is at stake compared to 'first-order' elections for national office. Numerous empirical studies of EP elections over the past decades have

lent support to this model by showing that turnout is lower than in national elections, smaller parties perform better and parties in national government are punished, particularly during the midterm (see, e.g., Reif 1984; Van der Eijk & Franklin 1996; Marsh 1998; Schmitt 2005; Hix & Marsh 2007, 2011). These patterns of behaviour are generally interpreted as voters responding to the low salience context of EP elections.

Yet few studies have unpacked the individual-level motivations that lead to different types of behaviour. This article seeks to do just this by developing a framework of voting behaviour in second-order elections. To understand the micro-foundations of vote choices in these elections, our model distinguishes between *observed behaviour* and *motivations*. We identify two primary ways in which voters may alter their behaviour between first- and second-order elections: by changing the party they vote for (*switching*), or by not voting at all (*abstaining*). These observed behaviours, we argue, are driven by two distinct types of motivations: *sincere voting* (changing behaviour due to ideological differences) and *protest voting* (changing behaviour to send a signal of disapproval with a party, government or institution). Both motivations can be directed towards the domestic and the European levels of governance.

The second contribution of this article is to present a framework for understanding the factors that moderate the importance of the domestic and the European arenas. We propose moderating factors at the contextual level. We argue that the politicisation of the EU issue conditions the extent to which voters rely on arena-specific EU considerations in EP elections. Specifically, we posit that higher levels of party polarisation on the EU issue and negative EU campaign coverage magnify the importance of EU-specific considerations. We test these propositions in a multilevel analysis of voting behaviour in EP elections across 27 countries, using European Election Studies (EES) data and Media Study data from the 2009 EP elections (EES 2009; Van Egmond et al. 2010; Schuck et al. 2010). These data allow us to examine individual-level motivations and to explore how the specific campaign context conditions these motivations.

The article proceeds as follows. First, we briefly review the literature on second-order elections. Second, we present a theoretical model of the factors that motivate changes in behaviour between first- and second-order elections based on a voter utility function. Third, we test the hypotheses derived from the model of individual-level vote choice. Our findings show that sincere and protest motivations both matter in EP elections, but that system-level politicisation of the EU issue conditions the degree to which voters base their choices on domestic or European concerns. The findings thus have important implications for understanding when and why voters change their behaviour between different types of elections.

Voting behaviour in European Parliament elections

There is plenty of evidence that Europeans vote differently in national and European elections. Notwithstanding the increasing importance of the EP since the first direct elections in 1979, studies have demonstrated three broad patterns of empirical regularities repeated in all seven EP elections (see, e.g., Reif & Schmitt 1980; Marsh 1998; Hix & Marsh 2007, 2011). First, levels of turnout are lower than in national elections. Second, citizens favour smaller parties over larger ones compared to national elections. Third, parties in national governments do worse in EP elections than in national elections, especially when the EP elections take place during the middle of the national election cycle.

The classic explanation is that changing patterns of voting behaviour between national and European elections are due to the fact that less is at stake in second-order elections, and as a consequence, 'voters cast their votes not only as a result of conditions present within the specific context of the second-order arena, but also on the basis of factors in the main political arena of the nation' (Reif & Schmitt 1980: 9; see also Van der Eijk & Franklin 1996; Ferrara & Weishaupt 2004; Hix & Marsh 2007). In comparison to first-order national elections, where the formation of a government is a primary objective, strategic considerations about party size and government performance matter less in second-order EP elections, and consequently voters are expected to vote more 'sincerely', focusing on ideological similarities. As Reif and Schmitt (1980: 9) put it: 'The large electorally decisive parties may receive votes in first-order elections from voters whose actual preferences lie with some small or new party.' Strategic voting assumes that voters with an instrumental motivation will vote for a party other than their most preferred party if the former has a better chance of influencing government formation (McKelvey & Ordeshook 1972; Cox 1997; Hobolt & Karp 2010), but given that EP elections do not result in the formation of a government either at the national or at the European level this type of motivation is likely to be of minimal importance. Yet, whereas strategic voting aimed at influencing government formation is improbable in EP elections, Reif and Schmitt (1980: 10) do recognise that voters may be motivated by a desire to punish national governments: '[S]ome, who generally support the government, vote for the opposition in secondary elections in order to apply pressure to the government . . . although not fundamentally changing their party allegiance.' These central intuitions of the second-order election model are consistent with the patterns of behaviour that we observe in EP elections since smaller parties generally perform better, while governing parties are punished.

Recent studies have raised two interrelated concerns about the absence of an individual vote choice model and the use and interpretation of aggregate-level data. The first concern is primarily theoretical and focuses on the lack of an explicit individual-level model of vote choice to explain the aggregate-level regularities (Marsh 2007; Schmitt et al. 2008; Hobolt et al. 2009; Bakker & Polk 2010; Marsh & Mikhaylov 2010; Hobolt & Wittrock 2011). Contributions to the literature have gone some way towards developing models of individual vote choice. Hobolt et al. (2009), for example, present a model of why some voters defect from governing parties in EP elections, which builds on the spatial voting literature. According to this model, defection is a function of distance to the governing party on the left–right and EU dimensions and non-policy motivations, conditioned by the campaign context. Recent work has also made progress on categorising different types of voters rather than treating all voters in second-order elections as equal (Bakker & Polk 2010; Weber 2011). In our theoretical model below, we build on these recent innovations in the literature to present a more comprehensive framework of second-order voting that incorporates both observed behaviours and motivations.

The second concern about the classic second-order election literature relates to the interpretation of the aggregate-level regularities in EP election outcomes. Scholars have found that the same patterns are consistent with an alternative explanation – namely arena-specific (or 'Europe matters') motivations for voting (Marsh 2007; Hobolt et al. 2009). According to this perspective, low turnout and defection from governing parties may not be entirely due to the general decline in government support at the midterm; it may also be caused by dissatisfaction with the position of these parties on the political dimension particularly relevant in EP elections – namely European integration. Hobolt et al. (2009) demonstrate that voters are more likely to defect from a governing party if they have more eurosceptic preferences than the party (see also Clark & Rohrschneider 2009). Similarly, De Vries et al. (2011) have shown that attitudes towards Europe are an important factor deciding individual-level vote choice in the 2009 EP elections, especially among those who are more politically sophisticated and when media attention is greater. In a systematic comparison of the 'second-order' and the 'Europe matters' theses, Hix and Marsh (2007), using aggregate-level data from six EP elections, show that large parties tend to lose votes in EP elections regardless of their position on European integration. However, they also find some electoral gains for anti-EU parties and parties that emphasise the European issue (see also Hix & Marsh 2011).

