

**Strategic Non-Voting
in European Parliament Elections**

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1. Overview

Participation in European Parliament elections is low, and increasingly so over the five elections since 1979. While considerable research effort has been invested to explore the causes of the meagre turnout in European Parliament elections, the results so far are somewhat inconclusive. On the aggregate level, we know quite well that context matters. It does make a difference, of course, whether voting is compulsory or not; but it matters as well whether European Parliament elections are held concurrently with national first order (or other “more important” second order) elections or whether this is not the case; whether national first order elections are close or not; and whether or not voting is restricted to Sundays (see van der Eijk and Franklin 1996: chapter 19).

On the individual level things seem to be less clear. Traditional predictors of individual turnout in European Parliament elections (as well as in any other election) are hardly disputed: the effects of social integration, political mobilisation and party attachment, and what may be called the “decisiveness” of an electoral contest. One controversial question remains which carries, in addition, some political dynamite. This question is whether abstentions in European Parliament elections are strategic in that they carry a hidden political message -- like “I don't agree with the whole European business”, or “Why do we need a European Parliament. Let's get things right at home”, and so on. Euro-hostile non-voting in European Parliament elections is the core of what is here referred to as strategic non-voting.

The paper sets out to determine the relative importance of strategic non-voting in European Parliament elections as compared to what may be called sincere non-voting. Two factors conducive to strategic non-voting are actually distinguished, a. the (lack of) support for the EU (“I don't like Europe”), and b. the (lack of) policy appeal of political parties (“I do not have a reasonable choice”). Four categories of sincere non-voting are controlled for: (lack of) support for national politics; (lack of) parties' general appeal (“There is no party I could support”); involvement (“I don't care”); and (lack of) efficacy (“My vote does not matter”). Social structure is also considered as a more remote social factor which precedes the political ones.

2. Theoretical considerations

2.1. Strategic and sincere (non-) voting

Research on strategic voting¹ is restricted to matters of party choice. The question of electoral participation is usually not considered. Stephen Fisher, for example, in his work on Britain defines a strategic (he says: tactical) voter as “... someone who votes for a party they believe is more likely to win than their preferred party, in order to vote effectively.” (Fischer 2000:1) Referring back to McKelvey and Ordeshook (1972) and ultimately to Riker and Ordeshook (1968), Alvarez and Nagler go beyond that by adding characteristics of the voters' individual preference order and of the competitive con-

¹ Depending on the author, strategic voting is also called tactical or sophisticated voting.

text of the electoral decision. For them, a strategic voter chooses “... her second most preferred party if the more preferred party is unlikely to win and there is a close contest between the second and third ranked party.” (2000: 58)

In these and similar accounts, non-voting is not considered to be a choice option for “strategic” behaviour.² However, the act of voting is based on two decisions: (1) the decision to turn out, and (2) the decision to choose one (or more, depending on the electoral system) of the alternatives on offer.³ It is not very plausible why voters should restrict strategic considerations to only one of these two decisions. On the contrary, if (and to the degree that) voters behave strategically, there is every reason to expect them to do so both in view of turnout and party (or candidate) choice.

It is necessary, therefore, to expand existing notions of strategic behaviour so that they apply not only to party choice but to non-voting as well. This, in turn, requires some initial understanding of the motives and political aims which, by abstaining from the election, a strategic non-voter might pursue. The motives for strategic behaviour are related to the different outcomes of an election. For present purposes, it suffices to distinguish just the two most important kinds of outcome: policies and legitimacy.

Almost every election installs a new, or confirms the old, government. The government’s political agenda ultimately results in a set of governmental policies. This is the policy outcome of elections. Based on past performance (mostly for government parties) and on election programmes (mostly for opposition parties), voters form expectations about likely policy outcomes of an election. European Parliament elections are different from most other elections because they do not contribute to the formation of a government. The policy consequences of different outcomes of a European Parliament election are therefore difficult to determine (which is not to say that they would not exist).

General elections are not only a way to collectively decide about future policies.⁴ They also add to the legitimacy of the political regime. This is the second outcome of elections that is relevant here. Citizens’ participation in this democratic decision making process is often taken to indicate system support, while abstentions may signify two things – indifference as well as system opposition or alienation (Pappi 1996). The context of available choice options seems to matter here a great deal. The smaller the number of anti-system choice options available on the ballot are, *ceteris paribus*, the more likely abstention is to express system opposition.⁵

² Quite the contrary, rational choice-oriented scholarship still struggles with the question how voting can be understood as rational behaviour (see Aldrich 1993).

³ Some authors have suggested that voting implies just one decision, with not turning out as one of the options amidst the options provided by the parties on the ballot (e.g., Schram, 1989). As such perspectives have failed so far to provide new insights into the bases of turnout and party choice, we do not follow them.

⁴ Obviously, the term ‘decide’ should not be taken too literally. The causal chain from elections to government formation to policies is far from deterministic.

⁵ An obvious example are elections under communist rule, e.g. in the former GDR. Anti-system parties could not form and participate in general elections, and citizens opposing the regime could not directly express their preferences: they had to abstain in order to do so. A good number did, but official turnout figures were sugarcoated in order to mock mass support (Weber 1999).

Abstaining because of system opposition, or more generally due to the lack of appropriate choice options, is an indirect manifestation of political preferences which is in many ways comparable to what past research has called “strategic voting”. In what follows, we will apply this notion to the motives of non-voting in European Parliament elections and try assess how important strategic non-voting actually is in this particular type of election.

