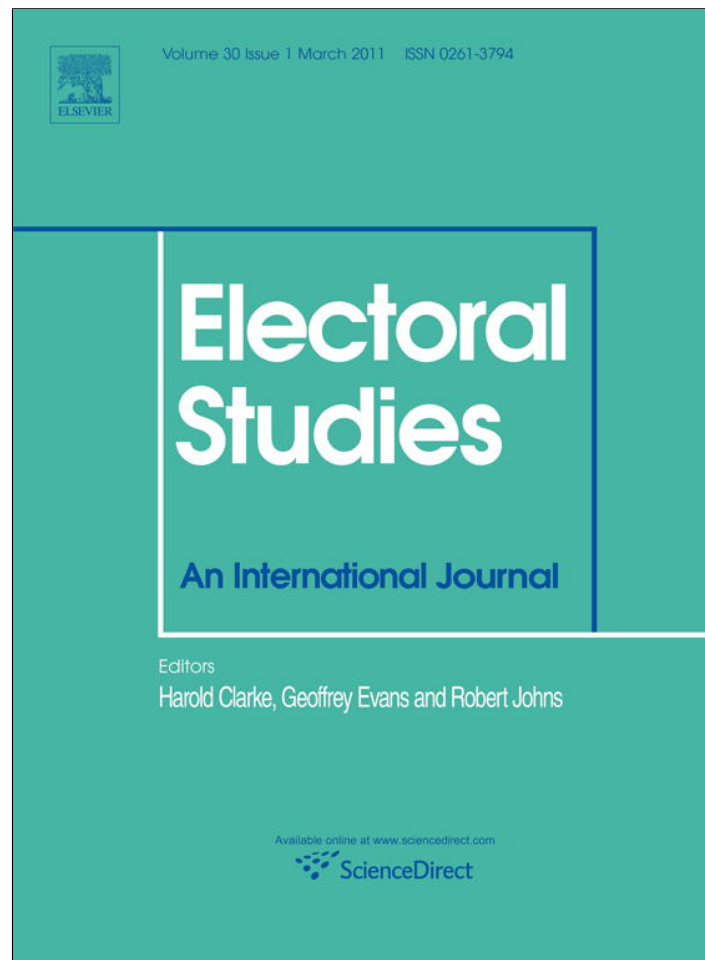


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## Editorial

# Introduction: Electoral democracy in the European Union

## 1. Introduction

The elections to the European Parliament (EP) in June 2009 gave the citizens of 27 countries the opportunity to elect delegates to represent some 500 million Europeans. These elections marked not only the largest ever exercise in trans-national electoral democracy, but also three decades of direct elections to the EP. In her inaugural address to the first directly-elected Parliament, the President of the Parliament, Simone Veil, said that “the historic election of June 1979 has raised hopes — tremendous hopes — in Europe. Our electors would not forgive us if we failed to take up this heavy but infinitely rewarding responsibility.” After 30 years of a directly elected Parliament, it is a good time to take stock and evaluate whether these hopes have been fulfilled.

Much has changed in Europe since the first direct elections in 1979. The European Economic Community has been transformed into the European Union and has enlarged its membership from 9 to 27 countries. The competences of the Union have also expanded to encompass most policy domains, including monetary union, human rights and foreign policy. With the aim of strengthening democracy at the European level, successive treaty reforms have transformed the EP from a weak consultative assembly into a genuine parliament with co-legislative powers in the policy-making process. But despite these efforts to strengthen the Parliament, scholars and commentators alike have avowed that Europe suffers from a ‘democratic deficit’. It has been argued that there is only a weak connection between voter preferences expressed in EP elections and EP decision-making. A key problem is the second-order nature of EP elections, which fails to motivate public interest in the elections themselves, or in politics at the European level more broadly. The result is a low turnout at these elections and vote choices based on domestic rather than European policy concerns. This raises the question: Is electoral democracy working in the European Union?

The articles in this Special Symposium address this question in a comprehensive and rigorous examination of

the state of electoral democracy in the European Union today, focusing on an in-depth analysis of the most recent 2009 elections to the European Parliament. This rigorous assessment has been made possible by the most ambitious data collection effort on European Parliament elections to date: the collaborative project on “*Providing an Infrastructure for Research on Electoral Democracy in the European Union*” (PIREDEU) with its origins in the European Election Studies (EES). This data collection effort, funded by the EU’s Seventh Framework Programme and the British Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), focused on campaign and electoral behaviour in each of the EU’s 27 member states, employing surveys of citizens and candidates, a party manifesto study, and media content analysis. The data permit scholars to investigate the entire chain of representation that links voters, candidates, parties and policies.<sup>1</sup> The PIREDEU project has enabled the contributors to this Special Symposium to take stock of electoral democracy in the European Union by examining not only the behaviour of voters, but also the links between voters, candidates and parties and the influence of the campaign context on these relationships. The articles pose the following questions: Does the second-order model of EP elections still hold? To what extent do campaigns, and other context-specific factors, influence the degree to which EP elections are about ‘Europe’ rather than about national politics? What are the implications of the nature of EP elections for political participation? The objective of the Special Symposium is to contribute not only to our understanding of the 2009 European elections, but also to existing theories of voting behaviour, campaigning, and electoral democracy in the EU.

