

## **The European Parliament elections of May 2014: Second-order or crisis elections?**

**Ilke Toygur**

Autonomous University of Madrid, Madrid, Spain

**Hermann Schmitt**

University of Manchester, Manchester, UK and

University of Mannheim, Mannheim, Germany

### **Abstract**

The 2014 European Parliament elections took place in a very fragile environment. Economic crisis, bailout packages, and austerity measures were the central agenda in many countries while a strong decline of trust in European and national institutions in some parts of the Union was alarming. The politicization of Europe has been accelerated with the crisis while the roles of arenas have been changing. This paper comments on the aggregate EP election results and compares them with the latest national parliamentary elections, after 2009. The historical discussion of if EP elections are second-order national elections will be on the table. Political parties will be taken as the unit of analysis and the trends of increasing extreme right, shrinking mainstream parties and the changes party systems going through will be analysed.

### **Key Words**

European Parliament elections, second-order, crisis

### **Corresponding author:**

Ilke Toygur, Department of Political Science and International Relations, Universidad

Autónoma de Madrid, Ciudad Universitaria de Cantoblanco, 28049, Madrid, Spain

Email: [ilke.toygur@uam.es](mailto:ilke.toygur@uam.es)

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## **Introduction: Same question, different Europe**

Since the very first direct elections to the European Parliament (EP) in 1979, the same question has been asked various times: Are European Parliament elections still second-order national elections? Is it still national dynamics that are affecting the voting behaviour of European citizens while casting their votes in European elections? This paper will look for the answer for the May 2014 elections, after six years of economic crisis in Europe and various political changes.

The European Union of 2014 and the direct elections of its parliament differ from the past in many ways. First of all, since the first direct elections, the number of member countries has more than tripled, and increased from 9 to 28. Today, the Union includes both the West and the East of the continent, which opens the ground to variations in the electoral systems and party systems. Secondly, the power of the European Parliament constantly increased, especially since the Lisbon Treaty got into force. In addition, for the first time in history, political groups of the EP wanted to offer voters a say in the election of the President of the European Commission (EC) and nominated candidates for it before the elections.

Thirdly, and possibly very important in our context, an economic crisis (resulting from the over-stretching of public debts in some of the Eurozone countries) has been affecting Europe since 2008. This has had consequences regarding the unemployment rate (youth unemployment in particular), trust in national and European governance, support for European integration, to name just the most important areas. This situation has changed dynamics of the Union, increased not only Euroscepticism but also xenophobia. In this paper, we expect to measure effects of the changes Europe has been going through on the results of May 2014 elections.

This article proceeds as follows. The following section will discuss the theoretical background of second-order elections and present the hypothesis to be tested in this paper. Then it will briefly summarize the results of the EP2014 elections. Subsequently we test our hypothesis with aggregate level data. The last section offers some conclusion and discusses the future research agenda.

## **Still second-order?**

In the aftermath of the first direct election of the European Parliament in 1979, the concept of second-order national elections was proposed in order to understand the outcome of these novel kind of supra-national but still “less important” elections (Reif &

Schmitt, 1980). Back then, multi-level governance was comparably undiscovered territory, the policy reach of the Union was still limited, and the powers of the parliament were limited too. In such an environment, European Parliament elections were far from deciding who is “in power”. This was still achieved in national first-order elections, which elect the members of national parliaments or, as the case may have been, the national president. Other less important levels of governance are also elected, often at different times. Characteristic of those second-order elections is that there is less at stake. There are certain dimensions that help us to identify an election as second-order. In this paper we will test the EP 2014 elections, to see whether they still fit the original claim.

The first hypothesis of the second-order national elections model is that participation is lower since there is “less-at-stake”. Elections of that kind are less politicised and as a consequence electoral mobilization is lower. The reasons behind the low participation rates have been investigated in a growing body of research; depending a bit on the completeness of the set of control variables introduced in micro-level models of electoral participation, the findings suggest that non-voting in European Parliament elections is usually not caused by Euro-scepticism and hence not a sign of a legitimacy crisis of the European Union ((Schmitt, 2005; Schmitt & Mannheimer, 1991; van der Eijk & Schmitt, 2009)

**H1:** Participation is lower in EP elections, compared to the preceding national first order election.

The second hypothesis derived from the second-order national election model claims that national government parties do worse since a number of citizens punish them for their—unavoidable—disappointments in the national political arena. This punishment can be realised as vote switches, i.e. citizens can vote for another party, or they can just abstain in an EP election.

**H2:** Government parties’ vote shares decline in EP elections, compared to the national elections.

In addition, the amount that government parties lose follows a pattern, which is related to the national electoral cycle. Already in the 1970, US scholars found that the popularity of the US president followed a cyclical pattern, with a post-electoral euphoria right after

the victory, a decline of popularity roughly until mid-term, and a gradual recovery in the approach to the subsequent election (Campbell, 1993; Stimson, 1976; Tufte, 1975). Similar phenomena have been confirmed for state elections in Germany (Dinkel, 1978; Schmitt & Reif, 2003), by-elections in Britain (Norris, 1990) or in Portugal (Freire, 2004). Similarly, second-order European Parliament election results are affected by the national electoral cycle (Reif, 1984; Reif & Schmitt, 1980).

