Chapter Five

Impact of issues on party performance

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INTRODUCTION

European Parliament (EP) elections are traditionally analysed and interpreted according to the second order model (Reif and Schmitt 1980; van der Eijk and Franklin 1996): EP elections are second order contests characterized by low turnout (Franklin 2001) and driven by domestic factors (de Vreese et al. 2006). Such contexts, furthermore, offer a platform for new parties to emerge, they tend to favour small rather than big parties and, finally, they are likely to result in electoral losses for governing parties. Since the first direct elections to the European Parliament in 1979, the second-order theory has been tested in the aftermath of each single election (van der Eijk, Franklin and Marsh 1996; Marsh 1998; Schmitt 2005; Schmitt and Teperoglou 2015), and has repeatedly confirmed its conceptual and empirical validity.

As regards the main characteristics of a second-order election, lower turnout is the one that is most strictly linked to the lower saliency of EP elections. This feature has been explained by relying on a small number of structural factors (Franklin 2001), which are not related to the EU dimension. For instance, scholars have shown that saliency of EP elections depends also on the time of national electoral cycles in which they occur: EP elections are more important when they take place shortly before a national parliamentary election, at which time they gain an importance as 'barometers' of national party standings (van der Eijk and Franklin 1996).

Compared to other second-order elections (e.g. local elections), nevertheless, EP elections share with first-order elections an important feature: they are both held at the national level. Party competition at national level has been interpreted by some scholars in terms of issue competition (Carmines and Stimson 1980; Green-Pedersen 2007). According to the second-order perspective, the impact of issues on EP elections should be mostly related to domestic factors (de Vreese et al., 2006). Consequently it has traditionally been maintained that these elections had no European issue content (van der Eijk and Franklin 1996). However, more recently scholars started to question some of the second order features, especially trying to show the increasing importance of supranational elements in EP elections (Bellucci, Garzia and Rubal 2010; Trechsel 2010; Hix and Marsh 2011; Shuck et al. 2011; Hobolt and Spo-

on 2012).[1] In this contribution, we support the argument of a "growing European-ness of European elections" (Trechsel, De Sio and Garzia 2017) through empirical analyses which take into account the role played by shared issues among EU member states in explaining party performances.

By taking as a reference point the previous parliamentary elections, we first demonstrate the lower relevance and predictive power of the second-order model for analysing party performance when issues are not taken into account; then, we show that party gains and losses – compared to previous national elections – can be significantly explained by party stances on the same issues across the 28 EU countries, showing signs of a perhaps new emergence of a common European debate, structured around a few key issues; nevertheless, relevant differences emerge when the main geographical areas of the EU are taken into account.

BEYOND THE SECOND-ORDER ELECTION MODEL: THE IMPACT OF ISSUES ON PARTY PERFORMANCE

In this chapter, we aim at analysing and explaining party performance in the 2019 EP elections going beyond the traditional second-order explanations. In light of recent studies that show, with different degrees of success, that the influence of Europe on voting might have even increased over time due to the continuous strengthening of the EP's powers (Schmitt 2005) and a greater visibility of European issues during the campaign (Trechsel 2010, Trechsel, De Sio and Garzia 2017), we expect that parties take positions on similar key issues which inform the political debate in Europe, not only when national elections are held, but also in times of EP elections . Thus, we first expect that:

> in order to predict electoral performance in the 2019 EP elections in terms of gains or losses compared to previous parliamentary elections, issue stances of political parties significantly contribute in terms of predictive power on top of structural second-order factors, even when estimating a common model for all EU-28 countries.

Secondly, we expect that, despite a potentially increasing Europeanization of the political space, issue stances of parties have a differentiated impact on electoral performance in different geographical areas of the EU, rooted in diverse political traditions, developments and socio-economic contexts. In this regard, the structure of

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1. It needs to be recognized that the 2014 EP elections (and perhaps also those of 2019) were held in the context of a considerable europeanization of national political discourses. If EP elections constitute distorted reflections of national political concerns (van der Eijk and Franklin 1996) then it would be expected, even according to Second Order Election (SOE) theory, that these elections would reflect any European content that national elections might acquire. So such content occurring after 2009 does not contradict SOE theory. The discovery of shared trends across EU countries in issue effects also does not contradict SOE theory since SOE theory does not consider this possibility.

political conflict in Central Eastern Europe has been traditionally very different compared to Western Europe, with the former characterised by higher electoral volatility, weaker party allegiances, a less structured political space (Bielasiak 2005) or different ideological combinations of economic and cultural issues (Kitschelt 1992). Furthermore, studies that have analysed citizens' attitudes through the lenses of post-materialism (Inglehart 1990) have shown that individuals have different issue priorities depending on their level of material wellbeing, with post-materialist attitudes spreading especially among well-educated middle classes. Borrowing on these insights and recognising the risks to empirical inference that derive from data limitations (given that we do not employ individual-level data), it is plausible to expect that:

> distinguishing between the different European geographical areas, electoral gains are explained by different party positions on issues, with post-materialist, environmentalist positions playing a greater role in the richest countries of the Centre-North.

