



INSTITUTO
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45 Years of European Elections: Unpacking Drivers of Vote

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Master in Political Science

Supervisor:

Doctor Ana Espírito-Santo, Assistant Professor
Iscte - Instituto Universitário de Lisboa

October, 2024



SOCIOLOGIA
E POLÍTICAS PÚBLICAS

Department of Political Science and Public Policy

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RESUMO

Esta dissertação examina os fatores que influenciam o desempenho de partidos em eleições europeias ao longo de 45 anos, utilizando uma base-de-dados original abrangendo o período de 1979 a 2024. Aqui constata-se que os partidos que lideram governos nacionais perdem em média 4.18 pontos percentuais, enquanto os parceiros de coligação perdem 2.72 pontos. Estes efeitos intensificam-se quando as eleições ocorrem a meio do ciclo nacional, refletindo a tendência dos eleitores de manifestarem insatisfação com os incumbentes. Os partidos menores e recém-formados apresentam ganhos, pois as eleições europeias funcionam como uma plataforma experimental para os eleitores. Adicionalmente, os partidos com posições fortes sobre integração europeia demonstram melhor desempenho, sublinhando a relevância de temas ligados à União Europeia. Esta dissertação oferece uma base fundamentada para futuros trabalhos sobre modelos de previsão de eleições europeias, permitindo uma análise mais detalhada do comportamento eleitoral no contexto da União Europeia.

Palavras-chave: eleições europeias, eleições de segunda ordem, comportamento eleitoral

ABSTRACT

The dissertation examines the factors influencing party performance in European elections across 45 years, with an original dataset spanning 1979 to 2024. We found that parties leading national governments lose an average of 4.18 percentage points, whereas junior coalition partners lose 2.72 points. These effects intensify when elections occur mid-cycle, further highlighting voter tendencies to express dissatisfaction with incumbents. Smaller and newly formed parties exhibit gains, as European elections serve as an experimental platform for voters. Additionally, parties with strong positions on European integration perform better, underlining the significance of EU positions. This research provides a foundational understanding for future forecasting of European elections, enabling a nuanced analysis of electoral behaviour within the EU context.

Keywords: European elections, second-order elections, voting behavior

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INTRODUCTION

The question of how people vote has been long studied, and three main schools of thought have solidified. The sociological model of voting behaviour (Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet 1944) maintains that social structures and thus factors like class, religion, ethnicity and social group membership are the main determinants of voting, and that people vote following their group identity. The psychosocial model of voting behaviour (Campbell, Converse Miller and Stokes 1960) defends that individuals have loyalty towards political parties which are developed through community influences, and that creates an anchor that guides voting choices. Finally, the rational choice model of voting behaviour (Downs 1957) states that voters make their decision on how to vote based on their self-interest, considering the costs and benefits of each candidate in order to maximise their utility.

These electoral behaviour models have served as the basis on how we attempt to predict election results. With the advent of the rational choice model, scientific methods of forecasting election results have been developed. Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier (2014) distinguish three approaches to build a scientific forecasting model: structuralist, aggregator and synthesizer. A structuralist approach estimates outcomes by focusing on a core explanatory factor, using standard regression techniques. This approach generally provides a stable forecast over the short term. In contrast, aggregator models make predictions based primarily on voter intention data gathered from opinion polls. Lastly, synthesizer models combine a core economic explanation with voter intention data, integrating these elements through advanced quantitative modelling. Both structuralist and synthesizer models emphasize the importance of economic and political factors in explaining voting behavior.

Forecasting the result of elections is at the centre of political debate in most countries. In most national elections regular polling offers an easy and accessible tool for this, either directly - simply through the opinion polls themselves - or through the use of aggregator forecasting models.

There are many reasons why opinion polls are important. At the political level, electoral forecasting gives information to political parties about the evolution of the

correlation of forces which allows them to make adjustments in their strategies or redirect their legislative priorities (Lewis-Beck 2005). When preparing their electoral campaign, it allows parties to have an optimised allocation of resources (Holbrook and DeSart 1999). At the level of media, opinion polls are central in the coverage of elections (Welch 2002) and constitute a main source of voters' expectations of the results (Irwin and Holsteyn 2002).

Within the academic debate, the importance of forecasting election results has also been recognised. Electoral forecast tools already exist at the national level for many countries, namely for the United States (Campbell 1992), for the United Kingdom (Fisher et al 2011), for Italy (Bellucci 2010), for Ireland (Louwerse 2016), for Lithuania (Jastramskis 2012), for Chile (Bunker and Bauchowitz 2015), and for Germany (Jérôme, Jérôme-Speziari and Lewis-Beck 2013 and Küntzler 2014). However, while national elections have frequent polling, European elections have historically lacked this focus. Through regular polling most national elections have a scientific tool that can project, at any point in the electoral cycle, the new correlation of forces in parliament if new elections were called. But since European elections are not regularly polled - and when they are at the national level, not at the continental level - European democracy lacks this tool.

In 1951, a new supranational organisation was founded: the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC). This was soon equipped with its own parliamentary assembly: the Common Assembly of the ECSC. Yet, it had little to no powers and was mostly composed of delegates of national parliaments. European integration developed fastly, and so did its legislative body: in 1979 the first European elections elected the first continental members of parliament; in 1981 the European Parliament voted for the first time a (symbolic) motion of confidence in the President of the European Commission; in 1993 it gained veto power over the nomination of the European Commission; in 1999 the mere threat of a motion of censure made the Santer Commission resign and, in 2009, the Lisbon Treaty made a direct link between the European elections and the election of the Commission President, what led to the first leading candidates being presented by political parties at the European level ("europarties") in 2014. Even though European elections are considered more and more relevant in the guidance of politics at the European level, these are still

considered as a second-order matter (Corbett 2014) and often disregarded by national media (Boomgaarden et al 2010).

The process of leading candidates for the presidency of the European Commission who today lead their continental parties in European campaign - usually referred to with the German expression *Spitzenkandidaten* - represents an attempt to bring more transparency in the link between the results of European elections and the EU's executive (Schmitt, Hobolt and Popa 2015). Yet it is today impossible to predict if a ruling Commission President would potentially be reelected if new elections were called. Also, in elections with lower turnout and low media coverage, an electoral forecast tool can offer one way to give European elections a stronger media relevance (Welch 2002).

As we have stated before, based on the work of Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier (2014), in order to establish this tool for European elections, since we lack the direct vote intention data that would make an aggregator model feasible, we would need to understand core political and economic explanation of vote in the specific election in order to use it either directly in structuralist models or together with vote intention data in a synthesizer model. A first step towards a potential building of such models is understanding what factors affect party performance in European elections. We thus aim to answer that simple question: What are the factors that affect party performance in European elections?

While this question has been answered before, it has been so only for specific elections (for example Reif and Schmitt 1980 for 1979, Reif 1984 for 1984, Marsh 1998 for 1979-1994, Schmitt 2005 for 2004, Schmitt and Toygür 2016 for 2014). By having a 45-year span we can have a global view of the answer across the entirety of the European elections and how those factors might have become more or less salient.

