

Economic crisis and European elections: an alteration of the electoral cycle?

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. *The research question*

In the months preceding the 2009 European elections, several reasons emerged to deem such round of voting a special case, deserving particular attention. The 2009 elections come after the outbreak of one of the worst economic crises of the last decades. Moreover, the initial financial outbreak of the crisis came in the final phases of the U.S. presidential campaign, preventing immediate action by the U.S. government. This called several European governments to take the lead of a coordinate action: an effort which only partially succeeded. Also, the European Central Bank was criticized by many for not being as fast in reacting as required by the severe crisis.

In this general political climate, the 2009 European elections became a key test case for the assessment of two general research questions.

The first question concerns the presence of *effects of delegitimation of EU policy making*. A possible outcome of the crisis could be of turning the attention of most citizens back to national governments, which would appoint *national* answers to the crisis. In this regard, one could expect such phenomena as increasing abstention, increasing protest voting, increasing fragmentation, increasing success of anti-EU parties.

The second question is less closely tied to EU policy making, and concerns the ordinary mechanism of reward-and-punishment connected to the electoral evaluation of government action, especially in intermediate, second-order elections. In this regard, one could expect *a potential weakening of electoral support to governing parties*, due to the emergence of the economic crisis.

As seen, the 2009 elections provide an interesting test case for an initial answer to these two questions. Yet, an appropriate evaluation of the results requires an appropriate contextualization, based on two separate aspects.

First, the 2009 European elections require to be contextualized in *analytic* terms. Several contributions in the literature have proposed to frame European elections in terms of *second-order elections*. This interpretation is based on the hypothesis that the stakes are generally less relevant in European elections than in national elections. As such, European elections can be considered *second-order elections*, being generally considered by politicians and citizens as an occasion to gauge political consensus, in campaigns mostly dominated by national issues. Given the lower relevance of such elections, the second order model defines European elections as characterized by a *lower turnout* (and higher percentages of non valid votes), by – usually – *particularly positive results for small or new, “flash” parties*, and by *losses for governing parties*. Regarding this last point, the notion of *electoral cycle* will be used, linking to the idea that the natural development of a legislature through its period of office features different *phases*, each characterized by different priorities and type of government action. As such, these phases also imply different levels of political support by the public opinion, with the weakest point occurring generally in the middle of a cycle (Reif and Schmitt 1980; Schmitt 2005; Marsh 1998).

Secondly, this round of voting calls for an appropriate *historical* contextualization. It is of limited utility to simply compare these election results with the previous European or national elections in each countries. Trends across a longer time span are required, in order to reliably answer the main research question, that is, if the 2009 European elections are significantly different from other European elections in the past. It is precisely this need for historical contextualization that led to the choice of analyzing a longer timeframe.

Lastly, precisely for the mechanisms suggested by the notion of *electoral cycle*, it cannot be overstated that national factors must always be taken into account, and often suspected for being the key explanatory factor in each election.

1.2. The data

The research question has been investigated on a selection of eight European countries, aimed at including all large countries and a meaningful selection of smaller countries that were deemed most sensitive for anti-European and protest voting. Also, the availability of longer time series was considered as a criterion, leading to a prevailing selection of Western countries. As a result, the research included Austria, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain and the United Kingdom¹. These eight countries total 75,4% of the total EU-27 population².

For each country, electoral results have been collected for the 1994³, 1999, 2004 and 2009 European elections⁴; and for all national general elections⁵ since 1994⁶. Table 1 details all national elections included in the analysis.

Table 1 – The 66 elections included in the analysis

	at	de	es	fr	it	nl	pl	uk
1992								●
1993				●			●	
1994	●	○●	○	○	●○	○●		○
1995	●							
1996			●		●			
1997				●			●	●
1998		●				●		
1999	○●	○	○	○	○	○		○
2000			●					
2001					●		●	●
2002	●	●		●		●		
2003						●		
2004	○	○	○●	○	○	○	○	○
2005		●					●	●
2006	●				●	●		
2007				●			●	
2008	●		●		●			
2009	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

○=European elections; ●=National elections

¹ Countries are indicated through the report by referring to their ISO 3166 country code, coinciding with their Internet top-level domain country code.

² Source: Eurostat, “Total population”, <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat> .

³ 1996 for Austria.

⁴ For Poland, 2004 and 2009 only.

⁵ Results for the lower House, where a bicameral Parliament exists.

⁶ In some cases earlier elections were added (France 1993, Uk 1992), in order to include at least four national elections per country. Poland 1993 was also included, in order to increase the number of Polish elections, given that only two European elections were available for this country.

For each election, the following variables have been collected and/or computed:

- electoral participation (operationalized as the percentage of valid votes on the total of registered voters⁷);
- electoral party results for each party;
- effective number of parties, or N_{eff} (Laakso and Taagepera 1979);
- two-party vote concentration index (percentage of valid votes to the first two parties).

In addition to these data based on official results, a selection of results from public opinion polls was collected, for all the eight surveyed countries, for the January 2008-June 2009 timeframe.

Finally, this research also provides a classification of all the main political parties in the surveyed countries, based on their position on EU issues⁸.

1.3. Hypotheses and indicators

Given the general research questions outlined previously and the available data, the following hypotheses were chosen for empirical testing, on the eve of the electoral results. Their confirmation is aimed mainly at two goals: 1) validating the second-order model on a broad sample of elections; 2) highlight differences emerging in this specific election.

H1: Turnout in European elections is lower than in national elections.

(indicator: electoral participation)

This hypothesis is clearly derived from the second-order model approach, stating that the less relevant stake is paramount in predicting a lower participation, compared to a “civic” participation model that would predict comparable participation levels also in European elections.

H2: Voting concentration in European elections is lower than in national elections.

(indicators: N_{eff} , two-party concentration)

Also derived from the second-order model. The lower relevance of second-order elections brings about a favorable setting for small and new, “flash” parties, thus decreasing the concentration on large parties.

⁷ Due to uneven availability of actual turnout data.

⁸ See section 4 for details.

H3: Anti-European parties are stronger in European elections than in national elections.

(indicators: electoral results, interpreted through a party classification on EU issues)

This hypothesis derives from the idea that European elections are at least partly disputed on EU issues. Such elections should therefore bring more salience to the issues traditionally qualifying anti-EU parties, creating a favorable setting for such parties.

H4: Governing parties are weaker in European elections than in national elections.

(indicators: 2004 secondary analysis; 2009 electoral results, compared to latest national election)

The baseline hypothesis stems from the general electoral-cycle model. The comparison between 2004 and 2009 is crucial, as it aims at highlighting whether a drop in the support of governing parties is in line with the past.

H5: Since autumn 2008 (the outbreak of the economic crisis), governing parties weakened.

(indicators: public opinion trends and past electoral results)

This hypothesis is explicitly aimed at testing a direct effect of the economic crisis on the level of political support enjoyed by parties in office.

H6: since autumn 2008 (the outbreak of the economic crisis), anti-European parties strengthened.

(indicators: public opinion trends, interpreted through a party classification on EU issues)

Again, this hypothesis is explicitly aimed at testing a direct effect of the economic crisis on the level of political support enjoyed by anti-EU parties.

2. ELECTORAL PARTICIPATION

The research was carried out through a two-stage procedure. In order to ensure an analytically sound evaluation of the hypotheses, all of them were first assessed before the 2009 elections. This was made to establish a baseline interpretation, in order to provide an appropriate predictive foundation for the 2009 outcome. All hypotheses (and the overall interpretation) were then re-assessed, based on the actual 2009 outcome. Results from the two separate assessments are presented separately, in order to explicitly highlight the confirmation of previous predictions or, on the other hand, any surprising, unpredicted outcome.

2.1. Hypothesis assessment before the 2009 elections

The first empirical test concerns the historical contextualization of the electoral participation levels for European elections, compared to national elections, in the surveyed countries. Due to uneven availability of comparable turnout data, the chosen indicator is the percentage of valid votes on the total of registered voters. Trends for this indicator are presented in

Table 2, with separate rows for European and national elections.

A first overall evaluation of the phenomenon highlights how hypothesis H1 can definitely be confirmed: turnout in European elections is *significantly* lower than in national elections.

A synthetic European elections mobilization index can be computed for each country, as the ratio between a 3-election average participation in European elections (excluding the 2009 election) and the average participation in corresponding national elections.

Table 2 - Electoral participation (% valid votes on registered voters) in European and national elections, 1994-2009

	Election year																avg		
	92	93	94	95	96	97	98	99	00	01	02	03	04	05	06	07		08	09
Austria																			
EE					65,4			47,9					41,3					41,5	49,0
NE			80,1	84,0				79,2			83,0				77,1		77,2		80,1
France																			
EE				49,9				44,0					41,3					38,9	43,5
NE		64,5				65,6				61,6					59,3				62,7
Germany																			
EE				58,6				44,5					41,8					42,3	46,8
NE				77,9			81,1			78,1			76,4						78,4
Italy																			
EE				69,0				64,0					66,5					62,2	65,4
NE				80,4		76,9				75,4					81,2		77,5		78,3
Netherlands																			
EE				35,6				29,9					39,2					36,5	35,3
NE				78,4			73,2			78,9	79,9				80,2				78,1
Poland																			
EE													20,3					24,1	22,2
NE		51,7				46,1				44,4				38,9		52,7			46,8
Spain																			
EE				45,2				61,5					44,4					45,1	49,0
NE						76,2			67,2				73,7				72,6		72,4
United Kingdom																			
EE				36,5				24,1					34,2					34,2	32,3
NE	77,6						71,4			59,3					61,3				67,4

This index highlights how the surveyed countries actually cluster in groups. A first group is characterized by very low mobilization, featuring Poland with a value of 0.43 (over 3 European elections, of 100 citizens voting in national elections, only 43 vote in European elections), the Netherlands with 0.45 and the UK with 0.47. The second group shows instead higher mobilization values, including Germany (0.62), Austria (0.64), Spain (0.70) and France (0.72). Italy stands out as

an outlier, with the very high value of 0.85. However, the detailed trend for Spain shows how the 1999 election seems to lie out of the general trend for this country: on an overall basis, Italy and France can be considered the two countries with the highest mobilization levels.

2.2. Hypothesis assessment after the 2009 elections

It is precisely the pre-electoral assessment of turnout trends that allows us to examine turnout results for 2009 based on the previous knowledge that European elections are characterized by much lower participation. This result is also clearly visible in the trends presented in

Table 2, where the 2009 value is also reported. From a first general looking at the table, it appears that the 2009 European election has not marked a significant, general decrease in voting turnout. Compared to the 2004 election, Germany and Spain report slight increases, while Poland reports a more than 3-point increase. Italy reports instead a significant decrease of more than 6 points; however, it is still by far the country with the highest European turnout rate.

Table 3 – European mobilization index – ratio between participation in an European election and participation in the closest national election

	1994	1999	2004	2009	2004-2009 variation
it	0,86	0,83	0,88	0,80	-0,08
fr	0,77	0,67	0,67	0,66	-0,02
es	0,59	0,81	0,60	0,62	+0,02
at		0,61	0,50	0,54	+0,04
de	0,75	0,55	0,54	0,55	+0,02
uk	0,47	0,34	0,58	0,56	-0,02
nl	0,45	0,41	0,49	0,45	-0,04
pl			0,46	0,46	+0,00

Both the UK and Austria confirm the turnout rates of 2004, while France reports a 2.4-point decrease, and the Netherlands reports a 2.7-point decrease.

In general, it is difficult to maintain that the 2009 election has marked a significant decrease in European vote participation. Compared with the 1994-1999 transition, which reported major decreases in most surveyed countries (actually being responsible for much of the overall decrease in a 15-year period), the 2004-2009 transition shows pretty stable turnout trends, with several countries slightly increasing turnout, and with significant decreases – with the exception of the Netherlands – only in countries with still quite high turnout rates.

This interpretation can be even reinforced when we take into account the general turnout trend (also in national elections) affecting the observed countries. This can be done by computing the previously introduced European mobilization index for each European election (since 1994) in

each country, by comparing its turnout rate with the turnout rate of the last national election⁹, thus controlling for the general decrease in turnout and highlighting the particular features of European elections. Values of this index are reported in Table 3.

