
By Yoav Shemer Kunz
University of Strasbourg
Yoav.shemer@gmail.com

Abstract

The fundamental argument of this article is that the Second-order elections model, first introduced by K. Reif and H. Schmitt after the first direct European elections in 1979, only holds partially true when studying the June 2009 European elections for the French Greens. The article claims that the European elections might be secondary for the big parties, governmental or main opposition parties, who concentrate on preparing themselves and their voters for the “main game”, in the French case, the presidential elections. However, some parties are just too small to play in the “main” game. We claim that it is the blockage in the French national political space which leads the French Greens to turn their efforts to the supra national level; in their search for political legitimate resources, the French Greens seize an opportunity available for them on the European level. This paper is part of a political sociology approach to European studies, analysing the European Union as an alternative political arena, which offers different kinds of social resources to individuals and political groups who are relatively deprived of these resources in the national political space, and the differential usages made by real actors who attempt to connect to these resources in a multi-level governance system. The empirical material of this study consists of interviews with members of European Parliament (MEPs), candidates and campaign staff before and after the 2009 European elections, completed with in situ observations, press reviews and analysis of the elections’ outcomes.
Layout

Introduction
A Proportional Vote
The low turnout and the Green electorate
Lack of investment by the big parties
The marginality of the French Greens in the national political field
The environmental issue as a European issue
The non political perception of the EP elections
Conclusion

Introduction

This paper argues that the “Second-order national election model” (Reif and Schmitt, 1980) is only partially useful when studying the June 2009 European Parliament (EP) elections for the French Greens\(^1\). The article demonstrates how the EP elections may also be considered as First-order elections for a Second-order party, by analysing the specific characteristics of these elections, as well as the specific characteristics of the Green party in the French national political space. We argue that there exists a certain adjustment between the two, and that this adjustment makes these elections particularly favourable for the Greens. We claim that we cannot simply use the “Second-order model” in this case, but rather need to create a new model which analyses primary importance elections for a secondary political party. We use sociological methods and concepts in order to comprehend the different usages done by real actors of the European Union (EU) as a new emerging field of politics (Kauppi, 2005, Favell and Guiradon, 2009). This paper wishes to combine two isolated objects of research: the EP elections are usually studied by scholars specialized on European Studies, while the French Green party is usually studied by political scientists who are not particularly interested in

\(^1\) The paper is based on a research conducted before the June 2009 EP elections together with three colleagues, Ms Antje Pflugbeil, Ms Elodie Spielmann and Ms Alexis Walker. I would like to thank them here for their generous authorisation to base upon our common work.
European questions. We would like to go beyond the analytic separation between European and national actors, “as it becomes harder and harder to entirely disentangle the domestic and European levels of politics” (Taggart and Szczerbiak, 2008, p. 3). Our study of the EP elections through an analysis of one party’s position in its national political field, combining national and supra-national objects of research, seeks to join other contemporary scholars in their attempt to fully comprehend the multi-level system of the EU in all its complexity (Crum and Fossum, 2009, Kauppi 2005).

First, we shall study factors contributing to the specific nature of the EP elections which give a fundamental advantage to the French Green party: the proportional vote allowing small parties a good chance to be represented, the low turnout and the characteristics of the voters who do participate in these elections, the low level of investment by the big parties.

Secondly, we shall analyse the specific characteristics of the Green party which are better adjusted to the European political field than to the national one: the relative marginality of the Greens in the national political space, the environmental issue as a European issue and as an emerging post-modern cleavage beyond the left-right cleavage, as well as the non-political perception of the EP elections.