These alternative explanations of changes in behaviour between first- and second-order elections raise the methodological problem of observational equivalence – that is, the difference in levels of support for parties in national and European elections may be due to the fact that voters base their choices

on preferences relating to the performance of governing parties in the first-order (national) arena, but it may be equally a result of voters changing behaviours due to arena-specific (European) issues. Importantly, this also highlights the need to distinguish more systematically among the types of individual-level motivations that drive changing behaviour between first- and second-order elections. In the next section, we develop a theoretical model that unpacks the different types of motivations and behaviours.

Motivating the European voter

As discussed above, the classic second-order model implicitly identifies two separate motivations for a voter to change behaviour between first- and second-order elections (i.e., 'sincere voting' and 'protest voting'), but it does not provide an explicit model of individual-level motivations. To understand what drives changing behaviour between first- and second-order elections, our starting point is a basic voter utility model of EP elections. In line with the second-order election theory and most voter utility models, our assumption is that the EP voter is a 'sincere voter' who chooses the party that 'represents the voter's opinion more precisely' (Reif & Schmitt 1980: 9). The most common formal presentation of a sincere voter in the voting behaviour literature is the proximity model, originally developed in the context of a two-party system where voters are assumed to vote for the candidate or party that has issue positions closest to their own ideal point (Downs 1957; Enelow & Hinich 1984; Alvarez 1997). In a multiparty context, closeness to a party's position is expected to increase the relative utility of voting for that party. In Downs' original model the policy space is one-dimensional in that it pertains to the dominant dimension of contestation in the national context. However, given that EP elections take place in a multilevel setting, we model the voter's utility as a function of proximity on two dimensions: the left–right dimension, which is the dominant dimension in domestic European party systems (McDonald & Budge 2005; Mair 2008); and the European integration dimension.[1] In addition, our model also captures other considerations related to the performance of a party, such as the performance of a government party. Again, these can relate to the domestic or the European level.

The utility of voting for a party in an EP election can thus be expressed as:

$$U_i = [(Peu - Veu_i) + Ceu_i] + [(Plr - Vlr_i) + Cnat_i] \qquad (1)$$

where each voter's evaluation of the party's utility depends upon the distances between the positions of the party on the EU dimension *Peu* and the left–right

dimension Plr and the voter i's own ideal points Veu_i and Vlr_i on these dimensions.[2] The term C_i represents all the considerations involved in the voter's overall evaluation of Party A other than those pertaining to the specific issue dimensions included in the model (see Bartels 1986; Alvarez 1997). In the particular context of EP elections, $Cnat_i$ captures considerations about the performance of the national government that are not relevant to the European arena ('second-order' factors), whereas Ceu_i captures consideration concerning the performance of EU parties or institutions. The model does not include specific strategic motivations relating to government formation since, as discussed above, EP elections do not have a direct impact on the executive, and the relationship between EP party choice and the European Commission remains tenuous (Føllesdal & Hix 2006).[3]

The next step is to extend the model to incorporate factors that influence the relative weight of domestic and European considerations. Although the classic second-order literature has tended to argue that European considerations play a minimal role for voters in second-order elections, even Reif and Schmitt (1980: 10) acknowledged that arena-specific motivations are not entirely irrelevant. Recent work on electoral behaviour in Europe has argued that the issue of European integration is becoming increasingly politicised as we are witnessing public contention over European matters in referendums, party competition and media reporting (De Vreese 2003; Tillman 2004; De Vries 2007; Kriesi et al. 2008; Hobolt et al. 2009; Hooghe & Marks 2009). 'EU politicisation' refers to the increasing contentiousness of decision making in the process of European integration (Schmitter 1969). Hooghe and Marks (2009: 8) posit that this politicisation has changed both the content and the process of decision making. Importantly, however, the level of politicisation of European issues varies considerably across countries and specific electoral contests. We know from studies of vote choice in referendums and elections that 'EU issue voting' is more pronounced when the European issue is politicised in the domestic sphere (Tillman 2004; De Vries 2007; Hobolt 2009). Equally, we would expect that in Member States where the issue of European integration is politicised in the period leading up to the EP elections, more voters will be motivated by EU-specific concerns. In our model, we denote this mediating effect of EU politicisation as p, which defines the relative weight of arena-specific concerns. We assume that this weight is proportional to the level of politicisation of the EU issue and that it is constrained so that $0 \leq p \leq 1$. This means that the closer p is to 1, the more the EU-specific concerns (sincere and protest) will matter to the overall utility of the party. In our model, the conditioning effect of EU politicisation only applies to EU-specific concerns,[4] and can be expressed as follows:

$$U_i = p[(Peu - Veu_i) + Ceu_i] + [(Plr - Vlr_i) + Cnat_i] \qquad (2)$$

The final step is to translate this utility model of vote choice in EP elections into specific hypotheses about *changes in patterns of behaviour* between first-order and second-order elections. To distinguish among different types of behaviours, we build on recent studies of EP elections that have categorised types of voters. Weber (2011), for example, draws on Hirschman's (1979) *Exit, Voice and Loyalty* framework to construct a model of four types of second-order voters: those who exit from their party; those who exit from the system; those who express 'voice'; and core voters. In another recent study, Bakker and Polk (2010) create a typology of eight types of voters based on whether their motivation is strategic or sincere and if their vote in the EP election is consistent with their national election vote. Our model explicitly seeks to distinguish between observed behaviours and the motivations for these behaviours. We identify three broad types of behaviours in second-order elections: *partisanship* (voting for the same party as in the national elections); *switching* (switching to different between in the second-order election); and *abstaining* (voting in the national election, but abstaining in the EP election).