The table clearly shows how in most cases the index has stabilized through time, and 2009 marks no relevant, general decrease in the EMI. Three countries mark an increase of the EMI, one has in 2009 the same value as in 2004, four countries mark a decrease. It must be noted, though, that only for Italy and France the 2009 marks a lowest value of the EMI for the observed period. In all other countries, the 2009 election did not mark an historic low for the EMI value¹⁰.

As a conclusion regarding the eight observed countries, we can see not only that, in general, *European elections are characterized by a lower turnout*, but also that *the 2009 elections were not affected by particularly high levels of abstention*.

3. PARTY SYSTEM FRAGMENTATION

A second implication of the aforementioned *second-order* election model concerns party system fragmentation, since there are several factors that would suggest higher levels of fragmentation in European elections.

As second-order elections, European elections are characterized by stakes perceived as less relevant, and often occur in the middle of an electoral cycle, where government support is lower. Also, as turnout can be much lower than in national elections, significant electoral success (in terms of percentages on valid votes) can be obtained with less valid votes than in national elections. Moreover, the proportional-representation electoral system employed (albeit with various formulas and constituency sizes) by all EU countries for the election of the European Parliament is almost always more favourable to small parties than the corresponding system in national elections. This difference can be extremely relevant for countries adopting a single-member district, plurality or majority system for their national elections, such as France and the UK. Finally, the presence of EU issues, in those countries where these issues play a role in the campaign, can help move the competition out of the traditional, national party alignments, thus favoring specific parties targeted at EU issues.

All these factors combined define European elections as a political and institutional setting which can be much more favourable to small parties, and specifically for new, “flash” parties. As a result we previously posed hypothesis H2, by hypothesizing that European elections would be

⁹ Except for the 1994 European election in Spain, where the comparison was made with the 1996 national election.

¹⁰ Spain reported its low in 1994, Austria and Germany in 2004, the UK and the Netherlands in 1999.

characterized by higher levels of party system fragmentation, compared to corresponding national elections.

3.1. Hypothesis assessment before and after the 2009 elections

We chose to operationalize party system fragmentation by referring to two specific indicators: the effective number of parties (N_{eff}) and a two-party vote concentration index.

The effective number of parties was introduced by Markku Laakso and Rein Taagepera as the choice among several alternatives to “count” the relevant number of parties in a party system (Laakso and Taagepera 1979)¹¹. N_{eff} yields a result that can be interpreted in terms of effective number of parties; as an example, a party system with three parties obtaining 38, 28 and 15%, and with six more parties between 5 and 1% actually yields $N_{eff}=3,96$: several small parties count as almost one party.

Since this index is not very sensitive to small changes in party vote shares, we also resorted to a simple two-party vote concentration index, which is obtained by summing the vote shares of the first two parties.

In these terms, hypothesis H2 translates in the specific expectation that European elections, compared to comparable national elections, should show *higher* values of N_{eff} (higher fragmentation) and *lower* values of two-party concentration.

The pre-electoral analysis started by examining the trends reported in Table 4, without the data point for the 2009 European elections, which was not available at the time¹². A first look at the table seemed to disconfirm our hypothesis, but here national cases deserve some attention.

At first sight, Germany only shows a minor confirmation of the hypothesis. Both the 1994 and 2004 cases show a slightly higher level of fragmentation, while the 2004 election presents the same fragmentation as the comparable national election. Spain, on the other hand, not only presents constantly the lowest fragmentation levels of our eight countries, but also shows an impressive similarity between fragmentation in European and national elections, consistently across the 1994, 1999 and 2004 elections.

The situation becomes slightly more complex as we examine Poland and Italy. Poland is a more problematic case, as only the 2004 elections were available in the pre-electoral analysis, thus

¹¹ It is defined as $N_{eff} = \frac{1}{\sum_i p_i^2}$, where p_i is the vote share obtained by party i .

¹² As a result, this part of the analysis ignores the 2009 data point reported in all figures.

preventing any interpretation of trends. Italy, on the other hand, presents mixed evidence. The 1994 elections even showed a *lower* fragmentation than the comparable national elections, disputed only two months before¹³. While the 1999 result – with a success of minor parties – is a confirmation of the second-order hypothesis, the same result is not observed in 2004, while national elections – consistently with the effect of the electoral reforms – show a decreasing trend in fragmentation across all observed elections.

This first group of countries provided then, on the eve of the 2009 elections, little support for the hypothesis of a higher fragmentation in European than in national elections.

Table 4 - Party system fragmentation (effective number of parties) in European and national elections, 1994-2009

	Election year																	avg	
	92	93	94	95	96	97	98	99	00	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08		09
Austria																			
EE					3,9			3,9					3,9					4,9	4,1
NE			3,9	3,6				3,8			3,0				3,7		4,8		3,8
France																			
EE			7,3					8,6					6,7					6,6	7,3
NE		7,2				7,2				5,2						4,3			6,0
Germany																			
EE			4,4					3,8					4,8					5,7	4,7
NE			3,7				3,8			3,9				4,5					4,0
Italy																			
EE			6,0					7,9					6,0					4,6	6,1
NE			7,6		7,2					6,3					5,5		3,8		6,1
Netherlands																			
EE			5,0					5,6					6,4					7,8	6,2
NE			5,7				5,1			6,0	5,0				5,8				5,5
Poland																			
EE													7,5					3,4	5,5
NE		9,8				4,6				4,5				5,9		3,3			5,6
Spain																			
EE			2,7					3,3					2,7					2,9	2,9
NE					3,2				3,0				3,0				2,8		3,0
United Kingdom																			
EE			3,5					4,3					5,1					6,2	4,8
NE	3,1						3,2			3,3					3,6				3,3

After the electoral result, this first group of countries seems to confirm this impression, except for some specifications. Spain in the first place confirms its close overlap between fragmentation in the two types of elections. Poland (where a trend is now available) shows a low fragmentation in line with the results of the last national elections, that confirms the restructuring process experienced by this party system. Italy shows instead a somewhat mixed result. While on the one hand the level of fragmentation is constantly decreasing since the 2004 election, it is in

¹³ This could be explained to a major “bandwagon effect” that boosted the vote share of Silvio Berlusconi’s Forza Italia in the European elections, after the unexpected victory of Berlusconi two months before.

2009 on a higher level than expected, based on the 2008 national election result. It must be noted, though, that the 2008 election is an *outlier* in the regular trend of national elections, due to the particular competition strategy employed by the center-left coalition. As such, the level of fragmentation observed in the 2009 European elections in Italy can hardly be considered significantly higher than in national elections.

Reversed considerations apply to Germany. In this case, the European election happens shortly *before* the national elections (rather than shortly *after*, as in the Italian case). While the 1994-2004 analysis showed a close overlap in fragmentation levels between the two types of elections, the 2009 elections marks a strong increase in party system fragmentation.

In this case, (given the distance in time from the last national election) the only reliable test for our hypothesis requires the result of the forthcoming national elections. Given the past trend of a close overlap between European and national elections, we could forecast a higher level of fragmentation even in national elections.

The result of small differences in fragmentation between different types of elections is still partly confirmed as we examine the trends for the Netherlands and Austria. Austria shows only a slightly higher fragmentation in 1996 and 2004, while the 1999 election confirms the same fragmentation as in national elections. The situation is partly similar in the Netherlands, where only the 2004 election reports a higher fragmentation level than in national elections, consistently with the second-order hypothesis.

Yet results seem to go in a different direction as we examine the United Kingdom and France. These two cases show a similar trend: European elections show a higher level of fragmentation, and this difference in fragmentation seems to increase over time, as we compare the 1994, 1999 and 2004 elections with the corresponding national elections. This result suggested that, compared to other factors hypothesized, the institutional constraints of the electoral system should be regarded as a key explanatory factor.

The 2009 result provided then a definition of the trend (Table 4), which in some cases leads to more interesting hypotheses. Starting with the case of Austria, the 2009 result confirms an increase in fragmentation, which was already observed in national elections, yet not with levels significantly higher than in these latter. On the other hand, the Netherlands present a more problematic and interesting case, with a close analogy with Germany. Here again, we observe a strong increase in the fragmentation level; yet the distance in time since the last national election does not allow to understand whether this result is peculiar of the European election, or if it instead

reflects a general fragmentation trend occurring in the Dutch party system¹⁴. But the two most interesting cases are those of France and the United Kingdom. Here the 2009 result even reinforced our pre-electoral interpretation: the diverging trend between European and national elections has even increased. This shows in the first place the key relevance of the electoral system, since the two countries where fragmentation trends diverge most are those that adopt a plurality or majority system for national elections. Yet, this is the reason why this result has much less predictive power for the forthcoming UK elections, where the result can be expected to be in line with the national election trend, rather than with this last result of European elections. On the other hand, there is a reason why this level of fragmentation could have a feedback effect on national elections. The 2009 European election in the UK has redefined the role of “third party”, since both the Labour and the Liberal Party have achieved extremely similar result. In this case, we could expect that a traditional *viability shortcut*, which leads voters – in plurality systems – to avoid “third” candidates, will work in a potentially different direction in the forthcoming UK national elections¹⁵.

As a result of this analysis based on the Neff, a first impression is that the hypothesis of a higher fragmentation in European elections should be regarded with caution, except for some institutional factors that seem to play a key role. Also, the 2009 elections have not marked a general, significant increase in fragmentation. Relevant increases have been observed in the Netherlands and in the UK, and partially in Germany. In all these cases, although, such results do not mark an exception to long-term trends; as such, they cannot be directly connected to effects of the economic crisis.

Table 5 allows to compare the increase of fragmentation in European elections versus national elections. In most cases fragmentation is higher in European elections (ratio >1,00). With the exception of Austria and Poland, the differentials are positive throughout the period (1994-2009) considered, as it is shown by the positive values of the 1994-2009 variation.

¹⁴ It must be noted that the Netherlands have the lowest values of the European mobilization index. Less than half of voters of national election actually vote in European election, and this difference in electorate alone could explain a difference in fragmentation.

¹⁵ On the other hand, it must be noted that the huge difference in turnout between the two types of elections is probably overestimating this fragmentation effect.

Table 5 - European differential fragmentation index – ratio between N_{eff} in an European election and N_{eff} in the closest national election

	1994	1999	2004	2009	2004-2009 variation	4-election average
es	0,85	1,04	0,92	1,06	+0,14	0,97
it	0,79	1,11	0,95	1,22	+0,27	1,02
at		1,01	1,28	1,01	-0,27	1,10
nl	0,87	1,08	1,29	1,35	+0,06	1,15
de	1,18	0,99	1,24	1,28	+0,04	1,17
fr	1,01	1,18	1,27	1,52	+0,24	1,25
pl			1,67	1,02	-0,65	1,35
uk	1,16	1,33	1,53	1,73	+0,21	1,44

This first impression is mostly confirmed, as we move on to the analysis of the second indicator employed: two-party vote concentration.

Table 6 reports the trends for this indicator in the eight surveyed countries. It must be noted, in the first place, that this indicator (the sum of the vote shares of the first two parties) has a much higher sensitivity to changes compared to the N_{eff} , since it only depends on the vote shares of *two* parties, rather than on the vote shares of *all* parties. A small percentage change in the vote share of one of the two parties immediately reflects in the value of the index.

We would then expect higher variability for this index in the observed elections, given the variations in fragmentation measured by the N_{eff} . Yet, as we examine the first four countries, this result is not strongly present. In general, the trend for the two-party vote concentration seems to confirm the results provided by the analysis of the N_{eff} , and to some extent to show an even lower variation.

