

Explaining Low Turnout in EP Elections: Voter's Perceptions of the European Parliament

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Abstract: This paper utilizes data from the 2009 European Election Study to investigate how perceptions of the European Parliament influence voting behavior in European elections. I argue that individuals who view the EP as weak within the EU infrastructure will be more likely to abstain from EP elections or subordinate EU issues to national concerns. Much of the earlier research on EP elections uses contextual variables to demonstrate that governing parties suffer losses in EP elections, particularly in the middle of the election cycle; this research concludes that voters do not understand or care about EU issues and act according to national concerns in EP elections (Reif and Schmitt 1980, Marsh 1998, Hix and Marsh 2007). More recent studies rely on survey data to demonstrate that concerns over both national and EU level preferences influence voting behavior in EP elections (Hobolt, et al 2008, Clark and Rohrschneider 2009). This paper seeks to explain the discrepancy between the macro and micro-level research by identifying the micro and macro-level conditions that might discourage voters from acting on EU preferences in EP elections.

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The conventional wisdom about elections to the European Parliament (EP) suggests that Europeans do not really care about the European Union. The turnout in these elections is low by European standards, and has steadily decreased since 1979. The media does not appear to devote much coverage to EP campaigns (de Vreese, et al 2006), and the campaigns largely focus on political issues and the performance of political parties at the national level (Richardson 2001). Several scholars thus argue that EP elections merely act as second-order contests, in which voters behave according to concerns about national-level economics or politics (Reif and Schmitt 1980, Reif 1984, Marsh 1998; Ferrara and Weishaupt 2004; van der Brug, et al 2007; Hix and Marsh 2007). However, more recent contributions find that individual-level preferences concerning both national and EU-level politics influence voting behavior in EP elections (Hobolt, et al 2008, Clark and Rohrschneider 2009). Moreover, the substantial public interest in recent referenda on EU questions makes clear that the public has an interest in European integration.

The body of research on EP elections leaves two questions to be answered. First, how do we reconcile the low turnout in EP elections and the macro-level trends indicating that national politics dominate EP elections with micro-level evidence that Europeans have an interest in EU politics? In other words, if EP voters hold preferences on EU issues, why do they appear to subordinate the EU to national-level politics in EU-level elections or choose not to participate at all? Second, what conditions prompt EP voters to act on their EU preferences in EP elections? Some EP voters appear to vote according to positions on the European Union – what distinguishes these individuals from the rest of the electorate? To account for a larger percentage of the public, I look at both voter abstentions and voting decisions – in this paper, ‘voting

behavior' thus encompasses the decision to vote (or to stay at home) and the decision on how to vote in EP elections.

To answer these questions, I distinguish between “issue-based” and “institution-induced” voting. Issue-based voting concerns the salience of the political issues emphasized within campaigns and elections. If the public does not care about the issues at stake within an election, then they are less likely to view the election as having any real consequences and less likely to vote. For institution-induced voters, the perceived importance of political institutions matters as much as the salience of political issues. If these individuals do not believe in the representativeness or efficacy of their institutions, then they are less likely to take the election seriously or to vote. Whereas issue salience influences voters under most circumstances, perceptions of institutions only matter when voters have reasons to doubt their representative bodies.

Applying this theory to EP elections, the issue-based voters who do not care about EU politics are more likely to abstain from EP elections or, given the emphasis on national issues within EP campaigns, to behave according to the expectations of the second-order model. However, given the evidence of public interest in European integration, it is clear that these issue-based voters are only a part of the EP electorate. I expect there are also institution-induced voters who do not perceive the European Parliament as a viable representative body and consequently abstain from EP elections or direct their vote at the national parties. Until the early 1990s, the European Parliament was a consultative body and could not influence the direction of EU decision-making. Over the last two decades, successive treaty revisions have expanded the decision-making authority of the Parliament, but it still lacks many of the powers traditionally bestowed upon national parliaments. Critics of EU democracy often call attention to the

Parliament's lack of power vis-à-vis the Commission and Council of Ministers (Schmitter 2000, Siedentop 2000, Mauer 2007). Given the conventional wisdom that the EP does matter within the EU decision-making process, many individuals may simply regard EP elections as trivial instruments for addressing EU concerns. Consequently, while EP voters may hold preferences on EU issues, they may still view EP elections as not worth their time or as more useful for addressing national concerns.

Under what conditions do perceptions of the EP influence voting behavior? I argue that voters who are knowledgeable about EU politics are more likely to be aware of the EP's growing influence within the EU and more likely to behave according to the perceived importance of EU issues. Institution-induced voting is more likely amongst less knowledgeable Europeans, who are prone to accept the view that the EP is inconsequential. I also expect institution-induced voting to be more prevalent in countries with empowered parliamentary bodies; individuals within these political systems are more likely to expect a parliamentary body to effectively influence decision-making and to thus be influenced by perceptions of the EP's strength. To investigate these possibilities, this paper relies on data from the 2009 European Election Study and Fish and Kroenig's (1999) Legislative Powers Survey.

Second-Order Elections Theory

The literature on EP elections largely assumes that EP voting behavior is issue-based. Reif and Schmitt (1980) argue that EP elections are second-order contests because the most important and visible policy areas are governed by national-level decision-makers, who retain their positions regardless of the results in European elections. As such, voters use EP elections to cast 'sincere' or 'strategic' votes. Some voters identify most closely with a smaller, niche party, but choose to support a larger, centrist party in national elections to avoid 'wasting a vote'.

Given that the results of EP elections do not influence the standing of political parties at the national level, the “sincere” voter feels free to defect from the larger party and support their first choice in EP elections. Rather than defecting for ideological reasons, the “strategic voter” uses EP elections to send a message of disapproval to the party they normally support in national elections. As a result, smaller, niche parties perform better in European elections, while large, centrist parties and governing parties tend to suffer far more losses in second-order elections than in national elections. A large body of subsequent research has confirmed Reif and Schmitt’s initial conclusions, suggesting that the perceived irrelevance of EU politics leads voters to behave differently at the national and European levels (Reif 1984, Anderson and Ward 1996, Marsh 1998, Carrubba and Timpone 2005, Schmitt 2005, Koepke and Ringe 2006, Hix and Marsh 2007, Marsh 2007).

Much of this research relies on macro-level data to demonstrate the second-order effect, primarily arguing that the timing of EP elections within the national election cycle influences the extent of a governing party’s losses at the European level (Reif and Schmitt 1980, Marsh 1998, Hix and Marsh 2007). More recent studies focus on micro-level explanations for EP voting behavior; using survey data to investigate the relative influence of national and EU-level preferences on EP voters’ decisions to defect from their party of choice in EP elections. This research largely does not dispute the primacy of national-based, “first-order” preferences in EP elections, but contends that “second-order” preferences at the EU level may also influence EP voting behavior. EP voters are more likely to defect from a governing party if they perceive themselves as more Eurosceptic than the governing parties (Hobolt, et al 2009) or if they negatively assess the performance of the governing parties at the EU level (Clark and Rohrschneider 2009).

