The European Parliament Elections of June 2004:
Still Second-order? [1]

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Abstract

A quarter of a century ago the first series of European Parliament elections have been characterised as second-order national elections. A lot has changed since which might have had an impact upon this diagnosis. In this article I restate the central assumptions and predictions of the second-order elections model, and evaluate them against the outcome of the 2004 European Parliament election and a post-election survey. Surprisingly enough, the findings confirm the persisting second-order nature of EP elections for Western Europe. Things look very different, however, in the eight new Central- and East European member countries.

European Parliament elections are second-order national elections

When democracies rest on a stable, consolidated party system, elections are all but independent events. This holds for consecutive elections in the same political arena, where the result of the last contest is usually a more or less close approximation of the outcome of the next. It also holds for elections at

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different levels of a political system where an election result at the main level tends to affect the outcome of elections at other levels. This is nothing new or extraordinary, as whole libraries of publications demonstrate: The result of US mid-term elections relate in a characteristic way to those of the preceding presidential election (Campbell 1966 (1960); Stimpson 1976; Campbell 1993). The same goes for German *Landtagswahlen* which are not a unitary mid-term event but scattered all over the federal legislative period. In the early years, their results used to follow the national electoral cycle rather closely (Dinkel 1977) while this connection, perhaps as a result of the complex and complicated process of German re-unification, seems to have weakened in the last decade or so (Schmitt & Reif 2003). To be sure, it does not take a federal system to establish a link between the results of elections at different levels. By-elections in Britain (Norris 1990), or sub-national elections in France (Bélanger 2004) and Portugal (Freire 2004) all seem to follow the same logic.

In an early article which today reads as an explorer in the then uncharted territories of "multi-level governance",[2] Karlheinz Reif and I have distinguished two interrelated classes, or types, of elections. One of them is generally perceived to be important, sometimes even very important (like, when the pre-electoral support of government and opposition is or seems to be almost equally strong, or when stark contrasts about major policy decisions are characterising the appeals of the contenders, or both); these are *first-order elections*. First-order elections decide who is in power and what policies are pursued. Every electoral system disposes of a first-order election. But everywhere there are other elections in addition. This other and broader class we have called *second-order elections.* They are perceived to be less important, because there is less at stake. Examples are not only the sub-national or partial elections some of which have been mentioned before, but also the supra-national election of the members of the European Parliament. For all member-countries of the European Union, the supra-national European Parliament election is an additional second-order national election (Reif & Schmitt 1980).

Because there is less at stake in second-order elections and in European Parliament elections more in particular, their results have been described to differ from first-order election results in a number of ways.

Participation is lower

A first difference is that, in second-order elections politicisation is low, and electoral mobilisation is lower than it would be in a first-order election. As a result, *electoral participation in European*

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[2] On multi-level governance see e.g. König et al., 1996; Kohler-Koch & Eising 1999; Hooghe & Marks 2001.

Parliament elections is predicted to be lower as well. This is the first hypothesis to be tested against the 2004 European Parliament election results.

Note that in this view low participation has nothing to do with EU scepticism or opposition towards the European Parliament and its policies (see Blondel et al. 1998 for an alternative view). Despite the (perhaps) inevitable journalistic lamentation in the days after European Parliament elections, we hold – and have shown repeatedly (Schmitt & Mannheimer 1991; Schmitt & van der Eijk 2003) – that low participation does not signal a crisis of legitimacy of the European Union. This is our second hypothesis which we will test by analysing aggregate and individual level data from the 2004 election.

Government parties lose

Another important difference between first- and second-order elections is that voters use the latter as a low-cost opportunity to voice their dissatisfaction with government parties. Reasons for dissatisfaction are ubiquitous: the likelihood of disappointing voters is much higher for parties in charge of government than for those in opposition. *National government parties will therefore do worse in European Parliament elections* than they have done in the previous, and will do in the following first-order election. This is our third hypothesis which we will test against the 2004 European Parliament election results.[3]

But there is more to government losses than this. Not only are national government parties expected to lose support in second-order elections compared to their previous first-order result. They are expected to lose in an "orderly" fashion. The order referred to is know as the (first-order) electoral cycle (e.g. Tufte 1975). According to this, government parties' popularity follows a cyclical pattern: after a short period of post-electoral euphoria in which they enjoy an even higher rate of popular approval, their support more or less drastically declines until after midterm in order to increase again towards the end of the cycle (to some unknown level).[4] If this holds true, *government parties losses will vary according to the relative position of the EP election in the respective first-order electoral cycle*. This is the fourth hypothesis which we will test against the 2004 European Parliament election results.

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[3] We distinguish two sources of government party losses in European Parliament elections. One is vote switching: some first-order government voters will desert and vote for one of the opposition parties. The other is differential mobilisation: first-order government voters are expected to abstain in greater numbers than first-order opposition voters. We know from the 1999 European Elections Study that differential mobilisation is the stronger source of government parties' losses: many more first-order government voters (41% on average) than opposition voters (29% on average) abstain (see Marsh 2005: Table 3.2).
[4] There are at least two different explanations of this, one economic and one political. The economic variant uses the analogy of the business cycle and proposes that governments tend to deal with unpopular legislation (which tends to harm the interests of many voters) early in the period and come up with all sorts of electoral gifts towards the end of it, when the next election draws close (e.g. Kirchgässner 1986). The political variant emphasises the evolution of electoral mobilisation which reaches a climax at election time only in order to melt down thereafter (e.g. Stimson 1976).

Big parties lose

A final difference between first- and second-order elections has to do with the motives of vote choice. Because there is less at stake in second-order elections, there is less reason to vote strategically – strategic voting being defined as supporting another than the most preferred party. Incentives for strategic voting are of course varying between electoral systems. If there is a general tendency, however, one is probably right to say that strategic voters, in case of doubt, will support larger parties due to their larger policy impact, instead of voting for their first preference for a smaller party. This phenomenon has been repeatedly referred to as "voting with the head" rather than "voting with the heart." *As strategic considerations do not play much of a role in European Parliament elections, this suggests that small parties do relatively better compared to first-order election results*. This is the fifth hypothesis which we will test against the 2004 European Parliament election result.

The EU is no longer what it was in 1979

All of these hypothesis relate to what we have called the "less-at-stake"- dimension of second-order elections. As they have been confirmed in a number of independent analyses (e.g. Marsh 1998), why should it pay to examine them again? Of course, any further corroboration should be able to stabilise our trust in the generality of the proposed explanatory model. But there are other reasons originating in the changing nature of the European Union and its parliament that might have affected the second-order nature of European elections.