The research will be built on an original dataset, putting together election results from 45-years of European elections across the 27 member-states. This original dataset will also include data on national elections, party positioning data and economic data.

This results in a total of 184 observations of elections across 27 countries, with a minimum of 3 elections and a maximum of 10 elections per country.

This dissertation is divided into three chapters. The first one is the literature review, where the state of the art is presented. First we will go more in depth on the models of voting behaviour, then we will look into the second-order election model and how it applies to European elections. The hypotheses are then presented still in this chapter. The second chapter explains the objectives and methodology in detail, including an explanation of the original dataset used for this work. Finally, the third chapter presents the results of the hypothesis testing. The dissertation ends with a conclusion, including a discussion of the findings and potential future research on the topic.

CHAPTER 1 - Literature Review

1.1 On the theoretical models of voting behaviour

What leads citizens to vote the way they do has been one of the most relevant debates in the study of politics, and the need to study and answer this question has led to three general models that serve as frameworks to explain voter behaviour: the sociological model, the psychosocial model and the rational choice model. In this chapter we are going to explore these three models and how they offer the basis to understand the dynamics of voting behaviour.

The sociological model

Also known as the Columbia School model, the sociological model of voting behaviour is focused on the idea that it is the social and political environment of a voter that influences their electoral behaviour.

This theory was developed starting with a study on the 1940 US presidential election, where Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet (1944) tested how voters arrived at their decision on who to vote for, having been then further developed with the 1948 US presidential elections by Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee (1954). The conclusion was that the social groups to which each voter belonged to was what influenced their vote, and thus social characteristics like socio-economic status, religion and area of residence act as social differentiation factors that determine political preference. These factors are also found to be transmitted between generations, making them durable factors. They further found that those who changed their voting option during the study did so because of their belonging to different social groups with divergent policy preferences. According to this research electoral campaigns served mostly to reinforce the choice of the voter, with conversion or activation of voters being secondary effects. Further on, they find that when a voter and their preferred candidate have objectively different policies, the voter instead of changing their vote is more prone to change their perception of the candidate.

It is of note that this model was developed based on the 1940 to 1948 US political cycle. Not only is the US a mostly two-party system - even though in 1948 a third-party did carry four states with a national vote share of 2.4% - but in this period

the share of Democratic vote was stable around 50%-55% while the Republican vote share was constant around 45%¹.

The application of this model to Western Europe was the subject of research by Lipset and Rokkan (1967), where it connected these social differentiation factors to the political cleavages that originated from major social transformations like the national and industrial revolutions. They explain how these cleavages led to social groups to align with particular political parties, namely how the class cleavage led to the creation of socialist parties or the state/church cleavage led to the creation of liberal parties. By aligning political parties and social cleavages, this has crystallised the social differentiation factors into the different political parties' electoral bases.

The sociological model of voting behaviour is found not to explain vote change between elections. Since socio-economic status, religion and area of residence are mostly unchangeable in the short to medium-term, then the vote change is broadly unexplained. This has led to the development of the psychosocial model of voting behaviour.

The psychosocial model

Also known as the School of Michigan, the psychosocial model of voting behaviour says that individuals have a sense of identification and loyalty towards political parties which comes from the social and political environment of those individuals and that serves as an anchor that guides voting behaviour. This research was developed across the US presidential elections of 1948 (Campbell and Kahn 1952), 1952 (Campbell, Gurin and Miller 1954) and 1956 (Campbell, Converse, Miller and Stokes 1960). This model shows that voters do have durable social characteristics, such as their socio-economic status, but instead of that defining voting behaviour as defended by the sociological model, these characteristics instead define someone's partisanship. Partisanship is taken as an "affective orientation to an important group-object in his environment" (Campbell, Converse, Miller and Stokes 1960, p. 121) which serves as a filter through which more temporal factors are evaluated. The voting behaviour is thus not directly defined neither by someone's social

¹ the Democratic Party won the 1940 election with 54.7% of the vote, the 1944 election with 53.4% and the 1948 election with 49.6%. From 1932 to 1952 there was a 2-decade period of constant Democratic presidents in the United States of America. The Republican Party achieved 44.8% in 1940, 45.9% in 1944 and 45.1% in 1948.

characteristics, nor by the partisanship, but by factors that affect a certain election - like the issues at play or the candidates - which are read through this filter. While this model defends that change in partisanship is rare and depends on the existence of major changes in someone's social status or political environment, it still allows for people to vote against their own partisanship without altering it, if the subjective reading of the election at hand, even if evaluated through the partisan filter, leads the voter to vote for a different party.

Critics of this model have from the beginning defended that it's difficult to apply it in a non-bipartisan political system, like those of most of Europe. Dalton (2000) shows how cognitive mobilisation in Germany has led to dealignment as voters move from traditional parties like the Social Democratic Party (SPD) or the Christian-Democratic Union (CDU) to newer parties like the Greens or the Alternative for Germany (AfD) based on issues. In an even more clear way, Italy's rapidly evolving party-system with significant realignment (Dalton, Flanagan and Beck 1984) lacks explanation under the psychosocial model. The case of Sweden where partisanship towards the Social Democrats (*Socialdemokraterna*) was high yet has declined quickly in recent years (Schmitt and Holmberg 1995), also confronts the model with its limitations. Even in the United Kingdom, with a more comparable bipartisan environment where elections are mostly fought between the Labour and Conservatives parties, the strength of regional parties in Scotland and Wales has shown a more nuanced reality that the psychosocial has difficulties explaining (Crewe and Denver 1985).

This criticism has led to the development of a model that bypasses the partisan filter: the rational choice model of voting behaviour.

The rational choice model

The rational choice model of voting behaviour comes from an economic explanation of voting choice (Downs 1957). It assumes that all involved actors are rational which leads to parties "formulat[ing] whatever policies they believe will gain the most votes" (Downs 1957, p. 295) with the absolute goal "to win elections" (Downs 1957, p. 28), while at the same time voters seek to maximise their own self-interest and thus vote for the party that offers them the most benefit. This model is built on the assumption that all the actors, besides rational, are also trustworthy and thus their actions can be

predicted, and that there is still a level of uncertainty which makes choosing between different options a reality.

Under this model, when voters have to decide which party to vote for, they make a comparison of expected benefits of each option and choose the party that offers them the most benefit. Ideology thus is taken as a "short cut a voter can save himself the cost of being informed upon a wider range of issues" (Downs 1957, p. 98). This logic leads parties to defend proposals that benefit a majority of the electorate, which is only mitigated by the diversity of the electorate and level of uncertainty which make parties differentiate their proposals and not congregate on a single-point.

The model has come under criticism for its difficulty in explaining why voters heavily choose to vote when their single vote has very little impact in elections (Uhlman 1989). While testing it for the 1993, 1997 and 2000 Canadian elections, Blais (2000) found that half the voters voted without making calculation of benefits and that the rational choice model has very little explanatory power.