There have been few efforts to examine whether perceptions of the European Parliament influence abstentions and vote switching in EP elections. Carrubba and Timpone (2005) provide some support for the theory of institution-induced voting, finding that voters who perceive the Parliament as more influential within the EU are less likely to vote for a Green Party in EP elections. Additionally, while there has not been any research into the potential effect of parliamentary strength, we have evidence that the national political environment shapes voters' perceptions of the EP. Weber (2007) argues that EP campaigns generally emphasize first-order issues and thus cue voters to act on first-order preferences, while Hobolt, et al (2009) conclude that voters are more likely to defect from governing parties when Eurosceptic rhetoric is more prominent within EP campaigns. However, there is a growing body of research that suggests attitudes toward the EU are filtered through experiences with national institutions.

National Institutions and EU Attitudes

Rohrschneider (2002) argues that there are both substantive and procedural dimensions to political representation. The substantive dimension consists of a regime's ability to deliver goods and services to the public. The procedural dimension concerns the opportunities for citizens to express their preferences and demands to their political institutions. "The procedural aspect is particularly important given that individuals rarely obtain everything they value: what counts, to a considerable degree, is the belief that institutions provide a fair articulation of one's interests" (464). Many individuals assess the representational quality of their political regime based on the openness of its administrative and arbitrating institutions; the performance of bureaucracies and judiciaries thus affects how well the public feels represented by their parliaments and governments (Rohrschneider 2005). Rohrschneider (2002) theorizes that similar patterns emerge within the EU's multi-level system of governance.

When citizens live in a country with high-quality institutions, the contrast in institutional quality between the two (national and European) levels in all likelihood increases the salience of the EU's representation deficit. This, in turn, should increase the odds that citizens actually evaluate the EU on the basis of its representation deficit rather than another feature, (such as) the common market (465).

Estimating a multi-level model with opinion surveys and institutional ratings, he demonstrates that the quality of national institutions mediates the impact of the perceived democracy deficit on support for the EU.

Applying insights from this research, I examine how institutional quality shapes voting behavior in EP elections. Thus far, this procedural-based research has only examined the relationship between experiences with national institutions and attitudes toward the EU's democracy deficit. To evaluate the relationship between national institutions and democratic behavior at the EU level, it is important to also investigate the potential effects of institutional quality on how the public actually uses mechanisms for democratic accountability at the EU level.

I also expand on this research by looking at national parliaments as filtering mechanisms, rather than national bureaucracies or judiciaries. It seems unlikely that EP voters would judge the European Parliament based on their experiences with administrative or arbitrating institutions – EP voters are not likely to expect the EP to act as a European-level bureaucracy or judiciary. Moreover, national parliaments offer an excellent barometer for evaluating the procedural quality of democratic regimes. Parliamentarians are the voters' delegates within the political system (Strom 2000, Maurer 2007), articulating the views and preferences of a range of different groups and interests (Polsby 1975). Parliaments serve as venues for bargaining and compromise between opposing views (Gerring and Thacker 2008), and may diminish the potential for societal conflicts (Rohrschneider 1999). In other words, parliaments offer an important point of access

for the public to provide input and feedback to their decision-makers. We might thus better assess the quality of national-level representation by focusing on national parliaments.

Perceptions of Parliamentary Power

There are a number of reasons that EP voters might not perceive the European Parliament as influential within the EU. The Parliament was largely a consultative body until the late 1980s, and has often been criticized for lacking the powers to ensure democratic accountability in the EU (Schmitter 2000, Siedentop 2000). Of course, it is no longer a side-note. In 1992, the Parliament gained the right to approve Commission proposals for new EU laws in a limited number of policy areas, and successive treaties have widened the scope of the Parliament's jurisdiction to include most EU policies. In that same period of time, it has exercised significant oversight powers over the European Commission, including powerful rebukes of the Santer Commission in 1999 and the Barossa Commission in 2004. However, it appears that the Parliament still acts as the junior partner to the Council of Ministers. It is excluded from EU decision-making in a few important and visible areas – such as taxation and international trade – and does not have a role within the open method of coordination over economic, employment, and social policy (Mauer 2007). Moreover, the Parliament has minimal input into the drafting of administrative law, and has not been given a place within the Council's system of committees that approve Commission proposals for new rules and policies (Mauer 2007). Given these limitations on the EP's power and the long-held view that the EP did not matter within the EU, the public may not regard the EP as capable of influencing EU politics.

Moreover, the Parliament has failed to present itself as the people's representative body at the EU level. EP campaigns focus on national politics, and offer minimal competition over EU issues (Franklin 2001). The conventional wisdom about the EP suggests that the different

political groups – factions of ideologically-similar national parties – often work together to maximize the Parliament’s influence vis-à-vis the Commission and Council, and thus tend to represent a single, pro-integration approach to the EU (Tsebelis 1994, Attina 1990). Mauer (2007) argues that, as the EP has gained a greater role in policy-making, Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) have had to devote more resources to learning about policy and less time to “mediating citizens’ or constituency concerns” (99). Indeed, in a 2006 survey, many MEPs indicate that constituency work falls low on their list of priorities (EPRG 2006). EP voters may thus doubt the extent to which the Parliament facilitates public input into EU decision-making.

Negative perceptions may be mediated by how much individuals actually know about the European Parliament. Prior research demonstrates that knowledge increases the salience of EU issues. Examining voting behavior in the 1994 Norwegian accession referendum, Hobolt (2007) demonstrates that greater levels of EU knowledge improved *voter competence* – more knowledgeable Norwegian voters are more likely to make choices based on preferences about the EU rather than support for a governing party. In a study of the 2009 EP elections, Hobolt and Wittrock (2010) similarly find that EP voters are more likely to vote according to EU preferences if they receive information about the EU positions of the competing parties. I expect that knowledge may also serve to decrease the likelihood of institution-induced voting in EP elections. Having paid closer attention to political developments in the EU, knowledgeable Europeans are more likely to be aware of recent gains in the European Parliament’s influence over EU decision-making.

I also theorize that institution-induced voting is more prevalent in countries with strong parliamentary traditions; individuals accustomed to such traditions are more likely to expect

parliaments to effectively influence decision-making and to check the power of the executive. In contrast, individuals from countries with weak parliamentary traditions may not be as focused on the strengths of parliamentary bodies and thus more likely to place greater emphasis on political issues.

In many European countries, executives have acquired much of the policy-making authority once delegated to parliaments (Laver & Shepsle 1996, Bergman, et al 2000). Parliaments, in turn, have increasingly assumed responsibility for checking the power of executives; parliamentarians are delegated with the tasks of monitoring and holding accountable national governments (Bagehot 1990, Lijphart 1992, Shugart and Carey 1992). However, parliamentary strength – the capability of parliaments to influence or sanction the government – varies across different European political systems (Auel and Benz 2007). Analyzing executive-legislative relations, Liphart (1999) suggests that the influence of national parliaments depends upon the fundamental structure of the government (parliamentary vs. presidential) and the political conditions influencing presidential power. Additionally, parliamentary power is often enhanced by legal instruments – ex ante and ex post controls for mandating and reviewing government actions (Andeweg 2007, 105). In assessing parliamentary strength, Fish and Kroenig (2009) thus consider whether parliamentary approval is required to declare war, ratify treaties, or appoint members of the judiciary and whether parliaments can summon, investigate, or compel testimony from executive officials.