DATA

In our analysis, following a long-standing analytical approach (e.g., Schmitt 2005; Hix and Marsh 2007; 2011; Schmitt and Toygur 2016), we rely on aggregate-level data to investigate why citizens switch votes from national to European elections. Consequently, individual parties running at the 2019 EP elections are our unit of analysis, whereas the dependent variable is for each party the difference between the percentage of valid votes polled in the EP elections and that obtained at the previous national parliamentary elections held in the country (the same measure as used in Chapter 4 of this book). In contrast to the strategy pursued by De Sio, Russo and Franklin in that chapter, we focus only on the relative difference, ignoring the absolute one. More precisely, for each party we calculated vote-share gains or losses relative to votes won by that party at the most recent national election. Relying on relative vote changes across elections has the notable advantage of permitting a straightforward comparison between large parties (more likely to lose votes at EP election, according to the second-order model) and small parties, with results that are more sensitive compared to simple party performance differences. For instance, a party gain of 2-3 percent of the total vote is not a big gain in absolute terms. However, if that gain doubles the party's vote share, this would been conceived as a big victory by commentators and party supporters.

The main independent variables that operationalize the second order model are as follows:
- "Size" is the percentage of votes for each party in the last national election. This variable also represents the baseline to calculate the vote-share gap between national and the 2019 EP elections;
- "Government status" is a dummy variable scoring '1' for all parties included in the national government at the time of the 2019 EP elections and '0' for all others;

- "Early" is an index ranging between 0 and 1 that measures the period of the electoral cycle in which the EP election is held (the highest the index, the closest the EP election is to previous parliamentary election);
- The interaction between "size" and "early", which is intended to measure the influence of party size mediated by the effect of the electoral cycle. As shown by De Sio, Russo and Franklin in this book, electoral gains of small parties occur mainly at the start of the electoral cycle.

The coding of parties' positions on issues comes from the 2019 *euandi* project (whose dataset will be soon publicly released). In order to place parties in the political issue space, these operational measures are the result of an iterative approach to party placement strictly linked to the development of Internet-based Voting Advice Applications (VAAs). This method consists in comparing expert judgements with party self-placements (Trechsel and Mair 2011; Garzia, Trechsel and De Sio 2015; Trechsel, De Sio and Garzia 2017) in order to maximize the strengths of both methodologies, while at the same time attempting to counterbalance the respective weaknesses. Expert coding and party self-placement occur independently, but the respective results are compared to allow a control mechanism. Through this kind of datasets, it is possible to cover immediately in the aftermath of the EP elections a large number of policy issues, which are related to actual policy statements rather than to a generic classification of political conflict dimensions.

RESULTS

In Table 1 we show effects on party performance in the 2019 EP elections. In Model 1 only the aforementioned second orders factors are included as control variables. In Model 2 we added as predictors party positions on issues.[2] The first evident result that emerges is that the explanatory power of second order theory is not very large: the variance explained by Model 1 is 13%.[3] This means that much of the variation in party support between national elections and following EP elections is due to other factors than the structural elements of the second-order theory: indeed, when we add party positions in Model 2, R-squared increases significantly, reaching 24%.

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2. Considering the relatively low number of observations and the relatively large number of issues, we pursued a systematic strategy for identifying a parsimonious model. We first ran a full model with 21 issues from the VAA of the 2019 *euandi* project (after having excluded the "EU transnational party lists" issue because of too many missing values). We then excluded issues with effects characterized by very high p-values (equal or above 0.8). Finally, we looked at bivariate Pearson correlations between the remaining issues. According to the strength of association (Cohen 1988), we excluded some variables (e.g. "anti-immigration", "green taxes", "EU foreign policy") in order to avoid items picking up on the same covariance component. See the Appendix for the complete list of analysed issues, along with question wording.
3. Because effects are small and the number of observations is limited being aggregate data, we set the bar for statistical significance at 0.1 rather than the more conventional 0.05.