Table 6 - Two-party vote concentration (% valid votes to the first two parties) in European and national elections, 1994-2009

	Election year																		avg
	92	93	94	95	96	97	98	99	00	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	
Austria																			
EE					58,8			62,4					66,0					53,5	
NE			62,7	66,4				60,1			78,8				69,7		55,2		
France																			
EE			40,1					35,0					45,5					44,3	
NE		38,9				38,7				57,4						64,3			
Germany																			
EE			64,2					70,0					58,0					51,4	
NE			70,5				69,3				68,0			62,0					
Italy																			
EE			49,7					42,6					52,0					61,4	
NE			41,4		41,6					46,0					55,0		70,4		
Netherlands																			
EE			53,7					47,1					48,0					37,0	
NE			46,2				53,7				44,9	55,9			47,7				
Poland																			
EE													40,1					71,8	
NE		35,8					61,0			53,7				51,1		73,6			
Spain																			
EE			85,1					76,4					85,2					81,9	
NE					77,2				79,9				81,6			84,7			
United Kingdom																			
EE			69,6					63,8					52,3					44,3	
NE	76,4					74,0				72,4				67,6					

Starting from Germany, this country – consistently with the results of the Neff analysis – shows only a slightly lower level of concentration in European elections, with the same level in the two elections in 2004, and the 2009 result confirming our previous interpretation (and potential prediction). Spain also confirms the results of the previous analysis, with a very close overlap between European and national elections. Both Poland (in the two elections considered) and Italy consistently show an overlap between European and national elections, and this result is particularly strong in this latter case. Also, this result can be considered surprising, given the increase in the Neff observed in 1999. Yet there is a simple interpretation: in that election, much of the increase in fragmentation should be attributed to a rebalancing between the first two parties. This has the effect of increasing the Neff (a closer balance between the first two parties conceptually increases the *effective* number of parties) without affecting the two-party vote concentration. Also, the comparison between 2008 and 2009 shows also in terms of two-party vote concentration, how the 2008 national election lies out of the (current) trend, also in national elections.

Coming finally to a second group of countries, we still have a general confirmation for the results of the Neff analysis. Austria and the Netherlands show a slightly lower level of concentration, yet with a general overlap between European and national elections. In this latter case, the next national

election will provide a key test for the Dutch fragmentation trends. Finally, the UK and France confirm the results of the Neff analysis: the two countries with the strongest differences in fragmentation between European and national elections are those that employ plurality or majority systems for national elections.

Table 7 - European differential two-party concentration index – ratio between two-party concentration in an European election and two-party concentration in the closest national election

	1994	1999	2004	2009	2004-2009 variation	4-election average
it	1,20	1,02	1,13	0,87	-0,26	1,06
es	1,10	0,99	1,04	0,97	-0,08	1,03
at		1,04	0,84	0,97	+0,13	0,95
nl	1,16	0,88	0,86	0,78	-0,08	0,92
de	0,91	1,01	0,85	0,83	-0,02	0,90
pl			0,75	0,98	+0,23	0,86
fr	1,03	0,90	0,79	0,69	-0,10	0,85
uk	0,91	0,86	0,72	0,65	-0,07	0,79

Table 7 compares the increase of concentration in European versus national elections. The decrease in the concentration of the vote from national to European elections is a characteristic of any European election (with the partial exception of 1994) and the 2009 values are not significantly different from those of 2004.

As a first, general conclusion on the analysis of party system fragmentation, the main result is that hypothesis H2 should be appropriately revised and contextualized. *In general, European elections do not seem to present significantly higher levels of fragmentation than comparable national elections.* As such, hypothesis H2 should be rejected in the first place: European elections do not seem to be a strongly privileged arena for small and new parties. And regarding specifically the 2009 election, there seem to be present no sign of a sudden increase in fragmentation that could be attributed to the effect of the economic crisis.

On the other hand, *some countries show a clear trend towards an increase in fragmentation, and this trend seems to interact strongly with the structure of opportunities and incentives provided by the electoral system.* This phenomenon deserves some brief considerations, that can be framed as new research questions for future research.

a) In the first place, it must be noted that the success of minor parties is not a distinctive character of European elections. Even if – in some cases – susceptible of empirical test in the forthcoming national elections, trends for Germany, the Netherlands, and Austria show that a possible trend of an increasing fragmentation equally affects national and European elections.

b) There are two key exceptions, albeit in two opposite directions. The first exception is the UK, where a trend of increasing fragmentation – similar to that observed in other countries – is clearly visible in European elections, while almost absent in national elections. A reversed example is that of France, where we observe a trend in the *decrease* of fragmentation. Yet this trend is visible only in national elections, while European elections show a much weaker decrease of fragmentation. These two examples strongly call into question the role of the electoral system: both countries adopt a single-member-district electoral system for national elections (plurality formula in the UK, majority with run-off in France), strongly limiting the role of third and minor parties. This clearly explains how European elections really provide a radically different structure of opportunities and incentives for minor parties. This allows, in the UK, the expression of a trend towards a *higher* fragmentation, which is suppressed in national elections¹⁶. In the case of France, this different structure of opportunities and incentives allows minor parties to resist, in European elections, a trend towards a *lower* fragmentation.

c) One further consideration is needed, looking at the UK trend, which shows an increasing divergence in fragmentation between European and national elections, but starting (at the beginning of the 90's) from an almost perfect overlap. Here the key question is *why* the special opportunities offered by European elections were not exploited, at that time, by minor parties. This calls into question the presence and strength of *competition* in the party system, and can be linked to further reflections about the emergence of minor, protest, anti-EU parties.

4. ANTI-EU PARTIES

The next research question is then connected to what we previously introduced as hypothesis H3, expecting that anti-EU parties would perform better in European elections, due to the higher salience of their distinctive issues and to a more favourable structure of opportunities.

The first problem in analyzing the electoral performance of anti-EU parties is obviously related to their *identification*, across several party systems. For this analysis we developed a classification scheme based on expert survey data collected through the PPMD (Party Policy in Modern Democracies) project (Benoit and Laver 2006). Based on this classification scheme, we assigned parties to one of three categories: Pro-EU; Moderately anti-EU; Anti-EU¹⁷. The

¹⁶ Albeit with the potential feedback effect suggested previously: once a level of fragmentation is reached in European elections, it could question the two-party competition structure, and thus pass a “threshold of influence” on national election vote.

¹⁷ The classification was based on the following PPMD issues: Issue 24 (“EU: authority”: Favours increasing vs. reducing the range of areas in which the EU can set policy), available for all countries except France and Poland;

classification of all parties is presented in Table 8. It must be obviously noted that differences among countries in the framing of EU issues makes comparisons among countries difficult, and these broad categories inevitably group in some cases parties with quite different positions.

Table 8 – Classification of parties based on their position on EU issues, 1992-2009

Country	Pro-EU	Moderately Anti-EU	Anti-EU
at	Grüne, Övp, Spö		Bzö*, Fpö
de	Fdp, Grüne, Spd	Cdu/Csu, Dkp, Pds	Dvu, Npd, Rep, Schil
es	Ciu, Iu, Pnv, Psoe	Pp	
fr	Europe-Ecologie*, Modem*, Ps, Udf	Rpr, Uem*, Ump*, Verts, Lo*, Npa*, Oenb*	Cpnt*, Fn, Mpf, Pcf, Rpf
it	Ds, Verdi, Idv, Marg., Pann., Pd*, Pdc, Sdi, Udc	An, Fi, Pdl*, Rc	Ln, Msft
nl	Cda, D66, Gl, Pvda	Cu, Sgp, Vvd	Lpf, Pvv*, Sp
pl	Po, Sld, Up, Uw	Aws, Pis	Lpr, Psl, S, Upr
uk	Lab, LibDem, PCy, Snp		Bnp*, Con, Ukip*

*Classified by the authors.

Given this necessary warning, we proceeded to the empirical test of hypothesis H3. The expectation connected to this hypothesis was that Anti-EU parties should have better performance in European elections, compared to national elections. The acceptance or rejection of this hypothesis would be the basis to correctly evaluate the 2009 result, in order to determine whether a positive result for Anti-EU parties was due to a particular effect of this election, or rather to a stable trend favoring Anti-EU parties in European elections.

Before examining national cases, a general remark can be anticipated. The overall analysis of the trends proposed shows how European elections do not seem to mark a privileged arena for Anti-EU parties (in line with the conclusion drawn about minor parties in general). There are cases where European elections are a special opportunity for Anti-EU parties, but there are also key examples of such parties that start their positive trend in national elections. Also, the 2009 elections

Issue 25 (“*EU: larger/stronger*”: opposes vs. favors an expanded and stronger EU), employed for France; Issue 4 (“*EU joining*”: opposes vs. favors joining the European Union), employed for Poland. After appropriate reversing, all parties were classified based on their score on these issues (measured on a 0-20 range). Parties with scores in the 0-10 range were classified Pro-EU; parties with scores in the 11-14 range were classified as Moderately anti-EU; parties with scores in the 15-20 range were classified as Anti-EU. We autonomously classified a few parties not included in the PPMD expert survey.

do not seem to have put this interpretative scheme into question, as we will see in the concluding remarks of this section.

Moving on to a review of national cases, Table 9 presents for each country, a trend for the four EU issue position areas (the three categories, plus uncategorized minor parties), with separate trends for European and national elections, across all elections since 1994.

Trends for Germany have been characterized, throughout the examined period, by several key features. First, a very weak presence of Anti-EU parties, which have failed to repeat in national and European elections the success occasionally obtained in local elections¹⁸. A second distinguishing feature of the German political system is a marked difference between European and national elections regarding the overall size of the Pro-EU and Moderately anti-EU camps. This is mainly due to the different electoral performance of the Cdu/Csu, which has consistently performed much better in European than in national elections. Given this contextualization, the 2009 result has even marked an improvement for the Pro-EU camp, compared to the 2004 European election, with the Pro and Moderate camps now balancing on almost the same size.

This result can be partially surprising given the strong defeat by the Spd: the explanation lies in the parallel success of both the Grüne and the Fdp.

A similar situation is that of Spain, where there are no relevant Anti-EU parties, and where trends do not show major changes in the size of the Pro and Moderate camps. The difference between European and national elections can be mostly attributed to classification issues. In this regard, the 2009 election is mostly in continuity with the past, since a significant part of non-classified parties is mostly composed of coalitions of small Pro-EU parties.

A partially different situation is that of Italy, where we first meet a significant presence of Anti-EU parties, essentially represented by the Lega Nord. The success of this party is a clear example of a phenomenon which is not tied specifically to European elections.

The trend for the Lega Nord can be traced continuously across national and European elections; in this regard, the 2009 result is in continuity with the success obtained in 2008, and could hardly be attributed to a direct effect of the economic crisis. Regarding the vote share of the Pro and Moderate camps, no significant difference seems to emerge between the two types of elections.

On a general note, Italy could be classified slightly less Pro-EU than Germany and Spain, with an almost equal balance of the Pro and Moderate camps, albeit with a significant presence of

¹⁸ Also due to the representation thresholds enforced by both the national and European election electoral system.

Anti-EU parties. Also, despite some variations through time, no clearly readable trend seems to emerge in the examined period.

Quite a different situation emerges as we examine the trends for Poland. The instability observed in the trend of national elections is partly due to classification issues, and partly attributable to the initial structuring of the party system. The comparison between European and national elections can only be performed with the 2004 and 2009 elections; however, this again shows that the success of Anti-EU parties is not specifically connected to European elections.

The overall situation that could stabilize after the 2007 national election seems to show a prevailing Pro-EU camp, with a weaker Moderate camp and a significant presence of Anti-EU parties (mostly the Psl – League of Polish Families).

An interesting, different situation emerges from the examination of the UK, where we find several distinguishing factors: 1) a strong Anti-EU camp; 2) a clear differentiation between national and European elections; 3) a trend seeing an increase of Anti-EU parties through time.

The first two factors are understandable given the inclusion in the Anti-EU camp of the Conservative Party and of both the Bnp and the UK Independence Party. This latter has seen a first success in 1999 (7,0%), followed by 17,1% in 2004 and 16,5% in 2009. On the other hand the Bnp, with negligible percentages in both 1999 and 2004, has reached 6,2% in 2009, marking an historical high for the Anti-EU area. In this regard, UK is probably the first country where we can deem the 2009 European election as a special case, with the success of the Bnp, the strong defeat of the Labour party, and the decrease of the Liberal Democrats.