The seemingly most trivial aspect of change is related to the geographical scope of what today is called the European Union. The number of member-countries has almost tripled, from 9 participating in the first direct election of 1979 to 25 participating in the sixth election of 2004.[5] From 1979 on, it took three rounds of enlargements to arrive where we are now – at a European Union which "re-unites" most of the historical and cultural Europe (e.g. Kühnhart and Rutz 1999). These three successive enlargements have changed the EU in a number of ways. Not only have they complicated EU decision-making and initiated a process of constitutionalisation and further parliamentarisation of the Union. They have also, the last or "East-ward" enlargement in particular, contributed to a growing heterogeneity of electoral systems involved in the election of MEPs : stable party systems based on

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[5] The European Community of 1979 already had experienced a first enlargement when Denmark, the UK and Ireland joined the original six.

(more or less) solid party alignments of its electorates are now coupled with consolidating party-systems and their highly volatile voters.[6]

In addition to the growing geographical reach of the Union, its policy scope has been amplified. When the ECCS began in 1952, there was hardly any policy authority allocated at the Union level of the European multi-level system of governance. Fifty years later, at the end of the 20th century, the Union is an important co-legislator, at a par with national legislatures. A series of expert judgements about the relative weight of "Europe" in the legislative process in 28 policy areas reveals that today, half of all significant legislation in these areas originates in Brussels rather than in Berlin or Bratislava or any other national capital (see Graph 1). In all of these cases, national legislatures only ratify, or rather adopt, ready-made EU-wide directives so that their national administrative apparatus can implement them.[7]

Graph 1

The Policy Scope of the European Union, 1952 - 2000
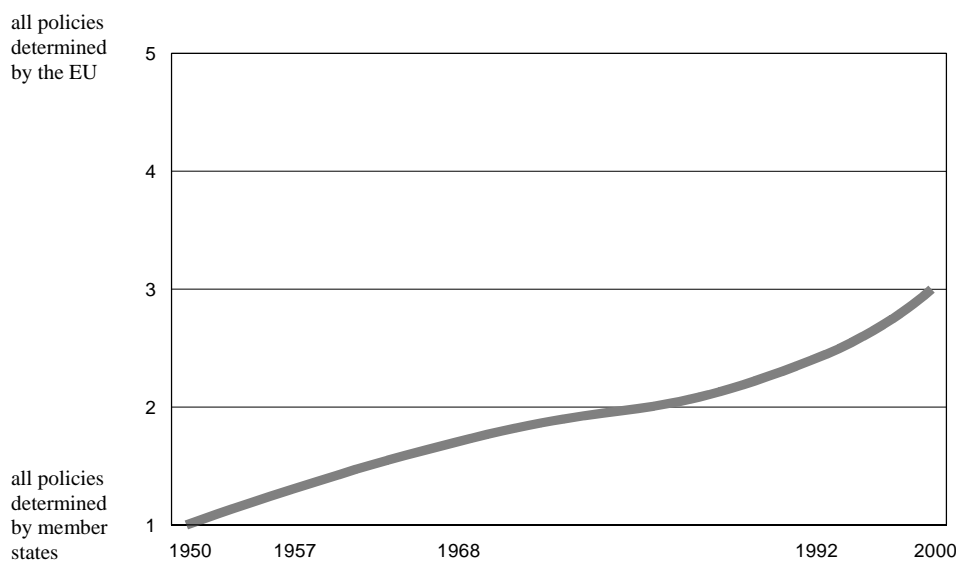
Note: The trend line indicates the average policy authority of the EU over 28 policy areas drawn from the economic, foreign, legal and constitutional, and social policy. Individual authority rankings are based on expert judgements by Lindberg and Scheingold 1970; Schmitter 1994; and Hooghe and Marks 2001; the raw figures are taken from Hooghe and Marks 2001: 187-189.

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[6] On the consolidation of East-European party systems and voter alignments see Hofferbert 1998; Birch 2001; also Mainwaring and Scully (1995) on what they call the "institutionalisation" of Latin American parties and party systems.

[7] Here is the cause of a relatively recent but probably accelerating legitimacy problem on the side of national parliaments. The electoral process that brings them into office does hardly recognise – let alone discuss and problematise – that there are limits to the authority of national parliaments of EU member-countries (and to the problem solving capacity of national politics more generally). See Steunenberg and Thomassen (2002) for a study addressing this kind of questions.

This growing policy authority of the EU level of European governance might well have affected the second-order nature of European Parliament elections. After all, what is at stake in European Union politics is no longer so limited. Moreover, over a series of successive EU treaties (the most recent ones in particular, i.e. those of Maastricht 1993; Amsterdam 1999; and Nice 2001) and a number of inter-institutional agreements, the powers of the European Parliament were consistently extended which could also have taken away some of the second-order nature of the election of its members.

In 2004 the Parliament is, together with the Council, involved in legislative acts *via* three distinct procedures (and a plethora of sub-procedures): consultation, co-operation and co-decision. The first is the one in which the parliament has the least to say; it is at the same time the one through which eighty percent of the EU-budget is spend mainly on matters of agricultural and structural policy making. The third is the most recent, it was established in the Treaty on the European Union (the Maastricht treaty) of 1993 and expanded in subsequent treaties. Only in this co-decision procedure the parliament cannot be overruled by the council: both institutions have to reach an agreement in order to co-legislate. If they don't, there will be no regulation. It is the "new" policy-domains that are subject to the co-decision procedure, like the common market, health, research, employment, crime, etc.[8]

The scope of the Union has been growing dramatically, both geographically and policy-wise. The powers of its parliament grew as well, some say exponentially, over the past ten years. If this has any bearing on European Parliament elections, it should lead to a decline of the second-order nature of it.

The political result of the European Parliament election of June 2004

In June 2004, 350 million citizens were called to elect the members of the sixth European Parliament. Of those, 58 million EU citizens had acquired voting rights only very recently through the "East-ward enlargement" of the EU and the accession of their countries on May 1, 2004. Many of those entitled to vote did not turn out. Looking at the European Union as a whole, electoral participation reached just 45,7% and was lower than in any of the five preceding elections. Participation was particularly low in the new member countries.

The main political result was that the Christian-conservative group turned out again strongest (see Appendix 1). As the group could even increase their share of members compared to the last parliament, it opposed the council preference (originally sponsored by France and Germany) for the Belgian liberal Jean-Luc Dehane as the future President of the Commission, and insisted on an alternative conservative candidate. The chairman of the group, the German Christian-democrat Hans-Gerd Pöttering,

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[8] International trade regulations are determined by the council alone, without any formal involvement of the parliament. See Maurer (2005) for a recent account addressing these questions.

claimed that this was imposed by the Draft of a Constitution for the European Union which stipulates that the President of the European Commission should be selected "in recognition of the result of the preceding election of the members of the European Parliament". After this intervention, it took a little while to identify a better fitting candidate in the person of the conservative prime-minister of Portugal, José Barroso, who then stepped down from his national offices in order to be able to accept the council nomination for President of the European Commission.