1.2 On the second-order election model

European elections have been defined as second-order elections since their first run backs to 1979 (Reif and Schmitt 1980). First-order elections are considered to be the key election in a national political cycle, be it the parliamentary elections in parliamentary systems or presidential elections in presidential systems. They are the ones that, even when indirectly, determine the leadership of the country (Reif and Schmitt 1980, p.8). Second-order elections are, on the other hand, elections that are given lower significance and lower attention, all while being fought in the same party system and same polity. Moreover, second-order elections are classified under barometer elections, meaning that they are elections that are viewed by voters as a way to send signals to the incumbent government (Anderson and Ward 1996) with the difference being that usually barometer elections include localised elections, such as municipal or regional elections, and second-order elections are fought in the national level. This connection between first-order and second-order elections establishes a relationship that, according to Reif and Schmitt (1980), includes the voters voting in the second-order election based on their thoughts about the first-order election.

One of the most studied examples of second-order elections are the US midterm elections. Since the United States House of Representatives is elected every two years, this means that half-way through the presidential term there is a contested national election. Tufte (1975) points that since the Civil War only once had the party that held the presidency gain seats in the midterms, something that after 1975 only happened again in 1998, during the impeachment of President Clinton over the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal, and in 2002, right after the September 11th terrorist attacks and the start of the war in Afghanistan. His research shows that the midterms are "a referendum on the performance of the President" and that while almost all Presidents lose in the midterms that the magnitude of said loss is related to the popularity of the President and the performance of the economy (Tufte 1975, p. 824).

The model, as described by Reif and Schmitt (1980) identifies some characteristics of the second-order elections: that turnout is lower, that governing parties suffer, that the level of suffering depends on the point in the national cycle the election happens; and that smaller parties, including those seeking to represent minorities and/or ethnic group, benefit. These are the factors that we will now develop further.

Reif and Schmitt (1980) believe that one of the key factors of second-order elections is that they have a lower turnout. Since these elections are seen as less important, there are less voters that will go vote. Likewise, since the immediate consequences of the elections are not felt in the main goals of the political parties, they might invest less and present less important candidates.

It was also found that parties that compose the national governing coalition generally perform worse due to the loss of discontented voters that protest against the government by either abstaining or voting for other parties and the loss of tactical supporters who voted for government parties only in national elections (Reif and Schmitt 1980). This was further confirmed for the 1979, 1984, 1989 and 1994 European elections by Marsh (1998).

The popularity of a government has been shown (Miller and Mackie 1973) to follow a particular cyclical pattern. This pattern starts with an improved popularity right after

the elections, which then declines until the mid-point of the cycle. At this point, the most distant point between elections, the electorate is not forced to objectively compare the electoral options and thus is seen to support the government less. Then, as elections start approaching the popularity of the government recovers.

Another key factor affecting a government's popularity is the economy. A simple reward-punishment model says that the popularity of a government is directly related with the voters perception of the economy (Lewis-Beck and Paldam 2000). While there are differences between the voters' subjective assessment of the economy and the actual economic data (Wlezien et al 1997), Tilley, Garry and Bold (2008) have found that direct economic data has some effect in at least some governing parties in European elections.

Since second-order elections have less practical consequences, voters also feel less constrained to vote tactically, and thus allow themselves to vote closer to their preferences (Oppenhuis, van der Eijk and Franklin 1996) which leads to smaller and newer political parties to perform better than bigger and more established parties (Reif and Schmitt 1980). New parties can also provoke a change in the party-system itself, as their appearance changes the competition as was in the previous national election. For the 1979-2004 period, the existence of new parties accounted for half the switch of votes between first-order and second-order elections (Hix and Marsh 2007).

The same is seen for parties with a sub-national identification who perform better as the election can be seen as a possibility to play down the role of the central government, which was also confirmed for the 1984 European election by Reif (1984).

Finally, if the elections are national in nature, and not European, then it's no surprise that whatever effects happen to differ by country. Hix and Marsh (2007) showed how the effects were different between the newer and older member-states.

1.3 On the Europe factor

Several authors question whether European elections are truly second-order elections, arguing that low turnout and the voting trends previously discussed might not occur because voters are focused on the first-order election arena. Instead, they suggest that these patterns may result from an inherent democratic deficit that causes voter apathy (Blondel et al., 1998). Alternatively, some argue that voters participate in European elections based on European issues. In this view, it is the governing parties - not the voters - who are disconnected from European topics (Hobolt, Spoon, and Tilley 2009).

Research has found that voters who support European integration are more likely to turnout to European elections (Blondel et al 1997 and van der Eijk and Schmitt 2007) and that those who believe European integration has gone too fast are more likely to change their vote from the previous national elections (Marsh 2003). It has also been found that those parties with strong internal divisions on their position regarding European integration suffer the most during European elections (Ferrara and Weishaupt 2004). These facts might lead to the conclusion that European elections are not second-order elections, but that voters vote in them according to their policy preferences on European issues (Carruba and Timpone 2005). Finally, higher participation in European elections has been found in states that are net beneficiaries of the EU budget, and thus where policies at the European level have a bigger direct effect on the voters (Matilla 2002).

Nonetheless, this criticism does not put into cause that the factors that are defined as part of the second-order model affect European elections, but if the same factors are due to other reasons. As stated before, in this dissertation we do not aim to explain why the factors exist but to quantify them.

1.4 Hypothesis

Based on the literature presented we can formulate several hypotheses for this dissertation.

Firstly the literature shows that voters use second-order elections to penalise the national government. This would lead us to hypothesise that parties in the national government lose in the European elections, when compared with the previous national election. In return opposition parties experience gains compared with the previous national election, as voters move from support to the government to support to the opposition. Therefore, we pose the following hypotheses:

H1: Parties in national government will experience losses in European elections.

Due to the role of leadership, we can also expect that the parties leading the government experience bigger losses than their junior coalition partners. Hence:

H2: Parties leading the national government will experience more significant losses than junior coalition partners.

The literature showed how the expected losses follow a cyclical pattern, where they are higher at mid-cycle. We thus can expect that the losses suffered by national government parties is higher when the European elections are held close to the mid-cycle than when they are held in the beginning or end of the national cycle.

Hence,

H3: Parties in the national government will experience greater losses, compared with the previous national election, if the European elections occur close to mid-cycle.

We have also seen how smaller parties and newer parties experience gains due to voters feeling less constrained to vote tactically. This is also applicable to parties that cater to specific ethnic, regional and linguistic minorities. Therefore we expect that:

H4: Smaller parties will experience gains in European elections

H5: Newer parties will experience gains in European elections

H6: Minority-focused parties will experience gains in European elections

A key feature of the second-order model is that the elections have lower turnout, due to the amount of voters who consider it less relevant to go vote, or who show their dissent by abstaining instead of voting for a different party. This takes us to the hypothesis that the higher the differential turnout between the national and European elections, the higher the effects based on the second-order election model. This leads us to expect the following:

H7: When there is high differential turnout, parties in national government will experience higher losses in European elections than when the differential turnout is lower

The literature also showed us that it is not clear if these effects are due to the second-order nature of the election or because voters have different policy preferences in European elections. From there we have seen expectations that parties with clear positions, in favour or against, European integration can expect gains in European elections. Hence,

H8: Parties with a strong position on European integration will experience gains in European elections.