The clear difference between results in national and European elections clearly calls into question the role of the plurality electoral system, strongly limiting the possibilities for “third” parties. But the 2009 result could mark a turning point also on this issue, since the defeat of the Labour party has determined a result with a leading Conservative party (27.8%) and actually three parties the size of a “third” party (Ukip 16.5, Labour 15.7 and LibDem 13.8%).

In such an uncertain situation, the traditional “candidate viability” concerns, driving most voters out of “third” candidates in plurality systems, could work – in the forthcoming national elections – in an unpredictable manner, with voters uncertain about who the “second” candidate is, and thus more prone to distribute their votes across more than two candidates. It is, though, worth noting that this particular result has happened in a context of low turnout. With the much higher turnout of national elections, the 2009 result could still lie out of the general trend.

Table 9 - Electoral strength (% valid votes) to EU issue position areas in European (bold) and national elections, 1992-2009 - “Pro”=Pro-EU; “n/c”=Not classified; “Mod”=Moderately anti-EU; “Anti”=anti-EU.

	Election year																	
	92	93	94	95	96	97	98	99	00	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09
Austria																		
Pro			70,0		71,2	65,6		71,7	67,5		88,3	78,9		80,7		65,7	63,0	
n/c			7,5		6,9	6,9		4,9	5,6		1,7	14,8		4,1		6,1	19,2	
Mod																		
Anti			22,5		21,9	27,5		23,4	26,9		10,0	6,3		15,1		28,2	17,7	
France																		
Pro		36,5	26,5				37,3	31,2			29,0	40,9				32,3	41,2	
n/c		11,4	13,2				15,8	20,7			15,1	12,7				14,3	13,7	
Mod		30,3	30,5				22,3	22,5			39,0	24,0				43,6	27,9	
Anti		21,9	29,7				24,6	25,5			17,0	22,4				9,8	17,2	
Germany																		
Pro			46,3	50,6			53,9	40,2			54,5	39,5		52,2			43,9	
n/c			6,0	1,7			2,6	3,3			1,2	6,9		1,8			8,9	
Mod			43,5	45,8			40,2	54,5			42,5	50,8		43,9			45,4	
Anti			4,1	1,9			3,3	2,1			1,9	2,8		2,1			1,7	
Italy																		
Pro			39,5	44,5		42,8		51,3		47,6		47,5		48,7		44,2	46,2	
n/c			4,7	6,6		1,4		2,9		1,6		7,0		3,5		4,7	4,1	
Mod			49,2	40,5		44,8		39,8		46,5		38,5		41,9		40,4	38,7	
Anti			6,6	8,4		11,0		6,1		4,3		6,9		5,9		10,7	11,0	
Netherlands																		
Pro			69,0	65,2			63,6	64,7			55,1	65,1	59,7		54,3		52,3	
n/c			3,9	11,8			6,4	1,8			2,3	1,3	11,7		2,8		5,5	
Mod			25,7	21,7			26,5	28,4			19,7	21,6	19,1		20,2		18,2	
Anti			1,3	1,3			3,5	5,0			22,9	12,0	9,5		22,7		24,0	
Poland																		
Pro		27,7				45,2				56,8		46,0		35,4		54,7	56,8	
n/c		50,9				13,5				1,0		6,0		11,2		2,8	6,3	
Mod						33,8				15,1		12,7		27,0		32,1	27,4	
Anti		21,4				7,4				27,1		35,0		26,3		10,4	9,6	
Spain																		
Pro			47,8		54,6			46,3	46,1			47,9	53,2			52,4	42,8	
n/c			11,0		6,3			13,3	8,7			10,6	9,0			7,2	15,2	
Mod			41,6		39,2			40,4	45,2			41,5	38,3			40,4	42,8	
Anti																		
United Kingdom																		
Pro	54,6		61,8			62,5		45,2		61,5		42,3		59,5			32,5	
n/c	3,4		10,2			6,3		11,0		5,1		12,2		5,2			17,0	
Mod																		
Anti	42,0		27,9			31,2		43,8		33,4		45,5		35,3			50,5	

A comparison between the UK and the next country in our analysis, France, is extremely interesting, as the two countries share single-member-district electoral systems for national elections, and thus present a marked difference in the structure of party opportunities and incentives between European and national elections. In a previous section we already suggested how this factor could have specular effects in the two countries: regarding fragmentation, we hypothesized that in the UK the plurality system could actually protect the national election arena from a trend of *increasing* fragmentation, while in France we suggested that the PR system of European elections could allow parties to resist a trend of *decreasing* fragmentation happening in national elections.

A similar interpretation scheme seems to emerge as we compare the two countries regarding the level of support for Anti-EU parties. As seen previously, data for the UK show an increasing trend for Anti-EU parties in European elections (mostly due to third parties), while national elections show an almost stable trend, since third parties have a much lower performance in such elections. France seems to almost show an opposite trend. In recent national elections, the support for Anti-EU parties (mostly Fn, Pcf, Mpf) has stably decreased, from 24.6% in 1997 to 9.8% in 2007. It must be precisely noted that this trend is much weaker in European elections, with a decrease from 25,5% in 1999 to 17,2% in 2009. Thus, it seems justifiable to propose a key role of the electoral system. While in national elections the redefinition of the party system structure (namely, with the creation of the Ump) has successfully reduced both fragmentation and support for Anti-EU parties by exploiting the opportunities offered by the electoral system to large parties, the lack of such opportunities in European elections has made this effort much less successful, and this alone could account for a better performance of Anti-EU parties. However, the trend still shows a decrease for such parties, and this clearly shows how, regarding France, the hypothesis of an Anti-EU party success due to the effects of economic crisis should be rejected.

The same hypothesis could probably not be rejected so easily as we move on to the case of the Netherlands. This case is a second example, after that of Italy, of Anti-EU parties developing in both national and European elections, thus denying a key role of the EU arena in promoting such parties. Anti-EU parties had negligible support until 2002, when the Lijst Pim Fortuyn – shortly after the death of its leader – obtained 17.0% in national elections. Lpf support understandably decreased in subsequent elections, but this decrease was compensated, in the 2006 national elections, by the success of the Anti-EU Socialist Party¹⁹. In this regard, the 16,9% obtained in 2009 by the Anti-EU Pvv (with the Sp dropping to 7,1%) only marks a slight increase for the Anti-EU area.

An overall interpretation of the Dutch trends, in comparison with France and the UK, suggests an even stronger role of electoral system. In this case, the homogeneity of opportunities and incentives between the two arenas is clearly shown by the emergence of Anti-EU parties in both national and European elections.

Yet, data from the Netherlands can be extremely interesting from another point of view, paradoxically revealing a strong, though somehow hidden, salience of EU issues. Especially when confronting the 2009 European elections with the 2006 national elections, two points emerge. On the one hand, the transition between these two elections records a very high volatility, with at least

¹⁹ The SP was the only left-wing party opposing the approval of the Treaty for an European Constitution in the 2005 referendum.

one third of the voters changing party between the two elections²⁰. On the other hand, the trends show an impressive stability in the size of the EU-issue camps: the Pro-EU area decreases from 54.3 to 52.3%; the Anti-EU area increases from 22.7 to 24.0%, with the Moderate Anti-EU area decreasing from 20.2 to 18.2%, and non classified parties increasing from 2.8 to 5.5%. These data indirectly suggest that EU issues could have substantially gained in salience in the Dutch electorate, since they seem to have started to matter as *borders* that shape voting behaviour, by limiting the areas where a strong volatility can be expressed. In other words, large flows of votes move between parties, but they only move between parties that *share the same views on the EU*: this could demonstrate that EU issues are already playing a key role in orienting voting behaviour in the Netherlands.

The thesis that electoral systems play a key role – and also, that the 2009 election did not mark a particular success for Anti-EU parties – is confirmed as we move on to the analysis of Austria. Trends are similar in both national and European elections, in line with the homogeneity of electoral systems. Austria has a clear Pro-EU majority due to the presence of the Övp and the Spö. However, there is also a clear presence of a strong Anti-EU camp, characterized by an almost stable strength through time. Regarding the comparison between 2008 and 2009, the strength of the Anti-EU camp can be considered unchanged, as the “non-classified” area in the European elections of 2004 and 2009 includes the Hans-Peter Martin List, which can be actually considered part of the Anti-EU camp. This list obtained 14,0% in 2004 and 17,9% in 2009, thus marking a stability and even a slight increase of the Anti-EU area.

When trying to draw some conclusions about the result of Anti-EU parties, we should first start by assessing our original hypotheses. The hypothesis that Anti-EU parties are stronger in European elections should at least be restated, by giving paramount importance to institutional factors, in the form of electoral systems. European elections represent a privileged arena for Anti-EU parties *only where national elections are disputed with electoral systems that strongly penalize small parties* (in our analysis, France and the UK). In all other cases, Anti-EU parties emerge indifferently in national or European elections.

Given this first result, our interpretation for the 2009 election is that Anti-EU parties have *not* generally obtained a particular success, that could be interpreted in light of a direct effect of the economic crisis. In most countries the size of the Anti-EU camp has remained almost unchanged.

²⁰ Electoral volatility is defined as the sum of both gains and losses (in absolute values) for each party, divided by two. As such, it can be interpreted as the *minimum* percentage of voters that have *certainly* changed their vote between two elections. For the 2006-2009 comparison in the Netherlands, this index reports a value of 33%.

The most important exception to this pattern is the UK, where the 2009 result marks an historical high for the Anti-EU camp. However, several specifications are necessary. First, trends for the UK show that the electoral system plays a key role, and thus that the most appropriate comparison is among European elections. When concentrating on these latter, an increasing trend for the Anti-EU camp shows having started much before 2009, with the Ukip obtaining its first success in 1999 and reaching its historical high in 2004. Only the success of the Bnp can be identified as a genuine phenomenon of 2009; yet, given the emergence of political scandals on the eve of the European election, it is not easy to directly attribute the success of the Bnp to a direct effect of the crisis.

On a general note, results for Anti-EU parties seem to confirm the interpretation proposed about fragmentation. The 2009 election does not seem to show a particular success for Anti-EU parties; this suggests that the economic crisis did not have direct effects on support for such parties.

5. ARE GOVERNING PARTIES WEAKER?

In this section we move on to the research question defined by hypotheses H4 and (partly) H5. We refer to the expectation that governing parties should in general obtain a lower performance in European elections; and that they could specifically have obtained an even lower performance in the 2009 elections, due to the additional effect of the economic crisis.

The hypothesis of a lower support for governing parties in European elections directly stems from the framing of European elections as *second-order* election. As mentioned in the introduction, such elections are characterized by a much lower relevance of the stakes, thus generating a less strong obligation for voters that usually support parties that run for government. But, most importantly, elections happening between national elections are affected by effects of the *electoral cycle*. With this term we identify the presence of a natural development of a legislature through its period of office. Such development inevitably features different *phases*, each characterized by different priorities and type of government action. It is clearly understandable that, after an initial “honeymoon” period where the newly elected government takes mostly symbolic action in order to set a political climate for its action, usually the less popular pieces of legislation are concentrated in the first half of the period of office, still far before the next election; the end of the period of office, getting closer to the election, is usually characterized by more popular measures, often aimed at redistributing resources that have been collected during the first part of the period of office (Stimson 1976; Tufte 1975; Kirchgassner 1986).