**H3:** Government parties' losses will follow the national electoral cycle.

As a third claim we note that since second-order elections are “less-important” there will be less strategic voting. Strategic voting means that electorates vote for another party than their most preferred ones for various reasons. Strategic voting strengthens the support for larger parties, since generally they have a larger likelihood to govern and hence the danger of wasting one's vote is smaller. As in second-order elections there is less-at-stake the consequences of wasting one's vote are less severe and citizens are expected to cast their vote for smaller parties even if there is no possibility for them to “win”.

**H4:** Small parties do better in EP elections, compared to their results in first-order national elections.

There is a further dimension to be considered here which goes beyond the original second-order election model – the current economic crisis as a consequence of overstretched public debts in some of the Eurozone countries. Ahead of the 2014 elections to the European Parliament, in some of the debtor countries, public protests against the Eurozone government's austerity policy were in the news (e.g. in Greece, Spain, and Portugal). On the other side of this new economic cleavage in Europe, in creditor countries, the critique about the obvious risks of the common currency has lent support to new Euro-sceptical parties even where nothing like this was known before (as in Germany regarding the AfD). At the same time, public support for European integration is dramatically going down, particularly in the creditor countries suffering from severe austerity measures (Roth, Nowak-Lehmann D., & Otter, 2013). As a result of all of this, and in addition to the original second-order national elections model by Reif and Schmitt

(1980) we expect that the support for Eurosceptic parties has been increasing particularly in the most hard-hit crisis countries, but also elsewhere in the Eurozone.

**H5:** Eurosceptic parties do better in the 2014 EP elections than in those of 2009, both in the creditor and debtor countries of the Eurozone.

Before we test these hypotheses, it is beneficial to go through the 2014 EP elections results, to be able to see the big picture.

### **Results of the May 2014 elections**

In May 2014, over 500 million European citizens went to the ballot boxes to elect their 751 representatives in Brussels and Strasbourg. In addition to all the individual candidates, a campaign was launched between the lead candidates of the major political groups – a campaign about choosing the President of the European Commission (EC). For the first time in the history of European Parliament elections, political groups went to elections with candidates for the EC presidency. Jean-Claude Juncker’s European Peoples Party, the former Prime Minister of Luxembourg and the former Head of the Eurozone Government, won the election. Both the European Council and the European Parliament elected Juncker as the President of the European Commission, not without remarkable hick-ups in the Council and not unanimously though. Martin Schulz, the former President of the European Parliament and lead candidate of the Socialist campaign, also ran for the Commission presidency. His PES group ended up second, and he was again elected as EP president. The other lead candidates, for the liberals Guy Verhofstadt, for the Greens Franziska Keller and Joseph Bove, and for the European Left Alexis Tsipras, spiced up the newly established TV debates, even if the polls didn’t show for them any chance to win. All in all, the 2014 elections may have started a tradition of “indirectly-electing” the president of the European Commission by way of electing the members of the European Parliament.

When we look at the election results, we see that the European People’s Party (EPP) got 29.4 per cent of the votes winning 221 chairs, followed by the Social Democrats (S&D) with 25.4 per cent of the votes and 191 seats. This means that the main political groups of Europe, Social Democrats of the centre-left and Christian Democrats of the centre-right, occupy slightly more than half of the seats (55%) of the

