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Party Performance in European Parliament Elections

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ABSTRACT

Research on elections to the European Parliament (EP) has consistently found that European elections are distinguished by a lack of European content. Such elections, in spite of the growing powers exercised by the EP, remain 'second-order'. Clearly, however, EU-related issues have affected the performance of some political parties in EP elections, particularly in countries such as Sweden and Denmark. In our empirical analysis of the three most recent EP elections, we explain party choice as a function of both European and non-EU-related factors. Through the use of standard regression models, we find that the parties that have not 'got their act together' on European issues – whose internal fractionalization leads to ambiguities about their stance on EU integration – systematically perform worse. We also corroborate some of the implications of the 'second-order' model and resolve some empirical disputes.

KEY WORDS

- elections
- European integration
- European Parliament
- party choice
- second-order model

Introduction

Europe does not matter. This appears to be the verdict that, with few exceptions, two decades of research on the elections to the European Parliament (EP) have delivered. Such elections, in spite of the growing influence exercised by the EP on European legislative procedures (Bogdanor, 1989; Kreppel, 2002), remain 'second-order' elections because they are inconsequential to the distribution of political offices at the national level (Reif and Schmitt, 1980). Voters largely perceive them as irrelevant. Many of them do not even bother going to the polls, contributing to the dismally low turnout observable in most member countries. Those who do cast their ballot are more likely to vote with an eye to the national political arena than to express a choice for the party they believe to be the most qualified to represent their views on European issues. For political parties, the salience of EP elections is high only to the extent that they serve as indicators of their (national) strength. To mobilize voters who are more unmotivated and apathetic than usual, parties resort to well-rehearsed campaign strategies, platforms, and slogans they typically employ in national, 'first-order' elections. Consequently, elections to the EP are fought by national political parties to win the support of nationally minded voters on national political issues. EP elections do not offer any real choice over alternative approaches to European integration, nor do most voters care about expressing such a choice.

Clearly, however, EU-related issues have exerted a significant impact on the performance of at least some political parties in EP elections. In Denmark, where strong disagreements persist over the extent to which the country should be integrated with the rest of Europe, if at all, EP elections give rise to new forms of party competition. Lists that strongly oppose the EU, including the June Movement and the People's Movement, which do not compete in national elections, invariably capture a sizeable share of the vote, capitalizing on the defections *en masse* of disgruntled voters from the parties that dominate the national, 'first-order' arena.¹ In Sweden, the outcome of EP elections is very much influenced by the reservations that many Swedes have about European integration. In 1995, shortly after Sweden's accession to the EU, the first EP elections led to a humbling defeat for the largest (if not unambiguously) pro-integration parties. In contrast, the anti-EU Greens, which generally struggle to pass the 4% threshold in Riksdag elections, received 17.2% of the vote, and the Left Party, another Euro-skeptical party, increased its share of the vote from 8% to 12%. This trend was repeated in 1999, albeit with less dramatic swings.

Anecdotal evidence appears to demonstrate that EP elections are indeed about Europe in at least some member countries. However, do European

issues systematically affect party performance in EP elections? Does Europe matter to voting decisions only where dissatisfaction with the EU is widespread, or are such effects observable throughout the old continent? Although recent studies (Marsh, 1998; Marsh and Franklin, 1996) have shown that some of the unexplained variance in models of party choice may be attributed to the impact of European issues, they have failed to identify relevant Europe-related variables affecting the difference between a party's performance in national and European elections.

Through our empirical analysis of the three most recent EP elections, we begin to answer these open research questions by modeling performance differentials as a function of both European and non-EU-related factors. We evaluate the effects on a party's performance in EP elections of its position on the EU, the salience it places on European issues, and its internal cohesion on questions of European integration. We find that the parties that have not 'got their act together' on European issues (i.e. parties in which internal divisions between leaders and activists lead to ambiguities about their stance on integration) systematically perform worse in EP elections compared with national legislative elections. This pattern is slightly more pronounced for governing parties than for opposition forces and is observable in countries with both high and low levels of conflict over European integration. We also test some of the implications of the 'second-order' model. We corroborate some propositions and resolve some empirical disputes.

European elections without European content

Shortly after the first Europe-wide elections held in 1979, Reif and Schmitt (1980) noted that elections to the European Parliament are inherently different from national legislative elections. In particular, the subordination of the European Parliament to other institutions within the European Union and the irrelevance of European elections to the distribution of political power within member countries render such elections 'second-order.' The outcome of 'second-order' elections, where little is at stake, is largely determined by patterns of party competition characterizing the more salient 'first-order' national political arena. Parties do not compete on alternative platforms based on different visions of how the European Union should be governed; they run on their trademark platforms and tend to downplay their differences on European integration (Hix, 1999). Voters, in turn, do not vote for the parties (or candidates) they believe to be best qualified to run the EU (Kuechler, 1991); they cast their ballots to make a statement about the national political arena.

The 'second-order' model, which 20 years after its original formulation

retains applicability in the face of the growing importance of the EP to policy-making in the European Union, has a number of empirical implications. The first of these corollaries, which has received robust support in extensive empirical tests, is that turnout in EP elections should be far lower than that typically observed in national elections, because less relevant electoral competitions reduce the benefits of individual participation. The 'second-order' model, however, also has important (and somewhat more controversial) implications for party choice. Reif and Schmitt (1980) predict that the perceived unimportance of EP elections induces voters to cast their ballots for parties they would not vote for in national elections. In Europe-wide elections, voters are expected to engage in more sincere, less strategic behavior, which should affect the outcome of the election in two distinct ways.