Figure 1 presents our theoretical framework. It illustrates the two primary motivations (sincere and protest) directed at the domestic and/or the European level that drive three types of EP electoral behaviour. The model also shows that the politicisation of the EU is a moderating factor that conditions the degree to which domestic or EU considerations matter.

This leads us to our hypotheses. Our first hypothesis relates to sincere voting directed at the domestic level. Sincere considerations are likely to cause changes in behaviour since voters can afford to 'vote with their heart' in second-order elections that do not lead to the formation of a government. We thus posit in our first hypothesis that voters are less likely to support a party
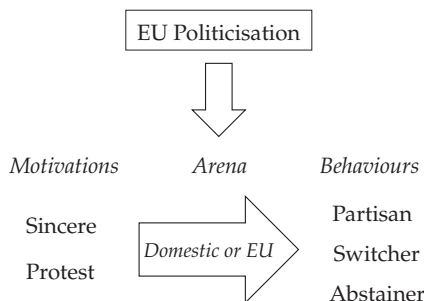

Figure 1. Motivating the European voter.

that is further away from them ideologically and more likely to abstain because of policy disagreement:

> *H1*: The closer voters are to the position of their national party on the left–right dimension, the less likely they are to switch or abstain in EP elections.

Given that 'less is at stake' in EP elections, a voter may also use this occasion to cast a protest vote to signal dissatisfaction with the incumbent. According to the literature, this depends on the incumbent's performance, conditioned by when the European election falls in the national election cycle (Reif 1984; Van der Eijk & Franklin 1996; Marsh 1998; Kousser 2004). Voters motivated by a protest consideration will thus rely on their evaluation of the government's record when casting their vote. If a voter is dissatisfied with the government's performance, she will be more likely to express her protest by either switching to another party or by abstaining. This leads to the second hypothesis:

> *H2*: The greater the dissatisfaction with government performance, the more likely voters are to switch or abstain in EP elections.

Voters may also be motivated to change behaviour due to EU-specific factors. According to this explanation of changes in behaviour, attitudes relating to the European arena become more salient to voters in EP elections, and consequently voters may decide to switch their party or abstain because they disagree with the party they supported in national elections on European issues (see Hix & Marsh 2007; Hobolt et al.2009; De Vries et al. 2011). This brings us to our EU-specific sincere voting hypothesis:

> *H3*: The larger the distance between voters and the position of their national party on the European integration dimension, the more likely they are to switch or abstain in EP elections.

Protest voting may also be extended to the European level. In theory, voters may use EP elections to express dissatisfaction with their party's performance in the EP. However, in practice, given the limited information available to voters about the EP in general or the actions of specific MEPs in particular, there is not sufficient information available to voters to make such considerations salient (Hix & Hagemann 2009). Protest voting based on party performance at the EU level would require that voters have at least a limited knowledge about the policy behaviour of MEPs. However, general

dissatisfaction with the performance of EU institutions can lead to an exit or switching strategy to signal protest with the EU, which is our fourth hypothesis.

H4: The greater the dissatisfaction with the EU, the more likely voters are to switch or abstain in EP elections.

Finally, we expect the politicisation of the European integration issue to moderate the relative influence of EU-specific concerns on voters' decisions. Two key indicators of the level of politicisation are the degree of party polarisation on the issue and the contentiousness of European integration in the campaign coverage. Party polarisation is a central determinant of the politicisation of political issues. When parties are divided on an issue, their positions become clearer and voters are able to make real choices on the issue (Carmines & Stimson 1989). Greater party polarisation on the European issue not only offers voters greater choice on that dimension, but also increases the salience of European issues to voters and thus makes it more likely that they will vote on this basis in EP elections (Van der Eijk & Franklin 2004; De Vries 2007; Hobolt 2009). A second indicator of the level of politicisation is the contentiousness of the EU issue in the campaign coverage. Since voters receive information and cues from the mass media, we know that the media have an important agenda-setting role in shaping voting behaviour (McCombs & Shaw 1972; Popkin 1991). There is also ample evidence that the tone of the media coverage can affect voters' perceptions, preferences and decision to vote (see, e.g., Norris et al. 1999; Wattenberg & Brians 1999; Druckman & Parkin 2005). In the context of EP elections, we expect that the more critical the media coverage of the European integration process is during the campaign, the more voters will be primed to consider arena-specific concerns when casting their ballots. In other words, we expect that disagreements between voters and parties over EU issues will play a greater role in voters' EP vote choices when the problems associated with European integration are highlighted in the media during the campaign.

We might expect politicisation to have different direct effects on the likelihood of abstaining and switching. For example, it seems plausible that politicisation would have a mobilising effect in EP elections, and thus decrease the likelihood of abstaining but increase the likelihood of switching. However, we are not primarily interested in the direct effect of politicisation on behaviour, but rather in the conditioning effect of motivations on behaviour. We expect these two types of politicisation to condition the effect of sincere and protest motivations in similar ways for both abstaining and switching. Polarisation on the EU dimension and negative coverage of the EU will make EU-specific concerns weigh more when voters decide whether or not to vote and for whom to vote. This brings us to our final two hypotheses:

H5: The more politicised the issue of European integration, the greater the impact of the distance between voters and parties on the EU dimension on the likelihood of switching or abstaining in EP elections.

H6: The more politicised the issue of European integration, the greater the impact of dissatisfaction with the EU on the likelihood of switching or abstaining in EP elections.

In the following section, we discuss how we evaluate these propositions empirically.

Data and methods

To test our model of voting behaviour in second-order elections, we use the 2009 European Election Study (EES 2009; Van Egmond et al. 2010) and Media Study (Schuck et al. 2010). The EES voter study was fielded during the four weeks immediately following the EP elections of June 2009, with independently drawn samples of over 1,000 respondents in each of the EU's 27 Member States. The Media Study contains content analysis of news stories from the three weeks before the elections from the main national evening news broadcast, two broadsheets and one tabloid newspaper in each of the 27 Member States. A total of 52,009 television and newspaper stories were coded.