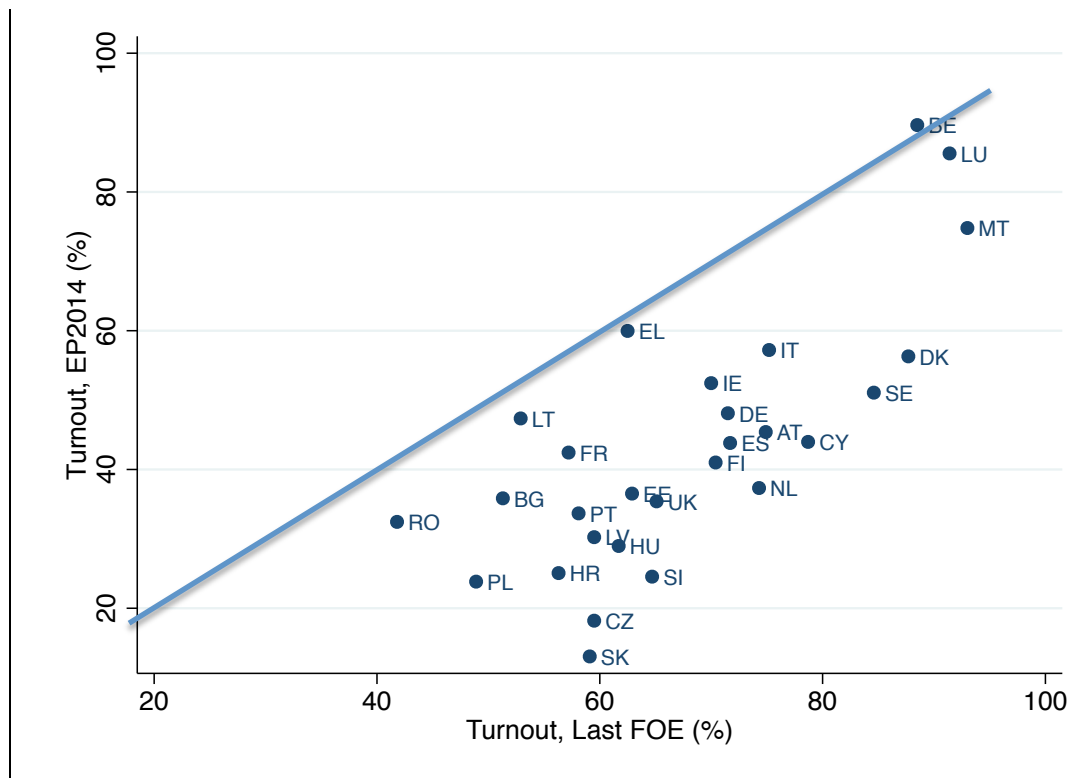
newly elected parliament. This can be understood as a sign of weakening of mainstream politics.

The third group of the EP is European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), got 9.3 per cent of the votes and won 70 seats. Led by the British Tories, they did not present a candidate for EC presidency. This moderate Eurosceptic group is accompanied by a second that calls itself Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD) and has 48 members. The UK Independence Party leads it and Italy's Five Star Movement is also part of it.

*Is participation lower?*

As we already mentioned above, one of the most fundamental assumptions of the second-order elections model is that participation is lower compared to first-order elections, since politicisation and electoral mobilisation is deficient. In order to test this expectation against reality, we compare turnout levels in the EP2014 election with those in the preceding first-order national election (FOE). Figure 1 shows the results of this analysis.

**Figure 1.** Participation in EP2014 and the preceding FOEs in the member states



Sources: Turnout EP, official statistics published by <http://www.results-elections2014.eu/en/country-results-de-2014.html>, turnout FOEs <http://www.parties-and-elections.eu/countries.html>.

We find that participation in the 2014 election of the members of the European Parliament is generally lower than it was in the preceding FOEs (with the exception of Belgium). Belgium and Luxembourg are organising general elections under a compulsory voting regime, which is applied in Luxembourg only for citizens under 75 years of age. This is why participation in these two countries is about as high as it was in the previous national election. In addition, Belgium ran simultaneously first order elections and provincial elections in addition to the election of the members of the European Parliament; strangely enough, the recorded participation rate for Belgian EP elections is almost 90 per cent, while it is 88.5 for the simultaneous national election. Belgium is indeed the only country with a somewhat higher turnout rate in the EP election. Another country that does not really meet our expectations is Greece where electoral participation was very close (only 2.5 per cent difference) to the level of previous election of the members of the national parliament. As Greece is one of the hardest hit countries in the current financial crisis, we might see this as an indication that the crisis has contributed to electoral mobilisation there (and probably elsewhere too).

In addition to that there are huge differences in participation between member states. The lowest five are all Eastern European countries that share a communist socialisation background of “fake” elections. The lowest participation rate of all is recorded in Slovakia with only 13.05 per cent. This is the lowest participation rate ever recorded in a European Parliament election. Slovakia is followed by the Czech Republic with 18.2 per cent, Poland with 23.83 per cent, Slovenia with 24.55 per cent, and Croatia with 25.06 per cent.

When we compare the 2014 turnout levels with the results of the 2009 EP elections, participation has increased in 11 countries. The most remarkable case of all is Lithuania where turnout rose by more than 25 per cent. In addition to that, participation increased in Croatia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Netherlands, Romania, Spain, Sweden and the UK.

In addition to testing the second-order character of turnout in the 2014 EP elections, we also did a very preliminary analysis of the impact of the economic crisis and the associated deterioration of public support for European unification on aggregate participation levels. We have run a number of straightforward OLS regressions that take the turnout rate in EP elections as the dependent variable, and crisis indicators and EU support as the main predictors. As a control for all sorts of confounding effects we use the turnout rate in the last FOEs. As crisis indicators, we use government debt and

unemployment interchangeably.<sup>1</sup> For including EU attitudes in the model, we use two different variables extracted from Eurobarometer surveys, one about whether one's country had a better future outside the EU and the other about trust in the EP.<sup>2</sup>

Table 1 presents the results of these initial regression models. It seems that the public debt (measured as a proportion of the national GDP) does significantly<sup>3</sup> affect the 2014 EP turnout, even if controlled for the previous national turnout rate. We find that turnout slightly increases with increasing public debt. Interestingly, our two indicators of EU attitudes as well reach statistical significance in the debt models (models 1 and 2) and reduce participation levels: the more EU sceptical a country is, the lower is its participation in the 2014 election to the European Parliament.