This alone could testify the competitive mood (in EU-institutional terms) of the newly elected parliament. But the struggle went on when Barroso's list of designated commissioners did not meet the consent of a majority of the house, this time spear-headed by the centre-left including the socialists, the greens and the liberals. In retrospect, one is tempted to believe that they could not stand the victory of the conservatives over the council and therefore had to try their own revolt which finally was successful when Baroso (in consultation with Pöttering) decided to not put his original proposal to a parliamentary vote. The result was that the incoming president had to go back to the council and negotiate about how to adjust the composition of his future commission to the various different requirements and tastes of the parliament. This led to the replacement of some candidates and to the re-allocation of future commissioners and portfolios in other cases. Only after these concessions, the new Commission was finally accepted by a majority of the members of the sixth directly elected European Parliament.

Still Second-Order?

A parliament as vigorous as this, could it result from a series of second-order elections which are mainly motivated by first-order rather than by European Union considerations? This is the question we will be pursuing in the following. Testing all of the hypothesis spelled out, we will compare the results of the 2004 European Parliament election in each member-country with those of the preceding first-order national – i.e. legislative – election .[9]

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[9] France is the only country for which it is not obvious what the preceding first-order national election actually is. In late spring 2002, the French elected the President of the Republic in two rounds, with Jospin (from the left) defeated in the first round, and Girac (from the right) and Le Pen (extreme right) competing in the second round. Girac was elected with a overwhelming majority stretching from the far-left to the (moderate) right. Legislative elections were held shortly thereafter, in which the presidential camp could secure a triumphant victory in a sort of honeymoon period after the presidential result. While this essentially characterises this legislative election as "second-order" – the power question had been answered before – it is still the most logical election to compare the European result to. For merely technical reasons of the electoral rule applied, it would be odd to compare the distribution of votes between two very uneven candidates in the second round of the presidential election with the European Parliament result. And after all, the result of the legislative election did only underscore what the true result of the preceding presidential election was (see for more detail Perrineau & Ysmal 2003; Cautrès & Mayer 2004).

Participation

It is one of the constituent elements of second-order elections that participation is lower than it would be if a first-order election was held. But low participation does not of itself indicate a lack of legitimacy: in second-order elections, it is merely a result of the characteristic lack of politicisation and electoral mobilisation. We will investigate these claims in three steps. First, we will relate the turnout rates of the 2004 European Parliament election to that of the preceding first-order election. Second, we will investigate aggregate data and see whether pro- or anti-EU-sentiments have any net effect on turnout levels. Results of aggregate data analyses may be misleading when transposed to the individual-level (e.g. Achen and Shively 1995). This is why we will present the results of a micro-level analysis of electoral participation in a third step. There, we will identify the net impact of EU attitudes on self-reported turnout controlled for a number of other constructs known to be related to turnout.

Graph 2 shows that participation was indeed lower in the European Parliament elections of 2004 than it was in the preceding first-order election. This holds for 22 of 25 electoral systems under study. The three exceptions are Ireland (where a referendum was held concurrently with the European Parliament election), and Belgium and Luxembourg (with compulsory voting and concurrent national or regional elections in addition. There are a few additional anomalies – i.e. better than average turnout – which one could refer to, like the somewhat elevated turnout in Lithuania (presumably due to a concurrent presidential election, first round), Italy (concurrent regional elections in large parts of the country), and Greece (post-electoral euphoria?). What also becomes very obvious is that a number of the new post-communist member-countries, among them Slovakia, Poland, and Estonia, did very poorly.

But these "punctual" explanations do not to lead very far. We therefore move on to a first more systematic inspection of the causes of relatively low or high turnout based on aggregate statistics (Table 1). Our dependent variable here is the proportion of those entitled to vote which has participated. Independent variables are – with one exception – variables that can describe the context of the act of voting. One of them is compulsory voting regulations; another is whether voting is restricted to Sundays; a third is whether a first-order election was held at the same day; and a fourth contextual variable is whether the election took place in a post-communist environment. A final variable summarising all peculiarities of the national electoral systems is the turnout in the last first-order election. All of these variables turned out

to significantly affect the national turnout rate of the European Parliament election of 2004 (Table 1).[10]

Graph 2
Participation in the EP election of 2004 was lower than in the preceding first-order national election
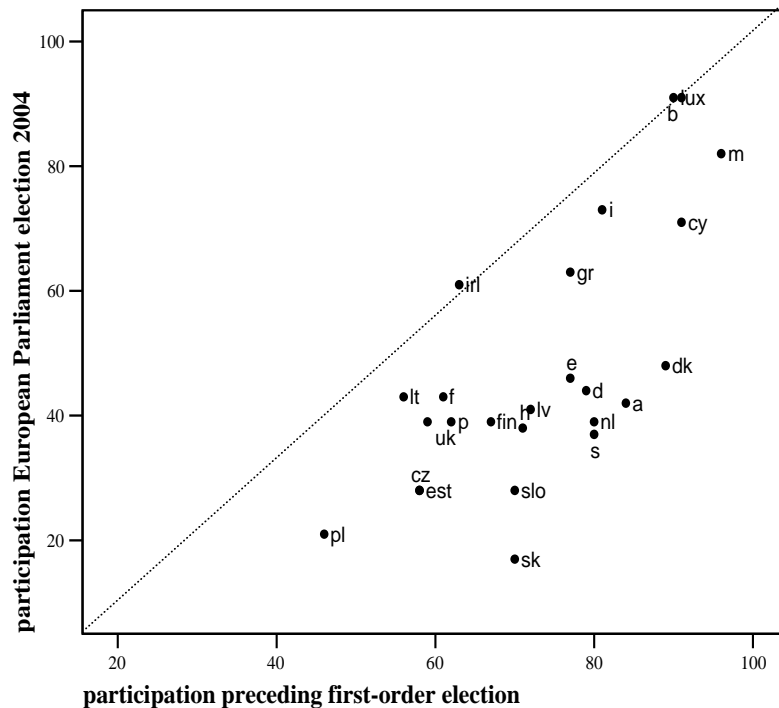
Compulsory voting is the strongest predictor of a higher than average turnout, which is hardly surprising. A post-communist environment, on the other hand, which stands for limited electoral experiences and underdeveloped norms of electoral participation deflates participation. Concurrent first-order elections indicate above-average mobilisation and strengthen participation. Sunday voting decreases the likelihood of participation (this is perhaps the only surprise in this regression analysis as conventional wisdom would predict the sign to be reversed). And our unspecific or summary variable "last FOE participation rate" is the second-best predictor in the model.

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[10] See Franklin (2001) for a diachronic analysis along the same lines which covers the elections from 1979 to 1999. While both analyses are based on the same dependent variable, he uses a somewhat different list of predictors. Compulsory voting, last FOE participation, concurrent FOE, FOE cycle, and Sunday voting are identical. The difference is that Franklin introduces an additional dummy variable – whether a particular EP election is the first in a country. We leave this variable out because it is almost identical (exceptions are Cyprus and Malta) and thus highly collinear with our alternative and more powerful predictor "post-communist member country".