Our dependent variable is whether a voter voted for the same party as she did in the national election, switched to a different party or abstained in the 2009 EP elections, based on question items on EP and national vote choice. The three categories of voter behaviour are thus *partisans, switchers* and *abstainers*, respectively (see Figure 1). Across the 28 political contexts,[5] there is a great deal of variance in these three categories. The mean percentage of partisans is 54.1 per cent, ranging from under 30 per cent in Latvia and the United Kingdom to over 70 per cent in Cyprus, Belgium (Flanders), Italy and Malta. Among the 20.6 per cent of respondents who switched their vote, there is also a large range across countries, from under 10 per cent in Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Malta and Slovakia to over 35 per cent in Ireland and Latvia. Finally, 25.4 per cent of voters who voted in the previous national election abstained in the EP election, varying from under 10 per cent in two of the countries with enforced compulsory voting (Belgium and Luxembourg) to over 40 per cent in Lithuania, Poland and Slovakia. Appendix Table 1 reports the values of the dependent variable by country.

Our individual-level models estimate the impact of the sincere and protest motivations on these behaviours. To assess the extent of sincere voting, we include two variables capturing the distance between a voter's position and

that of the party she voted for in the last national election: one for the left–right dimension and one for the European integration dimension. We calculated these variables by subtracting the respondent's self-placement on the left–right and EU dimensions from the mean placement of her party, both of which are 11-point scales, using absolute distances. To test the degree of protest voting, we include a dichotomous government approval variable and a satisfaction with EU democracy variable. This variable ranges from 1 (not at all satisfied) to 4 (very satisfied).[6] We also include a series of control variables. As we are interested in what motivates abstaining or switching, we employ a dichotomous partisanship variable. Following the extant literature (Campbell 1960; Verba et al. 1987; Lewis-Beck et al. 2008), we expect that those who are more partisan are less likely to abstain or switch. A voter's level of political awareness is also likely to affect behaviour by making her less likely to abstain and more likely to switch in EP elections. We therefore created an additive 7-point scale based on questions asked about both national and European political knowledge (Cronbach's alpha = 0.74). Moreover, we include a party size variable – measured as the seat share of the party in the last national election (Hix & Marsh 2007)[7] – since the second-order literature argues that voters are more likely to support larger parties in national elections because government formation is at stake, whereas size matters less in second-order elections (Van der Eijk & Franklin 1996). We also include three demographic control variables. Education is a five-category variable based on the age when the respondent stopped full time education. Gender is a dichotomous variable, where 0 is male and 1 is female. Finally, our measure of age is a continuous variable. Appendix Table 2 lists the questions used and their exact wording.

To test our hypotheses concerning the factors moderating the effect of EU-specific considerations, we include two variables in our model that measure EU politicisation across the different political contexts: the polarisation of the party system on the issue of EU integration, and the tone of the campaign. EU polarisation is measured as the standard deviation of the mean party positions in each system using the voters' placement of the parties in the EES survey.[8] To operationalise the tone of the overall campaign, we use a variable that measures the tone of the coverage in television and newspaper stories on the EU.[9]

We also have several control variables at the contextual level. Following the second-order election argument about electoral cycles, we include a dichotomous variable for midterm election, coded 1 if the EP election was held more than twelve months since the last national election and 0 otherwise. Moreover, as it seems likely that experience with democratic institutions in general will affect levels of defection and abstention, we use a dichotomous variable for

newly established democracy, coded 1 for the EU Member States that transitioned to democracy in the 1990s. Malta and Cyprus are thus are coded as 0.[10] Finally, as it is important to control for mandatory voting when exploring abstention we include a dichotomous variable for whether a country has compulsory voting.[11] See Appendix Table 3 for the descriptive statistics of all the independent variables.

To explain the variation in second-order vote choice both within and across countries, we use multilevel analysis since neglecting the hierarchical structure of the EES data could lead to an underestimation of standard errors and spurious inferences (Steenbergen & Jones 2002). A multilevel approach corrects for dependence of observations within countries (intra-class correlation) and makes adjustments to both within and between parameter estimates for the clustered nature of the data (Snijders & Bosker 1999). Moreover, a random-effects approach allows us to explicitly model differences in voting behaviour according to the specific political context that would not be possible with a fixed effects model. Since our dependent variable is multinomial, we estimate a hierarchical generalised linear model – with voters nested within political contexts – with a logit link function and a Bernoulli sampling model.[12] We discuss the results in the next section.

Results

To test our hypotheses, we estimate two models for both abstaining and switching. Our first model tests the strength of sincere and protest motivations (*H1–H4*) without considering the conditional relationships. Our second model evaluates the moderating effect of EU politicisation (*H5–H6*) and thus includes the relevant context-level variables and cross-level interactions. Table 1 shows the results from our individual level model of voting behaviour. We find strong support for our first four hypotheses. The larger the distance between the voter and her national party choice on the left–right dimension, the more likely she is to abstain and switch in the EP election. On the EU dimension, the more eurosceptic a voter is compared to her party, the more likely she is to switch or abstain. Finally, when voters approve of their national government's performance or are satisfied with democracy in the EU, they are less likely to abstain or switch. All of these results are significant at the 95 per cent level or higher. The control variables also behave as expected: partisans are less likely to switch and abstain; more knowledgeable and educated voters are less likely to abstain, but more likely to switch in EP elections; and older voters are generally more likely to stick to the same party in second-order elections. Finally, gender has no significant effects.

Table 1. Model of second-order electoral behaviour: Log odds of individual-level predictors

	Abstention/partisan	Switching/partisan
Individual-level predictors		
Intercept	2.32*** (0.22)	−0.49** (0.19)
EU distance	0.05*** (0.01)	0.05*** (0.01)
Left–right distance	0.04** (0.02)	0.07*** (0.02)
Government approval	−0.21*** (0.05)	−0.22*** (0.05)
EU satisfaction	−0.14*** (0.03)	−0.07** (0.03)
Partisanship	−1.00*** (0.05)	−1.14*** (0.05)
Knowledge	−0.14*** (0.01)	0.04** (0.02)
Education	−0.10*** (0.02)	0.10*** (0.02)
Female	−0.06 (0.05)	0.04 (0.05)
Age	−0.03*** (0.00)	−0.01*** (0.00)
Political system variance	0.61	0.29
Deviance	11,218	11,226
AIC	11,240	11,248
BIC	11,320	11,328
N (system; individual)	28; 10,780	28; 10,526

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. The dependent variable is multinomial (partisanship, abstention, switching) and partisanship is the reference category. The models have been estimated using a hierarchical generalised linear model with a logit link. *** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.10$.