The same is not true for the mean unemployment rate.<sup>4</sup> First, it does not affect participation significantly. Second, EU attitudes are equally uncorrelated with turnout in the unemployment models (models 3 and 4). As we already mentioned, the models are very preliminary. Voter level data will enrich the analysis.

**Table 1.** Explaining the impact of the crisis and pro-/anti-EU sentiments on turnout

Parameters	Estimates			
	Model I	Model II	Model III	Model IV
last FOE participation rate	0.944*** (0.163)	0.951*** (0.163)	1.051*** (0.186)	1.112*** (0.195)
gov't debt	0.139* (0.062)	0.252** (0.090)		
EU out	-0.79* (0.287)		-0.490 (0.276)	
no trust EP		-0.752* (0.275)		-0.223 (0.207)
unemployment			0.392 (0.630)	0.703 -17.295
constant	-5.679 -14.287	-4.30 (14.66)	-16.040 (18.77)	-28.197 (17.29)
R square	0.68	0.67	0.62	0.59
number of observations	28	28	28	28

*Note:* The dependent variable is the participation rate in the European Parliament election of 2014. In addition to sources indicated Figure 1, Eurostat (for gdebt and unemployment) and Eurobarometer (euout and trust variables) are used.

*Note:* First row presents the coefficients, while the second ones in brackets are standard errors.

\*\*\* significant at  $p < 0.001$ , \*\* significant at  $p < 0.01$ , \* significant at  $p < 0.05$ .

<sup>1</sup> Data for the indicators are from Eurostat. The unemployment figures are arithmetic means for yearly rates since 2008. Government debt is calculated as the percentage of GDP.

<sup>2</sup> In Special Eurobarometer 415, there are two questions. The first one asks respondents if they believe that their country would be able to better face the future outside the European Union. The second one is the classic question "Do you tend to trust or tend not to trust European Parliament." Both variables are of course inter-correlated and we use them interchangeably in our models.

<sup>3</sup> Given the fact that we are analyzing data from the universe of all EU member countries rather than from a sample, we use statistical significance here more as a robustness check than in its original meaning.

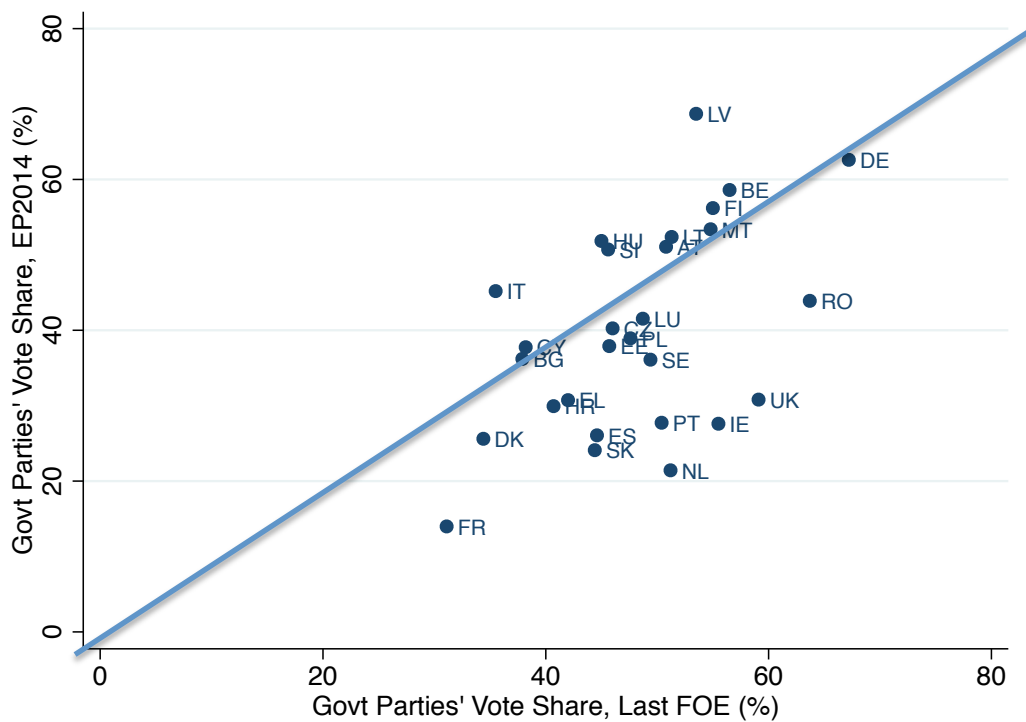
<sup>4</sup> The models use a yearly average unemployment rate since 2008. All the data is take from Eurostat.



