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### Introduction to the special issue

*No longer second-order? Explaining the European Parliament elections of 2019*

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# Introduction to the special issue: No longer second-order? Explaining the European Parliament elections of 2019

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## Abstract

The dominant perspective of European Parliament (EP) elections is that these are second-order national elections where little is at stake. This Special Issue asks whether this perspective is still valid in view of increased politicisation of European integration and in view of the higher turnout levels at the last EP elections. This introduction provides a general framework for the Special Issue and reflects upon some of its main findings. We argue that EP elections can only be considered first-order if they are primarily about the policies, rather than the polity. Some of the contributions in this Special Issue suggest that this is indeed the case. We reflect upon this and argue that there are reasons to expect that EP elections will become first-order elections in the future.

## Keywords

campaigns, elections, European Union, parties, political behaviour

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Up until the European Parliament (EP) elections of 2014, the dominant perspective among political scientists has been that EP elections are second-order national elections in which not much is at stake (e.g. Reif and Schmitt, 1980; Schmitt and Toygür, 2016; Thomassen, 2009; van der Brug and van der Eijk, 2007; van der Brug and de Vreese, 2016; van der Brug et al., 2016; van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996). Hitherto many scholars have argued that the complex multi-level governance structure of the European Union (EU) makes it unlikely that these elections can function in the same way as (first-order) national elections. First of all, there has been no clear connection between the outcome of EP elections and the composition of the prime executive agent at the EU-level, the

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European Commission. The *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure sought to partially address this problem with pan-European lead candidates standing for election of the Commission President. However, that procedure did not really change the second-order nature of EP elections in 2014 (Gattermann et al., 2016). Second, despite the co-decision powers of the EP, many important EU-decisions are ultimately taken by a majority vote of the heads of state in the European Council, who are in turn accountable to the *national* parliaments. Third, election campaigns for the EP receive little visibility in the media compared to national elections. Because of the second-order nature of these elections, voter turnout is expected to be low. Those who do participate in EP elections, would use their vote mostly as a signal to national parties – either by simply voting for the same party they normally support in national elections or, if voters were dissatisfied with the performance of a mainstream party, by supporting a radical party in the perceived absence of immediate consequences for domestic politics. As a result of this, European elections, albeit unintentionally, have long provided a platform for those who want to challenge the EU itself as well as some of its foundational principles such as support for liberal democracy and human rights.

However, the outcome of the 2019 EP elections was in many ways different than we would expect based on the second-order model. Following the election of lead candidate Jean-Claude Juncker as Commission President in 2014, the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure was employed again in the campaigns (albeit abandoned after the elections); turnout was much higher than it had been in 2014, namely, 50.66% compared to 42.61%<sup>1</sup>; and, even though some populist parties increased their vote share compared to 2014 (most notably Lega in Italy, Vox in Spain, Alternative for Germany and the Sweden Democrats), many of these parties did less well than they were doing in the polls a year before these elections (as in the case of the National Rally National Rally in France and the Dutch Freedom Party), or lost support (most notably the Danish People's Party and the Austrian Freedom Party). Populist parties at the radical left, such as Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain, the Dutch Socialist Party and Die Linke in Germany, lost votes, particularly when compared to their performance in the most recent national elections in their countries (see also Ivaldi, 2020). So, in the 2019 EP elections, we *do not* clearly observe the typical pattern of second-order elections whereby radical parties perform particularly well.

This raises the question whether the EP elections of 2019 were indeed less second-order than previous ones, and if so, how this can be explained. This Special Issue brings together a selection of studies which speak to different aspects of the EP elections of 2019 concerning questions related to the campaigns, party competition, electoral behaviour, and voter attitudes. What all of them have in common is that they critically assess the extent to which the recent EP elections can indeed be considered distinctively European, instead of merely an extension of national politics to the European level, and thereby increasingly show characteristics of first-order elections, even if not universally so. In the remainder of this introduction, we elaborate on each of these aspects and how the contributions to this Special Issue re-evaluate their second-order character. In doing so, we distinguish between campaigning and mobilisation, on the one hand, and preferences of the European electorate, on the other. Moreover, we pay particular attention to the distinction between the EU *polity* and European *policy* issues. When previous research has studied the degree to which a European focus is discernible in party campaigns, media coverage, or voter behaviour, this European focus was often conceptualised as support for the EU political system itself or, respectively, as Euroscepticism. In the past decade, scholars have become more interested in the extent to which policies that fall under the

competence of the EU become more relevant during EP elections, particularly for party campaigns and media coverage (e.g. Braun et al., 2016; Schuck et al., 2011). One could argue that once policies play a more important role than fundamental questions related to the polity itself, EP elections could be considered more first-order (see also Mair, 2000).