Hence, our first empirical expectation is confirmed: the predictive power of the second-order model when considered only in terms of its structural implications has considerably less predictive power for analysing party performance, compared to a model which includes party stances on the same issues across the 28 EU countries.

In particular, looking at Model 2, we notice that some issues have a significant effect on party performance: banks taxation (negative), assimilation (negative), tougher criminal sanctions (positive) and EU integration (positive). This means that parties which support EU integration and claim that criminals should be more severely punished are likely to have made electoral gains in the 2019 EP elections, compared to previous parliamentary elections. Conversely, positions in favour of cultural assimilation of migrants and of a higher taxation on banks and stock market exchanges are associated with electoral losses. This suggests the emergence of a common European debate, centred on different dimensions of the political space: the economic left-right dimension (Klingemann and Fuchs 1995; Knutsen 1995; 1997); the cultural dimension based on the libertarian-authoritarian distinction (Kitschelt 1994); and a dimension based on the divide between cultural integration and demarcation linked to globalization and EU integration processes (Kriesi et. al. 2006). In this regard, good party performances are explained by a mixture of political positions: right-wing on economy, authoritarian as regards law and order issues, but culturally open as regard EU integration and cultural integration of migrants.

However, we expect that this Europeanization of political dynamics is partial, with significant differences among geographical areas of the EU, consistently with the different steps of the EU enlargement and the very different political traditions and recent developments of EU countries, especially if we consider the distinction between eastern countries (of the former soviet bloc), countries of the centre-north of Europe and southern countries.[4] We therefore proceeded to test this second empirical expectation by interacting all the issue-related variables of Model 2 with dummy variables for the aforementioned areas, through separate models. Here we present the results of the significant interactions through plots of the marginal effects of issue positions on party performance across geographical areas.

Figure 1 shows the marginal effects of pro renewable energy stances on party performance across groups of countries. This variable in Model 2 of Table 1 was not significant. Interestingly, when we take into account the interaction with groups of countries, it becomes significant and positively associated with electoral gains in the Centre-North. This result is consistent with the geographically differentiated success of green parties in the 2019 EP elections, with the largest gains that occurred in the central-northern countries (for instance, the astonishing success of the Green Party in Germany which has become the second most voted party with 20% of the vo-

4. France is a country that shares features of both the South and the North: considering both socio-economic and political-institutional factors, we decided to include it in the Centre-North. To check the robustness of our results, we replicated the analyses including it in the South, and findings are substantially confirmed.

OUTCOME: RELATIVE GAINS/LOSSES IN VOTE SHARE	MODEL 1 BASE MODEL: ONLY SECOND-ORDER CONTROLS	MODEL 2 PARTY STANCES ON ISSUES
Second-order controls (*government status, party size, early in the electoral cycle, size*early*)	(included)	(included)
unemployment support		-0.19 (0.39)ns
banks taxation		-0.46 (0.34)
lower taxes		-0.36 (0.35)ns
assimilation		-0.74 (0.39)
tougher criminal sanctions		0.93 (0.35)
asylum quota		-0.14 (0.28)ns
euthanasia		0.02 (0.27)ns
renewable energy		0.41 (0.36)ns
EU integration		0.45 (0.30)
no veto power		0.00 (0.30)ns
Constant	1.00 (0.60)	1.00 (0.60)
R-squared	0.13	0.24
Observations	126	126

Table 1- Testing the full model of party performance in 2019 EP elections, OLS regressions

Notes: All coefficients at least significant at 0.1, one-tailed, unless marked "ns." Standard errors in parentheses.

tes). Again, environmental issues seem to play a relevant role in electoral terms only in the most economically developed part of Europe, confirming our expectation based on the assumptions of post-materialist theory (Inglehart 1990).