2.2. Euro-hostile abstentions in European Parliament elections

By politicians and the media alike, participation rates in European Parliament elections are seen as a crucial indicator of political support for the European Union. When the first direct election was called in 1979, the European Parliament launched a broad non-partisan mobilisation campaign in all member-countries of the Union (Reif 1985). Those efforts have been repeated in subsequent elections. In spite of this, turnout was widely considered disappointingly low in 1979, and has declined since. The trend generally points down. EU-wide participation dropped from some 60 percent in 1979 and 1984, to around 55 percent in 1989 and 1994, and down again to 50 percent in 1999 (Table 1).

— Table 1 about here —

This decline in turnout is probably less alarming than it might seem at first sight. At least to some degree, it is the consequence of successive enlargements of the Union with countries where turnout in first-order elections is (comparatively) low. The proportion of the EU citizenry “operating” under conditions of compulsory voting has declined.

In addition to compulsory voting, turnout is also affected by the timing of European Parliament elections relative to that of first-order national elections. Turnout is highest when European and national elections are held concurrently. It is lowest immediately after a first order national election, and increases slowly with the passing of the domestic electoral cycle. The effects of these factors are not immediately apparent, but they generate incomparabilities in ‘raw’ turnout figures.

When composition effects (originating in the variable proportion of citizens under compulsory voting) and timing effects (originating in the variable closeness of national first-order elections) are removed, participation in European Parliament elections is relatively stable (see e.g. Weßels and Schmitt 2000; Franklin 2001). But stable as “in reality” turnout may be, it is also particularly low. This brings us back to our question of strategic non-voting in European Parliament elections in general, and to that of Euro-hostile abstentions in particular.

Past research is somewhat inconclusive with regard to Euro-hostile abstentions. Schmitt and Mannheimer, in their 1991 analysis of the 1989 European Election Study data, find that participation in European Parliament elections is virtually unrelated to attitudes about European integration. In 1989 at least, electoral participation was

mostly a matter of habitual voting – “people went to the polls because they are used to doing so on election day.” (1991:50) Later analyses based on the same 1989 European Election Study included, in addition to individual level factors, systemic and contextual characteristics and their interaction with individual-level variables (see Franklin, van der Eijk and Oppenhuis 1996). While this strategy of research meant a big step forward (accompanied by a considerable raise of explained variance), attitudes about European integration and the European Community were again found to be unrelated with electoral participation.

Blondel, Sinnott and Svensson in their 1994 participation study conclude, by contrast, “voluntary Euro-abstention to be significantly affected by attitudes to European integration, by attitudes to the European Parliament, and by attitudes to the parties and candidates in the election, and that it is not significantly affected by second-order considerations and calculations” (Sinnott 2000: 70 summarising Blondel et al. 1998: 222-236). While this obviously conforms much better with conventional wisdom,⁶ the validity of those claims has to be questioned on methodological grounds.

Blondel et al. call *voluntary Euro-abstainers* those respondents who have, in the course of the interview, gave one or more of the following reasons for their abstention: “Lack of interest, distrust of or dissatisfaction with politics and politicians, lack of knowledge and dissatisfaction with the European Parliament electoral process.” (1998: 50). Two general objections can be made to such a *self-reporting intentions methodology*. First, survey respondents are themselves not the most reliable source of information about the causes of their behaviour.⁷ Second, the approach yields non-falsifiable (hence: non-scientific) propositions as it is impossible to assess whether the same causes (e.g., attitudes or opinions) exist among those who do not manifest the expected effect (i.e., who did in fact turn out). Moreover, Blondel et al. are guilty of ‘stacking the deck’. The category of respondents that was found to be “dissatisfied with the European Parliament electoral process” was to a large extent defined (i.e., selected) on the basis of this very characteristic

Although we are sceptical about the validity of the conclusions of Blondel *cum suis*, we still cannot rule out that things might have changed since we first explored the issue for the 1989 election. Over the last decade, the European Union has changed in many important ways. National sovereignty has been further transferred to Union authorities (like in the currency domain). The political consequences of EU policy making are more widely felt (like during the BSE crisis and the Hoof and Mouth Disease-epidemic). Last but not least, the dynamics of EU membership is a source of concern for many citizens (like the Eastward enlargement as it was approved in the Nice Treaty).

⁶ See e.g. J. Smith who notes that „Franklin, van der Eijk and Oppenhuis have challenged the sort of claims made in this section ...” and contends without further empirical evidence or argument that “... Despite their scepticism it seems that attitudes do have a part to play in explaining behaviour in EP elections.” (1999, p. 123, footnote 10)

⁷ Alvarez and Nagler (2000:61), reviewing the strategic voting literature, cast doubt on the validity of data gathered with the *self-reporting intentions methodology*: “Unfortunately, researchers using these survey questions do not appear to have seriously considered the quality of the survey responses obtained for questions asking for justifications of reported political behaviour.”

These and other developments might have changed the relation between mass political orientations towards the European Union and electoral behaviour in European Parliament elections. Euro-hostile abstentions in European Parliament elections might have become more numerous and hence, strategic non-voting in the EU more important than in the past. This is the question which we will try to answer in this paper.

3. Data base and strategy of analysis

3.1. The data base

The analyses reported below are based on the Voter Study of the European Election Study 1999 (EES'99). The data are obtained in a Union-wide, nationally representative mass survey administered by telephone (except in Italy) immediately after the European Parliament election of June 1999.⁸ Fieldwork was carried out by IPSOS (except in Italy). Overall, 13549 interviews were realised.⁹ The data are currently being made available for secondary analysis through the social science data archives.

3.2. The analytical scheme

In contrast to earlier work we will restrict our analytical efforts to individual level-relationships. As our research question does not involve multilevel relationships, no test for interactions of individual and systemic or contextual factors will be performed. In later versions of this work, we will go on and “dynamise” the analyses put forward here – that is, try to model the central predictors of electoral participation additionally (i.e., in addition to what we have done here) as a function of time – but this is not taken up here.