Overall, the contributions to this Special Issue indicate that while the EP elections continued to display features of a second-order election, they were more first-order in some aspects than previous ones. One possible explanation is that, compared to previous elections, more attention was paid to European policies rather than questions about the polity. However, support for the foundational principles of the EU appears to be less widespread than previous research suggests, particularly when it comes to some of the core values of liberal democracy (as van der Brug et al., 2021 demonstrate in this issue). This Special Issue therefore has important implications for scholarly debates concerning the second-order character of elections, as well as for those well as those political observers who were quick to label the 2019 EP election a ‘vote for Europe’.

## **Campaigning and mobilisation at a pan-European level**

The second-order election theory assumes that EP elections are basically second-order *national* elections (Reif and Schmitt, 1980), which means that European policy considerations play a minor role both in party campaigning and media coverage (e.g. de Vreese, 2009; Schuck et al., 2011), and ultimately in the choices of voters (e.g. Hix and Marsh, 2007; Schmitt and Toygür, 2016). This has two types of consequences: first, voters are less mobilised to turn out compared to national elections; second, if they do, they tend to use these elections to send a message to domestic parties. To address the first issue – low turnout – there has been a large body of research into conditioning factors at the macro, meso, and micro levels demonstrating that the general assumption of lower turnout does not necessarily hold across the board. In some countries, turnout is higher than in others, depending on, for example, domestic political cleavages and trust in the EU (Fiorino et al., 2019). Moreover, some groups are more likely to turn out than others, such as different generations of voters (Bhatti and Hansen, 2012). At the individual level, factors such as political knowledge play a role in the willingness to cast a vote in EP elections (Petričević and Stockemer, 2020). In addition, one might turn to political parties’ strategies, the campaigns, and the media for understanding turnout. Marquart et al. (2020) offer a comprehensive overview of the impact of both campaign and media exposure in relation to the 2019 EP elections. They offer a more detailed conceptualisation of predictors of electoral participation, combining both common aggregate level factors and a combination of the larger campaign environment as well as an assessment of individual campaign activities. They find that certain campaign activities have a mobilising influence, but that others can have negative effects, for example concerning the relationship of online communication and engagement.

The 2019 EP elections continued with the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure that was first employed in 2014. The original purpose of the procedure was that pan-European lead candidates mobilise European voters to take part in the elections by giving a face to European parties. In 2014, the *Spitzenkandidaten* indeed visited several countries on their campaign trail (Schmitt et al., 2015). The EP demanded that the lead candidate of the winning party family would be elected by the Parliament as the new Commission President. In 2014, this was indeed the case because the Heads of State in the European Council, who still have the right to propose a candidate, ultimately agreed to nominate

Jean-Claude Juncker of the EPP. That is why the EP insisted that a similar outcome should be pursued in 2019.<sup>2</sup> This time, however, the European Council proposed Ursula von der Leyen and not Manfred Weber, the lead candidate of the winning EPP. The EP accepted that choice and therewith abandoned its own initiative.