Figure 1. Marginal effects of renewable energy on party performance by groups of countries.
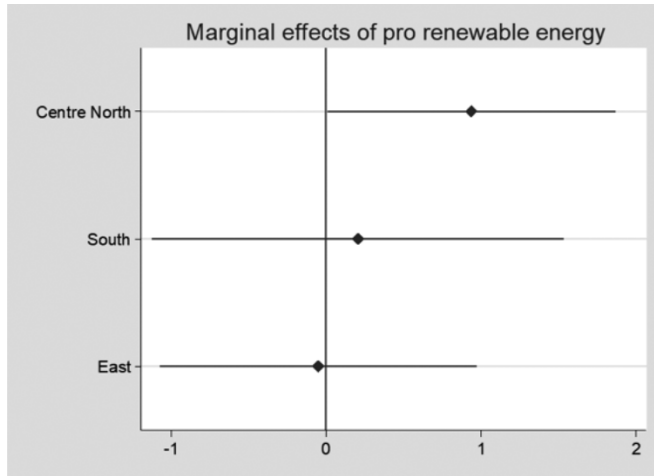
As regards economic issues (see Figure 2), positions supporting lower taxes (in Model 2 not significant) become substantially significant and negatively associated with party performances only in the Centre-North. Conversely, the negative and significant association between positions in favour of banks taxation and party performance holds only in eastern countries, whereas in the Centre-North the sign of the effect is the opposite, although not significant. These results seem to indicate a relevant political distinction between eastern and central-northern countries: in the latter, positions attached to the defence of the traditional welfare state (originated precisely in these countries) seem to be electorally rewarding, whereas in the East right-wing pro market positions appear more promising.

Figure 2. Marginal effects of banks taxation and lower taxes on party performance by groups of countries.
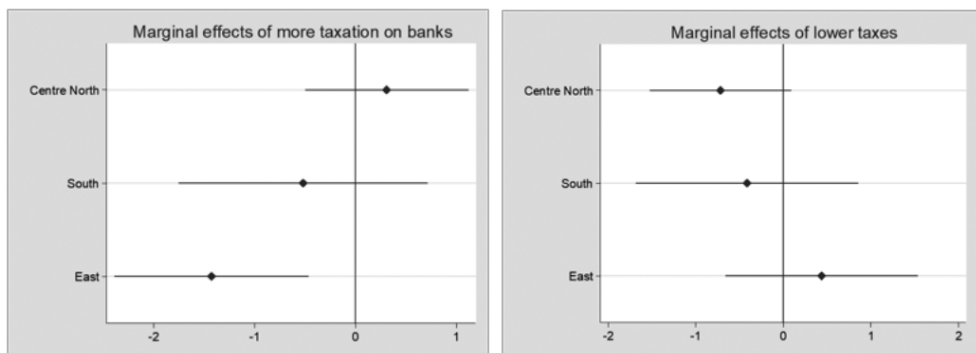
Political differences between geographical areas, especially those between central-northern and eastern countries, appear evident also when we consider marginal effects of cultural issues on party performance by groups of countries. Concerning issues related to cultural demarcation-integration (see Figure 3), the aforementioned significant and negative association between positions supporting cultural assimilation of migrants and party performance is a phenomenon which occurs mostly in the Centre-North (in the South it is less significant, while in the East such positions are positively associated with electoral performance, although not significantly). Similarly, pro-EU integration positions show substantial significant effects in the same geographical area (whereas in the South and in the East they are not significant, albeit the sign of the association is the same). Therefore, noteworthy political differences between Centre-North and East emerge not only as far as economic issues are concerned, but also when cultural issues are on the table. This latter point is confirmed by looking at Figure 4: positions in favour of tougher criminal sanctions – an issue traditionally linked to the authoritarian-libertarian dimension – are highly significant and positively associated with electoral gains in the East, whereas in the South and in the Centre-North are less significant, albeit showing the same direction. Finally, positions supporting distributions of asylum seekers quota among EU member states (a variable not significant in Model 2), keep being not statistically significant in the South and in the Centre-North, while becoming significant and associated with electoral losses in eastern countries.