First, given that EP elections do not affect national legislative majorities, voters do not have the incentive, as they would in 'first-order' elections, to vote for a large party that by virtue of its size may be expected to exercise greater influence on policy-making. Rather, voters are more likely to vote, expressively, for the party to which they feel closest ideologically (on national policy issues). Small parties, whose vote shares in national elections are negatively affected by the reluctance of voters to waste their vote on hopeless lists, gain votes in EP elections at the expense of larger, stronger parties. Second, similarly to US midterm elections (see Born, 1990; Campbell, 1960; Campbell, 1991; Kernell, 1977; Tufte, 1975; see also Marsh, 2000), European elections provide dissatisfied voters with the opportunity to punish the parties composing their respective national executives. Governing parties are expected to lose a greater number of votes when EP elections are held close to the midterm of the national electoral cycle. In contrast, the government's popularity increases toward the end of its term; governing parties have fewer losses when European elections shortly precede new 'first-order' elections (Reif, 1984).

Whereas few studies have questioned the hypothesis that small parties benefit in EP elections, the literature is characterized by a considerably more spirited debate over the sources of small party gains, the nature of the losses suffered by governing parties, and the identification of the specific parties that are better poised to take advantage of the defections experienced by large parties.

Most notably, van der Eijk et al. (1996), Oppenhuis et al. (1996), and Marsh (1998) have argued that the differences in party choice observable in EP elections are not necessarily attributable to the fact that voters behave expressively, either by voting for the party to which they are closest in the Downsian policy space or by expressing their sincere disgust for the government's betrayal of its campaign promises. Rather, small parties appear to benefit from

both sincere and sophisticated voting behavior, depending on the timing of the election. Van der Eijk et al. (1996) and Oppenhuis et al. (1996) show that sincere voting appears to be prevalent in 'throw-away' European elections, which are those that immediately follow national elections. Oppenhuis et al. (1996) find that more 'quasi-switching' tends to take place in European elections held early in the national electoral cycle.

Nonetheless, the relevance of EP elections to national party competition increases substantially when such contests occur closer to new national elections, because they serve as important indicators of the strength of individual parties and as critical tests of the public's approval of the governing coalition's performance in office. In 'barometer' (Anderson and Ward, 1996) or 'marker-setting' elections (see van der Eijk et al., 1996; Oppenhuis et al., 1996), voters have a strong incentive to behave strategically. Knowing that the media and politicians alike place considerable emphasis on the outcome of the election, voters have the opportunity to cast a protest vote that may serve to indicate their dissatisfaction with the government's policies without, nevertheless, at all affecting the distribution of political power at the national level. Parties in the executive, therefore, do not necessarily suffer from the fact that EP elections do not matter; rather, they experience more punishing defeats when EP elections are most important, when voters 'vote with the boot' (Oppenhuis et al., 1996) because national elections are near.

The expectation that EP elections are characterized by different patterns of voting behavior, depending on whether such elections are 'throw-away' or 'marker-setting', has an important implication for the analysis of party choice. Whereas small parties should be advantaged in both types of election, it is not entirely obvious that governing parties will systematically perform worse than opposition parties. The few empirical analyses of party choice that employ aggregate-level EP electoral data have considered this complication. Curtice (1989) noted that, although parties composing a national executive on average perform badly, opposition parties do not fare much better; the crucial variable affecting party performance is party size, not participation in government. Similarly, Oppenhuis et al. (1996: 303) find 'no support whatsoever for the notion that government parties in particular stand to suffer from such [second-order] effects'. More recently, Kousser (2003) introduced the possibility that voters penalize government parties only if their retrospective evaluation of the government's (particularly economic) record is negative. Marsh (1998: 606), however, finds evidence for a clear 'anti-government swing'. Similarly to Reif's (1984) model, government losses peak around the midterm; contrary to the expectations of the 'second-order' model, though, such losses level off after the midterm, rather than gradually diminishing.

In this paper, we attempt to disentangle the effects that a party's strength

and its participation in a national executive exert on its performance in EP elections. We tentatively hypothesize (H1) that *party size is inversely correlated with the gains a party makes in European elections relative to national legislative elections* and (H2) that *government parties tend to suffer losses in EP elections*. However, we also conjecture (H3) that *large government parties experience greater losses than their smaller coalition partners*, in part because (like most large parties) they are likely to suffer from the defection of voters who cast their ballot expressively and in part because their greater impact on the executive's policies renders them more likely to be blamed for the failure to deliver some of the coalition's campaign promises. Finally, through the use of multiple explanatory variables, we assess how the timing of EP elections affects fluctuations in the vote shares received by government parties.

Although the literature on EP elections has shown definitively that the voting behavior prevalent in such elections, whether it is sincere or strategic, advantages small parties, it has notably failed to demonstrate conclusively whether or not particular types of small party systematically gain from the defections suffered by their larger, more influential competitors. For different reasons, much of the literature expects extreme parties to fare particularly well in European elections. In his reformulation of the 'second-order' model, Reif (1997) argues that the superior mobilization capabilities of 'radical, protest, and populist' parties, coupled with the visibility that such parties often achieve thanks to extensive media coverage, confers considerable advantages upon these extreme groups in less critical elections such as those of the European Parliament. Irwin's (1995) 'third-rate' model, in contrast, attributes the gains that extreme parties are likely to make in EP elections to the fact that, in most member countries, mainstream parties offer voters no alternative perspectives on European issues or alternative visions of the future of the EU (Marsh and Norris, 1997; Hix, 1999). Voters who disagree with how the EU is governed or fear the consequences of taking integration too far have no choice but to abstain or to express their dissatisfaction by voting for extreme parties of the right or left, which are (for diametrically opposed reasons) the most Euro-skeptical (see Hooghe et al., 2002).