In contrast to other work, such as that by Blondel et al. (1998), we refrain from subdividing our sample of non-voters into voluntary and circumstantial. There is always a certain number of citizens who, due to personal circumstances, is prevented from participation. This is equally so no matter which election is called. Circumstantial non-voting, therefore, cannot add to our understanding of non-voting in European Parliament elections -- no epidemic diseases or other natural catastrophes are observed which could help explain the elevated abstention levels. Other methodologically inspired reasons aside, there is simply no good reason to continue on that road.

Having said what we will not do, we might as well say a few words about what we intend to do. Our dependent variable is participation in the 1999 European Parlia-

⁸ The EES'99 is the first in a row of now four studies which was conducted independently of the Eurobarometer surveys of the European Commission.

⁹ The numbers of interviews carried out vary between the countries, with some 1000 respondents interviewed in Denmark, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, and the United Kingdom, and some 500 interviews in the remaining countries except Luxembourg and Italy. In Luxembourg, 300 interviews were felt sufficient. In Italy, the questionnaire was administered by a telepanel and some 3700 interviews were realised.

ment election as reported in the post-electoral EES'99 survey.¹⁰ In addition to social-structural predictors of electoral participation,¹¹ six genuinely “political” constructs will be used as predictors:

1. support for EU politics²
2. support for national politics³
3. parties' general appeal⁴
4. parties' policy appeal⁵
5. political efficacy⁶ and
6. political involvement (see Graph 1).¹⁷

Our central indicator of strategic non-voting in European Parliament elections is *support for EU politics* (construct 1). We maintain that the stronger the (positive) correlation is between support for EU politics and participation in European Parliament elections, the more (Euro-hostile) strategic non-voting there is.¹⁸

The policy appeal of political parties (construct 4) is an additional and in a way more general indicator of strategic non-voting in European Parliament elections. If the policy appeal of political parties is very low, citizens may feel that there is no appro-

¹⁰ Measurements of electoral participation/abstention regularly suffer from the tendency of over-reporting (i.e., from the fact that people claim to have voted while they actually abstained). One of the reasons for this is the “social desirability” response set, i.e. that respondents say what they think is socially acceptable or desirable. We have tried to overcome this problem to some degree by lowering the “social desirability” threshold of having participated by the following wording of the participation question: “A lot of people abstained in the European Parliament election of June 10 while others voted. Did you cast your vote?” Answer categories are (1) yes (2) no (8) don't know (9) no answer. 8 and 9 are coded as missing. The data reveal that the “don't knows” are very few so that there is not need to reconsider (and possibly recode) these cases as likely non-voters. There are hardly any refusals either.

¹¹ These are age and sex of respondents, their education, church attendance, union membership, and urban-rural residence.

¹² This construct is based on the following indicators: EU membership is a good/bad thing (Eurobarometer trend variable); European integration has gone too far vs. should be pushed further (10 point scale); Preparedness for personal sacrifice if member-country in crisis; satisfaction with the functioning of EU democracy (4 point scale); satisfaction with national EU policy (4 point scale).

¹³ This construct is based on the following indicators: approval of the government's record to date; satisfaction with the functioning of democracy [in country] (4 point scale).

¹⁴ This class includes the following indicators: party attachment (4 categories from very close to not close to any party); vote probability for the most preferred of the relevant national parties (a value approaching 10 on a scale ranging from 1 to 10).

¹⁵ This construct is based on the following indicators: smallest distance to any of the nationally relevant parties in terms of European integration (see second indicator of footnote 9; this results in a value approaching 0 on a scale ranging from 0 to 9); smallest distance to any of the relevant national parties in terms of left and right (this as well results in a value approaching 0 on a scale ranging from 0 to 9); perceived existence or otherwise (dichotomous coding) of a national political party which is capable of dealing with the most important political problem (party competence).

¹⁶ This construct is based on the following indicators: politics is too complicated (4 point agree/disagree scale); vote does not matter (4 point agree/disagree scale).

¹⁷ This construct is based on the following indicators: attention to political news (4 point scale from none to a lot); interest in politics (4 point scale from not at all to very); attention to EU news (4 point scale from none to a lot); interest in EP election campaign (4 point scale from not at all to very).

¹⁸ Strong negative correlations indicate that Euro-hostile citizens are more likely to participate than to abstain, and *vice versa*. This can occur when Euro-critical forces are particularly successful in mobilising the vote, the result of which might be called sincere (Euro-hostile) voting.

priate “positive” choice option to them, causing them to abstain. A strong negative correlation of parties’ policy appeal with abstention should therefore signal a substantial amount of strategic non-voting. Parties’ policy appeal increases as the distance between the (non-) voter and the closest of the relevant national parties regarding European integration and left-right becomes smaller. We also included a measure of party competence to the effect that parties’ policy appeal is lacking if none of the national parties are felt competent to solve the political problem that the citizens regard as most important.¹⁹

Support for national politics (construct 2), *parties’ general appeal* (construct 3), *political efficacy* (construct 5) and *political involvement* (construct 6) are all in a way indicators of “straight” (or sincere) participation or abstention. There is no “hidden” political or substantive message behind the act of non-voting when people abstain due to a lack of mobilisation or involvement, party attachment, or political powerlessness and alienation. Among these four, past research has identified political involvement and parties’ general appeal as particularly strong predictors of electoral participation.

3.3. Strategy of analysis

We first report for each of the countries²⁰ in our survey the correlations between electoral participation and all independent variables we employ, which were listed in Figure 1, plus a few socio-demographic background variables. From these we can gauge to which extent the pattern of bivariate relationships provides a basis for expecting strategic nonvoting to occur.