Given that we are interested not only in the significance, but also in the relative magnitude of the effect of the three motivations, we calculate the change in the predicted probability of abstaining or switching for each of the motivation variables. To compare the size of the marginal effects, we increase the values of left–right distance, EU distance, government approval and EU satisfaction from the minimum to the maximum, holding all other variables at their means. Table 2 shows the resulting effect on the predicted probability of abstaining or switching (with 95 per cent confidence intervals in brackets). For distance on the EU dimension, moving from the minimum to the maximum values increases the likelihood of switching by 4 per cent and abstaining by 5 per cent. On the left–right dimension, a similar change in values increases the probability of switching by 9 per cent and abstaining by 8 per cent. For voters who approve of their government's performance, the likelihood of switching is 24 per cent, but this increases to 29 per cent for those who are not satisfied with their national government. Similarly, the predicted probability of abstaining increases by 5 per cent when moving

Table 2. Predicted probabilities of direct effects of motivations

	Minimum	Maximum
Switching		
EU distance	0.25 (0.24, 0.26)	0.29 (0.26, 0.32)
Left–right distance	0.25 (0.23, 0.26)	0.34 (0.28, 0.39)
Government approval	0.29 (0.28, 0.30)	0.24 (0.22, 0.25)
EU satisfaction	0.30 (0.28, 0.33)	0.23 (0.21, 0.25)
Abstaining		
EU distance	0.26 (0.24, 0.27)	0.31 (0.28, 0.34)
Left–right distance	0.26 (0.24, 0.27)	0.34 (0.29, 0.39)
Government approval	0.30 (0.28, 0.31)	0.25 (0.24, 0.26)
EU satisfaction	0.34 (0.32, 0.36)	0.22 (0.20, 0.24)

Note: The table shows the predicted probability of switching and abstaining at the minimum and maximum values of the independent variables, with all other variables held constant (95 per cent confidence intervals in brackets). The estimates are based on the models shown in Table 1.

from approval to disapproval. Finally, the likelihood of switching for those satisfied with EU democracy is 7 per cent lower than for those who are dissatisfied, whereas the probability of abstaining increases by 12 per cent for those who are dissatisfied. These findings illustrate that sincere and protest motivations have about the same magnitude of effect on the likelihood of changing behaviour between first- and second-order elections.

These results, however, ignore the conditioning effect of EU politicisation. According to our model (Eqn 2 and *H5* and *H6*), the effect of EU-specific concerns on behaviour is conditioned by the level of EU politicisation. Table 3 thus presents a fully specified model including the moderating impact of EU politicisation on the degree of arena-specific voting. To do this, we include interactions between the contextual moderating variables (EU party polarisation and EU campaign tone) and EU distance and EU satisfaction. We also include an additional cross-level interaction between midterm elections and government approval to control for the national electoral cycle effect of strategic protest voting hypothesised in the second-order election literature (see Van der Eijk & Franklin 1996; Marsh 1998; Hix & Marsh 2007). The results corroborate the finding in the extant literature that switching due to government dissatisfaction is more common when elections are held during the midterm.[13] Our other control variables have mixed results. Voting for a larger party in the national election results in a higher probability of abstaining, but a lower probability of switching. The timing of the EP election in the national

Table 3. Model of second-order electoral behaviour: Log odds of cross-level interactions

	Abstention/partisan	Switching/partisan
Individual-level predictors		
Intercept	2.13*** (0.66)	−0.39 (0.58)
EU distance	−0.06 (0.04)	−0.03 (0.04)
Left–right distance	0.04** (0.02)	0.07*** (0.02)
Government approval	−0.17 (0.12)	0.13 (0.12)
EU satisfaction	−0.22** (0.11)	0.01 (0.10)
Partisanship	−1.00*** (0.05)	−1.13*** (0.05)
Knowledge	−0.13*** (0.01)	0.04** (0.02)
Education	−0.10*** (0.02)	0.10*** (0.02)
Female	−0.05 (0.05)	0.05 (0.05)
Age	−0.03*** (0.002)	−0.006*** (0.002)
Context-level predictors		
Party size (NE)	0.005*** (0.002)	−0.007*** (0.002)
Midterm election	0.08 (0.30)	0.24 (0.26)
New democracy	0.74** (0.29)	−0.20 (0.24)
Compulsory voting	−1.05*** (0.30)	−0.57** (0.24)
EU polarisation	−0.09 (0.42)	−0.02 (0.36)
EU campaign tone	−1.95 (2.76)	−1.70 (2.53)
Cross-level interactions		
Midterm*Government approval	−0.09 (0.13)	−0.41*** (0.14)
EU distance*Polarisation	0.09** (0.04)	0.05 (0.03)
EU distance*EU tone	−0.40 (0.27)	−0.74*** (0.26)
EU satisfaction*Polarisation	0.06 (0.09)	−0.04 (0.08)
EU satisfaction*EU tone	−0.49 (0.65)	−0.05 (0.65)
Political system variance	0.28	0.19
Deviance	11,096	11,019
AIC	11,140	11,063
BIC	11,300	11,222
N (system; individual)	28; 10,675	28; 10,390

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. The dependent variable is multinomial (partisanship, abstention, switching) and partisanship is the reference category. The models have been estimated using a hierarchical generalised linear model with a logit link. NE = National election. *** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.10$.

election cycle does not have any statistically significant effect. As expected, voters in newly established democracies are more likely to abstain, whereas compulsory voting results in a decreased probability of both abstaining and switching.