The empirical assessment of these propositions has produced mixed results. Generally, no party family is found to perform consistently well in EP elections (see Marsh, 1998; Oppenhuis et al., 1996; van der Eijk et al., 1996). Oppenhuis et al. (1996) show that, whereas small centrist parties tend to benefit from the propensity of voters to cast their ballot sincerely in European elections held shortly after a national election, the performance of radical parties improves when voters 'put the boot in' in marker-setting elections. Curtice (1989), instead, finds evidence of a 'green tide,' but other studies (see Marsh, 1998: 602) concluded that the gains made by green parties are

generally quite modest. We attempt to contribute to the establishment of whether ideology has anything to do with party performance in EP elections by evaluating whether parties belonging to three broadly defined party families (extreme left, extreme right, and green) make systematic gains in Europe-wide competitions.

The second-order model and most of its subsequent reformulations have in common the conclusion that questions inherent to how the European Union should be governed play a very limited role in both the strategies enacted by political parties and the behavior displayed by the (relatively few) voters who show up at the polls in European elections. Whether European elections are 'second-order,' 'third-rate,' 'throw-away,' or 'marker-setting,' they are for the most part distinguished by a lack of European content. When these elections do not matter to national party competition, political parties are unlikely to invest more than symbolic organizational resources in differentiating themselves from their competitors on issues that have any European significance. When they do matter, parties are likely to get out the vote by mobilizing their 'normal supporters' through refinement of their normal campaign platforms based on national policy objectives (Franklin, 1991; Oppenhuis et al., 1996). In either case, nonetheless, the fact remains that European elections are not about Europe.

Three ways Europe can matter

The proposition that EP elections are less important than national elections has found consistent support in the analyses of party choice that have been conducted since the European Parliament's inception. However, the irrelevance of European issues has never been conclusively demonstrated. In what follows, we propose three mechanisms by which the electoral fortunes of individual parties in European elections may be affected by European themes.

The first of these mechanisms is also the most straightforward. We test the hypothesis (H4) that *the parties whose platforms give greater salience to European issues tend to perform better in EP elections*. The underlying reasoning is all too obvious. If the voters who participate in EP elections do so at least in part to manifest their views on European integration, it is conceivable that, other things being equal, parties that place greater emphasis on such issues will benefit, regardless of their position. This is consistent with the expectations of the 'directional theory of voting', which postulates that voters prefer parties that agree with the issues they care about and assertively express their positions on such issues (see Rabinowitz and Macdonald, 1989).

The assessment of the impact of the second EU-related explanatory

variable, a party's position on European integration, is slightly more complex. At least three possible stories can be told about the relationship between a party's stance on the EU and its performance in EP elections. In one of the possible scenarios, *a party's performance should improve, relative to national legislative elections, as the intensity of that party's support for European integration increases* (H5). This proposition is consistent with the findings with respect to turnout by Blondel et al. (1997), Franklin et al. (1996), Marsh (2000), Mattila (2003), and Reif (1985), who found a positive correlation between voters' propensity to turn out in European elections and their backing of the EU and between aggregate turnout rates and a country's overall levels of support for and knowledge of EU institutions. If voters who hold favorable views about the prospect of furthering European integration participate in greater numbers than those who are lukewarm or downright opposed to the EU, and if such voters cast their ballot for a party that most closely represents their views on European issues, it is plausible that this trend will translate into electoral gains for the parties that are most approving of the process of integration. Parties that can stake a legitimate claim to 'owning' the issue (see Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1994; Petrocik, 1996) of EU integration because of their unwavering support for European institutions may benefit from the fact that pro-EU voters are more likely to turn out in European elections.

An alternative scenario is that *parties that are most vehemently opposed to the EU will outperform other parties in EP elections, relative to national elections* (H6). This expectation is consistent with the considerations of those who have noted that, in most member states, parties take uncharacteristically similar positions on European integration. The widespread consensus, in turn, leaves voters who hold different views with only two options: stay home or cast a protest vote for a party with a strong, well-publicized aversion to the EU. In this scenario, parties that oppose European integration the most should outperform their more moderate competitors. Of course, these two stories are not mutually exclusive. The relationship between a party's performance and its stance on the EU could be best represented by a quadratic function, where parties that most strongly support or oppose the EU make considerable gains in EP elections whereas more moderate lists lose votes. We also consider the possibility (through the use of an interactive term) that the importance attached to European issues by a particular party will amplify the impact of its overall stance on its performance in European elections.

The third, and most important, EU-related factor we expect to inform party choice in the elections to the European Parliament is the degree of dissent that characterizes a given party on questions of European integration. We hypothesize that, *as internal dissent increases, the performance of a party in EP elections will decline, relative to the vote share received in national elections* (H7).

In other words, we anticipate that those parties that have not 'got their act together' on European integration will suffer more substantial desertions than will unified parties whose position is clear, whose programmatic goals with respect to the EU are well defined, and where the leadership's ability to promote such policy objectives relies on strong support from the base of the party. We consider the parties that experience lacerating 'Euro-divisions' (Aylott, 2002) to be likely to suffer punishing defeats in EP elections, as fractionalization renders their stance on European integration ambiguous and the conflict between leaders and rank-and-file activists generates uncertainty about the leaders' willingness, autonomy, and sway to advance the party's official position on the EU (if one exists).