Table 1
Low Participation = EU Scepticism?
A view at aggregate data.

(figures are OLS regression coefficients)

Predictor	b	std error	beta	sig. t
compulsory voting	24,5	7,3	.46	.004
last FOE participation rate	0,5	0,2	.32	.038
post-communist member	-11,9	5,5	-.28	.045
concurrent FOE	17,0	5,5	.25	.039
Sunday voting	-10,6	5,2	-.23	.057
insignificant effects - EU approval rate - cycle				
number of cases	25			
multiple R	.889			
R square	.790			

The dependent variable is the participation rate of EU member countries in the European Parliament election of 2004. Sources are as indicated in Graph 2, plus the European Omnibus Survey (EOS) post-election survey (EB Flash 162) for EU approval rates. FOE refers to first order election.

Statistically insignificant effects are often as theoretically relevant as significant ones are. There are two of them in the current model. One is the approval rate, in any of the 25 countries involved, of the fact that this country is a member of European Union: is this "a good thing", "a bad thing", or "neither a good thing nor a bad thing"? We take the proportion of the national citizenry which agrees on EU membership being a "good thing" as an indicator of a more EU-friendly or more EU-hostile environment of electoral participation, and find that variations in this environment do not affect turnout levels in any significant way. The other insignificant factor is the timing of an EP election in the first-order electoral cycle. This suggests that the cycle is perhaps a less mighty determinant in the new and larger European Union stretching out towards Eastern Europe. In any case, our findings seem to support the mobilisation-based explanation of low turnout figures, rather than its alternative which identifies EU scepticism as a major factor in electoral abstentions. Because individualistic interpretations of the findings of aggregate data analyses are dubious, we move now on to individual-level analyses in order to consolidate this finding.

In the two weeks after the 2004 election to the European Parliament, special "Flash"-Eurobarometer surveys were realised in the 25 member-countries of the Union which include a number of pertinent variables for the analysis of individual electoral participation. In these surveys, people were asked

whether they voted or not; this is our dependent variable.[11] EU-attitudes of respondents have been determined in a series of questions, which we have "condensed" in a factor-score (see Appendix 2 for details). A number of control variables are also available, among them the gender and age of respondents, as well as indicators of their social status, political information, party identification, and campaign involvement. All of these measures were included as potential predictors of electoral participation in a series of country-specific backward-conditional logistic regressions, the results of which are shown in Table 2.[12]

These findings suggest a number of things. One is that the social make-up of individual citizens is somewhat less closely related to electoral participation in the post-communist member-countries than it still is in many Western countries. Second, political information is probably a stronger predictor in those new post-communist democracies than in older democracies. Third, campaign involvement does not matter much probably because there was not much of a campaign to be involved in in the first place. Fourth, among the measures we dispose of party identification is probably the strongest predictor of electoral participation, with surprisingly strong coefficients also in the Eastern member countries. And fifth and finally, EU-scepticism does hardly contribute to our understanding of electoral participation. There are a few significant but hardly substantial effects, most of them (three of five) in the new Eastern member-countries.[13]

By way of summarising this branch of analyses, it is certainly right to say that (a) participation in European elections is generally lower than it is in first-order national elections; (b) abstentions might occasionally also be motivated by EU scepticism, but there is certainly no such general trend.

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[11] Because self-reported electoral participation chronically suffers from over-reporting, we have recoded the variable in such a way that all "don't know's" and "no answer's" are considered as non-voters.

[12] Note that a standardised logistic regression coefficient is reported which is the odds ratio minus "1" (so that a positive or negative effect has its origin at "0") multiplied by the standard deviation of this particular variable. The advantage of this procedure is that effect sizes can be compared across variables and countries. What this procedure does not do is to produce a fixed range within which the effects could possibly vary; however, our analyses suggests that there is a kind of a ceiling at +/- 3. See for similar strategies for establishing comparability between logistic regression coefficients Kreppel (2002) and Faas & Rattinger (2004).

[13] Among the consolidated party systems, a significant effect of EU scepticism on electoral participation survives all statistical controls only for the German and the Spanish sample. For the German case, this is corroborated by the findings of the European Election Study 2004 which shows that (a) there is a minor but significant effect of EU attitudes on the vote, and (b) that EU attitudes of Germans are chiefly determined by the perspective on Eastward enlargement of the Union (Schmitt 2005b).

Table 2

A Micro-Analysis of the Causes of Electoral Abstention
(figures are standardised effect coefficients [=(exp (B)-1)*std dev]
from backward conditional logistic regressions)

country	sex	age	social status	political infor'n	party ID	campaign involvement	EU attitudes	% correct	pseudo R2
				EU 15 + Cyprus and Malta					
Austria		0.6	0.4	0.3	0.5	.		83	.17
Belgium		0.3	0.4	**1.2**				92	.06
Cyprus		**1.7**	0.9		0.4	0.3		93	.32
Denmark		**1.2**	**1.5**	0.3	0.4		.	89	.33
Finland	.	0.9	**1.0**		**1.1**	0.7		77	.36
France	.	**1.0**	0.7		0.4	0.3		77	.24
Germany		0.7	0.4	0.5	**1.1**		0.4	83	.27
Greece				.	0.5	0.4	.	77	.09
Ireland		**1.2**	0.6	.		0.5	.	75	.34
Italy		0.8	0.7		0.9	.	.	82	.24
Luxembourg		0.4		**1.3**	0.3	.	.	79	.19
Malta		**1.5**	0.9		**1.0**			96	.22
Netherlands		**1.0**	0.8	.	**1.8**	0.3	.	82	.33
Portugal		0.8	0.4		0.6			72	.25
Spain			0.4	0.5	0.7	.	0.4	77	.20
Sweden		0.5	0.8	0.7	0.7			82	.25
UK	0.3	**1.0**	0.4		0.8	0.4	.	72	.29
				post-communist democracies					
Czech R	0.3	0.7		0.5	**2.5**		0.9	76	.43
Estonia	0.4	0.4		**1.2**	0.6	.		72	.28
Hungary		0.9	0.8	0.7	0.6		0.5	79	.30
Latvia	0.4	0.9	0.5	0.3		0.3	.	76	.28
Lithuania		**1.4**	0.7	0.6	0.3	0.5	.	74	.40
Poland		0.5	0.5	0.3	0.8	.	0.4	68	.25
Slovakia		0.5			**1.5**	0.3		76	.27
Slovenia		0.7	0.4	0.4	0.4	0.3		74	.21

Source: EOS post-election survey June 2004 (EB Flash 162). The dependent variable is self-reported participation, coded 1=yes and 0=all other (no, d.k., or n.a.). All coefficients are significant at .05 or better. Borderline-significance (between p=.05 and p=p.10) is symbolised by a dot (.). Social status is an additive index (ranging from 0 to 6) of occupational status (no paid employment, worker, employee, self-employed) and education (without degree, primary, secondary, university). Political information is an additive index of regular newspaper reading and political knowledge (indicated by the correct identification of the strongest party in the EP election of 2004). Campaign involvement is an additive index summarising 11 different campaign activities (from watching a TV spot over talking to friends and family to searching the internet). EU attitudes is a factor score as documented in the appendix.