### *Do government parties lose?*

Another important prediction of the second-order elections model is that governing parties lose support, since this sort of elections is frequently used to punish the parties of the incumbent government. In EP election of 2014, this prediction is valid for 20 of the 28 member countries. In Austria, Belgium, Finland and Lithuania, governing parties (including government coalitions) were able to gain a higher proportion of the valid vote in these elections as compared to what they had in the last first-order election, however the difference is small (less than 3 per cent on average). Furthermore, Hungary ran national elections in April 2014, while Italy changed Prime Minister in February 2014. With some imagination, the positive outcome of these governments can be understood as a sign of post-electoral euphoria. Figure 2 shows vote shares of governments in FOEs and in EP2014.

**Figure 2.** Vote share of government parties in EP2014 and the preceding first-order national election



The case of Latvia is another exception. After 3 years without elections the governing coalition increased its share of votes. Even if it looks troubling, it has a simple explanation: Latvia went through a Prime Minister (PM) change in January 2014. The country's new PM, Laimdota Straujuma is backed by an expanded four-party coalition,

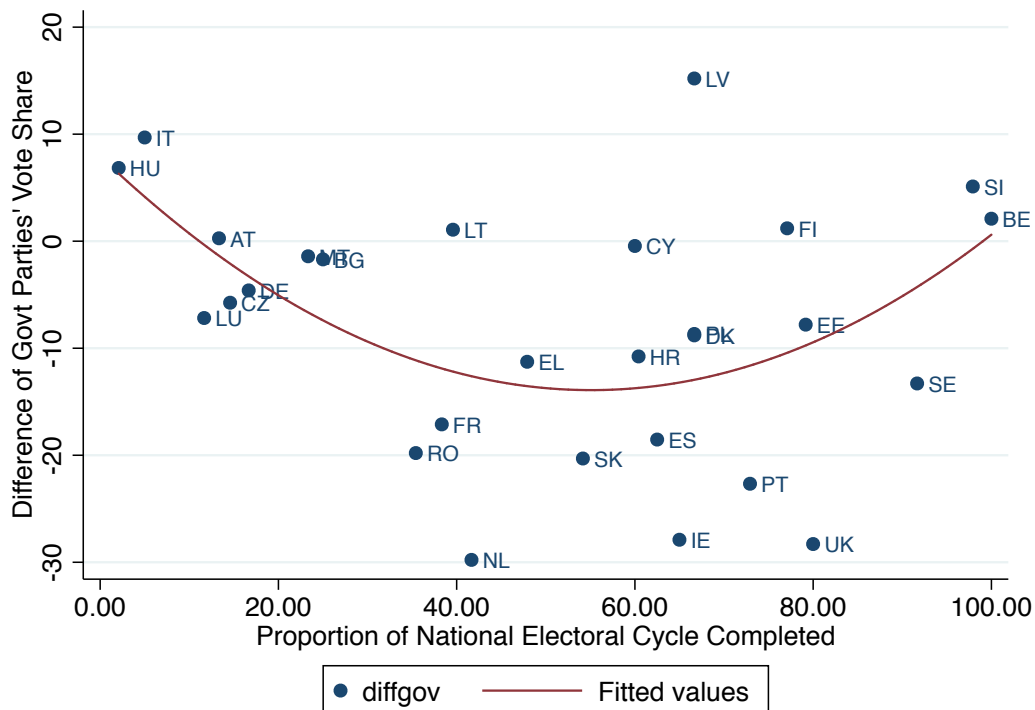
including in addition to the previous government parties Unity, RP and NA now also the ZZS.<sup>5</sup>

Turning finally to Slovenia we note that the country ran early elections in July 2014 after the resignation of the previous government in May. So we can perhaps assume that the political verdict about the new government was already taken in the European Parliament election and the subsequent national first-order election was only rubber-stamping the decision from late May.

*Do government losses follow the national electoral cycle?*

The second-order elections literature not only claims that governments are expected to lose support in this kind of elections, it also claims that the losses follow the first-order electoral cycle. Earlier research has shown that this tendency is less visible in the new member countries from Eastern Europe (Schmitt 2005, 2008). This was mainly explained by the smaller degree of saturation of the party systems there originating in much weaker ties between voters and parties (Schmitt & Scheuer, 2012).

**Figure 3.** The electoral cycle and vote difference of the governing parties



<sup>5</sup> <http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21593502-latvias-president-nominates-laimdota-straujuma-prime-minister-new-currency-new-leader>, retrieved on 23<sup>rd</sup> of August 2014.

Figure 3 identifies the relationship between the differences of governing parties (or coalitions) vote shares and the proportion of national electoral cycle that was completed at the time when the 2004 EP election was held. We find the expected curvilinear pattern: On average, governing parties lose the most at around midterm, and do comparatively better shortly after the last and shortly ahead of the next first-order election. There are a lot of cases that do not really follow that pattern, and the relationship is therefore not very strong (Figure 3). However, it is stronger in the West of Europe with its well-established party systems as it is in the much younger and weaker party systems of the new democracies in the East (Separate figures can be found in the appendix).