For voters who consider a party's stance on European integration to be an important policy dimension on which to base their voting decision in EP elections, a deeply divided party is not a particularly attractive choice. First, internal divisions may render the party's position so uncertain that voters may find it problematic to estimate the proximity of their ideal point to that of the party compared with the other options available. Second, even if the party does have an official position in spite of its internal fractures, it may lose the support of many of its habitual voters who disagree with the leadership's objectives. Such voters may simply stay home or may defect by voting, sincerely, for a party whose views on Europe most approximate theirs. Alternatively, they may behave strategically, deserting their own party as a means of signaling to the organization the need to get its act together. The 'second-order' nature of EP elections provides voters with the opportunity to do this without damaging their party's ability to govern or mount an effective opposition in the national, 'first-order' arena.

Finally, a seriously split party may suffer the defection of voters who agree with the leadership's position but doubt the leaders' ability actually to pursue their stated goals. In many cases, such doubts are more than legitimate. Leaders who do not enjoy the support of their party membership can reasonably be expected carefully to avoid pursuing policies that irritate the base, particularly if carrying out such policies is likely to jeopardize their leadership. Moreover, even if party leaders are deemed to be courageous enough to take actions that would exacerbate intra-party divisions, their capacity to do so efficaciously in the absence of the organization's support may be quite limited. If the leadership signals weakness or the inclination to sweep the contentious issue of European integration under the carpet, voters who care about European issues, even if they agree with the official party line, may take their business elsewhere and vote for a party that is not only closer to their policy views but also credible in its commitment to actually promote those policies.

When one considers the poor showing of some of the major (particularly social democratic) Scandinavian parties in EP elections, the logic outlined above appears to find rather solid empirical grounding. Aylott (2002) describes how internal divisions have led social democratic parties in Denmark and Sweden to 'compartmentalize' European issues, separating them from other policy goals. Party discipline is suspended, internal dissent is tolerated, and referenda are organized as a means to preserve the organizational integrity of the party and prevent the exit of Euro-skeptical activists who are offered the opportunity to pursue their agenda of opposition to the EU in separate direct elections. Moreover, to induce voters to separate European concerns from other campaign issues, such referenda are generally scheduled right after national elections.

This strategy yielded mixed results. In Denmark, Euro-divisions and the hostility towards the EU that is widespread among the local population have at times damaged the Social Democrats' performance in the national electoral arena. In Sweden, the performance of the Social Democratic Party in national elections and its overall popularity have not suffered. However, in both cases the compartmentalization of European issues and the ambiguities about European integration have undermined these parties' credibility on these issues and their ability to run effective campaigns in EP elections. In fact, for parties that encourage voters to ignore their position when thinking about the EU, organizing an efficacious European election campaign is likely to be a prohibitive task (Aylott, 2002). As a result, Swedish and Danish social democratic parties have experienced humbling defeats in European elections. Reif (1985) noted that, in 1984, the Danish Social Democrats were punished by voters for their ambiguous stance on the European Community. More recently, in the first elections of Swedish members of the European Parliament in 1995, the Social Democratic Party (SAP) received the lowest vote share of any national election since the 1920s (28%), even though opinion polls indicated that it would have garnered significantly more votes (35%) had Riksdag elections been held in place of the elections to the EP (Widfeldt, 1996). Only a year earlier, the SAP had received 44% of the vote in national elections.

Plausible and straightforward as our hypothesis may sound for Scandinavian countries, where European integration has become a critical dimension of political contestation, our considerations beg the question: Are such findings generalizable? Do internally divided parties suffer in EP elections throughout the continent? The answer very much depends on the assumptions one is willing to make with regard to the basis of voting decisions in European elections. In Sweden and Denmark, where a lively internal debate on integration renders EP elections more European, it is not surprising that

the parties that do not have a well-defined stance on the EU suffer. However, the extent to which intra-party divisions cause electoral defeats in countries where support for European integration is widespread, depends on whether voters think about European issues when they make their party choices. Though much of the literature has failed to establish that European issues influence the behavior of voters in EP elections, we expect there to be a subset of voters who take into consideration a party's position on the EU and the level of cohesiveness displayed by the party on questions of European governance and integration. Therefore, we hypothesize that internal dissent damages a party's performance in EP elections in countries with both high and low levels of disagreement on EU issues. Moreover, we expect this effect to be equally pronounced for government and opposition parties. A negative, statistically significant relationship between party performance and levels of internal fractionalization observable independently of other contextual factors would suggest that European elections are, at least in part, about Europe.

Research design

Our analysis assesses party performance in the elections to the European Parliament held in 1989, 1994, and 1999.² We include only election results starting from 1989 because those elections were the first to be held after the introduction of the 1986 Single European Act, which established the cooperation procedure³ and considerably expanded the European Parliament's policy-making powers (Bogdanor, 1989; Kreppel, 2002; Tsebelis, 2002). Given that in 1989 voters were electing, perhaps for the first time, a supranational assembly that had real power over the policies generated by the EU, such elections and those that followed can be expected, more than those that preceded the Single European Act, to be influenced by debates on issues of European relevance. We include in the analysis only those parties that participated in EP elections and in the previous ($t - 1$) and subsequent ($t + 1$) national legislative elections,⁴ that received more than 1% of the vote in at least one of these instances, and for which we had data on all the explanatory variables. We exclude parties from Luxembourg, because data on position, salience, and dissent are not available for that country. For countries that use mixed electoral systems (Germany and Italy) to elect their national legislatures, we use the vote shares received by parties in the proportional tier of the election. Overall, we include 244 parties (94 from the 1999 elections, 89 from 1994, and 61 from 1989).

