Chapter Four

Explaining the outcome. Second-order factors still matter, but with an exceptional turnout increase

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EU ELECTIONS AS SECOND ORDER ELECTIONS

After thirty-five years, nine elections, and an impressive amount of academic literature, it is common knowledge that European elections are second-order elections. Since the seminal work of Reif and Schmitt (1980), the Second Order Election (SOE) theory has been tested in the aftermath of each successive election (among others: van der Eijk, Franklin and Marsh, 1996; Marsh 1998; Schmitt 2005; Schmitt and Teperoglou 2015), and has repeatedly confirmed its effectiveness.

The main characteristic of a second-order election is to be less salient than a national Parliamentary election (which is first-order), because less is at stake. However, the key difference between other second-order (e.g. local elections) and European elections is that the latter share a key feature with first-order elections: they are both held at the national level.

Reif and Schmitt (1980) identify three main distinctive features that mark the difference between a national and a European election. Namely, (1) a lower turnout, (2) the parties in government will lose votes, and (3) smaller parties will do better and bigger parties will do worse.

Of these three characteristics, lower turnout is the one that is most obviously linked to the lower saliency of European elections. If little is at stake, why bother casting a ballot? Building on the assumption that voting in three successive national elections creates the habit of voting (Butler and Stokes, 1975; Plutzer, 2002; Franklin, 2004), Franklin and Hobolt (2011) have shown that it is indeed habitual voters that show up at the EU polls, because EU elections do not sufficiently mobilize the non-habitual ones. This partially explains why *big parties* – and especially parties in government – lose votes (van der Eijk, Franklin, and Oppenhuis 1996; Ferrara and Weishaupt 2004; Kousser 2004; Marsh 1998, 2003; Hix and Marsh 2007; Reif 1984). In fact, research suggests that voters tend overall to confirm their preferences at EU elections (van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996; Weber, 2007; Hobolt et al.,2009). Big parties and parties in government are generally those that also manage to mobilize non-habitual voters at national elections. Therefore, low turnout will inevitably – and disproportionally – punish them (Franklin and Hobolt 2011; Franklin and Hobolt 2015). On top of this, there is evidence that 40% of voters who switch party between a national and a European election, go from a big to a small

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party (Hix and Marsh, 2007). Those who tend to perform consistently better are anti-EU parties and green parties, whilst socialist parties tend to do worse. This seems to be due to a mix of (mostly) protest voting and (very partially) a proper European vote (Hix and Marsh, 2007).[1]

Regarding issues, these are expected to be more important at EP elections than at national elections because the latter engender strategic considerations. Many people would rather vote for a party that is likely to have an opportunity to pass its policies into law than to simply vote for the party that is closest to them on their most important issues – if that party would be unlikely to actually enact those policies. So votes for small parties go along with votes on issues that the voters concerned feel strongly about. SOE theory would lead us to expect these to be national issues, but there can easily be a pattern of concern for issues felt to have been neglected, for example environmental issues.

Although the volatility of vote preferences might have repercussions on the stability, and, more in general, on the party system of a country, low levels of turnout are more problematic at the EU level. In fact, turnout is widely considered an indirect indicator of legitimacy and quality of democracy (Lijphart 1999; Coppedge et al 2011). Therefore, making these elections more salient and actually about Europe (and not simply a substitute for internal polls of parties' popularity among voters) has been a crucial point both in scholarly discussions and at the political level. For example, van der Eijk and Franklin (1996) argued that in order to make elections more salient in the eyes of the voters, it was necessary that they would actually focus on Europe – but this is hard to achieve. An attempt in this sense was the introduction in 2014 of the so-called *Spitzenkandidaten*. The main idea was to try to reinforce the link between the President of the Commission and the elections. As Hobolt (2014) noticed, this reform did alter the way in which the candidate was selected, but did not change the nature of the EU elections (see also Christiansen and Schackleton 2019, in this book). This is of course due to several circumstances, but as Nielsen and Franklin (2017) argue, the core problem lies in the fact that even with the introduction of the *Spitzenkandidaten*, the 2014 EU elections failed "to achieve the objectives that elections are supposed to achieve: failing to provide direct policy consequences for the voice of people" (p. 9). The real power does not lie in the Commission, but in the European Council and in the club of EU Prime Ministers. Therefore, linking the elections to the President of the Commission did not ignite a process that would finally instate the democratic linkage between the EU Parliament and the EU's citizens. For these reasons Nielsen and Franklin (2017) argue that EU elections not only are second-order – they are also *second-rate*. If a second-order election lacks saliency, a second-rate election lacks a policy linkage, as the connection between the

1. It should be born in mind that SOE theory sees EP elections as displaying pale reflections of national political processes and concerns. It follows that if national politics show no interest in European matters that EP elections will show no such interest either. But the discovery of European issue concerns at EP eletions does not in itself run counter to SOE theory if those European issues have become evident in the national politics of the countries concerned.

voters' choices and policies that will be produced is missing. It could be argued that it is actually this second-rate nature that made the EU elections inevitably second-order in the eyes of national electorates.