The extent of parliamentary power should affect how the public conceptualizes the role of a parliament. Stronger parliaments are more likely to exert power and have an active role in decision-making, ensuring greater visibility in the public sphere. This type of political environment socializes voters to believe that parliaments should be able to effectively influence

decision-making and check the power of the executive. As weaker parliaments have a less prominent role in national politics, their constituents may not attribute the same importance to parliaments within the political process.

This variation in the strength of Europe's parliaments leads to national constituencies approaching EP elections with different paradigms. In countries with strong parliaments, there is both a greater likelihood that the public perceives the EP as weak and that these institutional perceptions influence whether they stay at home during EP elections or direct their vote at the national parties. In contrast, individuals accustomed to weaker parliaments – placing less emphasis on the importance of parliamentary bodies – do not likely hold clear opinions on the European Parliament and are more likely to abstain or vote based on the salience of national and EU political issues.

Summary: Why is that Europeans appear to hold preferences on EU political issues, but fail to genuinely participate in EP elections? Given the perceived weaknesses of the European Parliament, many Europeans do not believe they can effectively address EU issues through the EP. These individuals choose to abstain from EP elections or to focus on national political issues in their voting behavior. Negative perceptions of the EP are more likely to influence less knowledgeable Europeans and in countries with strong national parliaments. This argument leads to four testable hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Negative perceptions of the European Parliament prompt individuals to abstain from EP elections

Hypothesis 2: Negative perceptions of the European Parliament increase the likelihood that voters will use EP elections to punish governing parties for performance at the national level.

Hypotheses 3: Individuals with greater knowledge about EU politics are less likely to have negative perceptions of the European Parliament and less likely to base their vote choices on perceptions of the European Parliament

Hypothesis 4: Negative perceptions of the European Parliament have a greater effect on voting behavior is greater in countries with strong parliamentary traditions.

Data and Analysis

This paper primarily relies on survey data from the 2009 European Election Study (EES), a part of the project on "Providing an Infrastructure for Research on Electoral Democracy in the European Union" (PIREDEU), gathered during the late spring of 2009. I also use data from Eurobarometer 69.2, collected from March-May 2008. To measure the strength of national parliaments, I rely on the Parliamentary Powers Index, constructed by M. Steven Fish and Matthew Kroenig (1999).

Eurobarometer 69.2 includes a number of questions that allow us to illustrate the relative importance of national issues, EU issues, and perceptions of the EP. Respondents were first asked to indicate how likely it is that they will vote in the 2009 elections on a 1-10 scale, and then to identify the considerations that influence their intent to participate or to abstain from these elections. This survey also offers measures of trust in national and EU institutions and perceptions of the EP's importance within the European Union. Unfortunately, while respondents were asked how they voted in the 2004 EP elections and the last national elections, this data remains under embargo.

I measure participation in the 2009 elections with the EES question: "A lot of people abstained in the European Parliament elections of June 4, while others voted. Did you cast your vote?" There is a substantial discrepancy between reported and actual voting in EP elections. In 2008, over 65% of respondents in Eurobarometer 69.2 indicated there was a better than even chance that they would vote in the 2009 elections. The actual turnout, averaged across the EU-

27, was 43%¹. In the 2009 European Election Study, over 70% of respondents replied that they had voted in the elections. While the Eurobarometer and EES may have unintentionally over-sampled likely and actual EP voters, it seems more likely that these surveys have the same problem with voter over-reporting as found in other election studies (Granberg and Holmberg 1991, Karp and Brockington 2005). Fortunately, over-reporting does not appear to bias survey results toward any demographic (Traugott and Katosh 1979, Katosh and Traugott 1981, Hill and Hurley 1984, Silver, Anderson and Abramson 1986).

To measure vote choices across national and European elections, I use the standard four-part matrix (Carruba and Timpone 2005, Clark and Rohrschneider 2009) of EP defections, based on voters' recalled votes in the last national and EP elections: (1) voters support government parties in both elections; (2) support opposition parties in both elections; (3) move from government parties in national election to the opposition in EP elections; (4) defect from the opposition in national elections to government parties in EP elections. As with past EP elections, there are very few defections – roughly 89% consistently support the government or the opposition across elections. Amongst defectors, far more switch their vote from government parties to opposition parties – 11.5% compared with 3.38% who switch in favor of the government.

To examine how perceptions of the EP influence voting behavior, I use two questions from the EES. Respondents were asked to place themselves on a 5-point scale ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree” with the following statements: “The European Parliament takes into consideration the concerns of European citizens” and “It is very important for you which particular political party gained the most seats in the European Parliament elections”. To

¹ As reported by the EP at http://www.europarl.europa.eu/parliament/archive/elections2009/en/turnout_en.html

demonstrate support for the first two hypotheses, we should find that negative perceptions of the EP lead to abstentions or vote-switching in EP elections. I measure political knowledge by using a series of true/false factual questions included in the EES survey.

I construct two unique measures of the importance of national and EU politics. First, I measure the distance each respondent perceives between themselves and the party they supported in the last national election on national and EU issues, using questions that ask respondents to place themselves and their country's parties on 10-point left/right and pro/anti-European integration scales. If the EU matters to voters, then perceived distance on the EU scale should correspond with defections in EP elections. I also use two questions that evaluate the performance at the national and EU levels: "Do you approve or disapprove of the government's record to date?" and "How much confidence do you have that decisions made by the European Union will be in the interest of (your country)?" The second-order literature suggests that evaluations of the government's performance primarily influence EP voting behavior, while recent studies suggest that such evaluations are based on both national and EU issues. Again, if EU issues matters to voters, then declining confidence in EU decision-making should prompt defections from government parties (as each country's representatives at the EU level, I presume that voters hold government parties more responsible for EU decision-making).

Finally, I use the Parliamentary Powers Index to investigate how national parliaments condition expectations for the EP. The PPI contains 32 measures of parliamentary power under four groupings: influence over the executive; institutional autonomy; specified powers; and institutional capacity. To construct this index, Fish and Kroenig (1999) primarily rely on the Legislative Powers Survey – a survey of country experts on the powers of national legislatures. At least five experts on each country were asked to indicate whether their country's parliament

possesses each of the 32 powers. The principle investigators also studied national constitutions and secondary sources to check the survey results. The PPI scores range from 0 to 1. To estimate the score for each country, they divided the total number of affirmative answers by the total number of survey items. A legislature holding 24 of the 32 powers received a score of .75. If national legislatures influence EP voting behavior, then individuals from countries with higher PPI scores should be more likely to abstain from voting in EP elections and less likely to vote according to EU issues.