The dependent variable: Weighted performance differential

Most works on party choice in European elections employ as the study's key dependent variable the difference between the share of votes received in EP elections and that received in the previous national election. We take a different approach. In fact, our propositions do not seek to identify the factors that cause political parties to gain or lose votes compared with the previous national election. We seek to explain why particular parties fare better (or worse) than they would have in national elections held at the same time. Employing results from elections at $t - 1$ (which might have been held two, three, or even four years prior to European elections) as indicators of the current levels of popularity enjoyed by a particular party might bias the analysis because it ignores possible changes in the preferences of voters that might affect a party's fortunes in EP elections. Students of European Parliament elections have recognized this potential source of bias (Marsh, 2000; Oppenhuis et al., 1996). Most notably, Oppenhuis et al. (1996) employ a variable they designate 'quasi-switching', which is calculated by subtracting from a party's vote share in EP elections estimates of the vote share they would have received in national elections held at the same time. However, this measure is calculated from survey responses and hence cannot be employed in analyses of aggregate data.

We evaluate our propositions on a measure we (imaginatively) label 'weighted performance differential' (WPD). This variable is obtained by calculating the difference between the vote percentages received by party i in European elections and in the national legislative elections held at $t - 1$ and $t + 1$. Then these differences are weighted by the position of the EP elections in the national electoral cycle and summed. More formally, the weighted performance differential for party i is:

$$WPD_i = [(p_{iEP} - p_{i(t-1)}) * (1 - cycle_{EP})] + [(p_{iEP} - p_{i(t+1)}) * (cycle_{EP})],$$

where p_{iEP} , $p_{i(t-1)}$ and $p_{i(t+1)}$ are party i 's vote shares in EP elections and in the previous and subsequent national elections, respectively, and $cycle_{EP}$ is the position in the national electoral cycle (time in months between EP elections and national elections at $t - 1$ divided by the total duration of the electoral cycle).⁵ Obviously, employing this variable as an indicator of a party's popularity makes the somewhat heroic assumption that voters' preferences with respect to a particular party change linearly between elections at $t - 1$ and $t + 1$. Nonetheless, we consider this variable to have a lower potential to bias the analysis than measures assuming that voter preferences remain fixed for years at a time.

Independent variables

Size

To assess the hypothesis that small parties perform better in EP elections, we regress the weighted performance differential on the variable *Size*, which is a weighted average of the share of votes received by party *i* in the legislative elections at $t - 1$ and $t + 1$. We also evaluate this proposition by using the variable *Size* raised to the third power. We therefore account for the possibility that the relationship between size and performance differential may be best captured by a non-linear function in which small parties win votes, large parties lose votes, and the support of mid-sized parties remains stable (Marsh, 1998: 601).

Executive

We code this variable 1 if members of party *i* served in a national executive at the time EP elections were held and 0 otherwise. There are 82 government parties in our data set.

Salience

We evaluate the impact that the emphasis placed by party *i* on European integration has on its performance in EP elections by employing the variable *Salience*, which was taken from Ray's (1999) and Marks and Steenbergen's (1999) expert survey data.⁶ This variable is measured on a five-point ordinal scale that ranges from 1 ('European integration is of no importance, never mentioned by the party') to 5 ('European integration is the most important issue for the party').

Position

To assess the impact of a party's stance on the EU, we rescaled Ray's (1999) and Marks and Steenbergen's (1999) measure. After recoding, the variable *Position* is a seven-point ordinal scale ranging from -3 (Strongly opposed to European integration) to +3 (Strongly in favor of European integration). In most tests, we use a variable obtained by multiplying the values for *Position* by the values for *Salience* estimated for party *i*.

Dissent

Again, we employ Ray's (1999) and Marks and Steenbergen's (1999) expert survey data to establish the impact that internal divisions on the EU have on party *i*'s performance in EP elections. The variable *Dissent* ranges from 1 ('Complete unity') to 5 ('Leadership position opposed by a majority of party activists').⁷ A value of 2 indicates 'minor dissent', 3 denotes 'significant dissent', and 4 signifies that the 'party is evenly split'.

Party family

We assess the impact that a party's ideology has on its weighted performance differentials in EP elections through the use of three dichotomous variables. The variable *Extreme Left* is coded 1 for parties grouped in the 'radical left' category in Marks and Steenbergen's (1999) expert survey and 0 otherwise; the variable *Extreme Right* is coded 1 for parties grouped in the 'radical right' category in Marks and Steenbergen's (1999) expert survey and 0 otherwise; and the variable *Green* is coded 1 for parties grouped in the 'green' category in Marks and Steenbergen's (1999) expert survey and 0 otherwise. Our data set contains 29 *Extreme Left* parties, 18 *Extreme Right* parties, and 30 *Green* parties.

High contest and low contest

To assess the impact that intra-party divisions have on the weighted performance differential in countries where debates about European integration are more or less lively, we multiply the dichotomous variables *HighContest* and *LowContest* by the variable *Dissent*. A country is considered to be characterized by high levels of contestation on European integration if the difference between the percentage of respondents who indicated that EU membership is 'a good thing' and the percentage who indicated that it is 'a bad thing' in the 1999 European Election Study (van der Eijk et al., 2002) is less than 35 percentage points (alternative measures do not change the results). Austria, Denmark, Finland, Sweden, and the UK are the countries in our data set with high contestation.

Analysis

In this section, we evaluate the implications of the 'second-order' model and the hypotheses we proposed with regard to the impact that salience, position, and intra-party dissent have on party choice in European elections. Table 1 shows the results we obtain by regressing the weighted performance differential on indicators of party strength, participation in a national executive, party family, and electoral cycle.⁸ These tests evaluate hypotheses H1, H2, and H3 (Model 2) as well as the effect exerted by the timing of the election on the performance of government and opposition parties (Models 3 to 5). Hence, they constitute an assessment of Reif and Schmitt's (1980) 'second-order' model.