— Figure 1 about here —

As our survey contains different numbers of cases for the different political systems of the EU, we decided to correct for this by weighting the respective country samples to an identical number of effective cases. In this way we avoid the risk that relationships that are found to be significant in one system fail to be so in another only for reasons of a smaller sample size.²¹

As a second step in our analyses, we focus only on the variables that pertain to the first construct identified in Figure 1: (lack of) support for EU politics. We assess the

¹⁹ See Schmitt (2001) on the extra-ordinary importance of party competence considerations for vote choices.

²⁰ In these (and subsequent) analyses we distinguish between the two parts of Belgium — Flanders and Wallonia— because of the differences in their respective party systems. For the same reason we should differentiate between respondents in Northern Ireland and in Britain. The number of respondents in Northern Ireland is too small however to be used as a separate sub-sample, so these cases were dropped from the analysis.

²¹ The weight used in our analyses is known in the datafile as ‘political weight 2’. It weights within each of the countries the data so that (weighted) distribution of electoral behavior in the 1999 European Parliament elections corresponds to the actual election result in that country. The specifics of this method have been reported elsewhere (Van der Eijk and Oppenhuis, 1991, and Appendix B in Van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996). After this, the resulting weight was multiplied with a country specific constant so that the effective number of cases after weighting is equal for each political system.

strength of this set of 5 variables in explaining electoral turnout. We do so by means of multivariate regression analysis, a technique quite appropriate as we do not assume any particular causal sequence between these explanatory variables themselves. The limitation of this analysis is that no other controls are employed, and that their true causal importance may therefore be overstated. Yet, this analysis provides us with an upper limit of the causal importance of these variables in accounting for differences in electoral participation.²²

In a third step of analyses we add relevant controls. The aim of this third step is to assess the relative explanatory importance of each of the constructs depicted in Figure 1, plus the socio-demographics. Here, however, we cannot use multivariate regression. That would assume equal causal status between all the independent variables, an assumption we do not subscribe to. It does not seem sensible, for example, that socio-demographics and EU-attitudes are equally proximal to electoral participation. Rather, it seems appropriate to look at attitudes as mediating (part of) the effect of background characteristics of respondents, in addition to adding explanatory power to them.²³ Therefore, we use causal analysis methods (structural equation modelling) instead.

The general structure of the model to be tested is depicted in Figure 2, which displays the theoretical expectations included in the model that is estimated for each of the political systems of the EU. From these models different kinds of results are important. First, whether or not the causal structure imposed on the models that are estimated is falsified by the structure of the empirical data; this is reflected in so-called ‘fit’ coefficients. Second, the extent to which all these variables in combination are able to explain individual level variation in electoral participation, i.e., explained variance. Third, the causal importance of each of the constructs shown in Figure 1. This is expressed in so-called (standardized) total effects. These express in a way similar to standardized regression coefficients the sum of the direct as well as indirect causal effects of each of the constructs on electoral participation.

—Figure 2 about here —

As the total number of independent variables is 24, a structural equation model becomes more complex than necessary for the research question we address here. We are *not* primarily interested in the relative importance of each and every individual variable —let alone in the specification of their interrelationships— but rather in the im-

²² One could wonder why no method of analysis was used that is specifically designed for dichotomous dependent variables, such as, e.g., multivariate logit methods. First of all we refrained to do so for presentational purposes, having found that such analyses do not lead to substantively different conclusions. More importantly, however, the logit model is of little use in the subsequent step of our analysis, causal modelling. Logit models are firmly embedded in the tradition of regression, in which all independent variables have equivalent causal status. The consequence thereof is that only direct effects on the dependent are estimated and that (ubiquitous) intercorrelations between the exogenous variables (that is, all independents in the logit model) may lead to the absorption of one variable’s effects into that of another one. These problems are avoided in causal analysis, albeit at the cost of not being puritan in the handling of the dichotomous dependent variable.

²³ Of course, attitudinal variables can also be seen as moderators of the effect of background characteristics on electoral participation. In this paper, however, we will not pursue this possibility.

portance of clusters of variables, each representing a construct as illustrated in Figure 1. Therefore, each of these constructs has been operationalised in the form of a single empirical measure. Each construct is measured by the optimal linear transformation and addition of the variables involved. This is obtained by taking the predicted value of the dependent variable (electoral participation) from a multivariate linear regression with only the variables pertaining to a single construct. In contrast to methods such as factor analysis, this ensures that *all* explanatory power of this set of variables is retained. All constructs have been measured in this way, as well as the entire set of socio-demographic background variables.

4. Findings

4.1 Bivariate relationships

In Table 2 we present for each of the political systems of the EU the bivariate correlation between electoral participation on the one hand and each of the independent variables on the other hand. For presentational purposes, correlations not significant at the .05 level were omitted. The independent variables have been ordered according to the construct or cluster they belong to.

—Table 2 about here —

By looking at the rows of the table one sees immediately in how many of the systems each of these variables is significantly correlated with electoral participation. Three clusters stand out in this respect: political parties' general appeal, political involvement and political efficacy. With only a few exceptions, we find correlations of indicators of these constructs with electoral participation in all political systems under study.²⁴ Moreover, the signs of these correlations are all the same, and in the expected direction.