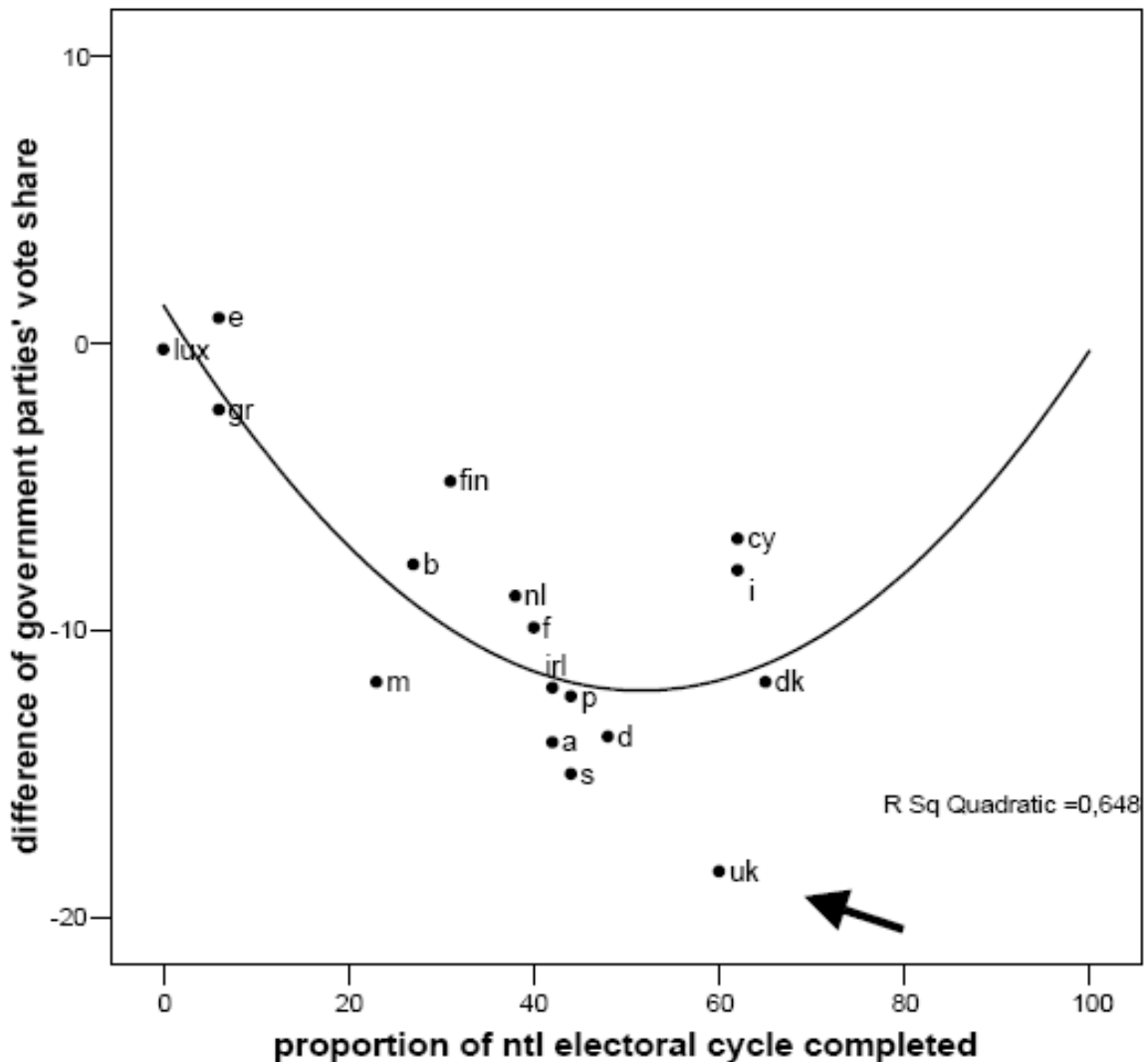
According to this model, we should expect not simply government support to be lower in European elections, but that this decrease in support should be connected with the position of the European election *within the electoral cycle*.

We come to test this hypothesis for the 2004 and 2009 elections. Regarding the former, we refer to an analysis performed by Schmitt (2005), while on the latter we replicate the same analysis, based on the 2009 results.

The results obtained by Schmitt are summarized in

Figure 1, which is directly reported from the original article. Values on the x axis express the percentage of national electoral cycle completed, on the date of the European elections. Values on the y axis express the percentage points lost by governing parties in the European elections, compared to the previous national elections.

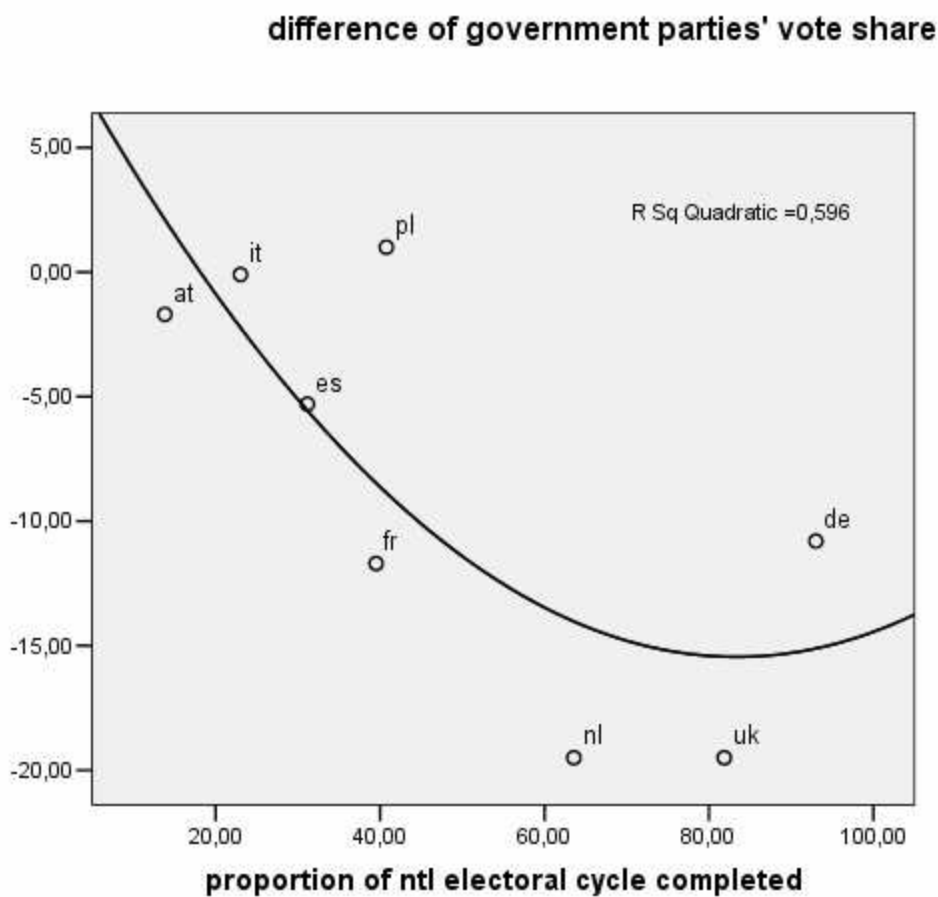
Figure 1 – Relation between electoral cycle position (% of National electoral cycle completed) and government parties losses (difference of government parties' vote share, compared to the last general election). 2004 European elections. [Schmitt 2005]



The diagram presents data points for 17 countries. All governments but Spain's lose votes, compared to their national election. Yet the heaviest losses seem to affect those governments where European elections are held close to 40% of the electoral cycle, while another group of countries at about 60% of electoral cycle obtain better results (with the remarkable exception of the UK). The chart also presents a superimposed best-fit quadratic model, showing a trend that seems to confirm the hypothesis of the electoral cycle. Such model also presents a quite remarkable fit, with an R-squared value of 0.65.

Using data from the eight surveyed countries, we replicated the analysis on the 2009 election. These data are particularly interesting because countries disperse on a wider range of values, regarding the degree of completion of the electoral cycle.

Figure 2 – Relation between electoral cycle position (% of National electoral cycle completed) and government parties losses (difference of government parties' vote share, compared to the last general election). 2009 European elections.



Values range between the 14% of cycle completed by Austria to the 93% completed by Germany, providing – despite the lower number of cases – the possibility for a more clear (yet less statistically accurate) evaluation of the hypothesis.

The results from 2009 seem to show a different picture. The presence of a cycle still seems clearly evident. Government at the beginning of the cycle experience minimal losses. Results are worse for the governments of countries such as Spain and France, being closer to the middle of the electoral cycle. Poland contradicts this trend, but it must be noted that, in the 2004 analysis, Eastern Europe countries were excluded from the analysis for the very reason that the model gave poor results for those countries, suggesting different voting behaviour mechanisms. Yet differences

emerge, as we examine the rightmost part of the diagram, showing the Netherlands, the UK and Germany, that have completed a significant part of the electoral cycle. These governments, despite being beyond or far beyond the middle of the cycle, do not seem to be able to recover support during the second part of the cycle, and remain at lower levels of support, even as they get closer to the end of the period of office. In the German case (though it is a special case, due to the exceptional presence of a large coalition) government parties are still eleven points below their previous result, when they have almost reached the end of their office. But the situation seems difficult to recover also for the UK and for the Netherlands, even if these governments still have a larger share of their office to complete. This effect is detected by the estimation of a best-fit quadratic model. The goodness of fit is still very good ($R\text{-squared} = 0,60$), but the most important information is that, while the 2004 model predicted that governments would almost recover their original support at the end of the cycle, the 2009 model predicts that governments will enjoy, at the end of the cycle, a level of support which could be almost fifteen points below their previous result.

In this regard, we could probably attribute part of this effect to the economic crisis. Precisely because the crisis is connected to the availability of those resources that are part of redistribution processes inspired by the government, a resource shortage deriving by the crisis strikes more strongly those governments entering the redistribution phase of the cycle. In the following section we will see how this can be an explanatory factor for the particular instability in public opinion observed in the Netherlands and in the UK.

6. PUBLIC OPINION TRENDS BEFORE THE 2009 ELECTIONS

We have taken into consideration public opinion data in order to test two hypotheses. H5 and H6 assess that the economic crisis might weaken governing parties (H5) and strengthen anti-European parties (H6).

The crisis started during 2008 but began to be really observable by public opinions in september 2008, when important banks failed. Since then, many governments have intervened in order to limit further failures and to give guarantees to the deposits. At least according to experts and media, these kinds of interventions should not be unpopular, due to the fact they might have reduced the panic of savers. However, we could expect a loss in government popularity due to the weakening of general economic conditions, according to the view that sees the way economy is going on as one of the best predictors of government popularity and electoral success. In other words, the basis of H5 lies more in the weakness of the economy than in a voters' judgement of governmental measures.

Among opposition parties, H6 hypothesizes that the anti-European ones may better profit of government's weaknesses. Traditionally European elections constitute an opportunity for any new parties to gain votes, but anti-European parties may better benefit by the "European" connotation of the vote and better mobilize the votes of those who perceive European democracy as too much focused on economics, and/or too far from ordinary citizens, and/or another arena to provide seats and prerogatives to politicians, and so on.

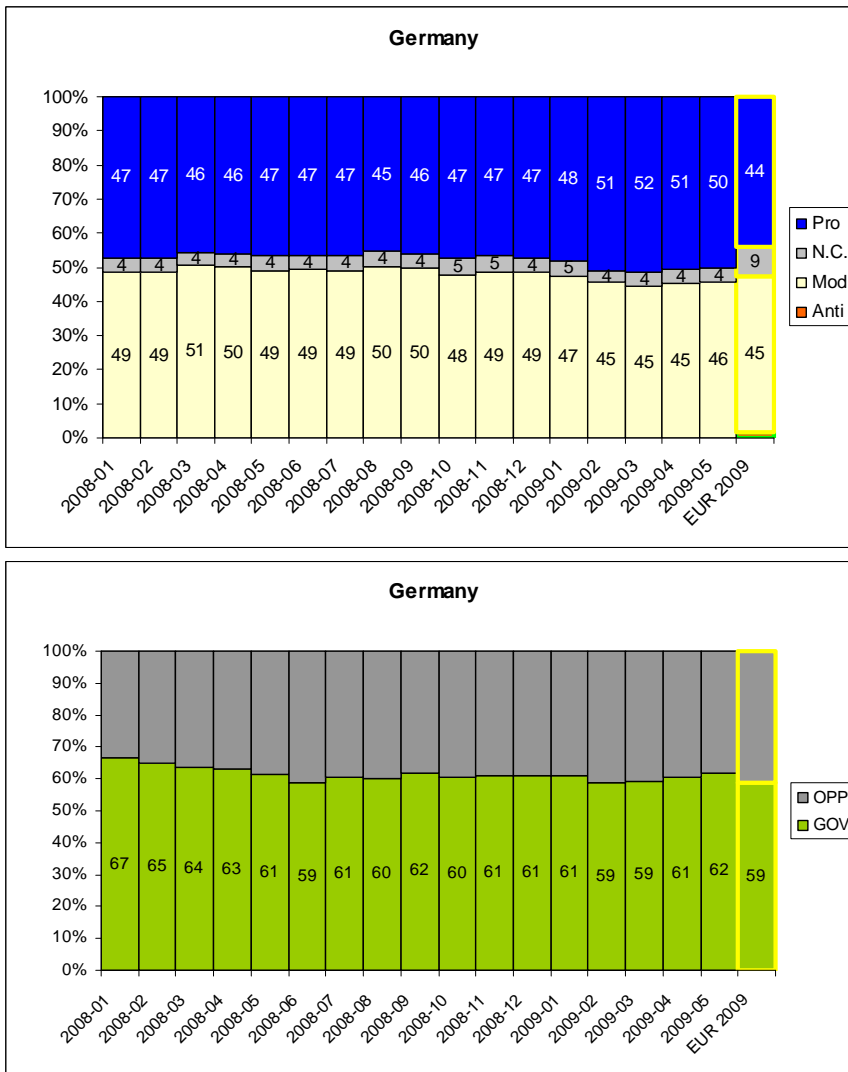
Our analysis of public opinion trends in the eight countries considered shows articulated results. Figure 3 to Figure 10 show public opinion trends and official electoral results according to the two dimensions considered in order to classify parties: their pro/anti European ideological stances (see above, Table 8) of parties and their belonging to the government or the opposition.