Government Parties

Although the arguments supporting this claim vary from one author to another, government parties are generally expected to lose support in second-order elections. This is what happened in the European Parliament election of 2004. Of the governments of 25 member-countries, 23 lost support compared to the previous first-order election. The only true exception to the rule is Slovakia where the government parties gained roughly 10 percent of the valid vote, but where at the same time participation went down to a record-low figure of 17 percent. An other exception is Spain. The new socialist government under Prime-minister Zapatero, which succeeded the conservative Aznar-government one month

ahead of the European Parliament election, could increase its share of the valid vote by about one percent. This however is fully in accordance with the expectation of a post-electoral euphoria shortly after the first-order election and does therefore not really count as an exception to the rule. We conclude that indeed, governments were the losers of the 2004 European Parliament elections.

Not only are national governments expected to loose support in second-order elections, these losses should follow a pattern known as the first-order electoral cycle. Do we find such a pattern in the results of the parties governing EU member-states? The answer is yes and no. There is a clear cyclical pattern in the results of the Western member-countries (see Graph 3). But the Eastern results do not fit into it (see Table 3). [14]

Graph 3

The Electoral Cycle At Work

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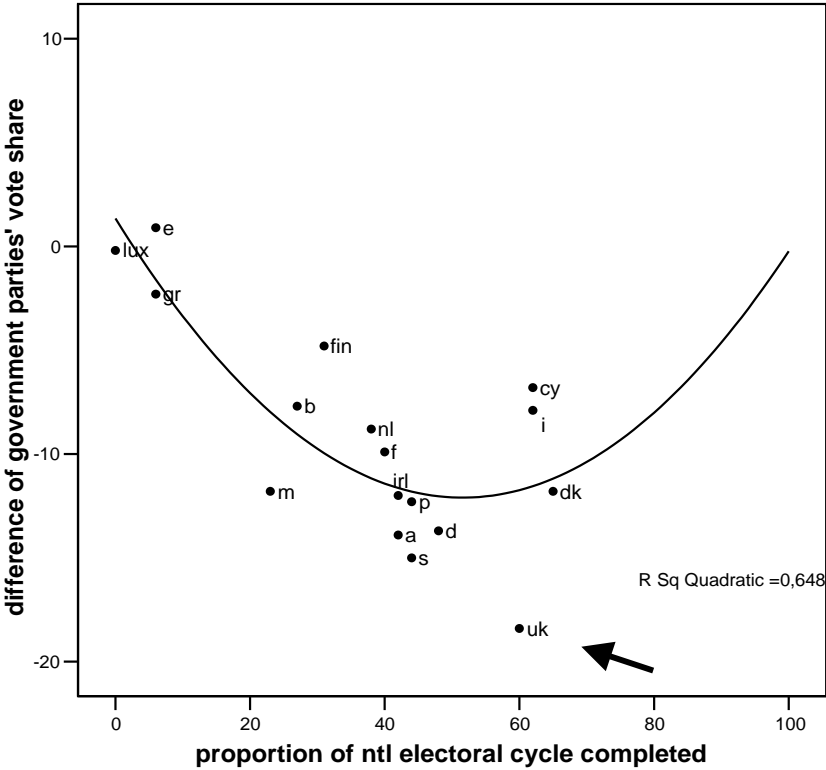
[14] There could be other reasons why national government parties lose in European Parliament elections, among them the performance of these governments in European Union politics. An alternative hypothesis would therefore state that governments should lose support if the voters are unhappy about how their country is represented in the EU, and *vice versa*. If we accept the standard Eurobarometer question "EU membership of [country] – good thing, bad thing, or neither?" as an indicator for popular satisfaction with government performance in EU politics, we can test this hypothesis. The result is discouraging. When we regress government losses on membership approval rates, we find insignificant coefficients. However, while the "membership" variable is obviously unrelated to government losses, it seems to co-vary substantially, itself, with the first-order electoral cycle. This suggests that there is a relation of EU approval with the national electoral cycle, the nature of which we will explore in future work.

If we concentrate our attention for a moment to the results of the European Parliament election in the 17 member-countries with consolidated or institutionalised party systems, it appears that the cyclical element is actually stronger in 2004 than it was in most of the previous European Parliament elections (Marsh 2005). The only serious outlier in 2004 is the UK result: Tony Blair and his Labour Party did considerably worse than the cycle would have predicted. It is of course tempting to attribute this to Blair's Iraq policy and the particularly poor standing of the British government at the time of the election as a result of it. But we must not forget that Britain uses two different electoral systems for the two elections under comparison, which could also explain some of the British particularity.[15]

A second-order polynomial regression of the relative performance of government parties on the timing of the election within the first-order electoral cycle explains 65 percent of the variance, with both terms being statistically significant (Table 3). The same regression for the 8 new post-communist members produces insignificant results.

Table 3

**There is no such cycle
in the new post-communist member countries**
(figures are raw regression coefficients and standard errors below)

sub-population	Constant	cycle	cycle*cycle	R sq	n
EU 15 + CY+M	1.347	-.522** .144	+.005* .002	.648	17
post-communist member countries	-14.979	-.064 1.978	+.001 .015	.000	8

Notes : ** p = .003 * p = .030. The dependent variable is the difference in the vote share of government parties in comparison to the last first-order election; for example, a "-18,4" means that all government parties together received 18,4% less (of the respective number of valid votes). Cycle is the proportion of the electoral cycle completed at the time when the European Parliament election of 2004 was held, the variable ranges from 0 to 100. Where governments can call early elections at their discretion (as in Britain and Denmark), the latest possible election date is assumed to indicate the end of the cycle. Sources as indicated in Graph 2.

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[15] Note that Britain and France are the only two member-countries which apply some variant of the single-member majority system for the election of national deputies, while Members of the European Parliament are elected according to a variant of the PR system – as everywhere else in the European Union. For a Union-wide comparison of the electoral systems applied in the 2004 European Parliament election see Nohlen (2004a) and, with some greater detail, Wüst and Stöver (2005).

Small Parties

Compared to their previous first-order result, small parties are expected to do better in second-order elections. How can we test this prediction in a parsimonious way? One could of course try to define a cutting point which separates small from non-small parties, say a vote share of 10 or 15 percent. But such a strategy, no matter how well it was argued, had to remain somewhat arbitrary. Following the work of Laakso and Taagepera (1979), we therefore settle on the effective number of parties as a criterion, and establish for each of the 25 member countries the difference in this index between the European Parliament election and the preceding first-order election. If small parties did indeed better, the effective number of (electoral) parties should be systematically higher in European Parliament elections. Graph 4 shows the results of this comparison.