For the other clusters, we find considerable country specific differences. The “support for EU politics” variables, for example, are all quite strongly correlated with electoral participation in Sweden. In a number of countries only some of these variables show significant correlations. There, these correlations are also weaker than in Sweden. In five countries —Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg and Portugal— none of these variables is significantly correlated with electoral participation. The correlations from this cluster of indicators are almost all positive, which indicates that “supportive” attitudes towards the EU are more prevalent among voters than among non-voters. This seems to be in line with a hypothesis of strategic non-voting, motivated by anti-EU attitudes. Three coefficients are, however, negative, and indicate that sometimes Eurosceptics of one kind or another are more, not less, prevalent among those who turn out to cast their vote. Obviously, contextual differences, such as the way in which

²⁴ Although the EU has 15 member states, we report on 16 systems, because we distinguish within Belgium between Flanders and Wallonia.

political parties are aligned with these attitudes have to be taken into account to understand these differences. Although we will not do such analyses in this paper, the mere fact that in Britain and (to some extent) in Flanders it are the Europhiles that are more prone to abstain should serve as a warning against hasty conclusions that abstention can only be motivated by a *lack* of support for the EU.

The construct “support for national politics” appears everywhere to be of limited importance at best. In 10 countries neither of the two variables involved shows any significant correlation, and in the remaining countries the significant correlations are weak (with the exception of —again— Sweden where the correlation of electoral participation with (lack of) satisfaction with democracy in the country is of medium strength).

The variables measuring “parties’ policy appeal” are also only weakly related to electoral participation, and quite differently so in the various political systems. As the construct is related to contextual phenomena such as the format of the party competition in the different political systems, the differences we find between the systems do not come as a surprise. What is surprising, however, is the general weakness of these correlations.

The cluster of socio-demographics also shows considerable country differences. Age is almost everywhere significantly related to electoral participation. Most often this correlation is negative, but in three systems it is positive. All correlations with education are positive, but in 7 of the 16 systems education is *not* significantly related to participation. Similar remarks can be made about the other background variables. Interesting as these differences may be, they are not central to our research question in this paper. The main reason for looking at these variables at all, is to use them as controls in later analyses.

4.2 EU-attitudes and electoral participation

The bivariate correlations presented in Table 2 do not tell us how much of the variance of electoral participation can conceivably be explained by sets of variables. In this section we focus on the set of 5 indicators that make up the construct “(lack of) support for EU politics”, one of the “usual suspects” in political and journalistic interpretations of low turnout in European elections. In academic circles the importance of these attitudes is contested, as discussed earlier in this paper.

Table 3 reports a multiple regression in each of the political systems, in which electoral participation is the dependent variable and the 5 different EU-attitudinal variables are used as independents. In this table, the systems are ordered on the basis of the variance that is explained by these variables (bottom row: adjusted R^2). Inspection of this table leads to the following conclusions.

— Table 3 about here —

First and foremost, the extent to which voting or abstention can be explained by support (or lack thereof) for the EU is extremely limited in most of the EU-systems. In 6 systems there is no significant contribution whatsoever to explaining variance in participation. In no less than 11 out of 16 systems, R^2 falls below .025. This includes such countries as Britain and Denmark, where Euroscepticism (possibly even Europhobia) is very strong and possibly dominant, as well as traditionally Europhile systems such as Italy and Luxembourg. In all systems but one, the explained variance is less than 5 percent, and that is an upper limit as controls for additional or rivalling explanations have not been included. The only real exception to this *pervasive marginality* of the effect of EU-support is Sweden. More than anywhere else in the EU, electoral participation may be (partly) explained by support or lack of support for the EU.

A second conclusion to be drawn from Table 3 is that of the 5 variables involved, one stands out in terms of the number of systems where it reaches significance. The willingness to sacrifice some of one's own wealth to help another country in the EU experiencing economic difficulties shows a significant regression coefficient in 7 systems (plus 2 borderline cases). This variable relates more directly than other ones to respondent's attachment to a EU-wide political community.

As already discussed, the degree to which electoral participation can be explained by EU-support may be different than indicated in Table 3, as no controls have been included in these analyses for potentially rivalling explanations of voting and abstention. To the extent that these effects merely mirror spurious correlations, they are overstated. In principle, they can also be under-stated, namely in the case of spurious zero-correlations, a rare but not impossible phenomenon. Their importance as shown here is not affected when they are an intermediate variable in a causal chain leading towards electoral participation.

4.3. Causal effects of the different constructs

The explanatory power of the constructs shown in Figure 1, and of the cluster of socio-demographic background variables has each been captured in a single variable, using the method described in section 2.3. With the resulting 7 independent variables and electoral participation as the dependent one, a series of causal models (structural equation models) has been estimated, using the hypothesised direction of potential effects that was depicted in Figure 2.

A first question to be addressed with this kind of modelling is whether or not the empirical observations contradict the hypothesised model, that is, the total set of hypothesised effects. This is indicated by so-called fit coefficients, which are reported in the bottom rows of Table 4. The value of these coefficients is in each case satisfactory, which implies that empirical observations did not falsify the assumptions of causal effects implied in the model, and no significant portions of covariance between the variables are left unaccounted.²⁵

²⁵ This does not exclude the possibility that other models, with different assumptions about the direction of causal processes, are also not falsified by the data.

— Table 4 about here —

The next question that we can address with the analyses reported in Table 4, is how well they explain electoral participation. In Table 4 we ordered the political systems again on the basis of explained variance. This order is different than that in Table 3, a difference that is caused by the inclusion of other constructs and variables that contribute to the explanation of voting and abstention. The explanatory power of the same set of independent variables varies considerably between the political systems of the EU. Greece ranks lowest, with a mere 6.7% explained variance, Sweden ranks highest with 30.9%. Why these differences? The coefficients of the independent variables may help elucidate these contrasts.

In a EU-wide perspective, three constructs or clusters stand out as the most powerful: social structure, political involvement, and parties' general appeal. The first of these, social structure, has by far the weakest (but still significant) effects in those systems where voting is compulsory (Belgium — Flanders and Wallonia— and Luxembourg), or where a kind quasi-compulsory regime is in place (Italy, Greece).