In some countries, the analysis of voting intentions as registered by survey polls since January 2008 (many months before the economic crisis) shows a remarkable stability and very few or no signals of the above mentioned hypotheses. Governmental parties tend to hold the same portion of the electoral market throughout the whole period, with no or few impact of the crisis. Specularly, the anti-European components (both if, as often happens, they are at the opposition and in the few cases in which some of them are at government) do not gain consensus since autumn 2008 and later. These stable trends can be seen in Germany, Spain, Italy, France and (partially) Austria. Three countries - namely Netherlands, Poland and UK – show more articulated trends as far as the strength of governing vs. opposition parties is concerned. In these countries, public opinion trends show also some variation in the support of pro/anti European parties. Netherlands, Poland and UK, thus, tend to show some aspects of the dynamics hypothesized in H5 and H6: governing parties tend to see their consensus weakened after the crisis, and anti-European parties tend to become more popular.

Taking into consideration also the last column (electoral results) of the graphs, it can be showed that in some countries anti-European parties tend to get more votes than those forecast according to the survey polls. An explanation of that might lie in the fact that anti-European parties may be less "socially acceptable". Some voters might not declare their vote for these parties in survey polls: as a consequence, these parties tend to be underestimated in the survey and to gain more votes the day of the elections. With the exception of Italy and France, Pro-European parties have a better performance in the last survey before the elections than in official results. In the Netherlands the results are the same as in the last survey and in the other five countries the electoral performance of Pro-European parties is worse than the forecast of the last survey before the elections (mainly due to the defeat of the Spd in Germany).

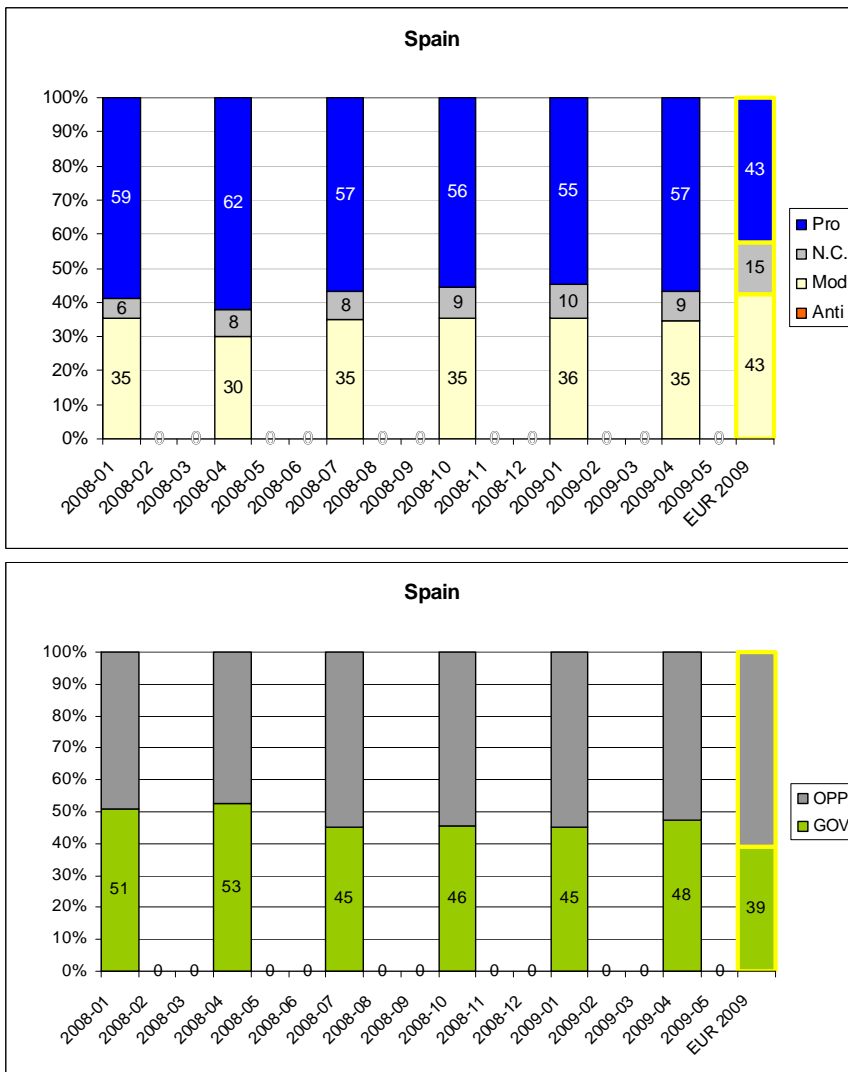
A closer view on each country's data allows to specify each trend. During the year and a half we have considered, public opinion polls in Germany (Figure 3) show a remarkable stability both regarding the pro/anti European and the government/opposition dimensions. The apparent strengthening of the Pro-European side (from 45-48% during the whole 2008 to 50-52% in the first months of 2009) is not confirmed by the official results, which rather show a strengthening of small parties which could not be classified according to this dimension. The coalition government support tends to decline in the first months of 2008, but it is not affected by the crisis and it is quite stable throughout the whole period.

Figure 3 – Public opinion support trends and final election results for EU issue party areas and government parties. Germany, Jan 2008-Jun 2009.



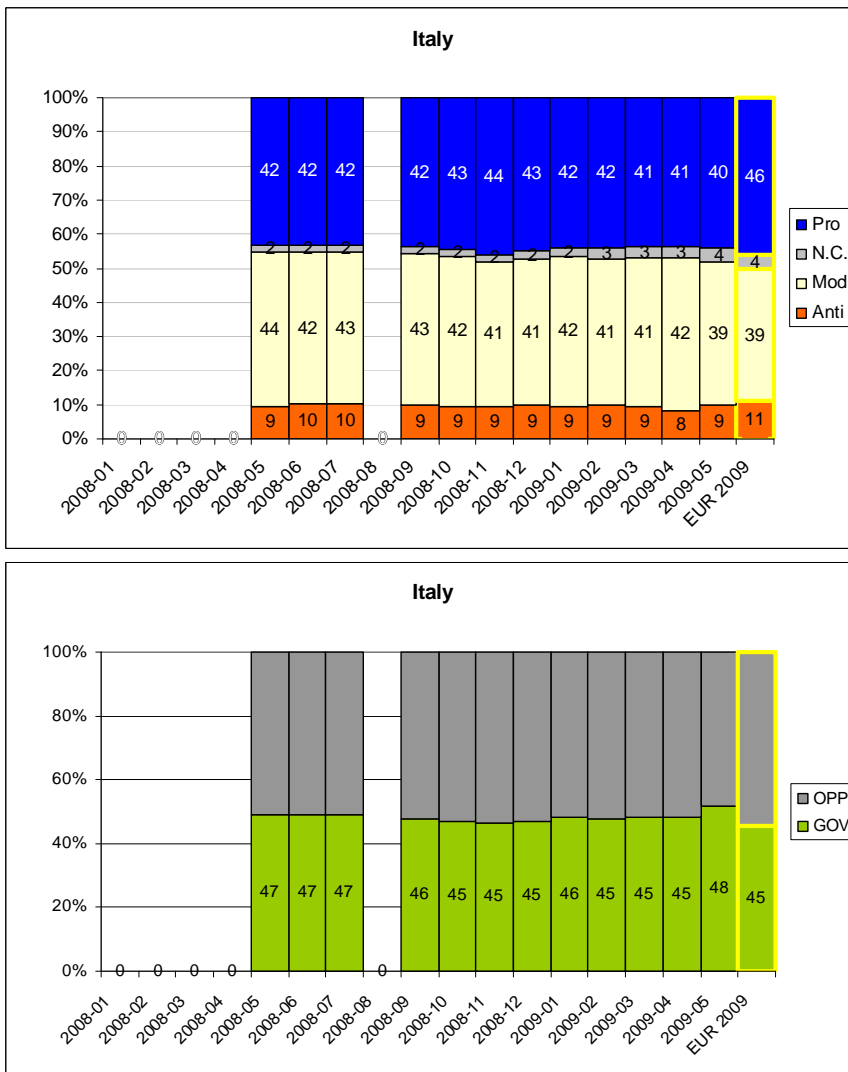
Spain, too, shows a high degree of stability in the expressed preferences in the available surveys (Figure 4). Both dimensions of analysis are characterized by stability. With the exception of april 2008, the Pro-European parties hold 55-59% and moderate anti-European are 35-36%.The support for the government varies from 45 to 53%: the maximum values can be detected at the beginning of 2008 but later no clear trend is detectable.

Figure 4 – Public opinion support trends and final election results for EU issue party areas and government parties. Spain, Jan 2008-Jun 2009.



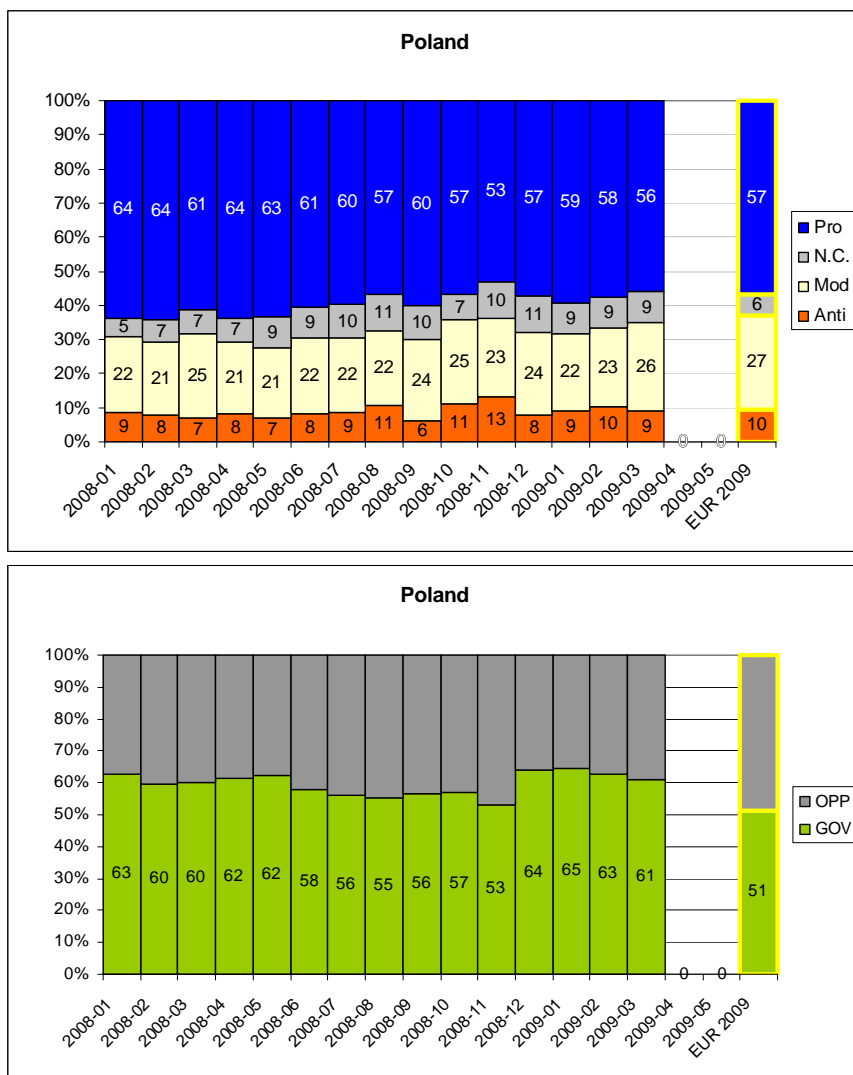
Electoral results, however, give a very different portrait: Pro-European parties gain 14 percentage points less votes than the most favourable survey, and the same holds (in a slightly limited way: -6 percentage points) for the Psoe government. The discrepancy between official results and survey is constant throughout all the surveys considered: this allows the hypothesis that undeclared voting intentions (for opposition and moderately anti-European parties) might have systematically affected survey results.