Figure 3. Marginal effects of cultural assimilation and EU integration on party performance by groups of countries.
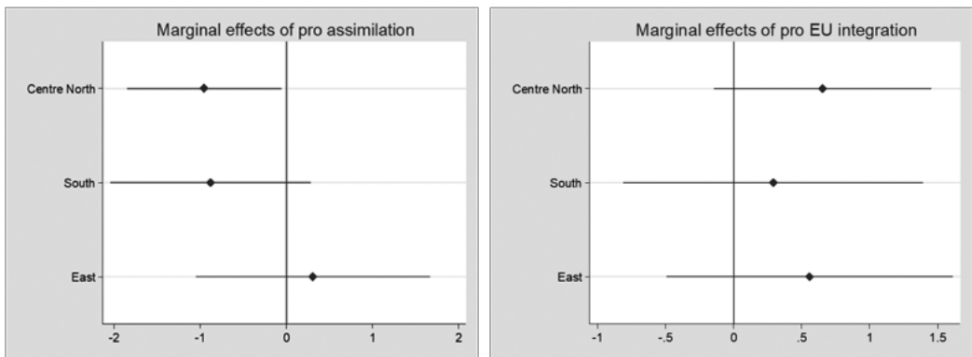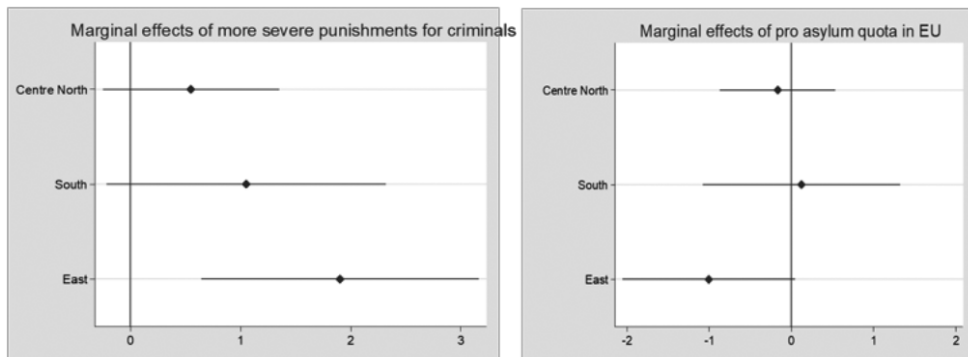
Figure 4. Marginal effects of tougher criminal sanctions and asylum quota on party performance by groups of countries.

To conclude, this analysis has shown that traditional second-order and structural factors, certainly relevant, are only partially sufficient to interpret and predict electoral performance of parties at the 2019 EP elections. Including in explanatory models party positions on key issues shared among EU countries appears a promising strategy. Furthermore, the growing importance of an European issue space should be nuanced taking into account relevant political differences between the geographical areas of the EU. Our results have shown, indeed, a clear divide between central-northern and eastern countries, in terms of the type of issue stances that can be electorally rewarding. In the Centre-North environmentalism, positions pro-cultural integration and to a certain extent the defence of the welfare model seem to be all issues than can lead to electoral gains. This issue context is particularly fruitful to explain the (geographically differentiated) "green wave" of the 2019 EP elections. This progressive landscape totally changes when we look at issue opportunities in the East: authoritarian stances on the cultural dimension and to a certain extant right-wing positions on the economy seem to be electorally rewarding, consistently with the political development of the last years. This is of course preliminary research with significant limitations, especially as regards the number of cases analysed (aggregate data from two elections). However, results appear promising and further research is needed to explore more in depth these preliminary insights, both enlarging the number and type of elections analysed and interplaying aggregate level data with citizens' opinions on issues through public opinion surveys.

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APPENDIX TO CHAPTER 5:
QUESTION WORDING OF ISSUE STATEMENTS

WELFARE	Social programmes should be maintained even at the cost of higher taxes
UNEMPLOYMENT SUPPORT	The state should provide stronger financial support to unemployed workers
EU DEFICIT	The European Union should rigorously punish Member States that violate the EU deficit rules
ASYLUM QUOTA	Asylum-seekers should be distributed proportionally among European Union Member States
ANTI IMMIGRATION	Immigration into Denmark should be made more restrictive
ASSIMILATION	Immigrants from outside Europe should be required to accept our culture and values
GAY UNIONS	The legalisation of same sex marriages is a good thing
LEGALISATION DRUGS	The legalisation of the personal use of soft drugs is to be welcomed
EUTHANASIA	Euthanasia should be legalized
LOWER TAXES	Government spending should be reduced in order to lower taxes
EU TAXATION	The EU should acquire its own tax raising powers
BANKS TAXATION	Bank and stock market gains should be taxed more heavily
GREEN TAXES	The promotion of public transport should be fostered through green taxes (e.g. road taxing)
RENEWABLE ENERGY	Renewable sources of energy (e.g. solar or wind energy) should be supported even if this means higher energy costs
INTERNET RESTRICTIONS	Restrictions of personal privacy on the Internet should be accepted for public security reasons
TOUGHER CRIMINAL SANCTIONS	Criminals should be punished more severely
EU DEFENCE	The European Union should strengthen its security and defence policy
EU FOREIGN POLICY	On foreign policy issues the European Union should speak with one voice
EU integration	European integration is a good thing
ANTIEURO	The single European currency (Euro) is a bad thing
NO VETO POWER	Individual member states of the European Union should have less veto power

PART II

RESULTS ACROSS THE 28 EU COUNTRIES