CONTEXTUAL INFLUENCES ON EP ELECTION TURNOUT

Though turnout at EP elections is invariably low, the level of turnout does fluctuate from one EP election to the next, tempting commentators to try to interpret these fluctuations in terms of support for or opposition to the EU or its European Parliament. Franklin (2001) argued, with a wealth of supportive evidence, that variations in EP election turnout could be almost entirely explained on the basis of a small number of contextual (or structural) factors, leaving little room for any sort of verdict on the EU or its Parliament.

First, many European Parliament elections have evidently been subject to a "first election boost". Like the first elections held in many circumstances (Kostelka 2017), turnout was elevated at each 20th century EP election that was a first-time event: the first EP election ever held (to the Parliament of 1979); the first EP election held in the Southern Enlargement countries (Spain and Portugal) to the Parliament elected in 1984, and the first election held in the Northern Enlargement countries (Austria, Finland and Sweden) to the Parliament elected in 1994. Only in the 21st Century did there appear to be no "first election boost", at the first EP election held in Eastern Enlargement countries. But various reasons can be adduced to explain this failure of a boost to appear (in particular, electoral fatigue at elections that followed closely on referendum campaigns to ratify membership in the EU).

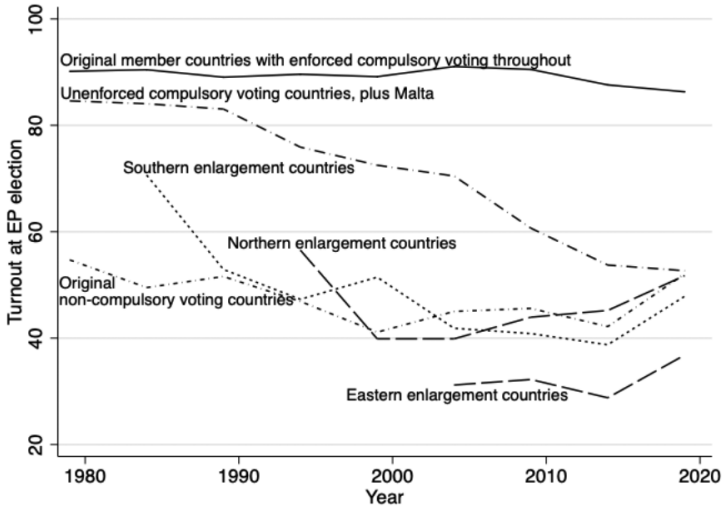
Second, European Parliament elections occur at different times in the national election cycles of member countries. This varies the low importance bestowed on them, increasing that low importance somewhat when these elections take place shortly before a national parliamentary election, meaning that they can be viewed as 'barometers' of national party standings (Eijk and Franklin 1996). The contrary is also true. When held in the immediate aftermath of national elections, EP elections have less importance than average because a better barometer of national party standings already exists in the results of that recent national election.

Third, EP elections are subject to composition effects, as repeated enlargements change the EU's complexion by adding countries in which turnout is higher or lower than the average turnout of the existing EU member states. In particular, the EU started out with four members in which electoral participation was compulsory (Belgium, Greece, Italy and Luxembourg – 40 percent of then member countries). Over time, however, Italy removed its compulsion to vote and only one of the 28 new member countries, Cyprus, was a compulsory voting country. Given the 37-percentage-point effect of compulsory voting on turnout at EP elections shown in the appendix to this chapter, the progres-sively smaller proportion of countries exhibiting this effect would naturally cause turnout to decline.