Participation in EP elections

Eurobarometer 69.2 examines a number of potential explanations for the low voter turnout in EP elections. Figure 1 summarizes the reasons why abstainers choose not to vote in the EP elections. There are very few Europeans who abstain because they are opposed to European integration, and around 40% indicate they do not have an interest in EU affairs. While only about a third of abstainers indicate that the EP lacks influence within EU decision-making, well over half agree that the EP does not deal with problems that matter to them and that Members of the EP do not represent their views. The most frequent response was that respondents do not have sufficient information about the Parliament's role, suggesting that knowledge indeed mediates perceptions of the EP and voting behavior. Indeed, the respondents who indicate they know enough about the EP's role express a greater interest in EU affairs and are far less likely to agree that the EP lacks power or is not representative.

The EES provides additional support for these conclusions. Figure 2 illustrates the considerations that influenced participation in the 2009 elections. Reported voters express relatively equal levels of approval/disapproval of the government and confidence/no confidence in EU decision-making. However, a substantially higher percentage of voters believe that it

matters which party wins EP elections than those who do not. Reported abstainers are more likely to disapprove of their national government, but even more likely to indicate a lack of faith in the EU and in EP elections. Of course, it is possible that most Europeans do not distinguish between the EU and the European Parliament. Checking perceptions of the EP against assessments of the EU, I do not find any significant relationship (EP representation=.33, EP important=.16).

I next conduct a logit analysis of the likelihood of EES respondents abstaining from EP elections, depicted in Table 1. In general, it appears that younger, less-educated respondents from lower socio-economic cohorts are more likely to abstain from EP elections. Confirming the earlier second order research, I find that disapproval of the national government and lack of confidence in EU decision-making increases the likelihood of abstaining from the EP elections. However, it also appears that views of the EP influence participation; the less someone perceives the EP as representative, the more likely they will abstain.

Eurobarometer 69.2 provides even stronger evidence that negative perceptions of the EP lead to lower participation in EP elections. Table 2 presents the results of an ordinary least squares analysis of the likelihood of voting in EP elections. Trust in national governments or views on the direction of national-level affairs do not appear to influence voter turnout at the EU level. The best predictors of participation are an individual's trust in the European Parliament and views of the EP's importance, offering strong support for our first hypothesis. Additionally, trust in national parliaments does have a significant effect on participation, suggesting that parliamentary strength at the national level may mediate the public's expectations from the EP.

Vote switching in EP elections

To investigate vote switching, I perform a multinomial logit analysis on the four-part matrix of voting behavior across national and EP elections, using individuals who vote for government parties in both elections as the reference category. Table 3 summarizes the results. The perception of ideological differences on the left-right or EU dimensions does not appear to influence voters who supported an opposition party in both national and European elections. The measures of government approval and confidence in EU decision-making are highly significant, supporting the hypothesis that both national and EU concerns motivate EP voting behavior. The measure of the EP's representational quality achieves significance, suggesting that those who do not view the EP as representative are more likely to support an opposition party across elections. However, perceptions of the EP's importance appear to have the opposite effect – the more that individuals perceive EP elections as important, the less likely they will defect from an opposition party.

As second-order arguments often focus on explaining defections from government parties, I expect this category to provide strong evidence for the argument that the EU does not matter to EP voters – instead I find the reverse. Both the left-right and EU ideological measures are statistically significant. The more that government supporters perceive themselves as diverging from their party on left-right and EU issues, the greater the likelihood they will defect to an opposition party in EP elections. Moreover, the government approval and EU confidence variables achieve statistical significance, indicating that government parties suffer greater losses in EP elections when their supporters lose confidence in both national and EU-level decision-making. This is far stronger evidence that the EU influences EP voting than found in previous

analyses of the 1999 and 2004 European Election Studies (Clark and Rohrschneider 2009), suggesting that the EU may be assuming a greater role in EP elections in later EP elections.

Turning to the EP variables, the measure representational quality does not achieve statistical significance. However, perceptions of the EP's importance appear to influence the likelihood of defections – the more government supporters agree that EP elections are inconsequential, the more likely they defect to an opposition party in EP elections. The measure of EP importance is weakly correlated with approval of the national government and confidence in EU decision-making, suggesting that respondents do not base their evaluations of the EP's importance on national parties or the larger EU decision-making process.

The fewest number of respondents fall under the category of voters defecting from an opposition party to a government party in EP elections. For this category, left-right distance, government approval, and EU distance are the only significant variables, indicating that national politics exerts more influence over EP voting behavior than EU politics. However, our measures of EP perceptions achieve statistical significance when I run a multinomial logit with opposition supporters in both elections as the baseline. In other words, the more opposition supporters perceive the EP as insignificant, the more likely they defect to a government party in EP elections.

To better illustrate these effects, I graph the predicted probabilities of defecting for each of the national, EU and EP variables. Figures 3 and 4 depict the influence of government approval and confidence in EU decision-making on voting behavior. As we would expect, individuals who disapprove of the national government are much more likely to vote for opposition parties in both sets of elections. However, government approval does not appear to have a substantial effect on the likelihood of defecting from a government party in EP elections.

In contrast, as individuals lose confidence in EU decision-making, they are far more likely to vote for an opposition party in both sets of elections or to defect from a government party in EP elections.

Figures 5 and 6 demonstrate the impact of perceptions of the European Parliament on vote choices across national and EU elections. Perceptions of the EP's representational quality appear to have a trivial effect on voting behavior. Doubts about how much the EP represents the public interest benefit opposition parties in both national and EU elections, but do not appear to prompt defections in EP elections. However, doubts about the importance of EP elections are noticeably more likely to vote for an opposition party in both elections or to defect from government parties in EP elections.

To further test the second hypothesis, I estimate the probability of a middle-class, 53-year old male with 20 years of education and some knowledge about the EU defecting from a government party in EP elections given negative perceptions of the EP and disapproval of the national government. If negative perceptions of the Parliament lead individuals to act on national political concerns in EP elections, then we should find a much higher predicted probability for government approval (and lower predicted probability for EU confidence) when voters do not perceive EP elections as important. The results, displayed in Table 4, indicate that government approval indeed has a larger effect on the likelihood of government defections when voters do not perceive EP elections as important. However, perceptions of the EP have an even greater effect on the influence of the EU confidence variable. Negative perceptions of the EP increase the likelihood of government defections, regardless of an individual's views of their national government or EU decision-making.

Micro and Macro-Level Intermediaries

Knowledge about the EU appears to have a significant effect on perceptions of the European Parliament. Nearly 63% of EES respondents who answer correctly all four of the knowledge measures agree that EP elections are important. In contrast, over 45% of those who failed to correctly answer any of these questions affirm the importance of EP elections. Similarly, those with greater knowledge are more likely to agree that the EP represents the public interest. However, I note that respondents with lower EU knowledge are less likely to answer the questions about the EP's importance and representational quality.

EU knowledge also has a clear effect on participation in the EP elections. Looking back at Table 1, lower levels of EU knowledge increase the likelihood that EES respondents report abstaining from the 2009 elections. However, contrary to our expectations, it appears that knowledgeable EP voters are more likely to be influenced by negative perceptions of the EP. Table 5 estimates the effect of EU knowledge on the predicted probabilities of government defections due to government approval, EU confidence, and EP perceptions. In general, knowledgeable EP voters are more likely to defect from a government party. Additionally, whereas a lack of confidence in EU decision-making and negative perceptions of the EP have a greater effect on knowledgeable EP voters than those with no EU knowledge, government disapproval has the same effect regardless of a respondent's level of EU knowledge. While more knowledgeable Europeans are more likely to participate in EP elections, they are also more likely to be swayed by perceptions that EP elections do not matter.