This underscores the observation by Franklin et al. (1996) that system characteristics can constrain the playing room for individual level factors when it comes to electoral participation. It also confirms the expectation of Verba, Nie and Kim (1978) that compulsory voting diminishes the effect of social inequality on political participation. In line with the reduced impact of social structure under conditions of (semi-)compulsory voting, we also see that in these same systems the effect of involvement is much weaker than elsewhere. So, the differences between systems in terms of the explanatory power of the model are at least in part a direct consequence of the limited opportunity for some kinds of variables to exert the effects they would have when voting is a voluntary act and abstention is legitimate.

Of the other variables, efficacy and parties' policy appeal are the most important, although their effects vary considerably between systems. Support (or lack thereof) for national politics or for EU politics are factors that do generate significant coefficients in only a few of the political systems. Support for national politics is the weakest of these two, which indicates that non-participation in European parliament elections can hardly be accounted for by citizens' alienation from their domestic political systems. Support for EU politics also fails to add significantly to explanations of voting or abstention in 9 out of 16 systems, and is significant, but weak in the other 7. It is strongest in Flanders, Luxembourg and Sweden, but even in those three systems inferior by far to the three most powerful factors: social structure, political involvement and general party support.

4. Summary and Perspectives

How much “strategy” is behind the motives for non-voting in European Parliament elections? Do people stay home because they disagree with the European Union and

European integration? Or is it the more general problem that non-voters do not have a “supportable choice option”, that is, (at least) one political party which expresses their policy concerns reasonably well? The answer, in a nutshell, is no. Nowhere does anti-EU sentiment play a major role in the decision to participate in, or abstain from European Parliament elections. Compared to that, the policy appeal of political parties is somewhat more important (in the Netherlands and in Wallonia in particular). But this second cluster of “strategic” motives of non-voting is not really pervasive either. Given the weight that is attributed to policy orientations in “economic” models of party choice, the limited impact of policy-based relative “choicelessness” on non-voting is actually quite surprising.

Among the individual-level constructs considered in the present study, social-structural locations are clearly the single most important predictor of electoral participation. It is the strongest standardised total effect in seven of our 16 political systems. General party support and political involvement together come in second, with four first ranks each. Strategic considerations – be it the Euro-hostile or the “choicelessness” variant of it – are clearly defeated, together with support for national politics and political efficacy.

This in a way is good news. Growing levels of abstention in European Parliament elections are not the result of alienation with the EU political system or hostility towards the politics of European integration. But there is a dark side as well. Due to the limited turnout, European Parliament elections do not contribute to the legitimation of the EU political system as much as they possibly could. And in the long run, low turnout figures might contribute to the erosion of political involvement and political support in more general terms. There is a danger of spill-over of apathy and disaffection to the politics at national and sub-national levels.

Having ruled out strategic non-voting as a major factor in explaining abstention in European parliament elections is one thing, a satisfactory explanation is quite another. A number of extensions of the analyses reported here should result in more satisfactory models, at least as far as explanatory power is concerned. First of all, low R^2 's are to some extent caused by local independence.²⁶ Some factors that impinge on voting versus abstaining are a constant within each of the political systems. They may have an “across-the-board” effect, which cannot be picked up in separate analyses for each of the systems. Therefore, a pooled analysis in which systemic and contextual explanatory factors are added to individual-level ones is necessary. In such an analysis we can also take into account the consequences of the timing of EP elections in terms of the domestic electoral cycle.

Pooled analyses may not add to our present account of within-system variance, but they are imperative for two reasons. First, understanding electoral participation in general has to take contextual factors into account, and this can best be done in a pooled analysis. Secondly, a pooled analysis offers unique possibilities for investigat-

²⁶ It must be recognized, however, that R^2 is an often misleading measure for the explanatory power. It seems almost impossible to eradicate the notion that the magnitude of this coefficient should be gauged in terms of the interval between 0 and 1. This is incorrect, however. Empirical distributions of categorical variables generate an upper limit that R^2 can attain that is usually far below 1.

ing the extent to which an explanation has to be “localised”, that is, whether the explanation is in some ways unique for specific systems. Residual analysis and the exploration of interactions between contextual variables (or country dummies) and individual-level variables are powerful tools to this end. Attention to local factors in addition to those that operate in a uniform way across systems is necessary, not so much as an ‘academic’ enterprise, but particularly to understand why Sweden is somewhat of an outlier amidst the other EU-systems.

A second kind of extension of our present analysis involves interactions involving subgroups. Generational differences and differences in political sophistication come immediately to mind when thinking about the possibility that the specification of an explanatory model may be different for subgroups of respondents

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Table 1
Participation in European Parliament Elections 1979-1999
 (percentages)

	1979	1984	1989	1994	1999
Austria				68 ³	49
Belgium	92	92	91	91	90
Denmark	47	52	46	53	50
Finland				60	30
France	61	57	49	53	47
Germany	66	57	62	60	45
Greece	79¹	77	[80]	71	70
Ireland	[63]	48	[68]	44	[51]
Italy	86	84	82	75	71
Luxembourg	[89]	[87]	[87]	[89]	[86]
Netherlands	58	51	47	36	30
Portugal		72 ³	51	36	40
Spain		69 ²	55	59	[64]
Sweden				42 ³	38
UK	32	33	36	36	23
EU-9	62				
EU-10	64	59			
EU-12		61	56	57	
EU-15				57	50

Sources: <http://europa.eu.int>; Statens Offentliga Utredningar 2000; Grundberg, Perrineau and Ysmal 2000. Notes: (1) election of 1981 (2) election of 1987 (3) election of 1995. Bold figures signify elections under compulsory voting; figures in [] indicate that national elections were held concurrently with European Parliament elections.