### *Do big parties lose?*

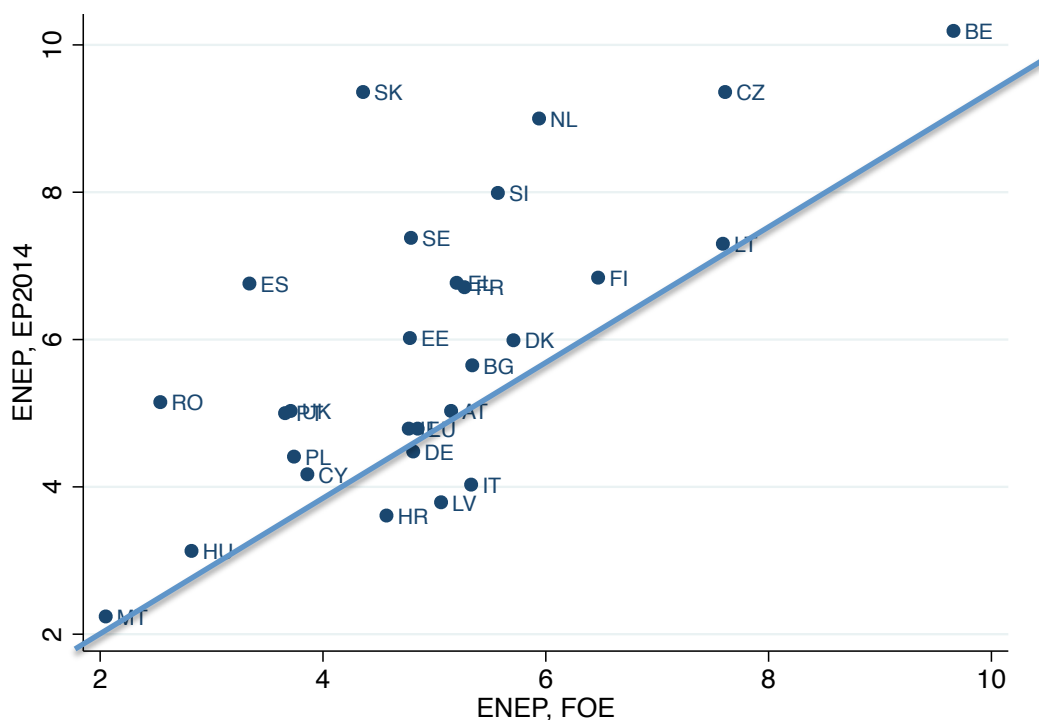
The last, but certainly not the least significant, assumption of the second-order elections model is related to the mechanism of vote choice. There are two basic mechanisms – sincere and strategic voting (Alvarez & Nagler, 2000). The model claims that, since there is less at-stake, citizens have less incentive to vote strategically. Instead, they are free to cast their vote in a sincere manner and support their first electoral preference, rather than another (larger, stronger, more likely to govern) party for deliberate reasons. For testing the hypothesis, we need to discriminate small parties from large parties. There is no consensus however at what proportion of votes small parties end and large parties begin. For this reason, we follow Laakso and Taagepera (Laakso & Taagepera, 1979), and calculate the effective number of electoral parties (ENEP) in both the EP election and previous first-order election.<sup>6</sup> Comparing these two numbers, we expect the EP number to be larger. This is our criteria to test this hypothesis. Figure 6 shows the results of this comparison.

Small parties did better in almost all of the EU members, sometimes considerably better. Spain is the first country to mention here since the ENEP has increased by 3.42 points. Even if the reasons should be inspected further, we are tempted to talk about a party system change (if this increase continues in next year's national elections). The Netherlands follows Spain, with a 3,06 increase in the effective number of parties since the 2012 elections.

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<sup>6</sup> The data set of Gallagher is used for the national ENEPs figures (Gallagher, 2013), while the ones for the EP elections are calculated by the authors using the same formula.

**Figure 4.** Effective number of parties, EP2014 and the preceding first-order national election



We can also see that in Romania and Sweden small parties did better. However, there are also some borderline countries, such as Austria, Germany, Luxembourg and Lithuania in which the ENEP number remained effectively unchanged. Only in Croatia, Italy and Latvia there is a certain decline in ENEP from the national elections to EP2014, these are the countries that do not support the prediction. Overall however the large majority of countries supports the theoretical expectation.