Figure 5 – Public opinion support trends and final election results for EU issue party areas and government parties. Italy, Jan 2008-Jun 2009.



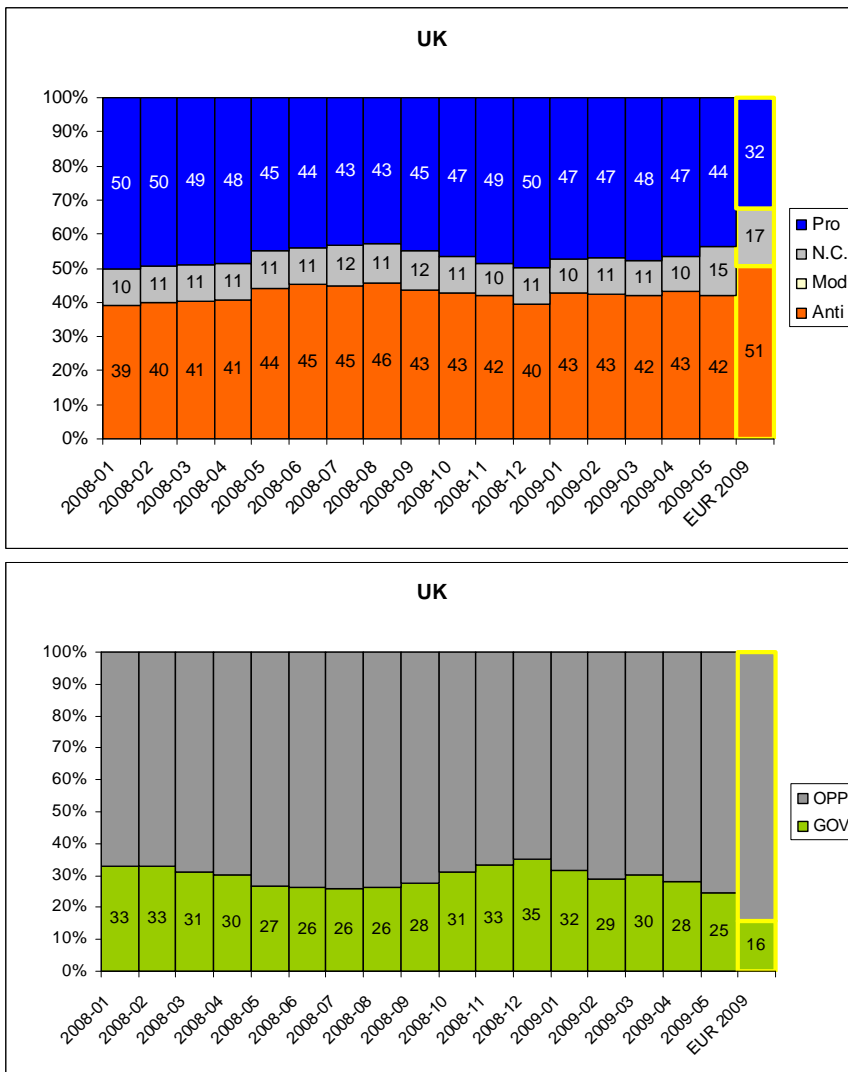
Italian surveys (Figure 5) show the traditional high degree of stability and a quite high degree of accuracy in forecasting electoral results. Both the strength of anti-European (around 10%) and moderately anti-European (around 40%) parties were showed also in survey polls, as it was the strength of governing parties.

Figure 6 – Public opinion support trends and final election results for EU issue party areas and government parties. Poland, Jan 2008-Jun 2009.



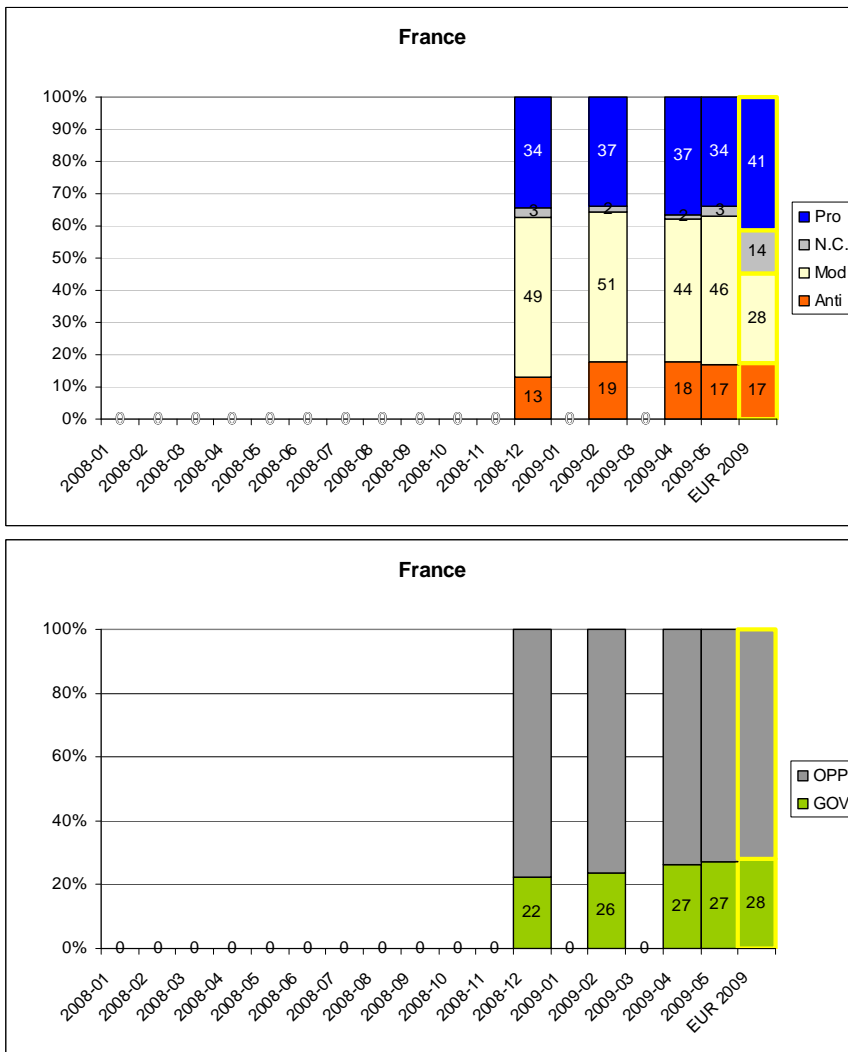
One of the countries in which there are more oscillations in public opinion is Poland (Figure 6). The strength of anti- and moderately anti-European parties tends to grow since autumn 2008 (when the crisis started) in survey polls and it is confirmed by electoral results. The government, above 60% until May 2008, falls to 53% (November 2008), then it grows again during the first months of 2009 (over 60% again) but it is punished by voters in the ballot box (51%: less than the most unfavourable survey).

Figure 7 – Public opinion support trends and final election results for EU issue party areas and government parties. UK, Jan 2008-Jun 2009.



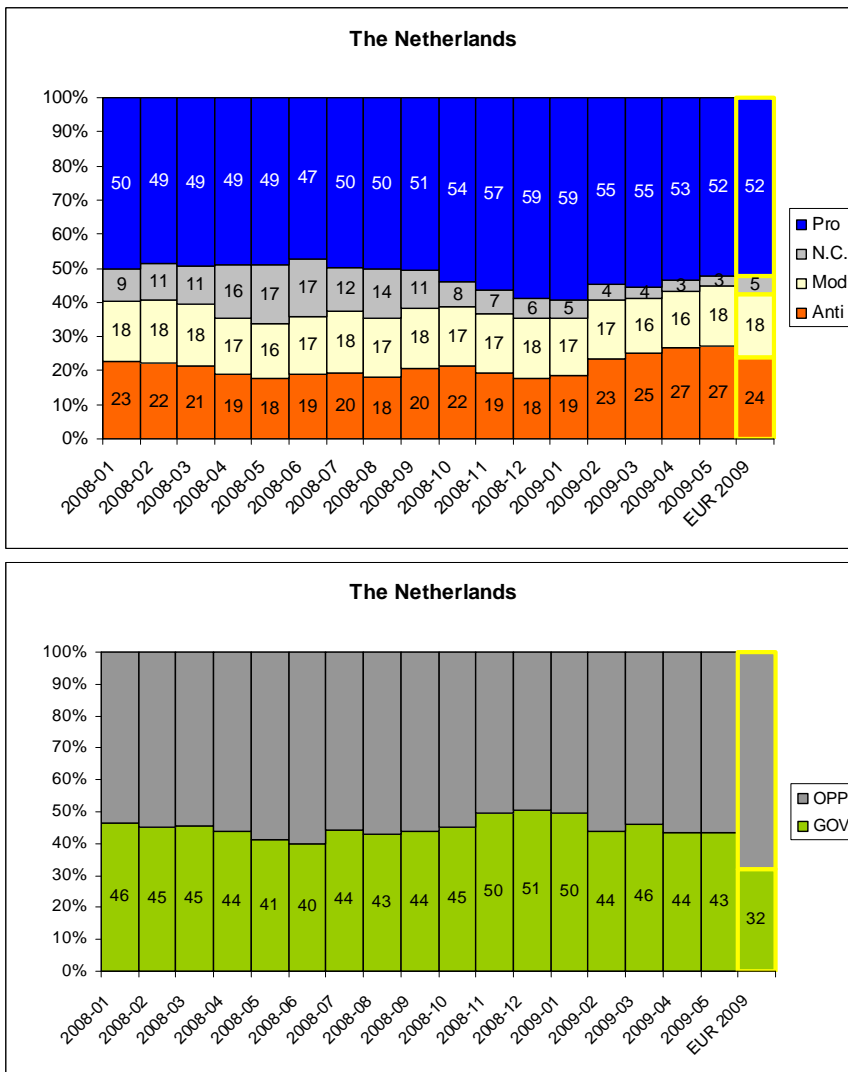
In the UK, too, the effects of the crisis seem to be detectable in public opinion polls (Figure 7). In this case, however, the period of minimal popularity of the (Pro-European) government is the summer 2008, before the crisis. The crisis and the subsequent government interventions seem to improve its popularity for some months, till the end of the year. Later, the government popularity decreases again, as is it (heavily) confirmed by electoral results.

Figure 8 – Public opinion support trends and final election results for EU issue party areas and government parties. France, Jan 2008-Jun 2009.