Table 2
Correlates of Participation in European Parliament Elections, 1999

	Au	Be F	Be W	De	Fi	Fr	Ge	GB	Gr	Ir	It	Lu	Ne	Po	Sp	Sw
<i>support for EU politics</i>																
EU membership bad or good	.110	-.138	.069	.078	.102		.131								.116	.270
integration gone too far vs. push further	.081		.121		.113		.142						.130			.245
personal sacrifice to help other EU country	.145	.102		.088	.190	.089	.191						.186			.198
satisfaction with EU democracy		.078							-.097						.090	.145
satisfaction with national EU policy			.130		.096		.119	-.082								.188
<i>support for national politics</i>																
approval of government record to date		-.131														.084
satisfaction with democracy in country							.096		.078	.078					.108	.202
<i>parties' general appeal</i>																
party attachment strength	.223	.128		.158	.312	.207	.182	.130	.155	.147	.250	.074	.274	.335	.183	.282
highest ptv score given	.217	.302		.106	.221	.203	.163	.208	.161	.231	.311	.219	.184	.316	.259	.256
<i>parties' policy appeal</i>																
distance of closest party on integration scale			.082			-.117										
distance of closest party on left-right scale			-.134			-.172						-.090	-.083	-.158	-.076	
no party felt competent to solve MIP	-.125						-.143		-.103	-.076	-.237			-.121	-.120	
<i>political efficacy</i>																
Politics too complicated	-.098		-.151	-.191	-.109	-.101	-.168	-.144		-.086		-.099	-.166			-.235
Vote does not matter	-.094	-.159	-.245	-.119	-.206	-.122	-.178	-.156		-.088			-.256	-.180	-.160	-.195
<i>political involvement</i>																
attention to news about politics	.183	.226	.120	.286	.275	.220	.251	.248	.076	.206	.169	.130	.280	.188	.152	.365
interest in politics	.159	.142	.178	.312	.299	.178	.268	.248	.137	.096	.199	.196	.273	.239	.134	.317
attention to news about Europe	.162	.118	.142	.230	.119	.218	.189	.268	.057		.147		.122			.283
interest in election campaign	.260	.135	.148	.432	.393	.238	.279	.336		.285	.228		.377	.328	.278	.386
<i>socio. demographics</i>																
sex		.079						-.099								
age	-.276	.162	.122	-.258	-.174	-.158	.191	-.190	-.147	-.239		-.149	-.194	-.121	-.216	-.261
education	.158			.085	.114	.165	.084	.180		.122				.074		.072
union membership		-.112			.098		-.100							-.096		.101
church attendance		-.100	.108	.160	.124	.159		.107		.255			.175		.185	.158
rural-urban residence				-.070		.079				-.183		-.071		-.134	-.084	.133

Source: *European Elections Study 1999*. Findings are based on weighted data (political weight 2). Figures are bivariate Pearson's correlation coefficients. Coefficients not significant at the .05 level are not reported.

Table 3

Electoral Participation and Attitudes Towards European Integration and the EU

Results from Multiple OLS Regressions (figures are unstandardised regression coefficients and significance levels)

	Sw	BF	Ge	Ne	Fi	BW	Au	De	Sp	GB	Fr	Lu	It	Po	Gr	Ir
constant	-.082 .312	.908 .000	.172 .096	.067 .584	.058 .538	.870 .000	.382 .000	.530 .000	.549 .000	.383 .000	.587 .000	.903 .000	.764 .000	.636 .000	.799 .000	.600 .000
EU membership bad or good thing	.092 .002	-.057 .000	.034 .358	-.025 .537	.014 .619	.003 .821	-.043 .159	.058 .043	.080 .006	.025 .376	.037 .286	.030 .210	-.009 .783	-.023 .622	.015 .489	.020 .607
personal sacrifice for member country	.081 .058	.065 .001	.144 .000	.147 .000	.211 .000	-.002 .928	.115 .005	.073 .063	-.010 .742	.072 .073	.079 .045	-.041 .045	.058 .145	-.009 .841	.010 .700	.008 .848
satisfaction with EU democracy	.006 .823	.039 .001	-.035 .203	-.050 .047	-.034 .269	-.020 .115	-.003 .276	-.029 .268	.039 .095	-.046 .055	-.010 .752	-.001 .952	.005 .841	.004 .902	.006 .691	.009 .771
integration ,too far' or ,push further'	.019 .025	.009 .016	.013 .090	.018 .035	.012 .182	.007 .017	.000 .974	.007 .404	-.008 .168	-.012 .147	-.003 .728	-.002 .538	-.004 .628	-.008 .194	.001 .804	-.001 .930
satisfaction with na- tional EU policy	.063 .026	-.016 .193	.049 .079	.037 .173	.041 .210	.033 .004	.015 .580	-.071 .014	.016 .438	-.036 .153	-.028 .274	.016 .297	.028 .221	.026 .382	.009 .537	-.040 .218
adjusted R2	.094 .000	.049 .000	.044 .000	.041 .000	.037 .000	.022 .001	.019 .002	.016 .006	.014 .014	.012 .027	.004 .201	.002 .286	-.001 .453	-.003 .681	-.004 .753	-.005 .895

Source: *European Elections Study 1999*. Findings are based on weighted data (political weight 2). All independent variables are coded such that the higher values are pointing in a Euro-positive direction.