*Do Eurosceptical parties gain in Eurozone countries?*

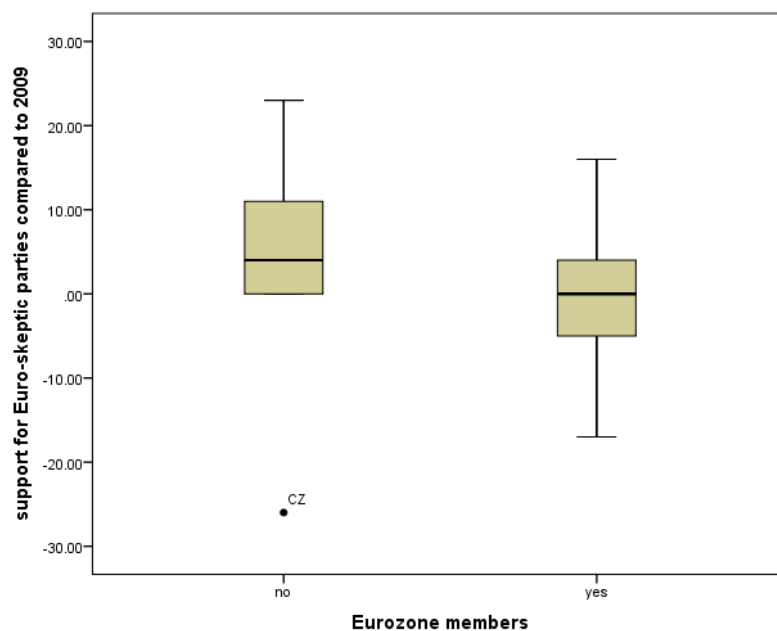
We have a final hypothesis to deal with – the one according to which Eurosceptical parties did better in the member countries of the Eurozone – whether hard hit or not by the economic and public debt crisis. We refer to all the Eurozone countries (rather than the most hard hit ones) is that Euroscepticism is not restricted to debtor countries, but also visible in some of the creditor countries. Put in operational terms, the increase of Eurosceptical parties in the EP elections of 2014 (compared to the EP election of 2009 – note the change of the frame of reference here) should be larger in the Eurozone countries than elsewhere in the EU. While this looks like an assumption that is straightforward to test – that’s not what it is. The problem consists in the definition of

Euroscepticism, and which parties are and are not Eurosceptic. There are a variety of proposals being published, all of which are more or less dissatisfactory (Harmsen & Spiering, 2005; Szczerbiak & Taggart, 2008; Taggart, 1998).

We do not have a final solution to solve this problem, but at least we follow a consistent strategy for identifying Eurosceptic parties. We rely on the perceptions of representative samples of citizens in all EU member countries. As part of the European Election Study 2014, we have asked our respondents where they place the relevant parties of their country on an 11-point scale which ranges from (1) European unification has already gone too far to (11) European unification should be pushed further. Arithmetic means identify the central tendency of those locations. Based on those, we classify a party as Eurosceptic if the mean location of it is (seen to be) at or below 5 (these parties are documented in the Appendix Table 1).

There are two big surprises emerging from this analysis. First, not all parties that we seem to know as Eurosceptic are perceived like this by the voters. For example, the Greek Syriza or the Italian M5S are not classified as such by their national citizenry. Second, Eurosceptic parties did not do better in Eurozone countries as compared to the rest of the Union (as is evidenced by the boxplot in Figure 5 below). In fact, there is hardly any difference between the central tendencies of the two distributions; just the dispersion of it is larger in the Eurozone.

**Graph 5:** The performance of Eurosceptic parties in Eurozone countries and elsewhere in the Union



## Conclusion

This paper tries to understand the main dynamics in the 2014 elections of the members of the European Parliament. Two rival expectations are tested – the second-order national elections model and the economic crisis scenario.

According to the first, European citizens decide about their representatives in Brussels mainly according to national criteria. Since Reif and Schmitt (1980) various authors have assessed the second-order-ness of EP elections, mostly affirming the original predictions. This paper asks the same question for the May 2014 elections, which were held after six years of economic crisis and various political changes in Europe.

According to the second scenario, citizens were impressed by the economic consequences of the public debt crisis (like mass unemployment, old age poverty) and supported Eurosceptical parties as a consequence. In this second view, it is the policies of the European Union – more specifically the European Monetary Union – which offers the main stimulus for electoral behaviour, not the national political process.

After testing the second-order elections assumptions, we conclude that in general they are still holding. The first one we have tested, if the participation is lower in EP elections compared to preceding FOEs, is still valid. The only promising country for future work is Greece, which has a very close participation rate to its FOE. Analysing the interaction between turnout and crisis symptoms we found that, even if controlled for turnout in the last national election, increasing public debt seems to stimulate an increase in turnout, while the same does not hold for unemployment rates. European attitudes which are associated with turnout decline together with the public debt predictor, but are insignificant in conjunction with unemployment. There is more work to be done here for future versions of the paper.

Another important assumption, the governing parties (or coalitions) lose support mainly holds, however there are exceptions. Some of them can be explained with post-election euphoria, while others require further investigation. When we look for the relationship between these losses and the electoral cycle we can conclude that governing parties lose the most at around midterm and do comparatively better shortly after and ahead elections. The national electoral cycle is still a stronger moderator of government parties' losses in the well-established party systems of Western Europe as compared to the post-communist Eastern Europe.