We've also seen how economic data affects governing parties' popularity. So we expect that:

H9: Parties in the national government will experience higher losses in European elections if the economic situation is weaker.

CHAPTER 2 - RESEARCH DESIGN

The data for the analysis that follows is collected into a unique database. This database includes every election from 1979 to 2024, across the current 27 member-states of the European Union. This is a total of 184 observations of elections in unique country-year combinations.

Due to the lack of data available on smaller parties, and their smaller political relevance, we have applied a criteria of relevance of 2.5% of the valid votes. This means that we include parties that both managed to elect to the European Parliament, but also parties that did not elect due to a higher threshold, be it legal or effective, to elect.

The dependent variable in these hypotheses is the party performance in European elections - *PERFORMANCE* -, measured by the difference of share of valid votes between the European elections and the previous national election. This data is sourced directly from national election authorities as indicated in Appendix I.

The variable *YEAR* corresponds to the year the election was held. For this analysis we are only considering the elections that happened in regular years: 1979, 1984, 1989, 1994, 1999, 2004, 2009, 2014, 2019 and 2024.

The variable *COUNTRY* is pretty straight-forward, with it being the member-state where the election is held. In this database we have all 27 current member-states of the European Union.

GOV is a dummy variable that indicates if the party is in the government coalition (taking the value 1) at the time of the election or if it's in the opposition (taking the value 0). *LEAD* and *JUNIOR* are equivalent variables taking the value 1 if, respectively, the party is leading the government, and thus having the Prime Minister, or if it's a junior coalition partner, and thus doesn't have the Prime Minister. This data is sourced from Döring and Manow (2024).

The variable *CYCLE* is the variable that defines when in the national cycle the European election falls. The national cycle is defined as the 4 years that are prescribed between elections, except where it is 5 years (Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, France, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Malta and the Netherlands). The variable *CYCLE* takes the value of the number of months between the date of the European election and the theoretical mid-point of the national cycle. It thus goes from 0, when the European election falls exactly in the mid-point of the national cycle, to 30 - or 2.5 years - when the European elections fall right at the start or end of a 5-year national cycle.

The variables *SIZE*, *NEW* and *MINORITY* are all dummy variables. The variable *SIZE* measures if the party is considered a big or small party, and takes the value 1 when the party has reached more than 15% of the valid vote in the previous national election. The variable *NEW* takes the value 1 when the party didn't run in the previous national election. And finally the variable *MINORITY* takes the value 1 when the party represents a specific ethnic, regional and linguistic minority. The variable *SIZE* and *NEW* are sourced directly from national election authorities as indicated in Appendix I, while the variable *MINORITY* is sourced for the election years 1979 to 1996 from Ray (1999), for the election years 1999 to 2019 from Jolly et al (2022), and for the election year 2024 from Hooghe et al (2024), with the addition of the party DPS (Dvizhenie za prava i svobodi) from Bulgaria representing the Turkish minority (Çelik 2009), the party LKS (Latvijas Krievu savienība) from Latvia representing the Russian minority (Cheskin and March 2016) and the CU (ChristenUnie) and SGP (Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij) parties in the Netherlands representing the conservative orthodox Reformed Protestants (Lucardie 2013).

The variable *TURNOUT* represents the differential turnout between the European election and the previous national election, taking a negative value when the European election had less turnout than the previous national election and a positive value when the European election had more turnout than the previous national election. The data that this is based on is sourced directly from national election authorities as indicated in Appendix I.

The variable *EUPOS* is defined as the party having a clearly anti-European or pro-European positioning. To calculate this we use expert data which classifies the overall orientation of the party leadership towards European integration, and calculate the distance of said position from the neutrality point. This takes a value from 0, when the party has a neutral position on European integration, to a maximum of 3 when the party has an extreme, be it positive or negative, position on European integration. The data is sourced for the election years 1979 to 1996 from Ray (1999), for the election years 1999 to 2019 from Jolly et al (2022), and for the election year 2024 from Hooghe et al (2024).

Finally the variable *ECONOMY* uses the percentage increase in GDP per capita to measure economic growth for the country in the election year as reported by the World Bank.

After presenting the results of some descriptive analysis, a series of regression models will be employed to test the hypotheses exposed beforehand. This statistical approach allows for isolating the effects of each variable on party performance in European elections.

CHAPTER 3 - RESULTS

As we have stated from the beginning, this dissertation focuses on 45 years of European elections, which happen every 5 years since 1979 in all the member-states of the European Union.

After applying the criteria of relevance of 2.5% of the valid votes nationally, we are left with 1340 cases. Table 1 shows the frequency of cases per country and per year, which goes from a minimum of 2 in Malta 2009 to a maximum of 12 in three combinations country-year (Latvia 2009, Belgium 2019 and Lithuania 2024). This leaves us with an average of 7 parties in each country-year to have more than 2.5% of the valid votes nationally.

Table 1: Distribution of cases per country and year

	1979	1984	1989	1994	1999	2004	2009	2014	2019	2024
BE	8	9	10	11	10	10	11	10	12	11
DK	10	9	9	8	9	8	7	8	9	11
FR	6	6	7	9	10	8	9	8	8	7
DE	5	5	6	7	6	6	6	7	7	10
IE	6	7	8	7	8	8	8	7	8	11
IT	8	7	7	8	9	6	7	7	6	8
LU	5	6	7	7	6	5	6	7	7	7
NL	4	6	6	6	7	10	9	10	11	11
GR	0	4	3	6	5	5	6	8	7	9
PT	0	0	4	4	4	4	5	5	6	7
ES	0	0	6	5	6	4	5	8	8	8
AT	0	0	0	0	5	5	6	6	5	7
FI	0	0	0	0	6	7	8	8	8	8
SE	0	0	0	0	7	8	10	9	8	8
CY	0	0	0	0	0	5	5	7	7	7
CZ	0	0	0	0	0	7	6	10	8	7
EE	0	0	0	0	0	7	6	7	7	8
HU	0	0	0	0	0	4	5	6	7	6
LV	0	0	0	0	0	9	12	7	9	8
LT	0	0	0	0	0	10	9	8	11	12
MT	0	0	0	0	0	3	2	4	3	4
PL	0	0	0	0	0	8	4	8	5	5
SK	0	0	0	0	0	8	7	10	11	8
SI	0	0	0	0	0	7	8	11	8	8
RO	0	0	0	0	0	0	6	9	7	7
BG	0	0	0	0	0	0	8	8	6	8
HR	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	11	8
Total	52	59	73	78	98	162	181	208	210	219