To explore the influence of national parliaments, I first compare subjective perceptions of national parliaments and the European Parliament. The European Election Study asks respondents to evaluate the representational quality and importance of both the European

Parliament and their national parliament. The public's evaluations of the European Parliament compare surprisingly well with assessments of national parliaments. A greater percentage of EES respondents find the EP to be more representative of the public interest than their national parliament; roughly 33% indicate the EP is more representative, 25% regard their national parliament as more representative, and 42% rate the two as equal. However, while more Europeans agree that the EP better represents the public, a larger proportion believe that national parliamentary elections matter more than EP elections – 29% favoring national elections and 13% favoring EP elections. These individuals may view EP elections as inconsequential due to their experiences with national parliaments.

To better test that possibility, I utilize the Parliamentary Powers Index (PPI). The PPI includes all EU countries except Luxembourg and Malta. The mean PPI score for these 25 countries is .73, with Cyprus (.41) and France (.56) receiving the two lowest scores on the PPI and Germany (.84) and Italy (.84) receiving the two highest scores. To illustrate, the .41 score indicates that the national parliament only holds 13 of the 32 potential powers/resources on the PPI. To test the fourth hypothesis, I estimate a multi-level mixed-effects logit model that incorporates the PPI scores along with interaction terms for the PPI and perceptions of the European Parliament. Table 5 depicts the results of this regression.

Most of the measures in this analysis reflect the same results as our earlier analysis of EES voter participation. Younger, less-educated members of lower socio-economic classes with less knowledge about the EU are more likely to abstain in EP elections. Additionally, as individuals lose confidence in EU decision-making, they are less likely to vote in the EP elections. However, as opposed to the earlier analysis, the measure of government approval is not statistically significant. Instead, the two interaction terms – representing the interaction of

national parliamentary strength with perceptions of the EP – are both significant. This finding suggests that individuals who are accustomed to more powerful parliaments and who perceive the EP as weak are more likely to abstain from EP elections. Of course, given that the PPI measure does not achieve significance, these findings may simply reflect the influence of EP perceptions.

Conclusions

Reif and Schmitt (1980) first noted that government parties lose a disproportionately large number of seats in EP elections, and that EP elections suffer from dramatically lower turnout than national elections. These trends are as true today as during the first EP elections. However, it is not clear that the public's lack of interest in EP elections is due to apathy toward the EU. Over the last two decades, the EU's jurisdiction has expanded to include a number of policy areas that have a clear and visible impact on the European public. In 2005, the intense debate over the proposed European Constitution and the pace of European integration led to substantially higher levels of participation in national referenda over the Constitution. Indeed, it appears that concerns over EU politics have motivated voters in more recent EP elections (Hobolt, et al 2009, Clark and Rohrschneider 2009), and this paper finds evidence that the EU had an even greater impact on voting behavior in the 2009 EP elections.

I argue that EP elections fail to generate greater public interest due to the perceived irrelevance of the European Parliament rather than public apathy toward the EU. The European Parliament was long marginalized within the EU decision-making process. Even though it has assumed a greater role in recent years, the EP lacks the power of legislative initiative – a role many still ascribe to legislative bodies – and has not secured influence over some of the more important EU policy areas. Given the long-standing and continuing critiques of the European

Parliament, the public may not view EP elections as a practical instrument for addressing EU politics. Our analysis lends some support to this argument. Negative perceptions of EP elections prompt individuals to abstain from EP elections, and increase the likelihood of defections from government parties in EP elections.

An individual's knowledge about the EU influences both their perceptions of the EP and the likelihood they will vote in EP elections. However, the effect on actual voting behavior is unclear. I argue that knowledgeable Europeans are more likely to be aware of the EP's actual influence and thus less likely to be swayed by perceptions of the EP – to the extent that these individuals defect from government or opposition parties, it would be due to concerns over EU-level politics. The most knowledgeable Europeans are not only more likely to defect from the party they supported in the last national or European election, but also to be influenced by negative perceptions of the EP.

Earlier research finds that the performance of administrative institutions mediate support for both national governments (Rohrschneider 2005) and the EU (Rohrschneider 2002). This paper begins to extend that research to explore how contextual variables influence actual behavior. The measure of parliamentary strength has a stronger relationship with perceptions of EP importance than the EP's representational quality, but that may be due to the PPI's emphasis on the capability of parliaments to influence decision-making. While I intend to investigate the substantive effects of national parliamentary strength on voting behavior in future iterations of this paper, this analysis provides preliminary evidence that experiences with political institutions at the national level indeed condition political behavior at the European level.

Appendix A: Construction of Measures

2009 European Election Study

Dependent Variables:

Participation in EP elections: I coded respondents who reported voting in the last EP elections as (1). I coded respondents who reported that they did not vote in the last EP elections as (0).

Government Support across National/EP elections: I coded respondents as (1) voted for a party in a governing coalition in both the last EP election and the last national election, (2) voted for a party not in a governing coalition in both the last EP election and the last national election, (3) voted for a party in a governing coalition in the last national election and a party not in a governing coalition in the last EP election and (4) voted for a party not in a governing coalition in the last national election and a party in a governing coalition in the last EP election.

Independent Variables:

Left-Right Distance: EES respondents were asked to place themselves and each of the largest political parties in their country on a 0-10 scale of left-right ideology, with 0 as the most left and 10 as the most rights. For each respondent, I subtracted the left-right score for the party they voted for in the last national election from their own left-right score and took the absolute value of the resulting number. The resulting variable ranges from (0) no ideological distance between the respondent and the party they supported in the last national election to (10) the widest ideological distance.

EU Distance: EES respondents were asked to place themselves and each of the largest political parties in their country on a 0-10 scale of support for European integration, with 0 representing the belief that “unification has already gone too far” and 10 that “unification should be pushed further”. For each respondent, I subtracted the EU score for the party they voted for in the last

national election from their own EU score and took the absolute value of the resulting number.

The resulting variable ranges from (0) no ideological distance between the respondent and the party they supported in the last national election to (10) the widest ideological distance.

Government Approval: “Let us now come back to Britain. Do you (0) approve or (1) disapprove of the government’s record to date?”.

Confidence in EU Decision-Making: “How much confidence do you have that decisions made by the European Union will be in the interest of <your country>?: (1) a great deal of confidence, (2) a fair amount, (4) not very much or (5) no confidence at all” I included the small number of don’t know responses as a (3) middle category.

EP Representational Quality: “The European Parliament takes into consideration the concerns of European citizens: (1) strongly agree, (2) agree, (4) neither agree nor disagree, (4) disagree, or (5) strongly disagree”.