Hypotheses H1 to H3 receive robust empirical support in our data. The proposition that small parties perform better in EP elections (H1) is strongly supported in all of our models. In particular, party size elevated to the third

Table 1 Party performance in EP elections: The second order model (OLS estimates)

<i>Dependent variable: Weighted Performance Differential</i>					
	<i>Model 1</i>	<i>Model 2</i>	<i>Model 3</i>	<i>Model 4</i>	<i>Model 5</i>
<i>Constant</i>	0.94 (0.62)	0.39 (0.46)	0.88 (0.78)	-0.02 (0.98)	0.12 (0.94)
<i>Size</i>	-0.03 (0.05)	-	-0.03 (0.05)	-0.03 (0.05)	-0.03 (0.05)
<i>Size</i> ³	-0.00007*** (0.00002)	-	-0.00007*** (0.00003)	-0.00007*** (0.00003)	-0.00007*** (0.00003)
<i>Executive</i>	-1.26** (0.59)	-0.81 (0.69)	-1.37 (0.99)	1.12 (1.36)	0.66 (1.27)
<i>Extreme Right</i>	-1.19 (-1.02)	-0.99 (1.02)	-1.19 (1.02)	-1.33 (1.01)	-1.32 (1.01)
<i>Extreme Left</i>	0.56 (0.84)	0.81 (0.85)	0.56 (0.85)	0.56 (0.84)	0.57 (0.84)
<i>Greens</i>	2.53*** (0.86)	2.87*** (0.83)	2.54*** (0.86)	2.57*** (0.85)	2.58*** (0.86)
<i>Executive*Size</i> ³	-	-0.0001*** (0.00001)	-	-	-
<i>Opposition*Size</i> ³	-	-0.0001*** (0.00002)	-	-	-
<i>Executive*Cycle</i>	-	-	0.40 (1.60)	-10.41** (5.21)	-6.00* (3.54)
<i>Opposition*Cycle</i>	-	-	0.11 (1.15)	5.78 (3.85)	3.68 (2.61)
<i>Executive*Cycle</i> ²	-	-	-	11.49** (5.27)	-
<i>Opposition*Cycle</i> ²	-	-	-	-5.97 (3.88)	-
<i>Executive*Cycle</i> ³	-	-	-	-	7.68** (3.79)
<i>Opposition*Cycle</i> ³	-	-	-	-	-4.20 (2.80)
<i>N</i>	244	244	244	244	244
<i>Adj. R²</i>	.32	.32	.31	.32	.32

Note:
Standard errors in parentheses
* $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$

power exercises a negative, highly significant impact on performance differentials⁹ indicating that the smallest parties do best, the performance of medium-sized parties tends to remain stable, and large parties suffer the most.

It is also notable that, as hypothesized (H2), government parties appear to lose votes in EP elections even when controls for party strength are considered. *Ceteris paribus*, parties in government should expect to lose slightly over 1% of the vote in EP elections. As anticipated in hypothesis 3, however, it appears that size matters to the magnitude of such losses. Small parties in government on average suffer fewer desertions than their larger coalition partners. In fact, the coefficients estimated for the interactive terms *Executive*Size*³ and *Opposition*Size*³ are negative and highly significant.

We have established that small parties and opposition parties perform systematically better in EP elections. However, which groupings in particular stand to benefit the most from the desertions that strong parties and parties in government tend to suffer? As noted, a sizeable portion of the literature on party choice expects extreme parties to outperform more moderate lists. The results shown in Table 1 indicate that extreme parties of the left and the right do not make significant gains in EP elections. However, the coefficients expressing the impact of the dichotomous variable *Green* are positive and highly significant. Even more importantly, the size of the parameter estimates is indicative of the fact that green parties receive a substantial vote bonus in European elections (2–3%) independently of party strength. From these results, it appears that such gains may be attributed to ‘being green’, not simply to being small. Our conjecture is that green parties have a much wider appeal than parties whose ideology is linked with a fascist or communist past (or present). Whereas the gains made by radical left and right parties may be conditional upon the electorate’s inclination to express a strong protest vote (Oppenhuis et al., 1996), green parties may expect, in several member countries, to benefit simultaneously from sincere, strategic, and protest voting. Whatever the sources of such a large performance boost, though, these results are evidence of a ‘Green tide’ (Curtice, 1989) in the last three European elections.

Models 3 to 5 allow us to test for the existence of curvilinear patterns in the performance differentials of government and opposition parties. In these models, we evaluate whether government parties lose votes in EP elections as a linear, quadratic, or cubic function of the time spent in office through the use of interactive terms we calculate by multiplying the variables *Executive* and *Opposition* by the position of the electoral cycle (between 0 and 1) in which EP elections are held. Again, the findings are quite consistent with the expectations of the ‘second-order’ model.

In Model 4, the fact that the interactive term *Executive*Cycle*² is significant provides some evidence for the hypothesis predicting that the performance of government parties suffers the most when European elections are held near the midterm of the national electoral cycle and improves when such

elections are scheduled closer to 'first-order' legislative elections. Moreover, the statistical significance of the interactive term *Executive*Cycle*³ in Model 5 suggests that a cubic function may also appropriately describe the relationship between electoral cycle and the performance of parties in the executive. In essence, though, the quadratic and cubic functions yield similar conclusions. Consistent with Reif's (1984) reformulation of the second-order model, the losses suffered by government parties increase sharply between the beginning of their term and the midpoint of their tenure in office; then such losses bottom out and their performance progressively improves as EP elections are held closer to general elections.¹⁰

Does Europe matter in European elections? While the results shown in Table 1 are quite consistent with previous research and with the expectations of the 'second-order' model, the results we present in Table 2 provide an assessment of the effects that Europe-related factors exercise on party performance. The propositions we advanced with respect to the impact of European themes on party choice (H4 to H7) receive mixed support in our data. On the one hand, neither the salience placed by a particular party on the EU nor its stance on European integration (multiplied by salience) appear to have any effect on performance differentials. Propositions H4 to H6 are not supported in our analysis. However, it is important to note that this does not necessarily imply that positions on EU integration play no role in informing a voter's party choice (a question that only survey research is equipped to address). Rather, these findings simply suggest that, in the aggregate, no particular position on the EU appears systematically to increase a party's vote share relative to national legislative elections. Though the behavior of voters who care about European issues may determine some vote shifts from one party to another, the net changes do not seem to benefit any particular party: neither abhorring nor fully embracing the process of integration appears to boost party performance in European elections.