The first set of papers examines the second-order nature of European Parliament elections. In the 30 years since the first direct elections to the European Parliament, election outcomes and vote choices have been interpreted primarily through the lens of the second-order election (SOE) model. This is not surprising given

<sup>1</sup> These data are available on the PIREDEU website: [www.piredeu.eu](http://www.piredeu.eu).

that empirical studies have continued to lend support to the key predictions set out in the original 1980 article by Reif and Schmitt. At the heart of Reif and Schmitt's theory of second-order elections is the proposition that they are of lesser importance than first-order elections for national office. Consequently, levels of turnout are lower than in national elections, citizens are not so concerned to support larger parties, and parties in national governments do worse in EP elections than in national elections, especially when the EP elections take place during the mid-term of the national election cycle. A key assumption of second-order theory is that differences in voting behaviour in EP and national elections are primarily due to an evaluation of parties on the basis of domestic politics, be it general government popularity, economic performance or sincere voting for smaller parties, rather than an evaluation of candidates on the basis of concerns specific to the European Union. But this assumption has been criticised in recent years. Most notably, scholars have suggested that the same patterns are consistent with a 'Europe matters' perspective. According to this perspective, low turnout and defection from governing parties may not be entirely due to the general decline in government support at mid-term, it may also be caused by dissatisfaction with the position of these parties on the European integration dimension.

In the first article of this Special Symposium, Hix and Marsh review the seven waves of EP elections to evaluate the second-order model and look for the existence of pan-European trends in each of the seven sets of elections. They find broad support for the SOE model, demonstrating that parties in national government are consistently punished. Yet, they also find evidence of certain pan-European trends in voting behaviour. Notably, and perhaps surprisingly, their results do not indicate a rise in the success of Eurosceptic parties, but rather pan-European trends in responses to common policy concerns, such as the green tide in 1989 and the shift away from the Social Democrats in the most recent elections. This suggests that a pan-European 'public opinion' may be emerging in EP elections, yet these common trends are not only concerned with preferences about more or less European integration, but also other salient issues on the European policy-agenda. The article by de Vries, van der Brug, van Egmond and van der Eijk also addresses the issue of when and why European issues matter in EP elections. Using the 2009 voter study, the authors examine the extent to which EP vote choices are affected by attitudes towards Europe. Notably they explore the role of political information and show that EU issue voting is much more pronounced in elections where parties and the media provide higher levels of political information on European matters. This importance of political information as a mediator is corroborated in the study by Hobolt and Wittrock. Their study uses experimental methods to test the main propositions of the second-order election model at the individual level. They find broad support for the SOE

model, but they also find that more information about party positions on the EU issues make voters more likely to vote on this basis, whereas providing more information on left-right issues has no similar effect.

The first set of articles thus suggests that the informational environment is crucial to patterns of voting behaviour. The second set of articles examines the nature of the campaign environment in the 2009 EP elections. The article by Schuck, Xezonakis, Elenbaas, Banducci and de Vreese analyses the news coverage of the 2009 EP elections in member states. Schuck et al. find that the EP elections play a more prominent role in media coverage than at the time of previous elections, and that the salience of EU issues is particularly pronounced in countries where there is greater contestation over Europe – in other words, where parties are more divided on the European issue. In the paper by Giebler and Wüst another aspect of the EP campaign context is examined, namely the campaigning by individual candidates. Analysing the 2009 candidate study, they show that both individual-, party- and country-level factors can explain variation in the intensity and nature of individual EP candidates campaigning. Their findings imply that to understand campaign effects in EP elections, we need to focus not only on the parties but also on individual candidates.

The final paper examines the implications of the nature of EP elections for political participation in European and national elections. Franklin and Hobolt show that EP elections have potentially adverse consequences for political participation, as they inculcate habits of non-voting among new voters. Using a combination of aggregate-level data and the 2009 EP voter survey, they demonstrate that the low-salience, second-order nature of European Parliament elections fails to mobilize new voters who have not yet acquired the habit of voting, with long-term implications for the evolution of electoral participation at both European and national elections.

Overall, the contributors to this Special Symposium thus demonstrate that European Parliament elections are still 'second-order' to national electoral contests, with potentially adverse consequences for electoral democracy in the European Union. However, there are also signs that these elections are becoming more genuinely European contests, where European issues matter, at least in some contexts. The analyses of the 2009 European Parliament elections reveal that in countries with high levels of party contestation the salience of the EU in the news coverage was higher. In turn, this combination of party polarization on the EU issue and intense media coverage induced voters to base their vote choices on EU issues to a greater extent. Greater party contestation on European issues thus emerges as a key factor that can facilitate more debate and news coverage, a higher degree of voting on the basis of EU issues, higher responsiveness of party elites to voter preferences and, perhaps, ultimately higher levels of citizen engagement and participation in European Parliament elections.

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