EP Importance: “It is very important for you which particular political party gained the most seats in the European Parliament elections: (1) strongly agree, (2) agree, (4) neither agree nor disagree, (4) disagree, or (5) strongly disagree”.

Knowledge of the EU: Each respondent was asked to answer four true/false questions about the history and institutions of the EU. I added the number correct responses for each respondent, resulting in a range from (0) no correct answers to (4) correctly answered all four questions.

Age: “What year were you born?” I subtracted each respondent’s answer from 2009 to estimate actual age.

Education: “How old were you when you stopped full-time education?” I substituted respondent’s age for those who replied “still studying”.

Sex: (0) female, (1) male.

Socio-Economic Class: “If you were asked to choose one of these five names for your social class, which would you say you belong to: (1) the working class, (2) the lower middle class, (3) the middle class, (4) the upper middle class, or (5) the upper class?” I grouped “other”, “don’t know” and refusals into an (6) other category.

Parliamentary Powers Index: The PPI scores each national parliament as “yes” or “no” on 32 different measures of the legislature’s influence over the executive, institutional autonomy, specified powers, and institutional capacity.

Eurobarometer 69.2

Dependent Variable:

Likely vote in EP elections: “Can you tell me on a scale of 1 to 10 how likely it is that you would vote in the next Europeans elections in June 2009?” “1” indicates that respondents plan to definitely not vote and “10” indicates that respondents plan to definitely vote. I coded “don’t know” responses as “5”.

Independent Variables:

EU Membership Bad: “Generally speaking, do you think that (OUR COUNTRY)'s membership of the European Union is...?” I coded answers as a good thing (1), neither good nor bad (2), or a bad thing (3). I coded don’t know responses as 2.

Country and EU Direction: Respondents were asked “at the present time, would you say that, in general, things are going in the right direction or in the wrong direction, in...?” for both their country and the EU. I coded answers as the right direction (1), neither the right nor the wrong direction (2), or the wrong direction (3). I coded don’t know responses as 2.

Trust in European Parliament and National Political Bodies: Respondents were asked “please tell me if you tend to trust it or tend not to trust it?” for their national government, their national

parliament, and the European Parliament. I coded answers as tend to trust (1), don't know (2), or tend not to trust (3).

Importance of European Parliament: Respondents were asked if the European Parliament “plays an important role or not in the life of the European Union?” I coded answers as important (1), don't know (2), or not important (3).

Education: “How old were you when you stopped full-time education?” I substituted respondent's age for those who replied “still studying”.

Age: “How old are you?”.

Sex: (1) male, (2) female

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Table 1: Predicting Abstentions in EP Elections – EES Analysis

Decision to Vote	Abstain (1) Vote (0)
Government Approval	.15** (.03)
Confidence in EU Decision-Making	.16** (.01)
EP Representational Quality	.06** (.01)
EP Importance	.45** (.01)
Knowledge of EU	-.21** (.01)
Education	-.03** (.003)
Sex	-.04 (.03)
Age	-.02** (.001)
Socio-Economic Class	-.11** (.01)

Note: Entries are coefficients from a logit analysis.

Source: 26,423 observations from the 2009 European Election Survey. * and ** denotes significance at the .05 and .01 level.

Table 2: Predicting Abstentions in EP Elections – Eurobarometer 69.2 Analysis

Decision to Vote	Likelihood of Voting
EU membership bad	-.78** (.03)
Country moving in wrong direction	-.01 (.03)
EU moving in wrong direction	-.07* (.03)
Tend not to trust national parliament	-.31** (.03)
Tend not to trust national government	-.01 (.03)
Tend not to trust European Parliament	-.37** (.03)
European Parliament not important in EU decision-making	-.49** (.03)
Education	.01** (.002)
Age	.02** (.001)
Sex	-.08* (.04)

Note: Entries are coefficients from an OLS analysis.

Source: 26,527 observations from Eurobarometer 69.2. * and ** denotes significance at the .05 and .01 level.

Table 3: Predicting Voting Behavior across National/EP Elections

Electoral Choices:	National – Vote Opp European – Vote Opp	National – Vote Gov European – Vote Opp	National – Vote Opp European – Vote Gov
Left-Right Distance	.02 (.01)	.14** (.02)	.13** (.03)
Government Approval	2.27** (.05)	1.28** (.07)	.68** (.13)
EU Distance	.008 (.01)	.04* (.01)	.05* (.02)
Confidence in EU Decision-Making	.10** (.02)	.21** (.03)	.08 (.05)
EP Representational Quality	.08** (.03)	-.01 (.04)	-.07 (.06)
EP Importance	-.06* (.02)	.13** (.03)	.08 (.05)
Knowledge of EU	.02 (.02)	.04 (.03)	.04 (.05)
Education	.01** (.004)	.01 (.01)	.02** (.008)
Sex	.07 (.05)	-.02 (.07)	-.12 (.12)
Age	-.008** (.002)	-.01** (.002)	-.01** (.004)
Socio-Economic Class	-.10** (.02)	-.02 (.03)	-.04 (.06)

Note: Entries are coefficients from a multi-nominal logit analysis. Government supporters in both elections are the reference category.

Source: 9,854 observations from the 2009 European Election Survey. * and ** denotes significance at the .05 and .01 level.

Table 4: Predicted Probabilities of Government Defections in EP Elections

Baseline Probability of Government Defection: .115			
	EP Importance Strongly Agree (1)	Strongly Disagree (5)	<i>Difference</i>
Government Approval			
Approve (0)	0.086	0.157	0.071
Disapprove (1)	0.097	0.185	0.088
<i>Difference</i>	0.011	0.028	
Confidence in EU			
High Confidence (1)	0.072	0.128	0.056
Low Confidence (5)	0.114	0.203	0.089
<i>Difference</i>	0.042	0.075	

Table 5: Predicted Probabilities of Government Defections in EP Elections at Different Levels of EU Knowledge

Baseline Probability of Government Defection: .115			
	EU Knowledge None (0)	High (4)	<i>Difference</i>
EP Importance			
Strongly Agree (1)	0.084	0.098	0.014
Strongly Disagree (5)	0.159	0.182	0.023
<i>Difference</i>	0.075	0.084	
Government Approval			
Approve (0)	0.097	0.114	0.017
Disapprove (1)	0.112	0.129	0.017
<i>Difference</i>	0.015	0.015	
Confidence in EU			
High Confidence (1)	0.079	0.091	0.012
Low Confidence (5)	0.133	0.153	0.02
<i>Difference</i>	0.054	0.062	

Table 6: Predicting Abstentions in EP Elections with Parliamentary Powers Index

Decision to Vote	Abstain (1) Vote (0)
Government Approval	.05 (.04)
Confidence in EU Decision-Making	.19** (.02)
Knowledge of EU	-.21** (.01)
Education	-.02** (.003)
Sex	-.04 (.03)
Age	-.03** (.01)
Socio-Economic Class	-.11** (.01)
Influence of National Parliament (PPI)	-1.23 (1.61)
Interaction of PPI score with Perceptions of EP Importance	.61** (.02)
Interaction of PPI score with Perceptions of EP Representational Quality	.05* (.02)

Note: Entries are coefficients from a multi-level mixed-effects logit analysis.