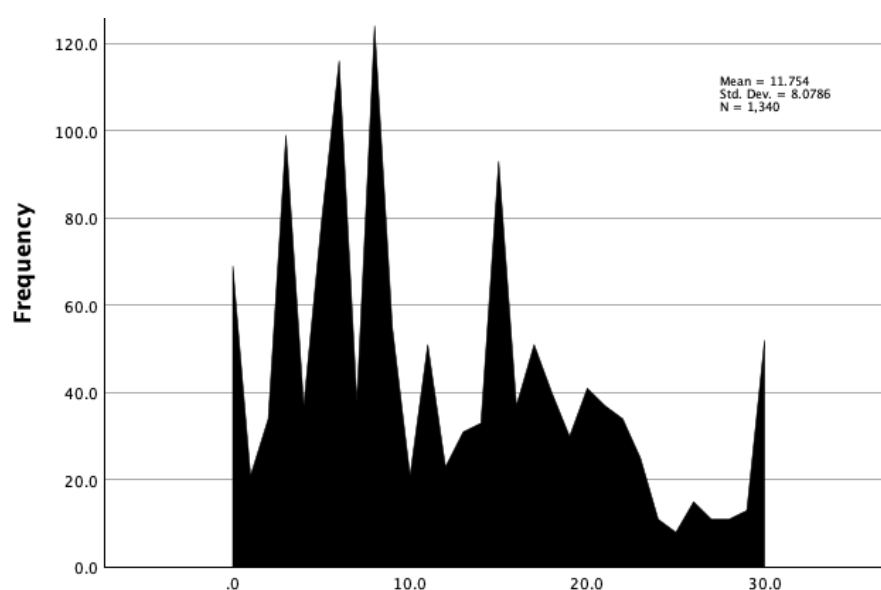
As we can see almost half the cases we are going to study have happened in the last three election years. As more countries have joined the EU, every election produced more cases than the previous one, going from only 52 parties crossing 2.5% of the national valid votes in 1979 to more than 200 in 2024. This shows the relevance of also analysing our results for each year.

One of the main factors we are studying is the influence of being in the national government at the time of the European elections. We are doing this through three variables, namely LEAD for the parties that are leading the government, JUNIOR for the junior coalition partners and GOV simply indicating if the party was in government, be it leading it or as a junior partner. We have that 30.8% of all cases are parties in government, divided by 13.2% being the lead parties and 17.6% as junior coalition members, as shown in table 2.

Table 2: Distribution of the variables GOV, LEAD and JUNIOR

	variable <i>GOV</i>	variable <i>LEAD</i>	variable <i>JUNIOR</i>
No (0)	927 (69.2%)	1163 (86.8%)	1104 (82.4%)
Yes (1)	413 (30.8%)	177 (13.2%)	236 (17.6%)

The European elections are regularly scheduled every five years, and have always happened between the 25th of May and the 18th of June. This means that the date of the European elections is known in advance, and falls randomly within the national cycles. As we have discussed, our variable CYCLE takes the value of the number of months between the date of the European election and the theoretical mid-point of the national cycle. We have, as we can see in figure 1, that the variable CYCLE has a mean value of 11.75 meaning that the average case happens 11.75 months away from the mid-cycle point.

Figure 1: Distribution of the variable CYCLE

Another key factor we are looking at is the size of the parties, which we measure based on the result of the previous national election. We see that there is an almost half-half division, with 46% of the cases being of parties we are considering big while 54% are not. We also have that 84% of the cases are parties running in the European election while they didn't run in the previous national election. Finally, we have 6.3% of the cases of parties representing a specific ethnic, regional and linguistic minority. The distribution of the variables *SIZE*, *NEW* and *MINORITY* can be seen in table 3.

Table 3: Distribution of the variables *SIZE*, *NEW* and *MINORITY*

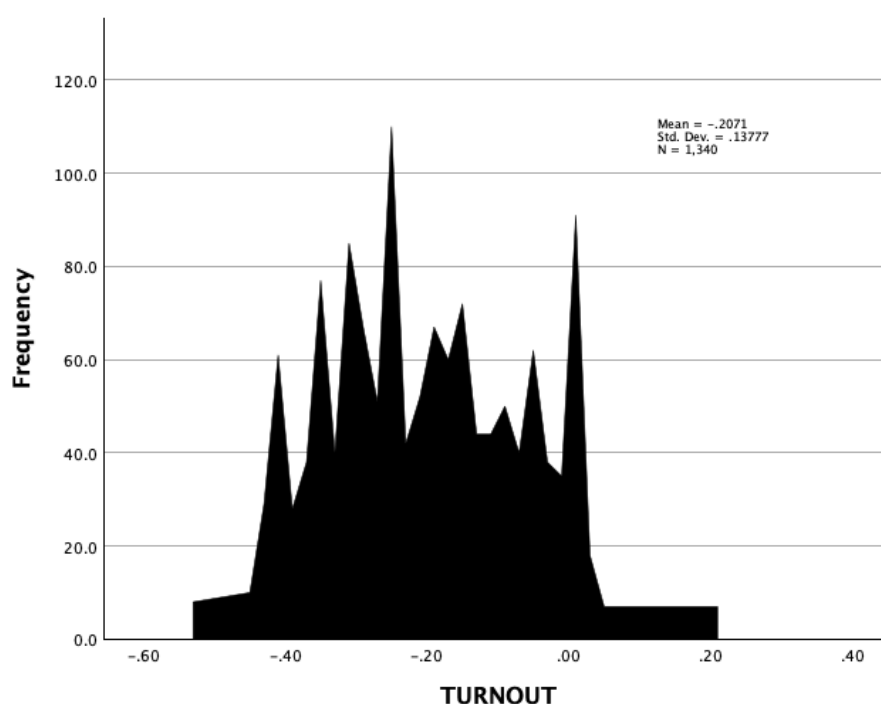
	variable <i>SIZE</i>	variable <i>NEW</i>	variable <i>MINORITY</i>
No (0)	723 (54%)	1126 (84%)	1256 (93.7%)
Yes (1)	617 (46%)	214 (16%)	84 (6.3%)

European elections have been known to have low turnout. In 47.3% of the country-year cases the turnout has been lower than 50%, as can be seen in Appendix III. The differences between countries is also pretty high, with Belgium - where voting is mandatory - having an average of 90.4% turnout and Slovakia having the lowest average turnout at 21.3%, including the lowest turnout ever of only 13.1% in 2014.

Yet, in our analysis we will be looking at differential turnout, meaning the difference between the national election turnout and the European election turnout. Here, as we can see in Appendix IV, we have an average of -20.7%, meaning that one European election has on average 20.7 percentage points less turnout than the previous national election in that country. Also here there's variance between countries, from the lowest in the Netherlands of -37.8% on average to the maximum of +1.1% in Romania. Only in 14 cases has this been a positive number, meaning that the European election turnout was higher than the previous national election turnout.