Finally, a new contextual effect has recently become apparent, also having to do with compulsory voting. It has been well-established that when compulsory voting

is abolished this initiates a long process of downward turnout adjustment as those who learned their voting habits under the compulsory regime retain those high-level turnout habits even as new voters fail to acquire the habit of voting at the same high level. Over the next fifty years, generational replacement slowly reduces the level of turnout to the level of those who had never known a compulsion to vote (Franklin 2004). This pattern of behavior applies to countries that had enforced the compulsion with sanctions that were apparent, even if not potent (as in Italy). But a number of countries have compulsory voting laws on the books that are not enforced. In such countries turnout was high when they acceded to to the EU, even if not as high as in countries where the compulsion was enforced. Two such countries are Greece and Cyprus, both EU member states. What has become apparent in the years since Cyprus became an EU member is that it has suffered a decline in turnout that looks very like a decline that had recently become apparent in Greece (a decline that had initially been masked by the timing of Greece's second and third EP elections, very close to the next national election in each case). The implication is that, in both Greece and Cyprus, elections to the EP in a country with un-enforced compulsory voting behave like elections at which the compulsion has been abolished. It seems that a symbolic compulsion is not potent at an election with no apparent purpose. This realization provides us with a group of three countries (Cyprus, Greece, and Italy) in which turnout at EP elections is in decline for a quasi-structural reason. For Greece and Cyprus this decline started at their second EP elections; for Italy it started at the first election after compulsory voting was abolished there, in 1994. A final country behaves as though it were a member of this group. In Malta there was never a compulsion to vote, but turnout in years leading up to EU acces-sion was as high as in compulsory voting countries (Hirczy 1995; Franklin 2004). It seems that an initially widespread habit of voting responds to the experience of EP elections in the same way regardless of the source of that habit, so long as a compulsion to vote is not enforced.

Figure 1. Turnout by different groups of EP-voting countries over time

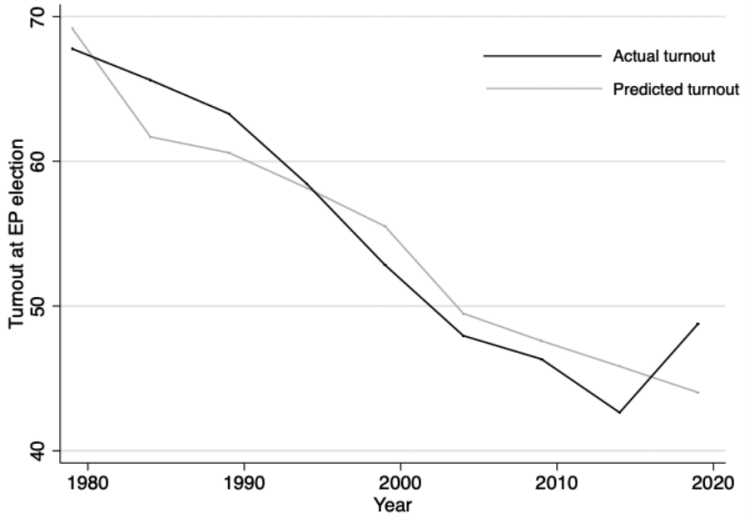


The four contextual effects just listed define four types of turnout evolution that different groups of countries should exhibit at predictable times during the course of their individual histories of EP election participation, giving the patterns shown in Figure 1. The figure distinguishes between the ten countries that participated in all EP elections ("Original") and those that acceeded at different times thereafter ("Southern enlargement", "Northern enlargement", "Eastern enlargement") while also distinguishing, among original EP voting countries, between those that had enforced compulsory voting throughout and those that never had compulsory voting. Additionally, we include a trace for countries with initially high turnout but no enforced compulsion to vote. At early EP elections this trace contains Greece and Italy, but those countries are joined by Cyprus and Malta in 2004.

The graph shows clearly the first election boost enjoyed by southern and northern enlargement countries (that boost is less obvious for original non-compulsory voting countries, but can still be discerned; it is absent for Eastern enlargement countries). The graph also shows a massive turnout decline from 1994 onwards among countries with initially high turnout but no enforced compulsion to vote. Indeed, turnout for all these different groups of countries appears to converge over time. For southern and northern enlargement countries this convergence is complete by the time of their second EP elections, after which variations in turnout are due to variations in election timing (see appendix). For West European countries (other than those with enforced compulsory voting) it is as though they had a "natural" level of turnout at EP elections that was rapidly approached with the passage of time, whatever their initial turnout level. Eastern enlargement countries have lower turnout over the entire span of their membership in the EU, producing a gap that appears rather constant over time as their turnout fluctuates more or less in step with that of the other non-compulsory voting countries.