Small parties did better in most of the EU member countries, in some countries such as Poland, Britain, Sweden and France even much better. But there are also cases in which they seem to have done worse: Slovakia, Lithuania, Estonia, and Latvia. And there are a few border-line cases where there was not much of a difference in small parties' share of votes: Hungary and Spain, Portugal and Luxembourg, Finland and Belgium. Overall, the visual impression is again that the hypothesis finds more support among consolidated party systems than among the new post-communist members.

Graph 4

Did Small Parties Do Better?
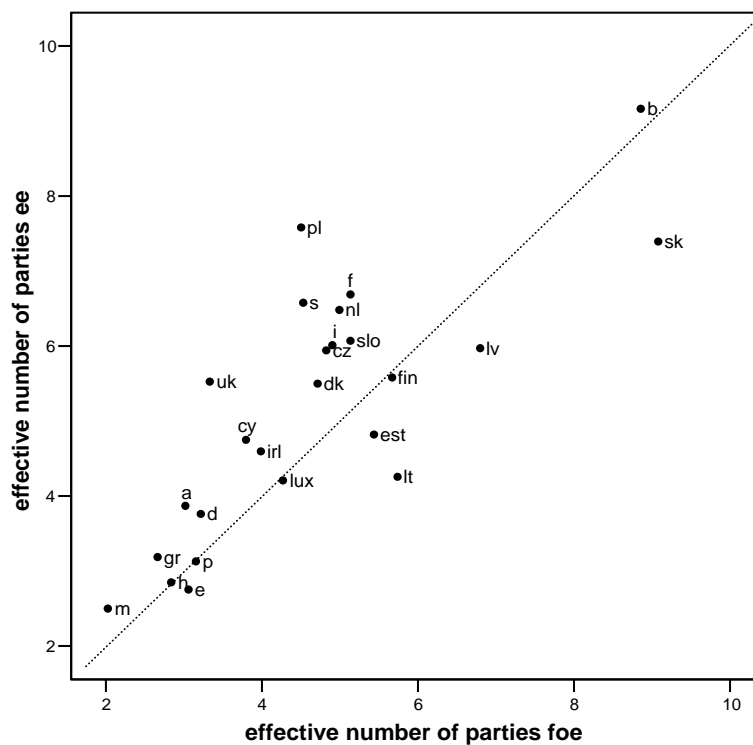
A somewhat more formal inspection of this visual impression is presented in Table 4. We again rely on a regression model and predict the effective number of parties in European Parliament elections by the effective number of parties in the preceding first-order election. This is highly successful for the class of consolidated party systems, where the first-order performance of the parties can explain 82 percent of the variance in the second-order performance. The effective number of parties is much the same in both contests (as a b-coefficient close to 1 testifies), except that we find on average three quarters of a party "more" in European Parliament elections (intercept = 0.716). Party systems in European Parliament elections are less concentrated on a few big parties, they are more differentiated, because small parties do systematically somewhat better than in first-order elections. The same regression performed on the party systems of the post-communist member countries produced again insignificant results.[16]

Table 4

The Relative Success of Small Parties
(figures are raw regression coefficients and standard errors below)

sub-population	constant	b	R sq	n
EU 15 + CY + M	0.716	1.011* 0.121	.823	17
post-communist member countries	2.846	0.499 .291	.328	8

Notes: * p = .002. Dependent is the effective number of parties in the EP election of 2004; its mean score is 4,96 in Western member countries and 5,61 in the new Eastern member countries. The predictor is the effective number of parties in the preceding first-order election; its mean score is 4,20 in the West, and 5,54 in the East. Sources as indicated in Graph 2.

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[16] Again, the better showing of small parties in the West could be due to other reasons for strategic voting which have mot much to do with the second-order nature of European Parliament elections. Due to the fact that the electoral rules applied differ – in cases considerably – between first-order national and European Parliament elections, the details of the electoral rules applied are particularly suspicious in that regard. In order to control for this potential influence on the electoral fortunes of parties of different size, we have determined the difference in constituency magnitude between European Parliament and first-order national elections (based on Nohlen 2004b and Wüst and Stöver 2005). It turned out that this difference does not have a significant effect on the relative performance of small parties (more precisely, on the difference in the "effective number of parties" index between the European Parliament election and the preceding first-order election). This must not be read as a refutation of established knowledge in the electoral systems literature (e.g. Cox 1998). The effects originating in the different electoral rules applied could just be comparatively modest compared to the effects that originate in the different nature of first- and second-order elections.

Understanding West-East Differences

The results of the 2004 European Parliament elections differ between the old Western member-countries (plus Cyprus and Malta), and the 8 new post-communist member countries. While participation is lower throughout, it is in the East that abstentions are extra-ordinarily high and have a light EU-sceptical tint. Government parties lost almost everywhere but for Eastern governments, these losses do not follow the cyclical pattern which we are familiar with for consolidated party systems since the first European Parliament election in 1979. Small parties, finally, do not systematically better in the European Parliament elections of the new Eastern members – again in marked contrast to Western member-countries.

The reason for all these differences, we propose, is in the nature of party alignments in the post-communist democracies. In most of these countries, a stable, consolidated party system has yet to develop. Parties have been changing names and alliances from one election to the next, and in between. As a result, many voters are changing their party preferences as well in between two first-order elections. And even if there were more stable party systems, stable party align-ments are known to take some time to develop (Converse 1969). It does therefore not really come as a surprise that volatility is still very high in post-communist democracies (see Birch 2001). How stark the contrast between consolidated and post-communist electoral systems

Graph 5

The Volatility Discrepancy

post-communist member country
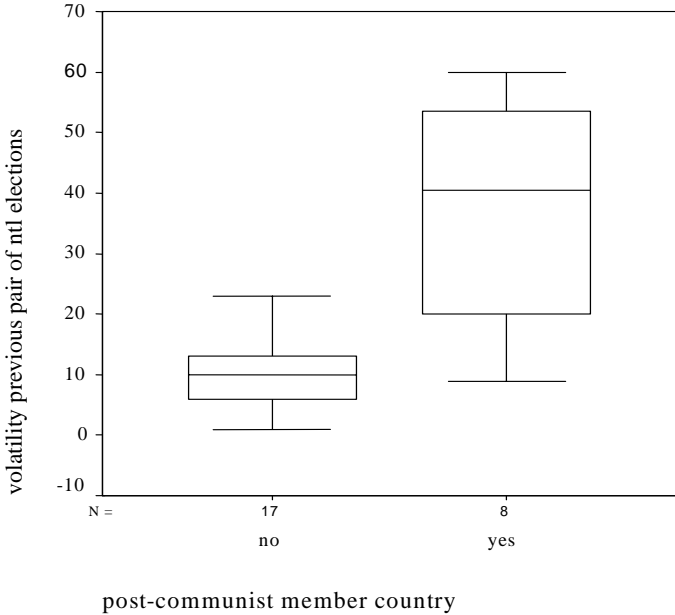
Note: Sources are as indicated in Graph 2.

actually are in this regard is shown in Graph 5.[17] Median volatility is at 10 percent (aggregate vote switches) in Western member-countries, as compared to 40 percent in the East. And the range of the distribution is almost three times as large in the East as compared to the West.