Table 4

Determinants of Participation in the European Parliament Elections of 1999

Standardized Total Effects (STEs), Explained Variance and Model Fit Indices

	Sw	Fi	Ne	Po	Ir	BF	De	GB	Sp	Au	Ge	Fr	It	Lu	BW	Gr
support EU politics	.117	.082				.142		.089	.085					.132	.075	
support ntl politics	.089							.054								
parties' general appeal	.261	.300	.247	.359	.222	.383	.094	.171	.242	.246	.200	.219	.332	.197	.077	.163
political involvement	.354	.319	.281	.224	.197	.174	.412	.278	.201	.186	.247	.184	.103	.170	.196	.115
parties' policy appeal	.167	.089	.248	.131			.086		.083		.142				.203	
political efficacy	.100											.143		.106		
social structure	.312	.279	.257	.223	.380	.175	.235	.305	.281	.303	.271	.220	.102	.173	.171	.172
% explained variance	30,9	26,0	24,8	23,8	22,9	22,6	21,7	19,5	18,8	18,3	18,1	14,4	12,9	12,6	10,7	6,7
NFI (1)	.978	.987	.978	.938	.932	.997	.998	.955	.972	.974	.976	.937	.968	.955	.990	.947
NNFI (2)	1.000	.996	.996	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	.993	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000
CFI (3)	1.000	.999	.998	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	.998	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000

Source: *European Elections Study 1999*. The structural equations program used is EQS. Findings are based on weighted data (political weight 2). For the EU-wide analysis, sample sizes are additionally adjusted to the proportions of national electorates. (1) Bentler and Bonett's Normed Fit Index. (2) Bentler and Bonett's Non-normed Fit Index. (3) Comparative Fit Index. STEs >.05 are not reported.

Figure 1

Indicators, Constructs, and the Dependent Variable: The Analytical Scheme

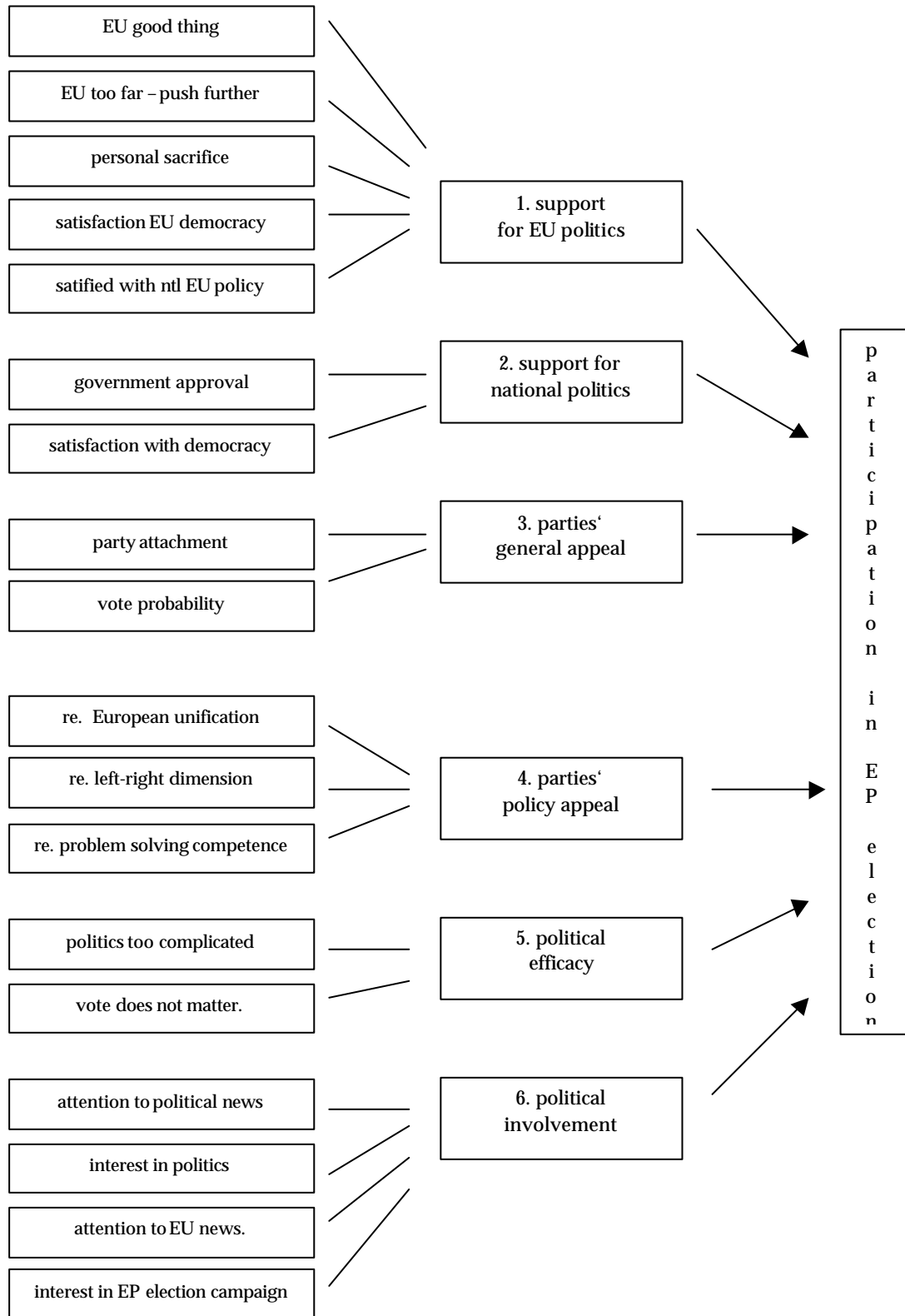


Figure 2

**Determinants of Electoral Participation in the 1999 European Election:
“Permissible” Arrows**