Nonetheless, the *Spitzenkandidaten* were still an important feature of the campaigns, although there was already considerable cross-national variation in the extent to which domestic political parties (Braun and Schwarzbözl, 2019; Popa et al., 2020) and national media paid attention to them during the campaigns (Gattermann, 2020; Schulze, 2016) in 2014. The 2014 EP elections were also the first to feature a lead candidate debate. From the Nixon versus Kennedy debates decades ago until today, scholars have engaged with the question of the effects of (televised) debates on voter attitudes. In other words, debates tend to receive a lot of attention in first-order elections, but hardly any attention in second-order elections, such as EP elections. The so-called Eurovision debate before the 2014 EP elections had reached a limited audience, but Maier et al. (2018) showed how exposure to this debate increased cognitive and political involvement as well as EU support, among young citizens (see also Maier et al., 2016). In this Special Issue, Palacios and Arnold (2021) test the effect of the 2019 debate, the so-called Maastricht debate, on voter awareness and evaluations of the *Spitzenkandidaten* in a novel experimental set-up. Although the audience reach of the debate was limited, Palacios and Arnold (2021) provide evidence which indicates that exposure to the debates could contribute positively to candidate recognition and subjective perceptions of information received. According to the authors, voters also felt more informed about the issues discussed during the debate; there are also weak indications that some changed their positions towards certain issues after having followed the debate. This suggests that the *Spitzenkandidaten* can add a distinct European perspective to the campaigns in combination with policy issues, although there is mixed evidence for the extent to which they indeed mobilise voters across Europe (Gattermann and Marquart, 2020; Schmitt et al., 2015).

Nonetheless, political parties function as the main channels of representation. Even though pan-European party families organise themselves in political groups inside the EP, European elections are organised at the national level, with the result that most voters are faced with a choice between domestic parties. There have been only a few transnational lists thus far, including Democracy in Europe Movement 2025 (DiEM25) led by Yanis Varoufakis or Volt Europa, which have fared rather poorly in 2019. This is why scholars have primarily been concerned with questions related to the willingness of national parties to engage with European issues in either EP or national elections (e.g. Adam and Maier, 2011; Kriesi, 2007; Senninger and Wagner, 2015). In this Special Issue, Maier et al. (2021) probe the question of party strategies: when do parties put Europe in the centre of their campaigns and when not. In the past, we have seen that some political parties, under certain circumstances, either embrace and play up the Europe theme in their campaigns or try to avoid and play down the topic (Maier et al., 2019). Maier et al. (2021) argue that one sign for EP elections becoming more first-order would be that mainstream parties also strategically and explicitly campaign on European issues and do not leave this merely to Eurosceptic parties. Their findings from an expert survey indicate that there were hardly any differences between domestic government and opposition parties when it comes to the attention paid to European issues at the expense of national issues. Moreover, not only government but also opposition parties would orientate themselves against their adversaries. In other words, party competition was characterised by dynamic campaigns over European issues in the 2019 EP elections, although further

research is required to assess the extent to which these issues have indeed dealt with questions related to the EU polity or European policies (see Braun et al., 2016).

Overall, this is an important decision by parties, which also in part affects the choice available to voters, as another contribution to this Special Issue demonstrates: Braun (2021) shows on the basis of a content analysis that political news in five member states of the EU has become more ‘European’ in nature, albeit at different levels. This means that the media pay more attention to the issue of European integration (i.e. the polity, not necessarily policies). Citizens, however, would still consider national politics more interesting than European politics and they tend to have more trust in national institutions than in European ones. While many voters still consider EP elections second-order, Braun argues that the ‘Europeanness’ of the public debate would mobilise European citizens to turn out to vote: in 2019, the more European voters were oriented, the more likely the more likely they were to participate in the elections. However, we do not know how this assumed relationship between the ‘Europeanness’ of the campaigns and turnout evolves over time.

Ehin and Talving (2021) argue that the gap between turnout rates at national versus European elections has recently decreased across Europe. Their findings of *ParlGov* data show that although European voters still show up more frequently at national elections, more of them were generally mobilised to take part in the 2019 EP elections compared to the three previous EP elections. This suggests that the EP elections of 2019 were indeed special in the sense that they attracted more voters than the second-order model would have previously predicted. Ehin and Talving (2021) note that the decreasing turnout gap can be explained in part by the declining participation rates in national elections. Schäfer’s (2021) contribution to this Special Issue sheds light on this gap by assessing the motivations of those voters who vote in national elections but not in EP elections, the so-called ‘EU-only abstainers’. He does not set out to explain country differences, but zooms in on individual level determinants of EP turnout. One important finding from the analysis of the European Election Study (EES) is that EU-only abstention is clearly related to Euroscepticism, which thus produces a bias in the parliament towards a relatively pro-EU parliament. It appears that voters’ decision to abstain is still related to distinctively European, yet negative, considerations. Yet, other than that, his analyses largely support the second-order model. The next question, therefore, is whether – beyond mobilisation – European considerations play a role for voter preferences.