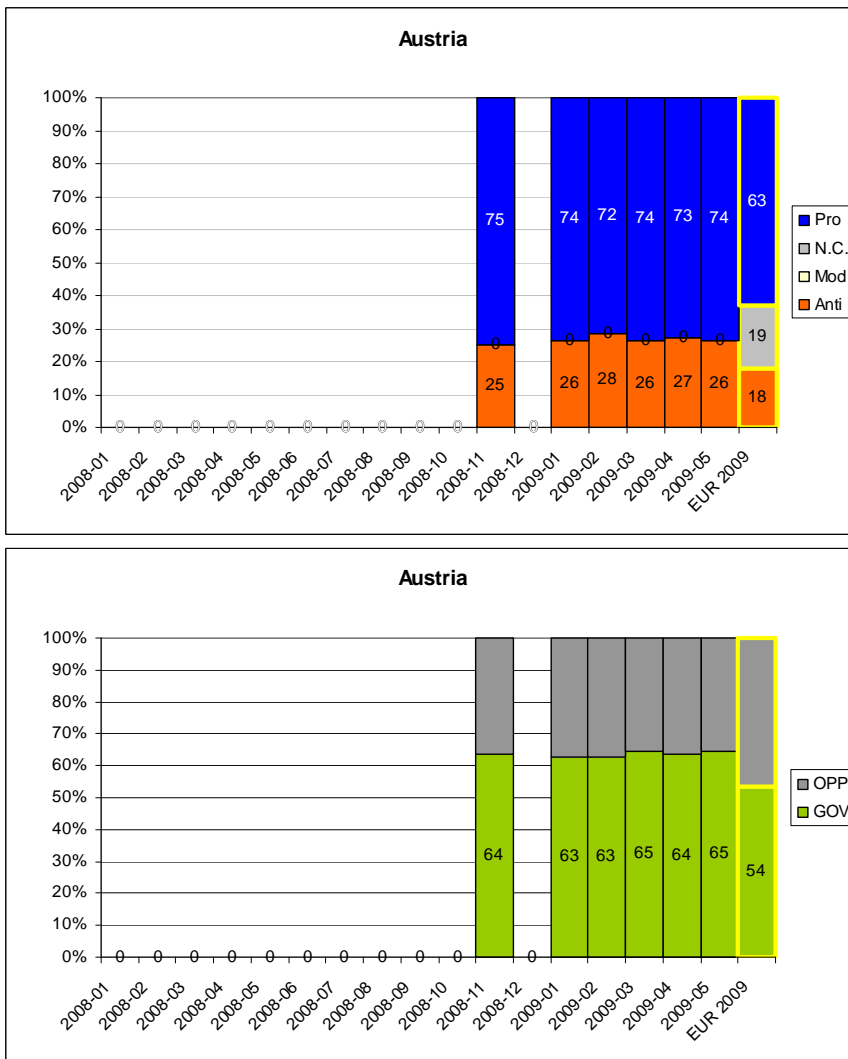
The few surveys available for France (Figure 8) show that the government (Ump) does perform slightly better than according to surveys. Regarding the pro/anti European dimension, the results might seem surprising, compared to the latest polls. Here, though, a methodological *caveat* is necessary. Even the latest polls reported voting intentions to the traditional list of the Verts instead of the new Europe-Ecologie list that disputed the elections: this difference is sensitive, since the Verts are classified as Moderately Anti-EU based on the PPMD data, while we chose to classify Europe-Ecologie as Pro-EU. This explains most of the discrepancy between the polls and the actual result.

Figure 9 – Public opinion support trends and final election results for EU issue party areas and government parties. The Netherlands, Jan 2008-Jun 2009.



Another country which is characterized by a high variability in public opinion trends is the Netherlands (Figure 9). As in UK, the ups and downs of the government end with an electoral result that is worse (32%) than in the worst public opinion polls (never below 40%). Along the pro-anti European dimension, however, the results are intermediate (52%) between the most and the less favourable polls (that vary from 59% to 47% for the Pro-European front). The comparison reveals to be particularly striking with the post-crisis period, which was characterized by the maximum strength of the government and of the Pro-European parties. In common with UK and (partially) Poland, Netherlands data show that after a “rally around the government” effect detectable in public opinion polls, electoral results tend to punish the government.

Figure 10 – Public opinion support trends and final election results for EU issue party areas and government parties. Austria, Jan 2008-Jun 2009.



Austrian results (few surveys available) show that the electoral performance of the government is lower than the expectations according to survey polls, while the pro/anti European dimension shows a high degree of stability. The only variation in the results, in comparison to the surveys, is due to the lack of data for the Hans-Peter Martin List, since polls were conducted on national elections voting intentions, and recorded results for this list more in line with its usual poor performance in national elections.

The overall portrait provided by these data shows quite a high degree of stability in survey polls since January 2008, both on the pro/anti European dimension and on the government/opposition dimension. In Germany, France and Italy voting intentions do not seem sensitive to economic crisis: both governing parties and Pro-European parties hold similar quotas of support during the period. In Spain and in Austria, however, the electoral results of these parties (mainly governing parties) are worse than public opinion polls. In Netherlands, Poland and UK public opinion trends show some confirmation of H5 (since autumn 2008, the outbreak of the economic crisis, governing parties weakened) and H6 (since autumn 2008, the outbreak of the economic crisis, anti-European parties strengthened), that are confirmed in electoral results. This point can suggest some connection with the conclusions drawn about the connection between government support and the electoral cycle: excluding Poland, the two countries with much higher instability are also the two countries that have passed the middle of the electoral cycle, thus entering the second phase of the cycle, when voters are much more sensitive to the evaluation of government action and of future perspectives. In this light, the impact of the crisis could have had some influence on the actual result²¹.

7. CONCLUSIONS

So far we have seen in detail different aspects of European elections in general (through a 15-year time period) and of the 2009 European election in particular. Drawing conclusions from the presented data is, in our opinion, best achieved in providing a synthetic assessment of the hypotheses presented in the introduction, by also providing specific comments regarding the 2009 election.

H1: Turnout in European elections is lower than in national elections.

This hypothesis is clearly confirmed by the data. Though with variable mobilization ratios across different countries, European elections are systematically affected by much lower levels of participation. Yet, an interesting result comes from the analysis of the 2009 election. The data show that in the observed countries *the 2009 elections have not been characterized by particularly low levels of participation.*

²¹ With Poland, another exception to this pattern (though for opposite reasons) is Germany, where the level of government support is higher than expected, though the electoral cycle is almost over. The grand coalition in office in Germany, though, seems to be a sufficient explanation for this result.

Yet such conclusion deserves two specifications. The first is that there actually *is* a decreasing trend through time, but this trend seems to have stabilized in the 2000's; most countries have reached their historical low in 1999 or 2004. The second specification is that there are two exceptions: France and Italy, which in 2009 have reached their historical low. It must be noted, though, that these two countries are, historically, the two countries with the highest turnout levels: the long-term trend seems to go towards a homogenization towards lower levels.

H2: Voting concentration in European elections is lower than in national elections.

H3: Anti-European parties are stronger in European elections than in national elections.

These two hypotheses can be answered conjointly, since the data show a first, key result: the dynamics regarding anti-EU parties are very similar to those generally regarding small, minor parties: anti-EU parties do not seem to specially benefit from a higher salience of anti-EU issues in European elections.

A partially surprising result is that both H2 and H3 are not substantially confirmed. *Small parties do not enjoy better results in European elections.* The development dynamics of small (and anti-EU parties) seem to evolve independently of the type of election: some of them have their first success in national election and develop across European and subsequent national elections; some instead have their first success in European elections and follow on through national elections; and so on.

The only relevant exception to this almost-irrelevance of the type of elections is based on *institutional* factors: where the electoral system for national elections has much higher thresholds for representation (France, UK) there emerges a substantial difference: small parties understandably achieve much better results in European elections. Thus it seems that mostly *institutions* matter. Yet a specification is necessary: this does not imply an *automatic* connection, predicting always more small parties in European elections. Party system fragmentation in these two parties seems connected to the presence of specific party strategies, aimed at exploiting the opportunities offered by the electoral systems. In the UK, fragmentation did not emerge even in European elections, until independent actors sensed the presence of promising political issues, along with the absence of institutional constraints in European elections. In a reversed fashion, France experienced a successful reduction of party fragmentation in the arena where the electoral system could help such process; yet this evolution seems much slower in European elections which use a PR system.

Regarding the 2009 election, it can hardly be maintained that they have recorded a particular increase in party system fragmentation, except for a few national cases where this has anyway marked the prosecution of existing trends.

H4: Governing parties are weaker in European elections than in national elections.

Among the hypotheses presented, this could probably be the one that is mostly confirmed by the data. Governments seem to enjoy lower levels of support in second-order elections (such as European elections), and this seems to happen according to understandable *cyclic* patterns, with the worst point of the cycle happening in the middle of their period of office.

In this regard, the 2009 elections seem to mark a difference compared to the previous 2004 election. *Governments in this election have obtained results that are worse than in the previous electoral cycle, and this seems to affect more those governments that are in the second part of the cycle.* All this combined suggest a prediction of negative results for governments in office, in their future national elections. In this regard, this could be the single most important point where the economic crisis seems to have had a detectable effect on voting intentions and behavior.

H5: Since autumn 2008 (the outbreak of the economic crisis), governing parties weakened.

The expectations of a further weakening of governments as a consequence of the economic crisis are only partially confirmed. In some countries (Germany, France and Italy) the hypothesis has to be refused, because opinion polls show a high degree of stability and the electoral results of the governing parties are not particularly negative (because they are at the beginning of the electoral cycle). In other countries (Spain and Austria) opinion polls do not show any impact of the crisis during the months following autumn 2008; however, governments experience severe electoral losses. Other countries (Netherlands and Poland) confirm the hypothesis that the crisis has (furtherly) weakened governing parties, which suffer some losses that according to opinion polls they seem to recover in the following months, a trend that is confirmed by the results in Poland but not in the Netherlands, where parties lose. In UK the government loses consensus before the outbreak of the crisis and the crisis constitutes, for some months, an opportunity for the government to re-gain some voting intentions. Nevertheless, the actual voting results will be even below the lowest levels recorded by public opinion polls. A possible explanatory hypothesis for both such outcome and for the general instability of public opinion – common traits of the UK and the Netherlands – could be the fact that both are in the

second half of their electoral cycle, and thus much closer than other countries to the time when voters start preparing their choices in view of the next election.

On a general note, the overall interpretation could be that *the impact of the crisis is not uniformly detectable throughout the countries considered; and that where there are public opinion changes after the crisis, they do not always go in the direction of a weakening of governing parties.*

H6: since autumn 2008 (the outbreak of the economic crisis), anti-European parties strengthened.

Also H6 can be confirmed only partially. The overall portrait given by opinion polls is that of a remarkable stability in the strength of Pro- vs. Anti-European parties. With very few exceptions, the trend of Anti-European parties is specular to that of governing parties. In countries where public opinion trends are more stable on the government/opposition dimension, such stability also holds along the pro/anti European dimension. Where there is instability, anti-European parties can benefit of a more volatile public opinion. It must be though noted that, on a general note, *Anti-European parties do not seem to have marked a general increasing trend, except for some national cases.*

After the evaluation of such hypotheses, what can be a general conclusion about the 2009 elections? Can “business as usual” be a synthetic comment about the 2009 elections? Yes and no. On the one hand, expectations for a dramatic surge of protest voting – with strong decrease in participation, an explosion of protest parties and major losses for governments in office – were not fulfilled, neither in small scale. When measured appropriately, participation did not decrease significantly, except for national cases where it was very high; party system fragmentation did not increase significantly, nor the success of anti-EU parties, which are mostly stable, or – when increasing – only prosecuting existing trends. On the other hand, some aspects of the results seem to show two medium-term trends. The first trend regards traces of instability an increasing fragmentation in some countries: a trend that started much before the 2009 elections, but that did not seem to interrupt, and that as such deserves future attention. The second trend concerns instead the electoral performance of governments in office: those governments that are closer to a future national election are experiencing stronger losses, possibly as an effect of the economic crisis.

It is precisely these two trends that allow us to identify two areas of special attention for the forthcoming season of national elections. First, we could expect fragmentation to stay high also in national elections; second – and more important – we could expect governments in office to

experience major defeats in national elections, if they are not able to reverse the trend that emerges from the 2009 result. In both cases, national elections happening in the next two-three years will be key test cases for the evolution of European party systems.

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