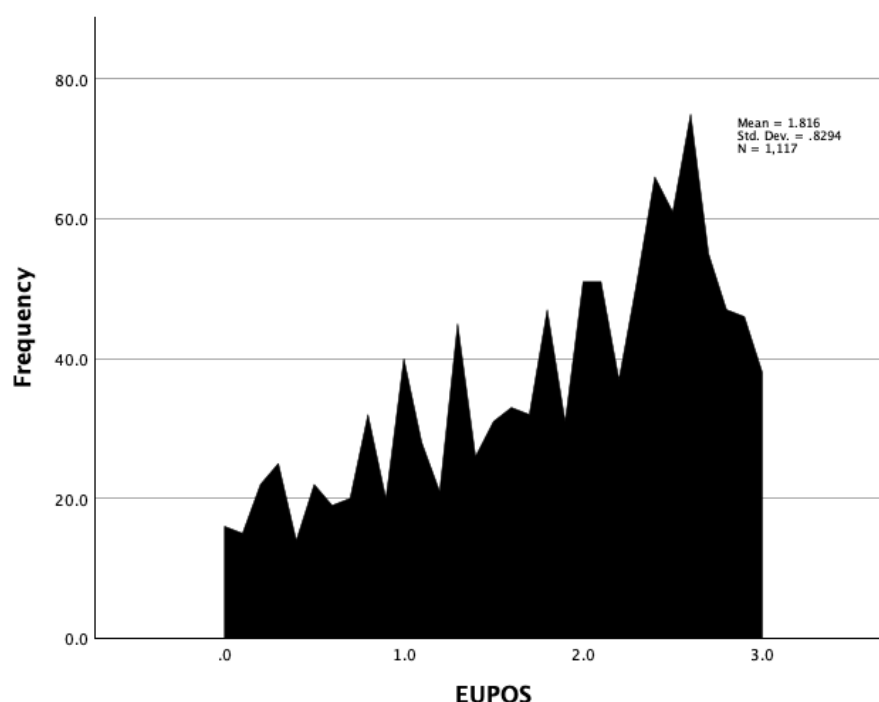
For our cases in analysis, the differential turnout has a mean of -20.7%, as per figure 2. We can see that most cases are between -40 and 0.

Figure 2: Distribution of the variable TURNOUT

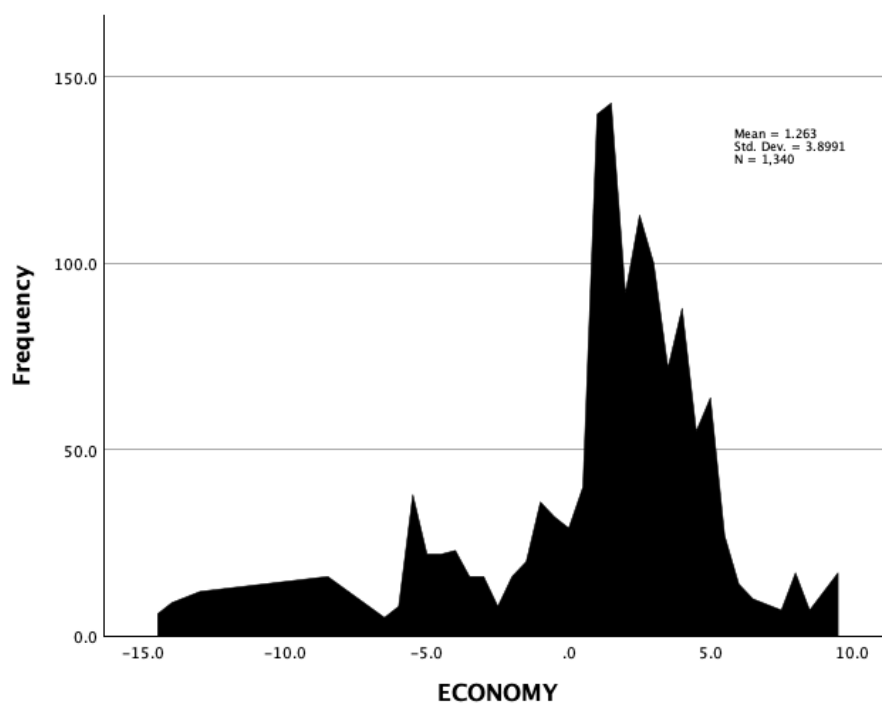


Finally, in terms of party positioning, we are looking at the position regarding European integration, and more concretely at the parties with the most strongly pro or anti-integration positioning. With a mean value of 1.816, this means that the average case has a European position tending to the extreme of the scale, as we can see in figure 3.

Figure 3: Distribution of the variable EUPOS



The last variable that we look at is the economic one, where we use the percentage increase in GDP per capita to measure economic growth. In our cases we have that the mean is 1.26 and the median 1.85, showing that a majority of cases happen during economic growth. Nonetheless the minimum value is -14.5 while the maximum is 9.5.

Figure 4: Distribution of the variable ECONOMY**Table 4:** Linear Regression

Variable	N	Unstandardized B	Standardized Beta	t	Sig.
LEAD	1117	-4.177	-0.217	-4.023	<0.001
JUNIOR	1117	-2.723	-0.159	-2.775	0.006
CYCLE	1117	-0.033	-0.037	-1.176	0.240
SIZE	1117	-4.176	-0.303	-9.428	<0.001
NEW	1117	11.012	0.470	16.280	<0.001
MINORITY	1117	-0.400	-0.015	-0.601	0.548
TURNOUT	1117	-0.941	-0.019	-0.600	0.549
EUPOS	1117	1.095	0.133	5.227	<0.001
ECONOMY	1117	-0.017	-0.009	-0.279	0.780
GovCycle	1117	0.127	0.133	2.675	0.008
GovTurnout	1117	2.880	0.055	1.082	0.280
GovEcon	1117	-0.144	-0.049	-1.506	0.132
Dependent Variable: PERFORMANCE. $R^2=0.320$					

Based on the linear regression, we can finally evaluate if each of our hypothesis is confirmed or not

H1: Parties in national government will experience losses in European elections.

H2: Parties leading the national government will experience more significant losses than junior coalition partners.

We have that both LEAD and JUNIOR have a statistically significant effect, with both effects being negative and the effect of LEAD (-4.177) being bigger than JUNIOR (-2.723). This means that we can confirm H1.1 by seeing that parties in national government experience losses in European elections and that, holding all other variables constant, a lead governing party loses 4.177 percentage points in European elections while a junior coalition party loses 2.723 percentage points.

H3: Parties in the national government will experience greater losses, compared with the previous national election, if the European elections occur close to mid-cycle.

We also have that GOVperCYCLE has a significant positive effect on performance, with a value of +0.127. This means that H3 is also confirmed, as the parties in national government experience greater loss in European elections when they occur close to mid-cycle. Holding all other variables constant, we have that a party loses 0.127 percentage points for each month that the election is held closer to the mid-cycle.

H4: Smaller parties will experience gains in European elections

H5: Newer parties will experience gains in European elections

H6: Minority-focused parties will experience gains in European elections

We can see that SIZE has a significant negative coefficient (-4.176), meaning that bigger parties, holding all other variables constant, lose 4.176 percentage points compared with the previous national election, confirming H4. The variable *NEW* is highly significant with a strong positive coefficient of 11.012, meaning that H5 is strongly confirmed. This means that newer party experience strong gains in European elections, being the most important factor of all those we have tested.

Finally we have found that the variable *MINORITY* is not significant, so we cannot confirm H6.

H7: When there is high differential turnout, parties in national government will experience higher losses in European elections than when the differential turnout is lower

We have found that the effect of different turnout on the governing parties losses is not significant, and thus cannot confirm H7.

H8: Parties with a strong position on European integration will experience gains in European elections.