A Proportional Vote

The EP elections in France are proportional elections, giving small and new parties the possibility to win seats and to be represented, unlike the majority vote, which favours the big political organizations (Delwit and De Waele, 2000, Hix and Hagemann, 2009). This mode of vote permits the representation of small and new parties and allows the voters to vote by their beliefs, values and convictions (Déloye, 2005). In the case of a majority vote, on the other hand, voters seem to choose by utility in a tactic rational calculation, as has been described in the French case as a “vote utile” in presidential or parliamentary elections in which individuals base their vote on blocking a specific opponent. Many green voters vote for the socialist party in majority votes in France, but for the ecological list in proportional votes (Mayer and Perrineau, 1992). Member of European Parliament (MEP) Alain Lipietz comments that in the EP elections, as well as in the municipal or cantonal elections, people
“vote like in an opinion poll: what you are, what you feel like. They vote by their ideas”\(^2\). Lipietz says that “for the Green party these are the favourite elections, together with the municipal ones, because of the proportional vote”\(^3\). It is quite interesting to remark that for the actors themselves, the EP elections are more similar to the municipal or the regional ones rather than to the national presidential elections. In other words, in the perception of the actors, elections on the supra-national level are more similar to elections on the infra-national level than on the national one. For the French Greens, both supra and infra national elections overturn the national elections, from above or from underneath. The results of the EP elections are compared by the actors with the results of the 2008 municipal elections in France, around 10% of the votes, quite similar to the 7.4% obtained in the 2004 EP elections. These results are very far from the low results of the Green candidate to the 2007 presidential elections, Mme Dominique Voynet, who obtained only 1.5% of the votes\(^4\). Another example is MEP José Bové, who obtained only 1.3% on the 2007 presidential elections, but was elected to the EP on June 2009 after having obtained 15.8% of the votes in his circumscription of South-West of France. The effect of the electoral rules is extremely vital to a small party such as the Greens. Obtaining 16.28% of the votes on the EP elections of 2009, the French Green list ‘Europe Ecologie’ gained 14 seats in the EP, exactly the same number of seats as the French Socialist Party (PS), a highly symbolic victory. According to our observation, the good score obtained by the French Greens in the EP elections of June 2009 is very much used as a reference in their actual campaign for the regional elections of March 2010.

We claim that the secondary elections model may be true for the big parties, but it is not so for small or new parties. Table no. 1 proposes a typology of primary and secondary elections for primary and secondary parties in France. The “second-order model” only refers to the first row in the table (1\(^{st}\) order parties), but not to the second row (small and new parties).

\(^2\) Interview with MEP Alain Lipietz, March 25th 2009. All interviews’ quotes are translated by the author.
\(^3\) Idem.
\(^4\) The reference to the municipal elections by the actors might be also an effect of context, the municipals being the previous elections on 2008. However, the actors also refer constantly to the 2004 EP elections, but not to the presidential elections of 2007.
Table 1: First-order and second-order elections and parties

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<td><strong>2nd order parties</strong></td>
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The low turnout and the Green electorate

Much has been said and is still being said about the low turnout in the EP elections, breaking the abstention record every five years, symbolizing the democratic deficit of the European Union and the lack of confidence of the citizens. However, the participation or non-participation of the French population in the elections in general is largely determined by socio-economic situation and social class (Braconnier and Dormagen, 2007). We find a large correlation between the characteristics of the voters of the EP elections and the electorate of the Greens. The ecologist electorate is often defined as urbane, middle class, educated, with a relatively high cultural capital (Déloye, 2005). Green MEP Nicole Kiil-Nielsen defines this electorate as “Bobo”⁵, an intellectual, academic middle class. There seems to be a strong correlation between the green electorate and the voters who do participate in the EP elections. These voters are also often described as an urban middle class, having a cultural capital, more supportive of the European integration process than the rest of the population⁶. We claim that this correlation gives an important advantage to the Greens in the EP elections. As MEP Kiil-Nielsen puts it: “If there is a low turnout, it is favourable for our list because our electorate is

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⁵ Interview with MEP Nicole Kiil-Nielsen, January 21st 2010.
⁶ According to Taggart’s and Szczerniak (2008), the French Green party is not considered as eurosceptic at all. However, they also claim that voters might be more eurosceptic than their parties.
relatively mobilized, pro European, and will vote. However, the others... people who are not very determined, if they vote they will vote for the big parties”7.

Lack of investment by the big parties

The large investment by the French Greens in the EP vote should be studied in comparison with the lack of investment by the big parties. According to Bernard Manin, the voters’ choice in today’s democracy is not an isolated or pre-determined one, but a choice between a multitude of possibilities, related to the general differentiated political offer (Manin, 2008). The fact that the EP elections are perceived as secondary and thus largely neglected by the big political organisations gives a real advantage for new and small parties. Till Weber explains that European issues are more present in EP elections when first-order elections are far away in the cycle of national elections, thus expanding the logic of the “Second-order model” (Weber, 2009). As Weber puts it nicely in the title of his article, “when the cat is away the mice will play”. However, while Weber’s cat is national elections and domestic issues and his mice are European integration issues, our cat and mice are big and small political parties. Mr. Eric Schultz, director of the political campaign in the East region of France, estimates his campaign budget as 600,000 euros, which is not much in comparison with other campaigns of the Greens. However, he explains that the EP elections “are not presidential elections, they mobilise less, so the parties invest less”8. His colleague in the local campaign committee and vice-mayor of Strasbourg, Alain Jund, explains that due to the vote by conviction in the EP elections, “even when the Greens do not do much, they have good score”9. We can relate this to the previous point, the general low turnout of the EP elections and the high level of participation of the Green electorate. An investment of a political party in an election is quite difficult to measure, but there are some elements that can be noted nonetheless, which indicate a relatively high level of investment by the French Greens. The French Green Party had started their public elections campaign half a year before the vote10, while other parties did not even determine their list of candidates until just before the elections. For a period of a few months, the Greens were the only campaigners in France, a fact which even sometimes prevented their public visibility because of the restrictions quotas in the media coverage of the