To interpret both the magnitude and significance of the hypothesised conditioning effects (*H5* and *H6*), we graphically illustrate how the marginal effects of EU distance on switching and abstention vary across the range of values of EU party polarisation and EU campaign tone in Figures 2 and 3 (Brambor et al. 2006; Kam & Franzese 2007). Figure 2 shows the marginal effect of the distance between voters and their national party on the EU dimension on switching and abstention increases for different levels of polarisation in the national party system and EU media tone. We find support for *H5*: the higher the level of party polarisation, the greater the effect of EU distance on the likelihood of abstaining and switching. For abstaining, it is only when the level of polarisation is above 1.35 (mean is 1.12) that EU distance has a significant effect. For switching, it is only when polarisation is above 1.46 that
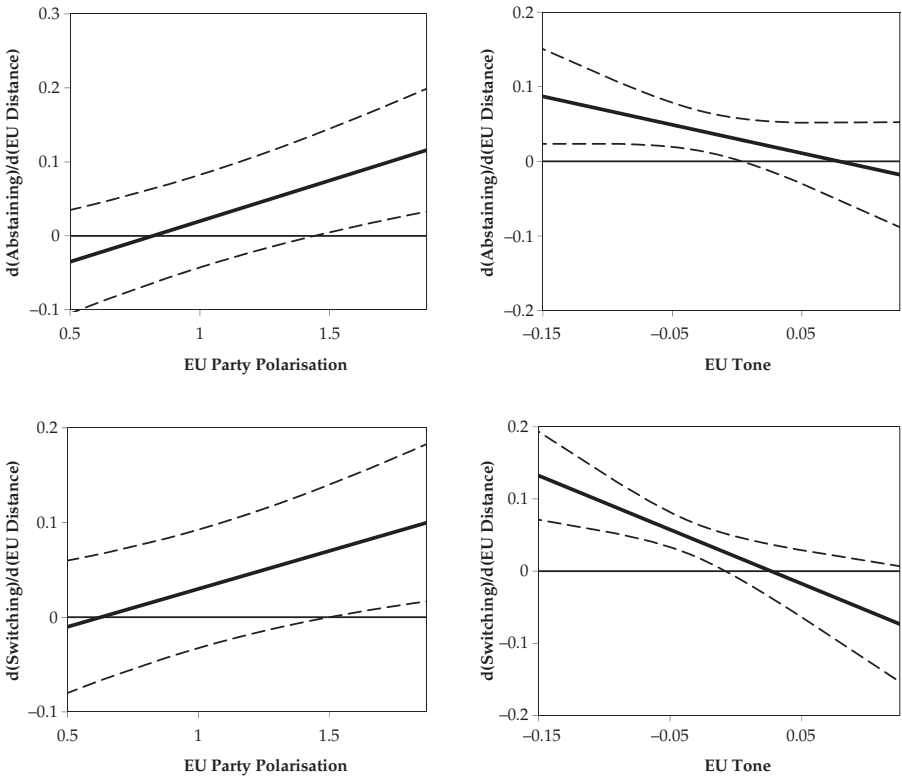

Figure 2. Marginal effect of EU distance across EU politicisation.
Note: These figures are estimated on the basis of the models in Table 3. They show the marginal effect of EU distance on the likelihood of switching and abstaining across different levels of EU party polarisation and EU tone. The upper and lower lines are the 95 per cent confidence intervals.
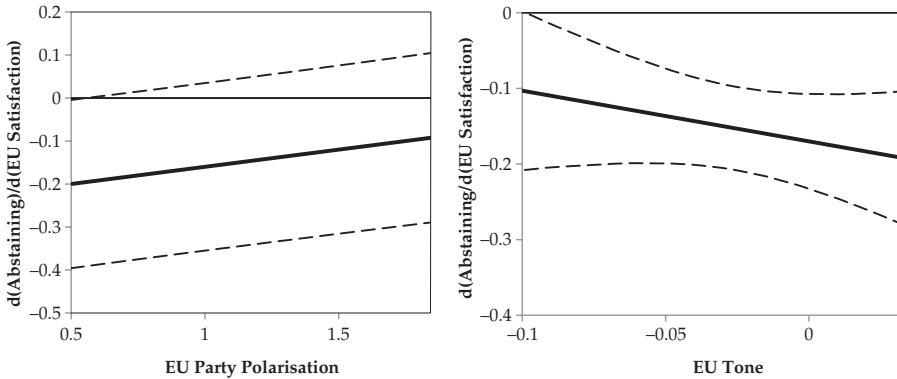
Figure 3. Marginal effect of EU satisfaction across EU politicisation.
Note: These figures are estimated on the basis of the models in Table 3. They show the marginal effect of EU satisfaction on the likelihood of abstaining across different levels of EU party polarisation and EU tone. The effects on the probability of switching are not shown here as they do not come close to statistical significance (see Table 3). The upper and lower lines are the 95 per cent confidence interval.

the distance's effect is significant. Equally, Figure 2 shows that a more negative campaign tone increases the importance of EU distance on abstaining and switching. It demonstrates that EU distance only matters when the campaign coverage is neutral or negative.

We find more limited support for the hypothesised conditioning effect of EU politicisation on the effect of satisfaction with democracy in the EU on behaviour (*H6*). As Table 3 shows, the effect on switching is not close to statistical significance. The figure plots the marginal effect of moving from the minimum to the maximum level of EU satisfaction on abstention across different levels of polarisation and campaign tone. Whereas there is no significant marginal effect of EU satisfaction at any level of party polarisation, the figure shows a downward sloping marginal effect of EU satisfaction on the likelihood of abstention as the campaign becomes more positive.

In summary, we find that while the politicisation of European integration makes EU-specific *sincere* voting (proximity on the EU dimension) more prevalent, it has little impact on the degree of EU-specific *protest* voting. This is perhaps not surprising given that politicisation of the EU not only makes the EU issue more salient, but also provides information about party positions on EU issues. Sincere voting on the EU dimension requires that voters have such information, whereas a protest vote based on dissatisfaction with the EU can be cast with very little information about EU politics or party positions.