## Preferences of the European electorate

The second consequence of the second-order phenomenon is that voters base their vote choice on domestic political considerations. After all, the parties on offer are, with few exceptions, national parties, and voters tend not to be fully aware about what’s at stake in EP elections. As a result, we see more protest voting and more sincere voting (e.g. Hix and Marsh, 2007). However, several scholars have argued that European elections are not just national elections, since the issue of European integration is increasingly politicized and since positions on this issue do explain why people switch between national and European elections (e.g. Hobolt et al., 2009).

Research on European issue voting (De Vries, 2010) mostly focuses on the polity itself, rather than on preferences for the policies that are decided upon at this level. So, we should wonder whether an increased politicisation of European integration makes European elections more European and less national. After all, EU-issue voting increases



in national elections as well (e.g. Netjes, 2004), particularly in the larger and net-contributing countries (Jurado and Navarrete, 2021). So, while it has been well documented that there is increased contestation over European integration (e.g. De Wilde et al., 2016; Hooghe and Marks, 2018; Hutter and Grande, 2014; Kriesi, 2016; van der Brug et al., 2022), this does not mean that European elections have become more ‘European’. Several articles in this Special Issue contribute to these discussions.

Two questions arise regarding European integration in the minds of voters: how much EU and what kind of EU. While research mostly focuses on the first question, the increasing politicisation is largely about the second. Should the EU be a (neo)liberal project, which considers free competition as the answer to all problems, or do we want market integration to be accompanied by social policies at the EU-level? Do we want an EU that defends the values of liberal democracy, promotes the rule of law, and takes action to promote sustainability? The article by van der Brug et al. (2021) demonstrates that support for the EU is related to support for liberal democracy. This relationship is especially strong in those EU countries where we have seen signals of democratic backsliding. One of the implications is that opposition forces in EU-countries where the rule of law is under threat expect to be protected by the EU from further backsliding. Several party groups in the EP have asked for measures against Hungary and Poland. While this will undoubtedly sour relationships within the EU, it is likely to make the composition of the EP more relevant in the eyes of the voters in those countries. In view of this, it may not be surprising that turnout in the EP elections increased quite drastically, especially in Poland and Hungary, as we discussed above.

Alongside turnout, Ehin and Talving (2021) were also interested in the electoral performances of political parties, which represent the outcome of voter behaviour. For this they created a database on party performance at the national level in all EP elections since 1979 and 2019. Their findings largely support the traditional second-order model when it comes to large parties and those in national government being punished at the EP polls. However, the latter were hardly affected by such voter behaviour in 2019. Moreover, there was little overall support for extremist parties performing better in EP compared to national elections. The authors even find a negative effect in 2019, suggesting that extremist parties did worse compared to the recent national elections. This pattern is different from the past and it deviates from predictions based on the second-order election model, even though Ehin and Talving (2021) conclude that the model is generally still supported.

However, we cannot be certain whether these diverging findings are connected to policies that political parties have offered in the 2019 EP elections. Voter motivations to support certain parties and not others could still be related to questions pertaining to the EU polity. This question is difficult to answer, but Sorace (2021) offers a novel perspective on retrospective voting in EP elections. Specifically, she links data on the legislative behaviour in the EP, which she gathered from *VoteWatch* and the EP website, to survey data from the EES to test whether voters reward (or punish) parties for the good (or poor) performance of their Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) in the preceding term. This seems to be the case. Even after controlling for party size, parties with more active and effective politicians gain more votes than those with less well performing MEPs. The effects are even stronger in electoral systems that allow candidates to cultivate a personal vote and for voters who closely followed the election campaigns. These findings suggest that voters do take the legislative performance of their representatives into account, although the latter are rather removed from European citizens in the member states. In

other words, legislative behaviour in the supranational arena does play a role for voter behaviour in EP elections which constrains the applicability of the second-order model.

## Conclusion

Taken together, this Special Issue offers a diverse set of perspectives on the question whether EP elections can nowadays be considered as less second-order compared to previous elections, and thereby joins a large body of research on similar questions (e.g. Reif and Schmitt, 1980; Thomassen, 2009; van der Brug and de Vreese, 2016; van der Brug et al., 2016; van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996). There are four main conclusions to be drawn in response to this question.