Elevated levels of abstentions and high volatility should find their correlate in weak and volatile party attachments. There is a measure of party attachment in the data of the EOS post-election survey, so that we can compare levels of party attachments in the West and the new East of the European Union. Table 5 informs about the results. They should be interpreted with care because level estimates of party attachments are known to be highly sensitive to varying question wordings (Katz 1985; Schmitt and Holmberg 1995). If we ignore these measurement problems for a moment and accept the frequency distributions of the Gallup question as a valid source of information, we find one in two Western EU citizens feeling close to one of the parties, while this proportion is only one in three among EU citizens from the Eastern countries. Measurement problems might render these estimates somewhat inaccurate; they can not obscure a clear West-East gap in partisanship. This gap needs to be put into perspective though. The figures are to be read on the background of a declining partisanship in many Western countries (Dalton and Wattenberg 2000), while partisan ties in post-communist countries are expected to slowly build up (e.g. Schmitt 2005a).

Table 5

Party Attachment of EU Citizens: West and East Compared

(figures are row percentages)

	not close to any party	somewhat close to one of the parties	very close to one of the parties	N of cases
EU 15 + Cyprus and Malta	46	39	15	20036
8 post-communist countries	66	22	12	3680

Chi Square (Pearson) = 497,686; df = 2; p = .000

Source: EOS post-election survey of June 2004 (EB Flash 162). Weighted data are analysed. The weighting factor applied is known to the data set as "redpol25"; it adjusts the weight of each interview to the national universe with respect to social-structural characteristics and to the political result of the European Parliament election of June 2004. In addition, the weight adjusts the interview to the EU universe with respect to the relative population size of a country within the EU.

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[17] Note that our understanding of volatility considers voters to switch if they vote in two consecutive elections for parties with different names, no matter whether these parties are mergers of previously separate parties; compare for a different view Sikk (2001).

Conclusion

In the West, European Parliament elections are still very much second-order elections: participation is low, first-order government parties lose support in a cyclical manner, and small parties do better than they would do if a first-order election was held. At the end of this paper, we want to come back to our initial account of a growing policy scope of the Union and the enlarged legislative powers of the European Parliament. Why have these changes failed to change the nature of European Parliament elections as second-order national elections?

There is a simple and a somewhat more complex answer to this question. The simple version of it maintains that some citizens do not fully realise how important the Union is for a multitude of policy decisions that affect their own daily life, and what role the European Parliament has to play in these decisions. Moreover, many of those who somehow do realise what is going on do not care about it at election day because they cannot relate EU policies to EP groups, let alone to national parties and their positions and ambitions in those processes.[18] It seems to be rational for them to ignore processes that are either beyond their perception, or cannot meaningfully be related to the choices they face on election day.

Things get a bit more complicated when we look into the reasons of this "rational ignorance" of European Parliament voters. In our view, the most basic defect of the EU party system, and hence of EU party competition, is the absence of a dominant government-opposition antagonism that is so characteristic of most parliamentary systems. There are a few reasons and a number of consequences of this. One of the reasons has been the felt need for broad parliamentary majorities which have to be build in order to increase the weight of the house in the struggle for broader powers of the parliament.[19] Another reason is in the organisation of the EU system of governance which confronts two "non-partisan" bodies – the commission and the council – with a partisan parliament.[20] And a third is probably the ongoing rivalry over the prevalence of national vs. EU policy considerations in the EP campaigns of national parties.[21]

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[18] The latter is of course relevant because it is the candidates of national parties that are campaigning for seats in the European Parliament election.

[19] But see Hix (2001) for an analysis of parliamentary votes which shows that the left-right divide has become more predictive in the voting behaviour of MEPs over the last years, or in other words that the cohesion of group voting has been increasing.

[20] Things are moving though, in the partisan direction. Not only are there "partisan" caucuses ahead of summit meetings, which are organised by EU party federations and aim at co-ordinating the policies of council and parliament on a partisan basis (see Hix & Lord 1997). The draft treaty on an EU constitution adds the requirement that the President of the European Commission should be able to represent the majority of the European Parliament (ART xxx).

[21] I am thinking here of the fact that the current leaders of the two largest political groups in the European Parliament are German (Pöttering, EPP and Schulz, PES), and that neither of them did play a significant role in the German EP election campaign. Angela Merkel, president of the CDU and head of the CDU/CSU group in the German Bundestag, and Gerhard Schröder, former chairman of the SPD and Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, did not leave them much room in the public debate.

The consequences of this are manifold, and we will pick up just a few without any particular order. One is that EU politics are lacking faces. There is not much personalisation of EU policies. However, mass communication – in particular the televised branch of it – requires faces, i. e. the personalisation of political claims. But there is no such confrontation in sight. Bush vs. Gore, Blair vs. Howard, Schröder vs. Merkel – such a confrontation of personalities would certainly be instrumental for the communication of EU policy alternatives to the voters.[22] For the time being, however, this is or seems to be unthinkable in EU politics.

Another consequence is the low salience of EP elections. We can of course think of counterfactuals (van der Brug and van der Eijk, 2005). "What if" European Parliament elections were about selecting a head of government, would it increase the salience of European Parliament elections? The most likely equivalent of this, in the current institutional set-up of the EU, would be the dependence of the fortunes of the president of the commission upon a parliamentary majority. In all likelihood, such a scenario would require and produce, between the different political forces involved, pre-electoral agreements on candidates (who should run for president of the commission, for the European socialists, the Christian-conservatives, etc.) and policies (an agenda for each electoral alliance, over the next five years). This would help increase the salience of the electoral decision and, moreover, help reorganise the parliament in terms of competitive electoral alliances.

A third consequence is that national politics do not dispose of a quasi-natural – i.e. partisan – point of reference within, and communication into, the political system of the European Union. This is not to say that those channels are completely alien to the multi-level system of the European Union. Rather the contrary: would these channels not exist in a more or less informal way, the European Union would not be what it is. But existing partisan structures are still weakly anchored and barely institutionalised.

Summing up we hold that the second-order nature of European Parliament elections is slowly heading towards a change. There is no doubt that the Union has been becoming more pervasive in policy terms, and the parliament is now more powerful than it ever was. 2004 was an extraordinary election with eight new post-communist member countries participating. It was only after the election that the parliament stood up against the council and requested a greater say in the nomination of the President of the European Commission, and the choice and portfolio assignments of his commissioners. Upon this background, it is probably reasonable to expect more of the same to come – at the 2009 election at the latest.