Source: 23,504 observations from the 2009 European Election Survey. Country weight was used. * and ** denotes significance at the .05 and .01 level.

Figure 1: Considerations shaping likely vote in 2009 EP elections

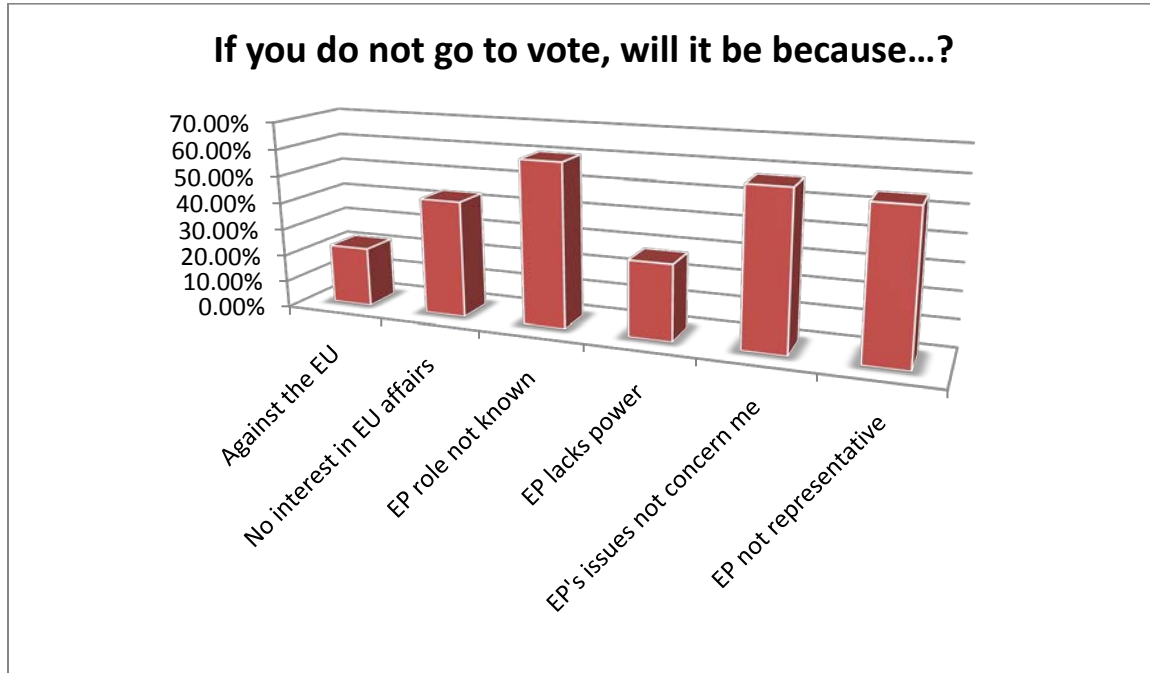


Figure 2: Considerations shaping reported participation in 2009 EP elections