On the other hand, European themes appear to explain some of the variance in the weighted performance differentials. Results of partial *F*-tests that compare the basic restricted model presented in Table 1 (Model 1) with the unrestricted models including indicators of salience, position, and dissent (Table 2, Models 1 and 2) indicate that adding such variables significantly improves model fit (at the .01 level). More importantly, the statistical tests we performed provide robust and consistent support for the proposition expecting that a party's performance in European elections is affected by its level of internal fractionalization (H7). The variable *Dissent* has a negative, statistically significant impact on performance differentials in each of the models we estimated. In addition, its substantive effect is quite large, albeit somewhat problematic to interpret. As predicted, this effect is observable for both

Table 2 Party performance in EP elections: Does Europe matter? (OLS estimates)

	<i>Dependent variable: Weighted Performance Differential</i>			
	<i>Model 1</i>	<i>Model 2</i>	<i>Model 3</i>	<i>Model 4</i>
<i>Constant</i>	2.67 (1.74)	3.68*** (1.00)	1.72 (1.11)	3.82*** (1.04)
<i>Size</i>	0.01 (0.05)	0.02 (0.05)	-0.005 (0.05)	0.02 (0.05)
<i>Size</i> ³	-0.00009*** (0.00002)	-0.00008*** (0.00002)	-0.00008*** (0.00003)	-0.00009*** (0.00003)
<i>Executive</i>	-1.19** (0.58)	-1.12* (0.59)	-	-1.13** (0.59)
<i>Salience</i>	0.24 (0.48)	-	-	-
<i>Salience*Position</i>	-	-0.04 (0.06)	-0.04 (0.06)	-0.04 (0.06)
<i>Dissent</i>	-1.64*** (0.45)	-1.72*** (0.46)	-	-
<i>Executive*Dissent</i>	-	-	-2.21*** (0.48)	-
<i>Opposition*Dissent</i>	-	-	-1.36*** (0.48)	-
<i>HighContest*Dissent</i>	-	-	-	-1.72*** (0.46)
<i>LowContest*Dissent</i>	-	-	-	-1.88*** (0.54)
<i>Extreme Right</i>	-1.42 (1.01)	-1.93 (1.21)	-2.03 (1.20)	-1.93 (1.21)
<i>Extreme Left</i>	0.88 (0.83)	0.56 (0.97)	0.39 (0.97)	0.64 (0.99)
<i>Greens</i>	3.46*** (0.88)	3.27*** (0.90)	3.10*** (0.89)	3.37*** (0.91)
<i>N</i>	244	244	244	244
<i>Adj. R²</i>	.35	.35	.36	.35

Note:

Standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$

opposition and government parties (see Model 3 in Table 2), although it is somewhat more marked for the latter. More notably, parties that are internally divided on European integration do not suffer more conspicuous losses in countries where stark disagreements persist over how far integration

should proceed (see Model 4 in Table 2). Even in countries where consensus about the EU is widespread, intra-party fractionalization leads to electoral defeats in Europe-wide competitions. These findings suggest that Europe does to some extent matter in European elections.

Conclusions

What have we learned from this study of party performance in European elections? Clearly, the inferences that can be made about individual voting decisions from aggregate data are quite limited. Nonetheless, our analysis allows us to draw a number of conclusions identifying systematic winners and losers in European elections. Though it is problematic to distinguish the gains made thanks to sophisticated voting from those that result from expressive voting, our assessment of the empirical implications of the 'second-order' model confirmed that small parties do better in EP elections than their larger competitors. Green parties appear to be the primary, more consistent beneficiary of the desertions that strong parties tend to suffer. In addition, we disentangled the effects that size and participation in a national executive exert on party performance. Government parties lose votes independently of their strength, though the anti-government vote shifts we found are less than dramatic. Finally, through the employment of a dependent variable that differs from the measures used in every other analysis of party choice in European elections, we established that the timing of the election has some impact on the magnitude of the vote losses experienced by government parties.

Perhaps more importantly, this study is among the few to provide evidence for the proposition that European elections are, at least in part, about Europe. Political parties may run Euro-campaigns that utilize national policy issues to mobilize habitual supporters in order to demonstrate their strength in the national 'first-order' arena. In turn, voters may indeed largely tune out during such campaigns and then take advantage of the insignificance of European elections to vote sincerely or to express their anger through a protest vote. Nonetheless, as we have shown, parties experiencing deep Euro-divisions suffer substantial desertions in elections to the European Parliament, as voters behave in a way that is consistent with seeing through, and punishing, intra-party fractionalization. Future studies employing individual-level data will provide the opportunity to evaluate more directly and definitively the logic explaining defections from internally divided parties. For now, it is probably safe to affirm that Europe does matter, at least to the extent that ambivalence, ambiguity, and lack of cohesiveness on European

integration are sources of non-trivial vote losses in European elections. Voters may not reward any particular stance on the EU, nor the intensity with which such a position is asserted; however, their voting decisions systematically punish parties that have not got their act together on European issues.