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7 Interview by telephone with candidate Nicole Kiil-Nielsen, May 2nd 2009.
8 Interview with Eric Schultz, campaign director of the east region, March 19th 2009.
9 Interview with Alain Jund, local campaign committee and vice mayor of Strasbourg, April 16th 2009.
10 For example, the public meeting launching the campaign in the east region was held on January 14th 2009.
elections campaign. In addition, the Green candidates for the EP elections were not second-order politicians looking for a job or a respectful retreat, but rather primary political personnel of the political ecology in France, national figures such as Dany Cohn-Bendit, Eva Joly or José Bové, who are quite well known in France. In addition, the French Greens have elaborated specific political messages for the 2009 EP elections, mainly trying to attach the economical and social crisis with the ecological one, emphasizing the importance of the European level of governance.

The marginality of the French Greens in the national political field

The EP elections can also be interpreted as a first-order election for a second-order party, when taking fully into consideration the relative marginality of the Green Party in the French national field (Sainteny, 1997, 2000). The French bipartisan system is largely dominated by the two main political organisations, the Socialist Party (PS) and the conservative one (UMP), thus leaving little place for emerging political forces, protest movements and ‘outsiders’ such as the ecologist movement (Gallagher, Laver and Mair, 2006). Being a proportional vote, the EP elections give this small organisation a precious and almost unique opportunity to obtain seats. The newly elected MEPs (12 out of the 14 elected) then gain access to rare resources of different kinds, both material and non-material: social, political, professional, as well as symbolic. In the case of the Green political field, the EP elections are a primary moment in one’s political career, because of the restricted field of possibilities open to Green politicians in France. We can analyse the nature of the political mandate of Green MEPs in the Green political field as an important, highly respected function, where Green politicians are able to connect to these different rare resources. These accumulated resources can then be converted to the national or infra-national level of politics, or other spheres of social activity. For example, it was in the 1989 EP elections that the French Green party had its first national electoral success since its official foundation in 1984, obtaining 10.6% of the votes and 9 seats in the EP. Mr. Gérard Onesta was 29 years old when elected MEP in these elections, and has since built his political career through twenty years in the EP, where he was also vice-

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11 Interview with Sarah Pinkélé, campaign coordinator in the French East region, March 19th and November 16th 2009.
president (Beauvallet, 2007). Leaving his seat in 2009, Onesta has become candidate on the March 2010 regional elections in his region, the Midi-Pyrénées. We argue that through individual and collective strategies, certain actors and groups seize political opportunities available to them on the supra-national level, in order to launch political careers and materialize their investment in the Green Party or in the ‘civil society’ in an environmental NGO. For these actors, the EP elections are not secondary at all, but rather a unique entry point to an alternative political space, since the national one is relatively inaccessible for them. In other words, The EP is for these individuals an important niche of activity where they can covert the resources they accumulated in the ‘civil society’ world into a professional political career. The EP is an important arena for other marginalized actors in the French national political field as well, such as female politicians (Beauvallet and Michon, 2004).

The environmental issue as a European issue

In addition, it is important to examine the specific political agenda carried by the Greens, and the specific type of resources the Green politicians have, which distinguish them from politicians in other parties. The Green party is composed of few professional politicians and many environmental practitioners, specialists in environmental protection such as agronomists, or environmental activists (Sainteny, 2000). The environmental issue can be considered as a developing European issue or a global issue (Dézalay, 2007, Boy, 1999, Déloye, 2005). The environmental issue can be analysed as a European area of public policy, a specific secondary domain of policy where nation-states leave the power of governance to the supra-national level. In reference to the cleavage theory (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967), we can analyse the green agenda as an attempt to go beyond the traditional left-right opposition, characteristic of industrial society. The Greens seem to build their political power around the opposition of economy vs. nature, a new emerging cleavage, characteristic to today’s post-modern society (Inglehart, 1977). The economy vs. nature cleavage may be considered as a European one, a post-modern cleavage which is more apt to cross border interdependence and the supra-national level of governance. According to Yves Déloye, “the study of discourse shows that only the Greens have opted for a European campaign clearly axed on European issues” (Deloye, 2005, p. 31). It is also a specific realm of public policy where the ecologists can mobilise their long years of activism, expertise, professional experience or technical specialised know-how.
The non political perception of the EP elections