Just one major anomaly remains to be mentioned. There is an uptick in turnout at the end of the series that applies to all EU member countries excepting only the countries with some type of com-pulsory or quasi-compulsory voting (in both of which traces, however, the rate of turout decline seems to reflect the same anomaly). An important question attends that anomaly. Is it just a fluctu-ation, such as those we see for particular groups of countries in particular years – fluctuations that may be largely the result of variations in the timing of elections for different groups? The pattern of turnout change in 2019 suggests an effect felt in common across all groups of countries, which could hardly be the result of peculiarities of election timing since such timing effects are country-specific.

Figure 2. Actual turnout at EP elections and turnout predicted by the structural model



We can verify the supposition that the 2019 turnout uptick was not due to factors included in the structural model if we use that model (see appendix, Table A) to predict the 2019 turnout outcome and compare the predicted outcome with the actual outcome. Indeed, we can do even better, predicting the turnout outcome for each year using the same structural model so that we can see to what extent predictions match outcomes over the whole sequence of EP elections.

As can be seen in Figure 2, actual turnout is quite well predicted by the structural model, even in 2019. Certainly the structural model does a good job of explaining the overall decline in turnout over the whole sequence of elections. And, although the fit of predicted to actual turnout was better in EP elections from 1989 to 2014, that fit is still pretty good in 2019. What is not good is the the fit of *trend* in predicted turnout to *trend* in actual turnout. The EP election of 2019 is the only one in which the trend in turnout since the previous election is wrongly predicted in terms of sign (positive instead of negative), and the error is huge. Effectively the fit of change in predicted turnout to change in actual turnout is zero in 2019.

So 2019 proves to be quite remarkable in terms of turnout – the first election in a sequence of 8 successive EP elections where the evolution of turnout since the previous election diverged com-pletely from what would have been expected on the basis of structural factors. In our statistical appendix we "explain" this divergence by means of what statisticians call a "dummy variable". Usu-ally such variables are poorly named, since they are used to indicate well-known factors that are associated with specific cases. In this instance the word "dummy" is unusually appropriate, how-ever. The variable indicates only the date when an otherwise unexplicated shock was felt.

Since the effect is not based on any structural factor yet known to scholars, the uptick in 2019 could be due to absolutely anything, and commentators will no doubt make hay attributing to it theories concocted for the occasion. Our own guess is that

citizens of all member states have been shocked by the Brexit spectacle (including citizens of Britain itself), and that a new appreciation of the importance of EP elections has been the result. But there is no way in which we can confirm that guess with data available to us at the time of writing.

Findings regarding turnout also have implications for other aspects of second order election theory, to which we now turn.

SECOND-ORDER EFFECTS ON EP PARTY SUPPORT

The second order theory expects parties to gain votes if they are small parties that are not members of the government of the day. However, the theory is not explicit about when these gains should occur. An important implication of our structural model's findings is that any gains in vote share made by small parties should occur towards the start of the electoral cycle, which is when most additional votes are cast.

In our analysis for this chapter we introduce what we take to be an additional innovation. We distinguish between two different ways in which gains to small parties can be measured. At first-take, one might presume that gains should be thought of relative to total votes cast – absolute gains – but, for individual small opposition parties, what would surely matter are gains or losses relative to votes won by that party at the most recent national election – relative gains. A party that gains 2 percent of the total vote might not seem to be gaining much and, in absolute terms, it is not. But, if that gain doubles its vote-share this would, relatively speaking, be hugely newsworthy and seen as a big victory by party supporters.

In the appendix to this chapter, Table B validates the structural expectations we get from the second order model. Small non-government parties do gain support both because they are small and also because they are not members of the government. The separate effects of being small and being in opposition to the government apply whichever method is used for measuring gains to small parties. However, being in opposition and being small are highly correlated, and if one is interested in the joint effects of both reasons for party gains it matters whether those gains are measured absolutely or relative to the size of the small party. When measured in absolute terms, opposition status does not add significantly to small party gains over what would be seen were the small party to have been a government member. However, if gains are measured relatively then small parties gain both because they are small and also because they are in opposition.

Additional analyses included in Table B show that these gains occur mainly at the start of the electoral cycle. Indeed effects for small parties at EP elections held shortly after national elections are the strongest effects in the table. Such parties gain four times more than the absolute proportion of votes they received at their most recent national election – gains that are statistically highly significant.