The fourth assumption that small parties do better also holds. In general most of the Member States have higher “effective numbers of electoral parties” (ENEP) in EP

elections than in national first order elections. The case of Spain needs to be underlined. The effective number of parties here rose 3.42 points, which can be a sign of a severe party system change. The relationship between the economic situation of the country and newly established parties requires further investigation.

So the second-order-ness of European Parliament elections, in the main, has again been confirmed. Does this also mean that the crisis scenario failed to inform our understanding of the 2014 EP election results? This is what we find in a very preliminary analysis: Euro-sceptic parties do not systematically gain more support in the Eurozone than outside it. There is a surprising result here. Some parties we, as “experts”, consider Eurosceptic are not perceived so by citizens. The Greek Syriza or Italy’s M5S can be given as most surprising examples.

All in all, we can say that the assumptions of second-order elections are still valid. The 2014 European Parliament elections were second order elections, and the crisis did not discourage to predictions of the second-order model. However there are a number of questions which need more exploration, and certain countries that require further attention. This will set the future agenda of research.

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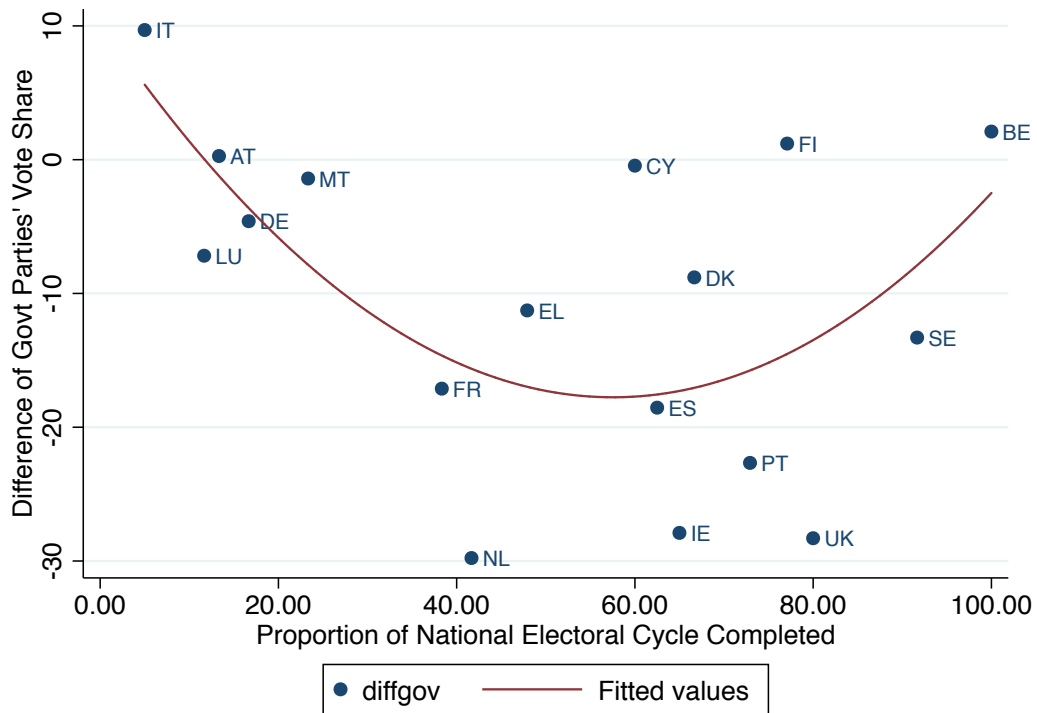


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**Appendix Table 1:** Eurosceptic parties in the EU member states

Country	Eurosceptic Parties							
AT					FPÖ	BZÖ		
BE							VB	
BG	GERB	KB	DPS	ATAKA				
HR	SDP	HNS	HDZ	HSP AS		HDSSB		
CY								
CZ				ODS	KSCM	LEV21		
DK								FBmEU
EE				Eke				
FI							Vas	
FR			FN		FdG		DLR	NPA
DE					Linke	AfD	Piraten	
EL					G.Dawn			
HU				MSZP	Együtt2014	DK		
IE								
IT								
LV					RP		LKS	
LT						LLRA		
LU						ADR		
MT								
NL			PVV					
PL								
PT	PSD	CDS-PP						
RO				PP-DD	UDMR	PRM	PMP	FC
SK	KDH	SDKU-DS	SMK-MKP			SaS		Most-Hid
SI	PS	SDS		DL			LDS	
ES	PP					ERC		
SE						SD		
UK						UKIP	SNP	

**Appendix Figure 1.** The electoral cycle and vote difference of the governing parties, for the Western Europe



**Appendix Figure 2.** The electoral cycle and vote difference of the governing parties, for the Eastern Europe