We also have a positive and significant effect of having a strong position on European integration. This shows that, holding all other variables constant, a party increases its vote as its position on European integration is more extreme.

H9: Parties in the national government will experience higher losses in European elections if the economic situation is weaker.

Finally, we see that the effect of the economy on governing parties, while the correlation exists, is not statistically significant and can be explained by other variables. Thus hypothesis 10 is rejected.

Discussion

Based on our research, we can finally reach some conclusions on the factors that have affected European elections in the past 45 years.

Influence on governing parties (hypothesis 1 and 2): Findings show that parties in national government experience losses in European elections, with a more pronounced impact on those parties that lead the government compared with their junior coalition partners. The lead parties in national governments have a loss of 4.18 percentage points, while their junior partners have a loss of 2.72 points. This confirms the theory that European elections penalise national incumbents.

Impact of the national electoral cycle (hypothesis 3): European elections are scheduled for every 5 years, meaning they fall in different parts of the national cycles in each country. Findings show that the closer the European elections fall in the mid-cycle the heavier the effects on government parties are. This is consistent with the literature that shows that the electorate evaluates more negatively the government around the mid-cycle.

Smaller and newer parties (hypothesis 4 and 5): Smaller and newer parties perform better, confirming our expectations that voters use the European elections to experiment with options they might not feel comfortable with in national elections.

Parties representing minorities (hypothesis 6): Parties that represent ethnic, cultural and linguistic minorities are, according to the literature, expected to perform better in European elections, yet we have not found this to be statistically relevant in our model, meaning that such performance might be explained by other factors, like the fact that they are smaller parties or opposition parties.

Differential turnout (hypothesis 7): As differential turnout grows, the difference between the general electorate of the European elections and the national elections also grows. Yet we have not found this to be a relevant factor in explaining the vote change between national and European elections.

Strong position on European integration (hypothesis 8): Parties with a strong position on European integration, be it positive or negative, have better results in European elections. This shows that the salience of European issues in European elections is also existing, making it not simply a second-order election but also an election with an arena of its own.

Economic effect (hypothesis 9): We had expected that as the economic performance, measured through GDP growth, worsens so would the governing parties results, yet this has not been confirmed. While there is a correlation, we have not found it to be statistically significant.

Conclusion

We've started this dissertation with a simple question: What are the factors that affect party performance in European elections? Based on a new dataset of 45 years of European elections, bringing together data from diverse sources, we have found several factors to answer this question based on the existing literature.

We have found that being in the national government at the time of the national elections has a big impact on the performance of parties. We have found that the party that holds the leadership of the national government loses, holding all other variables constant, 4.18 percentage points, while its junior coalition partners lose 2.72 points. This shows how European elections are used by voters to show their dissatisfaction with their national government. We have also found that this impact is higher when the European elections happen to occur near the midpoint of the national cycle.

As voters leave governing parties, they vote not only to the existing opposition but also to new parties that had not run in the previous national election. We have found a very strong performance of new parties, with a 11 percentage point growth for such parties holding all other variables constant. We have equally found that smaller parties have a 4 percentage point growth, when holding other variables constant.

Finally, we also confirmed that parties with a strong position on European integration increase their performance. This shows that genuine debates over European construction also affect the European elections.

This work involved a complete database of 45 years of elections, collecting data from different sources. Further work can be done to deepen this database and reach even more detailed knowledge of the factors that impact European elections. As we have said in the early parts of this work, European elections lack the forecasting tools that national elections usually have. A deeper research into these factors can allow such tools to be built.

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Appendix I: National election authorities

Austria	Bundesministerium Inneres (bmi.gv.at)
Belgium	IBZ (resultatselection.belgium.be)
Bulgaria	Central Electoral Commission (cik.bg)
Croatia	State Electoral Commission (izbori.hr)
Cyprus	Ministry of Interior (moi.gov.cy)
Czechia	Czech Statistical Office (volby.cz)
Denmark	Danish Statistics (dst.dk)
Estonia	Election Authority (valimised.ee)
Finland	Ministry of Justice - Information and Result Service (vaalit.fi)
France	Ministry of the Interior (interieur.gouv.fr)
Germany	Federal Returning Officer (bundeswahlleiterin.de)
Greece	Ministry of the Interior (ypes.gr)
Hungary	National Election Office (valasztas.hu)
Ireland	Government of the Republic of Ireland (gov.ie)
Italy	Court of Appeal (cortedicassazione.it)
LV	Central Electoral Commission(cvk.lv)
LT	Central Electoral Commission (vrk.lt)
LU	Government of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg (public.lu)
MT	Government of Malta (electoral.gov.mt)
NL	Electoral Council (verkiezingsuitslagen.nl)
PL	National Electoral Commission (wybory.gov.pl)
PT	Electoral National Commission (cne.pt)
RO	Central Electoral Office (bec.ro)
SK	Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic (volbysr.sk)
SI	National Electoral Commission (volitve.dvk-rs.si)
ES	Ministry of the Interior (infoelectoral.interior.gob.es)
SE	Election Authority (resultat.val.se)

Appendix II: Place in the national cycle of each European election by country

	1979	1984	1989	1994	1999	2004	2009	2014	2019	2024
BE	9.6%	52.2%	30.3%	51.0%	81.3%	21.5%	39.9%	79.0%	100.0%	100.0%
DK	57.9%	10.7%	27.5%	87.3%	31.2%	64.1%	39.2%	67.3%	98.5%	40.1%
FR	24.5%	59.8%	20.2%	24.2%	40.7%	39.9%	39.5%	38.7%	38.7%	39.5%
DE	67.1%	32.1%	59.9%	88.2%	17.7%	43.2%	93.0%	16.8%	41.7%	67.6%
IE	49.4%	38.9%	58.1%	38.4%	50.3%	51.8%	50.9%	81.0%	81.0%	100.0%
IT	59.5%	19.6%	40.3%	5.3%	62.9%	61.8%	23.0%	24.9%	24.5%	34.1%
LU	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	99.7%	100.0%	100.0%	99.7%	11.9%	12.3%	13.4%
NL	40.7%	35.3%	61.4%	95.2%	21.9%	27.7%	50.7%	34.0%	43.9%	64.7%
GR	0	66.6%	100.0%	16.8%	68.1%	6.7%	43.2%	48.4%	92.1%	24.0%
PT	0	0	48.6%	67.1%	92.5%	56.1%	100.0%	74.3%	91.1%	6.2%
ES	0	0	74.6%	25.4%	82.0%	6.2%	31.2%	62.8%	1.9%	22.1%
AT	0	0	0	0	69.8%	31.1%	13.6%	13.0%	32.2%	94.0%
FI	0	0	0	0	5.8%	31.2%	55.6%	77.7%	100.0%	29.7%
SE	0	0	0	0	18.2%	43.6%	68.1%	92.1%	17.7%	43.6%
CY	0	0	0	0	0	61.0%	60.9%	60.2%	60.2%	60.6%
CZ	0	0	0	0	0	49.9%	75.3%	14.5%	39.9%	66.7%
EE	0	0	0	0	0	32.1%	56.5%	80.5%	5.8%	31.6%
HU	0	0	0	0	0	53.7%	79.1%	3.4%	28.3%	54.7%
LV	0	0	0	0	0	42.2%	66.6%	67.2%	15.9%	42.3%
LT	0	0	0	0	0	92.1%	16.3%	40.3%	65.7%	91.6%
MT	0	0	0	0	0	23.4%	24.9%	24.2%	39.6%	44.2%
PL	0	0	0	0	0	68.1%	40.9%	65.7%	89.7%	16.3%
SK	0	0	0	0	0	43.2%	74.3%	55.2%	80.5%	17.3%
SI	0	0	0	0	0	91.6%	17.7%	61.8%	24.5%	53.4%
RO	0	0	0	0	0	0	12.9%	36.4%	61.4%	87.7%
BG	0	0	0	0	0	0	98.8%	25.9%	54.2%	29.7%
HR	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	61.8%	67.6%	3.6%