This is the first time, to the best of our knowledge, that a link has been made between the structural model of EP election turnout and the second order implications for party gains and losses. Because this is an incidental finding made in the course of a hurried preliminary investigation of new data, it is beyond the remit of this chap-

ter to validate the finding by seeing wither it can be replicated using data produced by previous EP elections. Until such an investigation is conducted we cannot be sure about these findings and must treat them as suggestive.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter we performed a first effort at providing explanatory factors for the outcome of these elections. Our reflection started from the established model that sees EP elections as second-order elections, and covered two separate dimensions: turnout and party support.

In terms of turnout, our analysis employed the established structural model that sees EP turnout conditioned by several factors which are not related in any way to the contingencies of political debate related to the EU. And it is here that we found a first, striking finding: while the structural model has in general a remarkable predictive power for EP election turnout, it clearly *cannot account for the turnout increase seen in these elections*. As a result, it has to be recognized that the 2019 EP elections might be marking a turning point in this regard: we might be witnessing – for different reasons, whose relative importance cannot be rigorously tested here – a turnout increase which might be related to some real politicization of these elections.

In terms of party support, our first tests do not show equally exceptional results. The second-order model still applies, with party gains and losses being partly explained by a combination of opposition status and small size, in turn interplaying with the timing of the EP election – whether it occurs close to the previous national election or not. However, our identification of structural dynamics that influence party support does not go into the detail of *what types* of small, opposition parties were rewarded in these elections. The open questions remains, whether, in the context of structural dynamics of party support, there might still have been some EU-wide trend that has rewarded parties with specific policy positions. Some clues that this might be the case have already emerged from the results presented in chapter 1 in this book (Angelucci and Carrieri 2019); but – more rigorously – this is the key research question assessed in the next chapter (Maggini et al. 2019).

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APPENDIX TO CHAPTER 4
STATISTICAL ANALYSES EXPLAINING TUROUT AT EP ELECTIONS

Table A - OLS regression findings for the structural model of EP election turnout (Franklin 2002)

	MODEL 1: WITHOUT NEW DEMOCRACIES		MODEL 2: WITH NEW DEMOCRACIES, NO INTERACTIONS		MODEL 3: WITH NEW DEMOCRACIES AND INTERACTIONS		MODEL 4: AS C BUT WITH DUMMY FOR 2019	
	Coef.	(s.e.)	Coef.	(s.e.)	Coef.	(s.e.)	Coef.	(s.e.)
First election "boost"	4.92	(2.90)	2.12	(2.37)ns	5.29	(2.94)	3.46	(2.88)ns
Time to next national election (0-1 proportion of 5 years)*	-6.79	(3.23)	-7.31	(3.00)	-6.92	(3.28)	-7.40	(3.17)
Compulsory voting**	37.12	(2.07)	37.30	(2.11)	37.16	(2.10)	37.20	(2.03)
New democracy			-14.81	(2.17)	-12.44	(3.59)	-11.40	(3.48)
New democracy X first election					-8.07	(4.40)	-4.37	(4.37)ns
New democracy X time to next national election					-2.65	(7.89)ns	-6.36	(7.68)ns
2019 year dummy							8.96	(2.48)
Electoral sequence (0-1 proportion of 9 elections)	-4.95	(3.17)ns	-5.02	(3.12)ns	-4.10	(3.16)ns	-10.98	(3.59)
Intercept	52.56	(2.42)	53.12	(2.35)	52.09	(2.44)	55.15	(2.50)
R-squared	0.73		0.76		0.77		0.79	
Observations	132		172		172		172	

Notes: All coefficients significant at the 0.05 level, one-tailed, unless marked "ns".
* Originally measured in days.
** Compulsory voting coded 1 if in effect and enforced. If abolished, coded as proportion of years left before all pre-reform voters have been replaced, starting with first election following abolition. If not enforced, coded as for abolition, starting with the second EP election at which the country partici pated (see main text for details).