Notes

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- 1 In 1999, the June Movement and the People's Movement garnered over 23% of the vote.
- 2 We include the 1995 Swedish election and the 1996 elections of Austrian and Finnish members of the EP.
- 3 This procedure allowed the EP to reject, by absolute majority, legislation approved by the Council of Ministers, which can override the veto only by unanimity.
- 4 National and European electoral data since 1991 were coded from the Political Data issues of the *European Journal of Political Research*. For the 1989 EP elections and for national elections held prior to 1991, we use data from van der Eijk and Franklin (1996) and Lodge (1990). Most parties participated in EP elections in the same form as they did in national elections. For those that did not, we adopted the following coding rules. If two or more parties competing in EP elections separately ran a single list in elections at $t - 1$ (or $t + 1$), we calculate their vote share at $t - 1$ (or $t + 1$) by dividing the aggregate vote share by the number of constituent parties. For parties that competed separately at $t - 1$ (or $t + 1$) but ran together in EP elections, we calculate their vote share at $t - 1$ (or $t + 1$) by summing the vote percentages received by each of the individual parties.
- 5 Suppose that a party receives 40% of the vote in an EP election ($p_{iEP} = 40$), 36% in the national elections held a year before ($p_{i(t-1)} = 36$), and 45% in the national elections held three years after the Europe-wide contest ($p_{i(t+1)} = 45$). In this case, $Cycle_{EP} = -12/48 = 0.25$. Therefore, $WPD = [(40 - 36) * (1 - 0.25)] + [(40 - 45) * (0.25)] = 1.75$. It is important to note that all of our results hold when we use the difference between a party's vote share in EP elections and the vote share it received in the national election held at $t - 1$ as our dependent variable.
- 6 The use of expert survey data raises an important practical question: to what extent do data generated through such surveys accurately reflect a party's position on a given issue, the importance it places on such issues, and its internal cohesiveness? Expert surveys do suffer from some disadvantages relative to other methods. Such disadvantages primarily derive from the use of less explicit coding procedures (see Laver and Garry, 2000: 621–2). Ray's (1999) and Marks and Steenbergen's (1999) data, however, have performed quite well when subjected to empirical tests that compare the validity of their estimates with those produced by other methods (see Marks et al., 2002: 589). Moreover, alternative data collection strategies, such as the coding of official

- party manifestos, make it impossible to estimate levels of intra-party divisions on issues such as European integration.
- 7 Marks and Steenbergen's (1999) data set provides measures of salience, position, and dissent estimated for 1999, 1996, 1992, and 1988. We use the 1999 data for the 1999 EP elections, the 1996 data for the 1994 elections, and the 1988 data for the 1989 elections. The mean of *Salience* is 3.13; the standard deviation is 0.58. The mean of *Position* is 1.08; the standard deviation is 1.77. The mean of *Dissent* is 1.85 and the standard deviation is 0.59.
 - 8 Tests for heteroskedasticity revealed that, predictably, the assumption of constant variance of the error term is violated in most of the models. We ran all of our tests with robust standard errors (for both Tables 1 and 2); the results do not differ from those presented here.
 - 9 Of course, we considered the possibility that large parties suffer in European elections from the lack of strategic voting, which may be traced back to more permissive electoral rules. If a country employs single-member plurality in national elections and proportional representation (PR) in European elections, we may expect large parties to lose votes in Europe-wide competition regardless of the nature of those elections. The electoral formulas used by EU member countries, however, are quite similar in legislative and European elections (the notable exceptions are Britain, which in 1999 employed PR in the European elections, and France, which uses PR in European elections). Moreover, though there are differences in mean district magnitudes (M), district magnitude in both national and European elections is generally above 5. As Cox (1997) suggests, strategic voting should dissipate when $M > 5$. Also, whereas in some countries the existence of a PR threshold (Italy) or much smaller district magnitudes (Spain) makes it harder for small parties to win seats in national elections, in others (Belgium and the Netherlands) smaller district magnitudes constrain the ability of small parties to win seats in EP elections, relative to national legislative seats. For these reasons, we do not expect the losses experienced by large parties in EP elections to be driven by the different incentives generated by the electoral rules (the results of the analysis do not change when we exclude French and, only for 1999, British parties).
 - 10 We can interpret the substantive implications of the quadratic and cubic models by plugging different values of the independent variables into the equations estimated in Models 4 and 5. In Model 4, for instance, when we consider the case of a government party that received 20% of the vote in the legislative election at $t - 1$, and plug into the equation different values of the variable *Cycle*, we obtain the following estimates. In EP elections held concurrently with national elections ($Cycle = 0$), the predicted value of the weighted performance differential is -0.06 . This value decreases to -0.98 when $Cycle = 0.1$, to -1.68 when $Cycle = 0.2$, to -2.38 when $Cycle = 0.4$, and to -2.39 when $Cycle = 0.5$. However, the weighted performance differential starts increasing after the midterm: to -2.16 when $Cycle = 0.6$, to -1.03 when $Cycle = 0.8$, and to -0.12 when $Cycle = 0.9$. When we consider the same party and estimate how the weighted performance differential changes by making use of the results shown in Model 5, we generate analogous predictions. The predicted value of the weighted performance differential equals -0.38 when $Cycle = 0$ and decreases thereafter to -0.97 when $Cycle = -0.1$, to -1.51

when $Cycle = 0.2$, to -2.29 when $Cycle^- = 0.4$, and to -2.42 when $Cycle = 0.5$. Again, the recovery begins after the midterm: the weighted performance differential increases to -2.32 when $Cycle^- = 0.6$, to -1.25 when $Cycle = 0.8$, and to -0.18 when $Cycle = 0.9$.

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