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[22] See Schmitt (2005c) who argues that EU politics, while quite successful in terms of interest intermediation, is suffering from a defective structure of opinion formation.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Elected members of the European Parliament 2004, by country of origin and political group

Appendix 2: Factor-analysing EU approval

Appendix 1

Elected members of the European Parliament 2004, by to country of origin and political group.

	all	christian-conservatives		socialists		liberals		greens	
Austria	18	ÖVP	6	SPÖ	7			Grüne	2
Belgium (F: Flanders; W: Wallonia)	24	CD&V/N-VA (F)	4	SPA-Spirit (F)	3	VLD-Vivant (F)	3	Groen (W)	1
		CDH (W)	1	PS (W)	4	MR (W)	2	Ecolo (W)	1
		CSP-EVP	1			MR (W)	1		
Czech Republic	24	ODS	9	CSSD	2				
		SN-ED	3						
		KDU-CSKL	2						
Cyprus	6	DISY	2			DIKO	1		
		Gia Tin Evropi	1						
Denmark	14	KF	1	SD	5	V	3	SF	1
						RV	1		
Estonia	6	IL	1	SDE	3	K	1		
						ER	1		
Finnland	14	KOK	4	SDP	3	KESK	4	VIHR	1
						SFP	1		
France	78	UMP	17	PS	31	UDF	11	Verts	6
Germany	99	CDU	40	SPD	23	FDP	7	B 90/Grüne	13
		CSU	9						
Greece	24	ND	11	PASOK	8				
Hungary	24	FIDESZ-MPP	12	MSZP	9	SZDSZ	2		
		MDF	1						
Ireland	13	FG	5	Labour	1	Ind	1		
Italy	78	FI	16	DS (Ulivo)	12	DL Margh	7	FED. Verdi	2
		UDC	5	SDI (Ulivo)	2	S.C.D.P (IdV)	2		
		AP-UDEUR	1	IND (Ulivo)	2	L. Bonino	2		
		SVP	1			MRE (Ulivo)	1		
		P.Pensionati	1						
Latvia	9	JL	2			LC	1	PCTVL	1
		TP	1						
Lithuania	13	TS	2	LSDP	2	DP	5		
						LCS	2		
Luxembourg	6	CSV	3	LSAP	1	DP	1	Déi Greng	1
Malta	5	PN	2	MLP	3				
Netherlands	27	CDA	7	PvdA	7	VVD	4	Groen Links	2
						D66	1	EurTrans	2
Poland	54	PO	15	SLD-UP	5	UW	4		
		PSL	4	SdPI	3				
Portugal	24	PPD-PSD	7	PS	12				
		CDS-PP	2						
Slowakia	14	SDKU	3	SMER	2				
		KDH	3	SDL	1				
		SMK	2						
Slovenia	7	SDS	2	ZLSD	1	LDS	2		
		NSi	2						
Spain	54	PP	24	PSOE	24	CIU	1	Los Verdes	1
						PNV	1	IC-V	1
								ERC	1
Sweden	19	MSP	4	SAP	5	FP	2	MPG	1
		Kd	1			CP	1		
United Kingdom	78	Conservatives	27	Labour	19	LD	12	Greens	2
		UUP	1					SNP	2
EU	732		268		200		88		42

Appendix 1, cont.

	all	far left		Democracy & Diversity		Europe of Nations		un-affiliated	
Austria	**18**							Martin	2
								FPÖ	1
Belgium (F: Flanders; W: Wallonia)	**24**							Vl. Blok (F)	3
Czech Republic	**24**	KSCN	6	Nezavisli	1			Nezavisli	1
Cyprus	**6**	AKEL	2						
Denmark	**14**	Folk B.	1	Juni B.	1	DF	1		
Estonia	**6**								
Finnland	**14**	VAS	1						
France	**78**	PC	2	MPF	3			FN	7
		PCR	1						
Germany	**99**	PDS	7						
Greece	**24**	KKE	3	LAOS	1				
		SYN	1						
Hungary	**24**								
Ireland	**13**	SF	1	Ind	1	FF	4		
Italy	**78**	RC	5	LN	4	AN	9	NPSI (s.u.p.e.)	1
		PdCI	2					US (s.u.p.e.)	1
								F. Tricolore	1
								A.S.-Mussolini	1
Latvia	**9**					TB-LNNK	4		
Lithuania	**13**					LDP	1		
						VNDPS	1		
Luxembourg	**6**								
Malta	**5**								
Netherlands	**27**	SP	2	CU-SGP	2				
Poland	**54**			LPR	10	PIS	7	SO	6
Portugal	**24**	CDU-PCP	2						
		BE	1						
Slowakia	**14**							LS-HZDS	3
Slovenia	**7**								
Spain	**54**	IU	1						
Sweden	**19**	VP	2	Junilistan	3				
United Kingdom	**78**	SF	1	UKIP	11			DUP	1
								UKIP	1
EU	**732**	**41**		**37**		**27**		**29**	

Source: http://www.elections2004.eu.int/ep-election/sites/en/index.htmlT

Appendix 2: Factor-analysing EU Approval

In the course of the EOS post-election survey, respondents were asked a number of questions concerning their attitudes and orientation towards the European Union and the recent election of the European Parliament. Responses were measured on a dichotomous agree-disagree scale, with don't knows coded in addition. We have factor-analysed the recoded variables (1=agree, 0=all other) and found a two dimensional solution as described in the table below. The first and most important dimension is a broad measure of legitimacy beliefs which includes attitudes towards the EU political community (citizen of Europe, attachment to Europe), the EU political regime (trust in institutions, EP represents citizens' concerns) and EU policies (the "membership of country is a good thing" standard Eurobarometer indicator). The second and considerably weaker factor measures respondents interest in the (party-) political result of the election.

Structure in attitudes towards EP elections and the EU: Europe vs. Party
(factor pattern scores after oblique rotation)

	Europe	party
feels to be a citizen of the EU	.75	
feels attached to Europe	.73	
EU membership of own country a good thing	.70	
trusts the EU institutions	.68	
feels the EP represents the concerns of EU citizens	.60	
very important which party gained the most seats		.82
very important which particular candidates won a seat		.79
very interested in politics and current affairs		.61

Source: EOS post-election survey June 2004 (EB Flash 162). Items were dichotomised before analysis, so that a "1" signifies agreement, and a "0" anything else (i.e. disagreement, d.k., n.a., etc). The factor analysis (PCA) was performed on the integrated and weighted data set, where weight factors adjust for social structural characteristics within a country and population size cross-nationally. The factors are correlated at r=.32, so that an oblique rotation was performed. Loadings smaller .5 are not shown. Weighted N approximates 24 000. The eigenvalues of the two extracted factors are 2.9 and 1.4, respectively. Together, they account for 43 % of the variation in the observed variables.

Test runs have shown that the five legitimacy statements invariably belong to one dimension, even if they are factor-analysed without the election items, and for each country separately. In our micro-level analysis of turnout, we utilise the factor scores of these EU legitimacy measures as a broad measure of EU approval.