Appendix III: Turnout per European election by country

	1979	1984	1989	1994	1999	2004	2009	2014	2019	2024
BE	91.4%	92.1%	90.7%	90.7%	91.0%	90.8%	90.4%	89.6%	88.5%	89.0%
DK	47.8%	52.4%	46.2%	52.9%	50.5%	47.9%	59.5%	56.3%	66.1%	58.2%
FR	60.7%	56.7%	48.8%	52.8%	46.8%	42.8%	40.6%	42.4%	50.1%	51.9%
DE	65.7%	56.8%	62.3%	60.0%	45.2%	43.0%	43.3%	48.1%	61.4%	65.0%
IE	63.6%	47.6%	68.3%	44.0%	50.2%	59.0%	57.6%	52.4%	49.7%	50.6%
IT	85.7%	82.5%	81.1%	73.6%	69.7%	71.7%	65.1%	57.2%	54.5%	48.3%
LU	88.9%	88.8%	87.4%	88.5%	86.6%	91.3%	90.8%	85.5%	84.1%	82.3%
NL	58.1%	50.9%	47.5%	35.7%	30.0%	39.3%	36.8%	37.3%	41.9%	46.2%
GR	0	77.2%	80.0%	71.2%	70.3%	63.2%	52.5%	59.3%	58.7%	41.4%
PT	0	0	51.1%	35.5%	39.9%	38.6%	36.8%	33.7%	30.7%	36.6%
ES	0	0	54.7%	59.1%	63.0%	45.1%	44.9%	43.8%	60.7%	46.4%
AT	0	0	0	0	49.4%	42.4%	46.0%	45.4%	59.8%	56.3%
FI	0	0	0	0	30.1%	39.4%	40.5%	39.1%	40.8%	40.4%
SE	0	0	0	0	38.8%	37.9%	45.5%	51.1%	55.3%	53.4%
CY	0	0	0	0	0	72.5%	59.4%	44.0%	45.0%	58.9%
CZ	0	0	0	0	0	28.3%	28.2%	18.2%	28.7%	36.4%
EE	0	0	0	0	0	26.8%	43.9%	36.5%	37.6%	37.7%
HU	0	0	0	0	0	38.5%	36.3%	29.0%	43.6%	60.6%
LV	0	0	0	0	0	41.3%	53.3%	30.1%	33.5%	33.8%
LT	0	0	0	0	0	48.4%	21.0%	47.4%	53.5%	29.0%
MT	0	0	0	0	0	82.4%	78.8%	74.8%	72.7%	73.0%
PL	0	0	0	0	0	20.9%	24.5%	23.8%	45.7%	40.7%
SK	0	0	0	0	0	16.9%	19.6%	13.1%	22.7%	34.4%
SI	0	0	0	0	0	28.4%	28.4%	24.5%	28.9%	41.7%
RO	0	0	0	0	0	0	27.7%	32.4%	51.2%	52.4%
BG	0	0	0	0	0	0	38.9%	35.8%	32.9%	33.6%
HR	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	25.2%	29.9%	20.5%

Appendix IV: Differential turnout per European election by country

	1979	1984	1989	1994	1999	2004	2009	2014	2019	2024
BE	-3.6%	-2.5%	-2.6%	-9.3%	0.4%	-0.8%	-0.7%	0.3%	0.1%	0.6%
DK	-40.7%	-35.8%	-39.3%	-29.6%	-35.3%	-39.0%	-26.8%	-31.1%	-19.8%	-25.9%
FR	-22.1%	-13.6%	-16.9%	-16.2%	-21.2%	-21.7%	-19.8%	-14.8%	1.4%	4.3%
DE	-25.0%	-32.3%	-22.0%	-17.7%	-37.0%	-36.1%	-34.4%	-23.4%	-14.8%	-11.4%
IE	-12.7%	-25.3%	-5.0%	-24.5%	-15.7%	-3.5%	-9.5%	-17.5%	-15.4%	-12.1%
IT	-5.0%	-5.5%	-7.8%	-12.7%	-13.2%	-9.7%	-15.5%	-18.0%	-14.9%	-15.5%
LU	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.2%	0.1%	-0.6%	-0.2%	-5.6%	-5.6%	-4.9%
NL	-30.0%	-30.1%	-38.3%	-43.1%	-43.3%	-40.8%	-43.6%	-37.2%	-40.0%	-31.6%
GR	0.0%	-4.3%	-0.3%	-8.0%	-6.1%	-13.4%	-21.6%	-3.2%	2.5%	-12.4%
PT	0.0%	0.0%	-20.5%	-32.2%	-26.4%	-22.9%	-27.5%	-24.4%	-25.1%	-23.4%
ES	0.0%	0.0%	-15.8%	-17.3%	-14.3%	-30.5%	-28.9%	-25.1%	-11.0%	-20.2%
AT	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	-36.6%	-41.8%	-32.8%	-29.5%	-20.2%	-19.3%
FI	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	-35.1%	-27.3%	-24.5%	-28.2%	-28.0%	-32.3%
SE	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	-42.5%	-42.3%	-36.5%	-33.6%	-31.9%	-30.8%
CY	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	-17.6%	-29.6%	-34.7%	-21.8%	-6.9%
CZ	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	-29.6%	-36.2%	-41.2%	-32.1%	-28.9%
EE	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	-31.4%	-18.0%	-27.0%	-26.1%	-25.9%
HU	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	-32.0%	-31.5%	-32.8%	-26.1%	-9.0%
LV	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	-35.7%	-7.7%	-29.3%	-21.0%	-25.6%
LT	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	-10.3%	-27.6%	-5.6%	2.8%	-18.8%
MT	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	-14.6%	-14.5%	-19.0%	-19.4%	-12.7%
PL	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	-25.3%	-29.3%	-25.1%	-5.2%	-33.7%
SK	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	-53.1%	-35.0%	-45.8%	-36.7%	-34.0%
SI	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	-41.7%	-34.7%	-41.1%	-23.7%	-29.2%
RO	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	-11.5%	-9.3%	11.7%	20.0%
BG	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	-16.8%	-16.7%	-19.7%	-7.0%
HR	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	-31.0%	-22.7%	-26.0%