In Table A, Model 1 corresponds to the model presented in Franklin (2001), though with time to the next national parliamentary election coded as a proportion (so that coefficient magnitudes are comparable across variables) rather than in months) and with established democracies included at every election up to 2019. Model 2 adds new democracies (countries acceding to the EU in 2014 with the exception of Malta and Cyprus, which were already included in Model 1). Model 3 adds interactions between new democracy and each of first election and time to next election. These show new democracies turning out at an even lower rate 2.9 percent lower than established democracies would have done in the absence of a first election boost (5.29 - 8.07 = -2.78), though the difference would not have been statistically significant. It also shows new democracies being more strongly affected (over a third more strongly) by time to the next election (-6.92 / -2.65 = 0.38), but again this difference would not have been statistically significant. This is the model used to derive predicted outcomes for Figures 1 and 2 in the main text. Finally, Model 4 inroduces the 2019 election year dummy, mentioned in the main text. The effect of this variable shows turnout in 2019 to have been almost 9 percent greater than would have been expected on the basis of the structural model (which would have led us to expect the turnout level shown in Figure 2 in the main text. This effect is highly significant, statistically. Indeed, there is less than a 1 in a thousand chance of this effect being the result of happenstance.

Importantly, all of these models except for the final one show no significant effect of electoral sequence – a measure of the location of each election in a nine election sequence coded 0 to 1. The effect (leaving aside Model 4) suggests a total drop in turnout of 5 percent. This is the fall in turnout *not* accounted for by contextual changes, a little more than half of one percent per EP election – rather less than the decline that would have been expected on the basis of work by Franklin and Hobolt (2011). It is possible that, far from a reduction in EP election support over the years, there has actually been an increase, net of contextual and other factors.

In Table B we show effects on party gains in vote share between national and EP elections, using both types of measure (overall and relative) mentioned in the main text. These different measures are presented in pairs of columns for different analyses. The explanatory power of second order theory is seen there to be very low, especially when it comes to relative gains, meaning that much of the fluctuation in party support between national elections and following EP elections is due to other factors than those that the theory takes into account, or are random in nature. Because effects are so small we set the bar for statistical significance at 0.1 rather than the more conventional 0.05.

The first four columns show effects of small party size and opposition status, each taken alone. Size has about ten times the apparent effect of opposition status and the relative measure shows close to ten times the apparent effect produced by the absolute measure. These four coefficients are highly significant, statistically. However, size and opposition status are also highly correlated, and share explanatory power. When we take the two together in Model 3 we find that, from both perspectives, opposition status loses statistical significance (and, indeed, acquires the wrong sign when

Table B - Relative and absolute gains from opposition status and small party size, OLS regressions

OUTCOME: GAIN IN VOTE SHARE	MODEL 1: OPPOSITION STATUS		MODEL 2: SMALL PARTY SIZE		MODEL 3: BOTH TOGETHER		MODEL 4: SMALL PARTY SIZE X TIME	
	Overall	Relative	Overall	Relative	Overall	Relative	Overall	Relative
Opposition status	0.03	0.57				-0.34		-0.34
	(0.01)	(0.20)			(0.01)ns	(0.22)ns	(0.01)ns	(0.22)
Small party size*			0.27	2.59	0.28	1.99	0.26	0.03
			(0.03)	(0.76)	(0.04)	(0.85)	(0.06)	(1.48)ns
Time left until the next national election (proportion)							0.01	0.76
							(0.02)ns	(0.40)
Small X time							0.04	4.44
							(0.12)	(2.86)
Intercept	-0.01	-0.03	0.03	-0.10	=0.03	-0.12	-0.02	0.24
	(0.00)	(0.09)ns	(0.00)	(0.11)ns	(0.00)	(0.11)ns	(0.01)	(0.22)ns
R-squared	0.04	0.03	0.22	0.04	0.22	0.05	0.22	0.06
Observations	267	267	267	267	267	267	267	267

Notes: All coefficients significant at 0.1, one-tailed, unless marked "ns." Standard errors in parentheses.
* 1 - size of party at the most recent national election, measured as a proportion of total votes cast.

measured from a relative perspective). The two measures also tell different stories in the final pair of columns, those for Model 4. There we see that the proportion of time left to the next election plays an important role in conditioning the strength of relative effects, but not of absolute effects. Relative effects of opposition status are significant in this model even though small party size is also taken into account. In

this model, effects of small size become significant in the expected direction only provided there is a long time left before the next national election. More importantly this effect is the most powerful of any seen in Table 1. At EP elections held close to the start of a country's election cycle, the smallest parties gain by a factor that is four times their size, though this boost explains little variance because the smallest parties are few in number and rarely have the good fortune to contest an EP election in the immediate aftermath of a national election.

This last model is suggestive of a strong link between the structural theory and second order theory, which should not surprise us since the structural theory itself incorporates second order theory in a number of ways. However, the findings are based on models with little power and we should bear in mind the relatively high probability (little less than 1 in 10) that these findings are spurious. Evidently they need to be confirmed in future research.