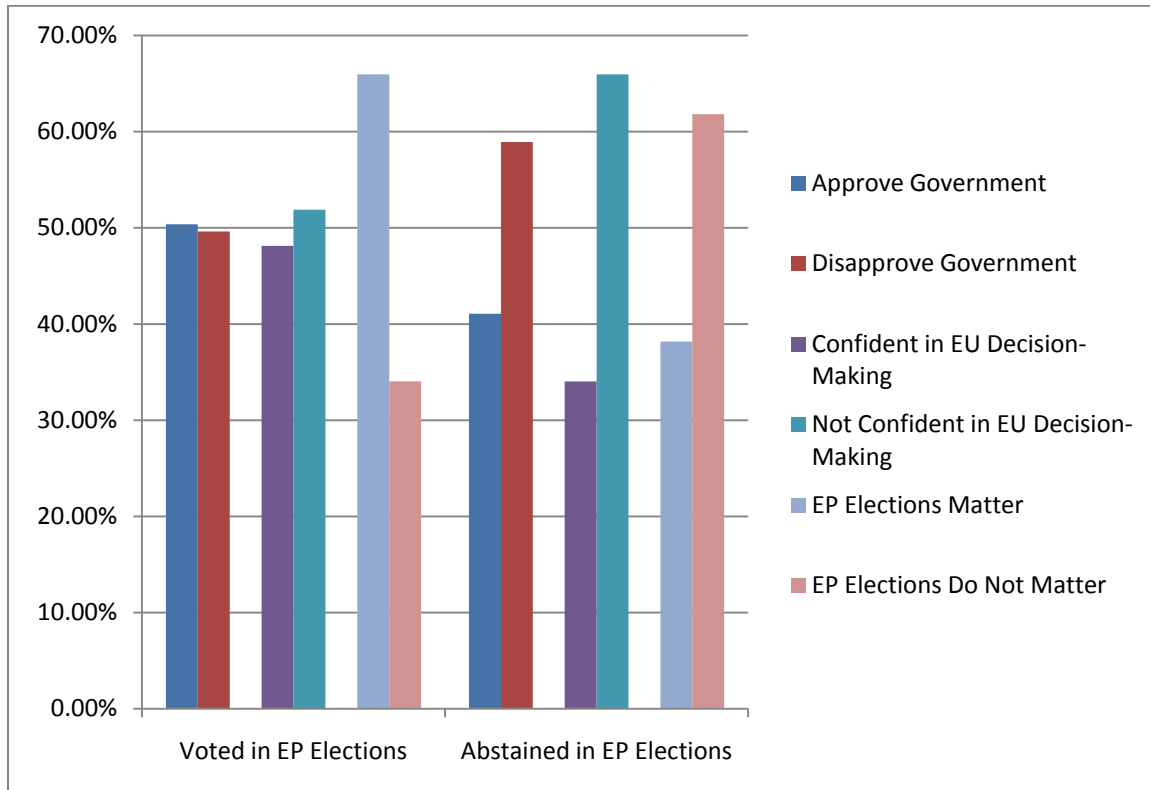


Figure 3: Government Approval

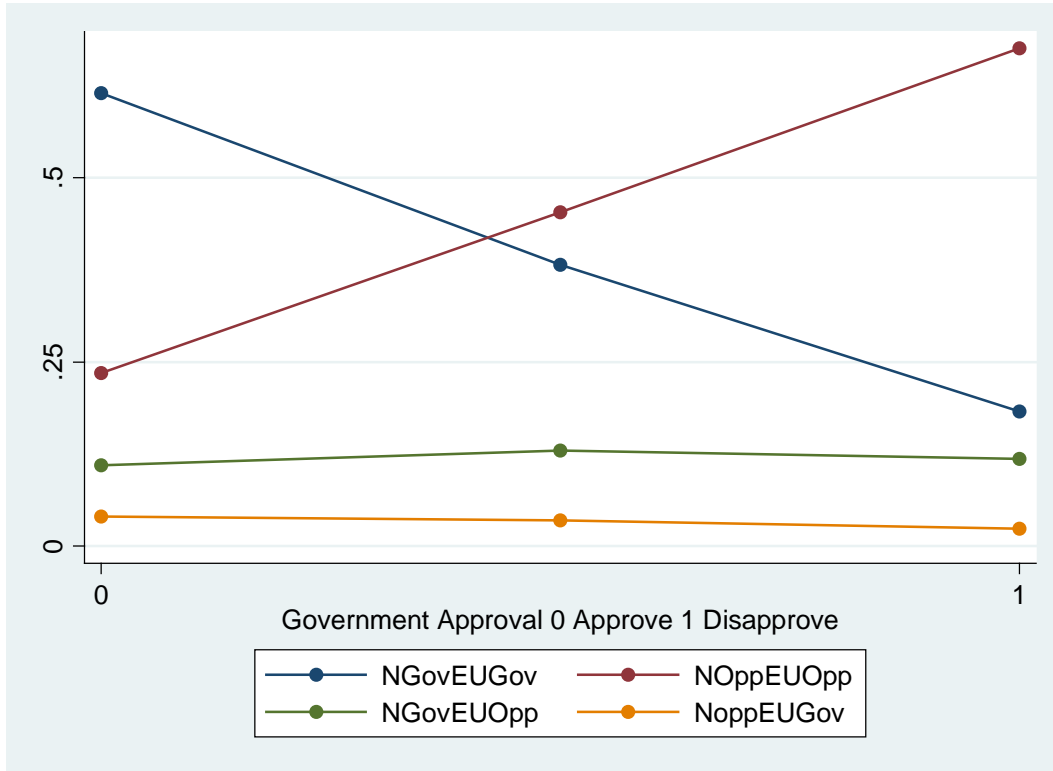


Figure 4: Confidence in EU Decision-Making

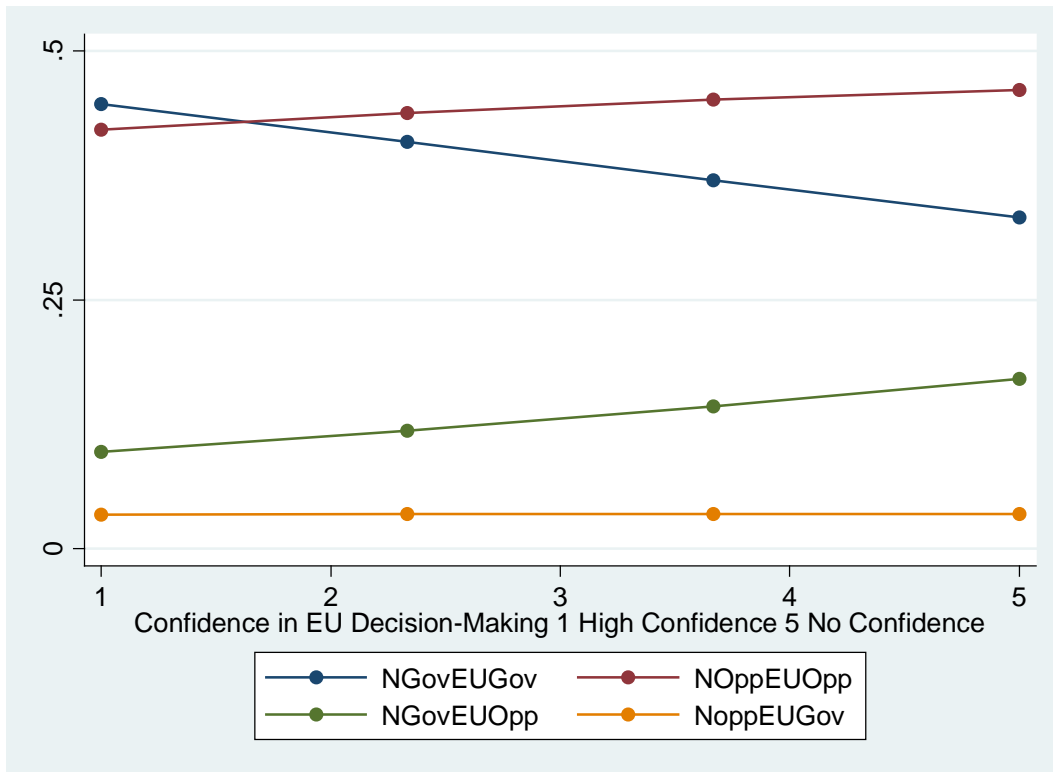


Figure 5: Perceptions of Quality of EP Representation

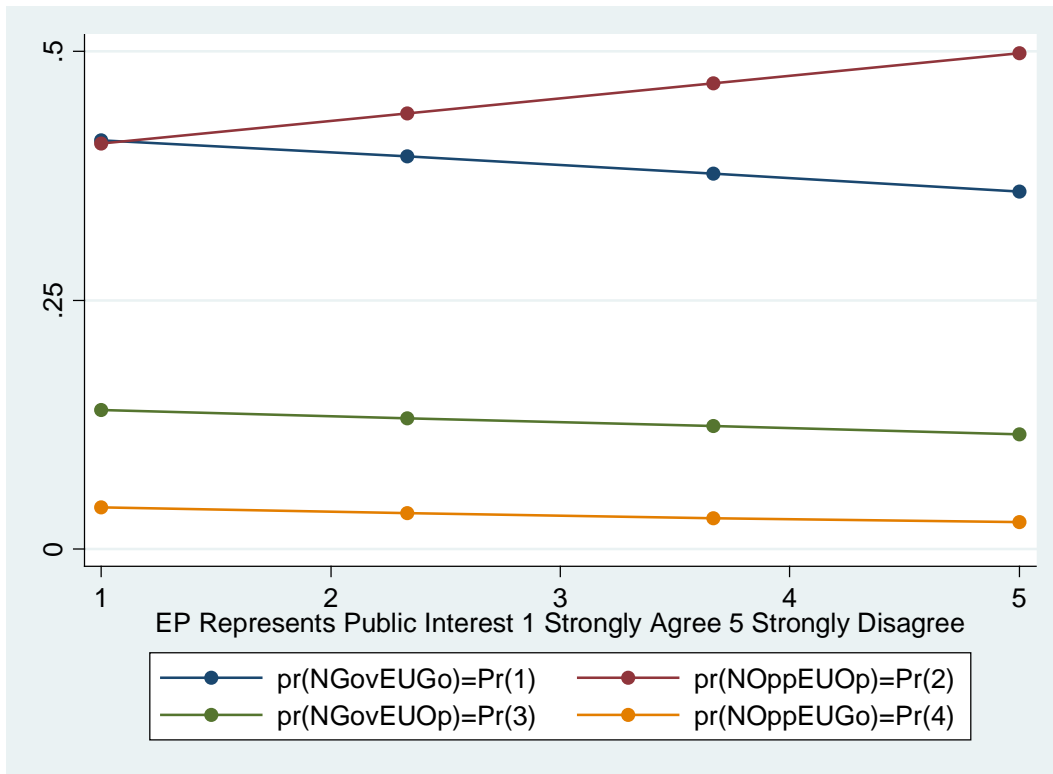


Figure 6: Perceptions of Importance of EP Elections