To illustrate the influence of politicisation on arena-specific sincere voting, we can look to Austria. In the campaign leading up to the 2009 EP elections,

the issue of the future of European integration was fiercely debated. The Austrian party system is one of the most polarised on the EU dimension (polarisation score of 1.66) with the two large mainstream parties – the People's Party (ÖVP) and Socialist Party (SPÖ) – broadly supportive of further European integration, whereas the populist far-right parties – the Freedom Party (FPÖ) and Alliance for the Future of Austria (BZÖ) – and the single-issue Hans Peter Martin list campaign on eurosceptic platforms. The coverage of the EU in the Austrian media was the most negative across the entire EU (EU tone score of –0.16). Considering this highly contentious campaign context, it is not surprising that arena-specific voting was very pronounced in Austria. A shift from the minimum to the maximum distance to the party on the EU dimension would make the average Austrian voter 18 per cent more likely to abstain and 13 per cent more likely to switch.[14] Not least due to arena-specific voting, Hans-Peter Martin's List '*For genuine control in Brussels*' won 18 per cent of the vote and three out of 17 seats, whereas his party won no seats in the previous Austrian legislative elections of 2006. In contrast, EU distance has no significant effect on second-order election behaviour for the average voter in countries where the EU issue is far less politicised, such as Bulgaria (polarisation score = 0.51, EU tone score = 0.02) and Lithuania (polarisation score = 0.56, EU tone score = 0.01).

Conclusion

At first glance, the outcome of the seventh direct elections to the EP in 2009 seems to lend further support to the second-order election model which has guided our interpretation of EP elections for three decades: at 43 per cent, turnout was not only significantly below that in national elections, but also lower than in any previous EP elections. Large governing parties generally performed poorly compared to national elections, while small opposition parties enjoyed substantial victories. Not only did green and far right parties win larger seat and vote shares than in recent national elections, but parties such as the Swedish Pirate Party and the Danish 'People's Movement against the EU' also gained representation. We can interpret these patterns as a sign that voters behave differently in EP elections because less is at stake and they are more concerned with domestic matters. Yet, other aspects of these elections may not fit so neatly with the second-order model. Anti-European parties generally performed much better than in national elections and socialist parties were punished across Europe, regardless of whether they were in government or in opposition (Hix & Marsh 2011). These outcomes suggest that concerns over European integration were important to voters and that

pan-European issues mattered in the campaigns. The aim of this article has been thus to unpack the individual-level motivations that drive changes in voting behaviour between first- and second-order elections. This contributes to our understanding of these aggregate patterns in EP elections. These findings also advance our comprehension of what motivates voters' decisions in second-order elections more generally.

The article proposes a theoretical framework for understanding second-order election behaviour, identifying two distinct types of motivations: sincere and protest. By explicitly distinguishing between these two different motivations directed at both the domestic and the EU levels, we are able not only to evaluate their relative impact on observed behaviours but also to examine what factors condition their impact. Our results clearly show that both sincere and protest motivations play a significant role in driving changes in electoral choices between first- and second-order elections. In fact, the magnitude of the effect of sincere and protest motivations on the likelihood of switching party or abstaining in the EP election is remarkably similar. This leaves the question of when and why arena-specific (EU) considerations matter to European voters. Our findings suggest the degree of arena-specific voting is moderated by contextual variables. Specifically, we find that the higher the level of politicisation of the European issue, the more party positions on EU issues drive vote choice in EP elections. While this finding is fairly intuitive, it has important implications for our understanding of electoral behaviour and democracy in the EU.

Examining the conditioning effect of party polarisation on the EU dimension shows that voters only take EU-specific considerations into account when political parties provide them with clear choices. In contrast, we find little conditioning effect of party polarisation on the degree of EU protest voting. This is good news for European democracy as it suggests that the increasing politicisation of European integration makes voters more likely to make choices on the basis of party positions on EU issues, but no more likely to simply cast a protest vote 'against Europe'. These findings also highlight that political parties are crucial in shaping the nature of electoral choices in Europe. As a further example, party polarisation on the EU dimension is in general significantly lower in the newly established democracies in the East compared to the established democracies in the West. When comparing arena-specific voting in these two sets of countries, we also find that distances to parties on the EU dimension have a large and significant effect on second-order behaviour in the West but no effect in the East. This naturally raises further questions about why the politicisation of the EU varies so considerably across the Member States and how the motivations of voters may encourage parties to adopt more polarised positions and the media to provide more

critical coverage of the EU. The relationship among party strategies, media coverage and voter motivation is likely to be reciprocal in ways that we cannot fully explore in a cross-national study, such as this one, but should be examined in future research.

Acknowledgements

Appendix Table 1. Voters in the 2009 European Parliament Election by country

	Partisan	Switcher	Abstainer	N
Austria	51.44	24.15	18.80	723
Belgium (Wallonia)	65.17	24.72	4.49*	252
Belgium (Flanders)	72.12	18.93	7.16*	384
Bulgaria	40.11	20.49	28.80	506
Cyprus	72.70	9.97	13.39*	732
Czech Republic	49.33	6.75	37.03	621
Denmark	54.46	31.20	10.65	886
Estonia	39.04	18.66	21.93	512
Finland	54.97	16.75	23.43	727
France	39.66	24.03	27.06	540
Germany	53.02	19.69	20.68	664
Greece	55.42	14.57	22.96	753
Hungary	49.78	11.98	34.20	665
Ireland	47.09	35.72	10.96	693
Italy	73.06	13.10	7.56	508
Latvia	29.84	45.38	16.75	527
Lithuania	42.53	10.90	42.18	544
Luxembourg	58.79	20.36	7.00*	529
Malta	80.27	6.63	8.29	574
Netherlands	44.28	26.01	27.28	844
Poland	46.44	10.84	40.78	606
Portugal	49.13	13.20	31.80	592
Romania	47.52	11.96	33.23	597

Appendix Table 1. Continued.

	Partisan	Switcher	Abstainer	N
Slovakia	41.64	9.92	45.18	683
Slovenia	45.09	19.66	30.93	730
Spain	56.89	13.23	26.88	711
Sweden	49.43	31.35	16.70	852
United Kingdom	29.33	24.56	37.38	669
Total/Mean	54.10	20.60	25.40	17,624

Notes: Only includes individuals who voted in the previous national election.
* Enforced compulsory voting. In addition, Greece has compulsory voting, but it is not enforced.