According to Olivier Costa, among other political scientists, the EP is generally characterized by a technical legitimacy and less by political representation, due to the complex and technical nature of its decisions and the lack of ‘real’ translational political parties (Costa, 2004). The EP is analysed as largely dominated by logics of expertise and specialised know how, and not ideological stances and left-right opposition. According to Costa, the political groups in the EP do not defend an elaborated political line, a societal project or a political agenda, and the expert’s discourse dominates over partisan representation or ideological references. This is probably partially due to the political culture of compromise of the European Union (EU) (Magnette, 2006). The constant search for consensus and coalition building through negotiations is very different than the French political culture of opposition between majority and minority and decisions by majority vote. The analysis of the EP as non-political is contested by other scholars, who confirm that “the EP is a real parliament, with real parties and real democratic politics” (Hix, Noury and Roland, 2007, p.11). However, the non-political perception of the EP seems to dominate among the French public. MEP Marie-Hélène Aubert commented on a discussion she had with a senior journalist of the newspaper “Ouest France”, to whom she had to explain the importance of the EP since “even the public opinion vehicles have the idea that the EP is useless, that it is people who do nothing and enjoy the good life”13. We argue here that the general perception of the EP elections as non-political and not about left and right represent an advantage to Green politicians, whose legitimacy is more due to their technical competence and professional knowledge, and less to their consequent stances on social and economic questions. MEP Isabelle Durant of Belgium explains why the Green party gains more votes in the EP elections than in federal or regional ones in Belgium: “on the local or regional level, one might say: ‘I give my vote to a good old socialist that I know since long time… for questions of social security in Belgium, it is perhaps better to vote socialist’… But since Europe is far away and people do not understand a thing, they are more inclined to take a risk or what is perceived as a risk”14.

13 Interview with MEP Marie-Hélène Aubert, March 25th 2009.
14 Interview with MEP Isabelle Durant, January 19th 2010.
Conclusion

In sum, we agree that the EP elections are secondary for the big parties, who see them more as a training session or a friendship match than the real thing. However, this article claims that for Green politicians the EP elections is the “main” game. The big parties who excel the national space do not need to invest much on the post national one. Small and new parties, however, invest much more than the big parties on the post-national level, which they perceive as an almost unique opportunity for them to win seats and thus get connected to a whole range of valuable rare resources which are available on the European level of governance. In other words, the small parties invest much more than the big ones in the supranational level, as they use the EU as an alternative field of action and a source of different resources. Immaterial resources, such as symbolic prestige or a network of connections throughout Europe can then be used by MEPs and their colleagues on the national level. For example, MEP Isabelle Durant told us that she sometimes sends SMS messages from the EP to her compatriots in the Green party to ‘denounce’ how MEPs of rival parties in Belgium vote in the EP\textsuperscript{15}. This is a small example of how a multilevel parliamentary field (Crum and Fossum, 2009) takes form in real day to day parliamentarian life, as a continuous linkage between the EP and national parliaments.

To conclude, the analysis proposed in this paper suggests a kind of “division of labor” between different political parties and different types of elections, which they perceive as primary or secondary. These parties are not only big or small, but also more or less adjusted to the EP elections and to the European level of governance, and more or less in need of ‘Europe’. This might help to explain parties’ stances towards European integration, as the level of legitimacy of the resources offered on the European level is a constant subject of conflict and power relations. We hope that this paper contributes to understanding how political actors’ logic of action takes part in structuring the new political European space, in a bottom-up approach to the EU. The political sociology approach in European studies seems here to be useful in order to fully comprehend the process of Europeanization in the multi-level governance system of the European Union.

\textsuperscript{15} Interview with MEP Isabelle Durant, January 19th 2010.
Acknowledgements

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Interviews

MEP Marie-Hélène Aubert (Greens, France), March 25th 2009.
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MEP Nicole Kiil-Nielsen (Greens, France), May 2nd 2009 and January 21st 2010
MEP Alain Lipietz (Greens, France), March 25th 2009
Alain Jund, vice mayor of Strasbourg and member of the local campaign committee, April 16th 2009.
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