First, those contributions that provide a longitudinal perspective point out that the 2019 EP elections were in many ways distinct from previous elections, particularly with respect to the campaigns. Maier et al. (2021) conclude that there are some early indications in their findings that party campaigns were generally more European in focus compared to 2014 and 2009 and Braun (2021) demonstrates that issues related to EU integration have become more prominent in national media between 1994 and 2019, albeit not universally so in all five countries under study. In sum, these two contributions highlight that the EU polity is increasingly being contested in EP elections.

Nonetheless, that does not mean that the 2019 EP elections can automatically be classified as more first-order. For this to be the case, European policy issues would also need to gain prominence in EP elections, both among parties and voters. This represents the second aspect of our conclusion. Ehin and Talving (2021) note that election outcomes in 2019 are atypical compared to previous elections when it comes to the decrease in the turnout gap between national and European elections, as well as with respect to the over-estimated success of extremist parties. Future research should enquire as to whether higher turnout and reduced relevance of Eurosceptic parties can indeed be linked to greater party competition over European issues.

Another set of contributions provides information about the relevance of policy issues in 2019. Although the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure is a feature of the polity and can be associated with politics in general, Palacios and Arnold (2021) argue that the debates would inform voters about policy issues. In other words, the procedure contributes to contestation over policies rather than the polity. Moreover, Sorace (2021) demonstrates that legislative behaviour in the preceding parliamentary term played a role for vote choice in the 2019 EP elections. This means that MEP involvement in European policy-making is relevant after all. The findings of these contributions underline the potential of EP elections becoming more first-order in the future provided that individual European politicians (*Spitzenkandidaten*, MEPs, and other candidates) focus on policy issues in the campaigns through which voters are informed about what is at stake.

Third, while some of the longitudinal perspectives indicate that EP elections have become (somewhat) less second-order, several contributions highlight that it would be premature to dismiss the second-order model altogether. According to Braun (2021), voters still consider European politics less important than national politics; and Schäfer (2021) finds that Euroscepticism is a strong predictor for abstention in EP elections. Likewise, party performance in the 2019 EP elections generally still comply with expectations of the second-order model (Ehin and Talving, 2021).

Fourth, van der Brug et al. (2021) demonstrate that support for the EU and attitudes towards liberal democracy are highly interlinked, particularly in countries where liberal



democracy is under threat. This means that EU supporters in those countries would probably expect the EU to act upon its principles and take steps to defend liberal democratic institutions. In some respects, this is also a debate about the ‘polity’, but here we see the discussion shifting from questions about the EU-polity (mainly ‘how much Europe’) to questions about the polity of the member states, as well as respect for minority rights (mainly ‘what kind of Europe’). These debates are likely to mobilise certain types of voters across the EU to take part in future EP elections: pro-Europeans in countries that experience democratic backsliding and defenders of European values in other countries are likely to increasingly consider the extent to which supranational policy-makers seek to combat illiberal tendencies in EU member states in their voting decision. EP elections would therefore become more first-order in the future beyond day-to-day policy issues concerning, for example the economy or climate change, but in the sense that these elections would focus less on ‘how much integration’, but more on what kind of EU voters want.

Summing up, the issue of European integration has become increasingly contested and it does play an increasing role in European elections, as well as in national elections as Jurado and Navarrete (2021) show. At the same time, there is some evidence which indicates that European policies are also becoming more important. We have argued that EP elections can only be considered first-order if they are primarily about the policies, rather than the polity (see also Mair, 2000). Some of the studies in this article provide evidence that this was more the case in 2019 than in previous elections. It seems likely that, as a consequence of further European integration, EU policies will become more contested in the future. We see that the eligibility of member states for receiving European subsidies are made dependent upon their adherence to the rule of law, and that some of these funds are explicitly intended to promote sustainability. If the European Commission promotes a more political and more contested policy agenda, the composition of the EP will matter more. So, it seems plausible that EP elections will continue to become more first-order. We therefore recommend that future research continues to examine these questions and pays particular attention to the role that European policies, rather than the European polity, play in the campaigns as well as voter mobilisation and electoral behaviour.

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### Notes

1. See <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/election-results-2019/en/turnout/>
2. Decision on the revision of the Framework Agreement on relations between the European Parliament and the European Commission, 7 February 2018 (2017/2233(ACI)).

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