Appendix Table 2. 2009 EES questions (using United Kingdom survey wording)

Question number	Wording [variable names in brackets]
Q24	A lot of people abstained in the European Parliament elections of 4 June, while others voted. Did you cast your vote? [*Dependent variable*]
Q25	Which party did you vote for? [*Dependent variable*]
Q27	Which party did you vote for at the general election of 2005? [*Dependent variable*]
Q46	In political matters, people talk of 'the left' and 'the right'. What is your position? Please indicate your views using any number on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means 'left' and 10 means 'right'. Which number best describes your position? [*Left–right distance*]
Q47	And about where would you place the following parties on this scale? [*Left–right distance*]
Q80	Some say European unification should be pushed further. Others say it already has gone too far. What is your opinion? Please indicate your views using a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means unification 'has already gone too far' and 10 means it 'should be pushed further'. What number on this scale best describes your position? [*EU distance*]
Q81	And about where would you place the following parties on this scale? [*EU distance*]
Q85	And how satisfied are you, on the whole, with the way democracy works in the European Union? [*EU satisfaction*]
Q86	Do you approve or disapprove of the government's record to date? [*Government approval*]
Q89	Do you feel yourself a little closer to one of the political parties than others? [*Partisanship*]
Q92–98	For each of the following statements, could you please tell me whether you believe they are true or false? [*Knowledge*]

Appendix Table 2. Continued.

Question number	Wording [variable names in brackets]
Q92	Switzerland is a member of the EU
Q93	The European Union has 25 Member States
Q94	Every country in the EU elects the same number of representatives to the European Parliament
Q95	Every six months, a different Member State becomes president of the Council of the European Union
Q96	The British Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families is Ed Balls
Q97	Individuals must be 25 or older to stand as candidates in British general elections
Q98	There are 969 members of the British House of Commons
Q100	How old were you when you stopped full-time education? [*Education*]
Q102	Are you male or female? [*Gender*]
Q103	What year were you born? [*Age*]

Appendix Table 3. Descriptive statistics of independent variables

	Mean	Minimum	Maximum	Standard deviation	N
Individual level					
EU distance	2.52	0	7.68	1.82	16,825
Left–right distance	1.80	0	8.96	1.44	18,110
Government approval	0.42	0	1	0.49	24,585
EU satisfaction	2.51	1	4	0.76	23,853
Partisanship	0.53	0	1	0.50	27,069
Knowledge	3.90	0	7	1.87	27,069
Education	3.41	1	5	1.39	27,069
Female	0.56	0	1	0.50	27,069
Age	50.29	18	99	16.91	26,763
Context level					
Party size	27.84	0	55	15.25	18,318
Midterm election	0.82	0	1	0.39	27,069
New democracy	0.37	0	1	0.48	27,069
Compulsory voting	0.15	0	1	0.35	27,069
EU polarisation	1.12	0.42	1.97	0.40	27,069
EU campaign tone	−0.02	−0.16	0.15	0.06	27,069

Notes

1. We recognise that European integration can also be considered a national issue in some contexts (and that left–right issues are equally relevant at the European level). However, as we seek to unpack voters' motivations in EP elections, we are interested in explaining under what conditions vote choice is determined by area-specific or European issues. Furthermore, while we acknowledge that operationalising voters' attitudes towards Europe as a unidimensional preference for more or less integration may be seen as an over-simplification, this question does appear to capture latent generic attitudes towards European integration, and the item is highly correlated with other questions focused on attitudes towards more or less EU involvement in specific types of policy (see Gabel 1998).

2. The spatial voting literature often uses squared ('Euclidean') distances rather than absolute distances, but empirically these measures do not yield very different results.

3. While strategic voting focused on influencing government formation is highly improbable in EP elections, it is not impossible that voters act strategically out of a concern about wasted votes, especially given the low district magnitudes in many national EP elections. Cox and Shugart (1996) and Cox (1997) show that district magnitudes of five and below create incentives for strategic voting.

4. We do not make any assumptions concerning the moderating effect of EU politicisation on left–right preference. On the one hand, left–right preference is one of the most readily available heuristics in domestic politics, so in contexts with little debate on the EU voters may rely more on their left–right preference. On the other hand, the EU has increasingly acquired competencies in most of the policy fields relevant to the nation, and the voting behaviour of legislators in the EP is largely structured around the left–right policy dimension (see Hix et al. 2007). Thus, a truly 'European vote' should perhaps be a vote based on left–right preferences as much as preferences about European integration. It is thus difficult to make a clear prediction about the effect of greater EU politicisation on the importance of left–right preferences to vote choice.

5. As Belgium's two regions of Flanders and Wallonia have two separate party systems, we consider them to be two different political contexts. Thus, we have 27 countries and 28 contexts in our dataset.

6. To examine the potential presence of strategic considerations in EP elections, we also ran our models with an interaction term between national party seat share and the size of the EP district. We would expect that the smaller the national party seat share and the smaller the district magnitude, the more likely strategic voters would be to switch in the EP elections to avoid wasted votes. However, we do not find evidence of this type of behaviour.

7. We also ran our models with vote share and a large party dummy variable for those parties which won 5 per cent or more of the vote in the national election. Both variables yielded the same overall results.

8. Our findings are robust when using the range of the parties' positions in each system with the EES data as well as the standard deviation and range using expert survey placement of parties (Benoit & Laver 2006; Hooghe et al. 2010).

9. The visibility of the EU in the media is another way of operationalising the context of the campaign. One could argue that the more stories there are about the EU, the more likely a voter is to be motivated by EU-specific concerns (see De Vries et al. 2011).

However, since we are interested in the type of information that voters are getting (and not necessarily the amount), we chose to use media tone as our proxy of the tone of the overall campaign.

10. We chose to use this operationalisation instead of new versus old EU Member States as this more accurately reflects the substantive difference between the two sets of countries. Importantly, the results do not change in any substantive way if we use the alternative operationalisation.

11. These data are from the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) database.

12. We also estimated the models using a multinomial logit (and probit) link and as a three-level model with voters nested within parties and political systems. The results of these estimation strategies are very similar, with none of the substantive results (significance or magnitude) differing. For a discussion of binary versus multinomial logit models, see Alvarez and Nagler (2000).

13. When we re-ran the models controlling for concurrent elections, our overall results are similar and this additional variable is insignificant. We also re-ran the models with the midterm variable operationalised as months since the national election. All results were similar.

14. We calculated the marginal effects based on the models shown in Table 1, holding all other variables at their mean.

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