

The Micro-Foundations of Second-order Election Theory:  
Theoretical Reconstructions and Empirical Tests  
Based Upon the European Election Study 2004.

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Abstract

Theory suggests that, relative to the preceding first order election result, turnout is lower in second-order elections, government parties lose, and small parties and ideologically extreme parties win. These regularities are not static but dynamic – government parties' losses are greater the closer a second-order election is located around first-order midterm. These 'aggregate' predictions of second-order elections theory have mostly been tested using aggregate data. The fact that they are based upon individual-level hypothesis has received much less attention. Only very recently, scholars started to uncover some of these micro-foundations of second-order election theory and confront them with micro-level empirical evidence. It is in this area that the current article aims at contributing some theoretical structure and empirical evidence.

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## 1. Introduction.

Second-order election (SOE) theory has become the dominant paradigm for the analysis of ‘less important elections’ (Marsh & Mikhaylov 2008). The skeleton version of it suggests that, relative to the preceding first order election (FOE) result, (1) turnout is lower in SOEs; (2) government parties loose; (3) small parties win; and (4) ideologically extreme parties win. These regularities, however, are not static but dynamic – they are likely to be inflated and deflated again as a function of the electoral cycle. Most important in this perspective is that (5) government parties’ losses are greater the closer a SOE is located around FOE midterm (Reif & Schmitt 1980; Reif 1984; Reif 1997).

Quite appropriately, these ‘aggregate’ predictions about differences between FOE and SOE results have mostly been tested using aggregate data (Schmitt 1990; Marsh 1998; Schmitt 2005; Hix & Marsh 2007). The fact that these predictions have been based upon individual-level hypothesis has received much less attention. Marsh and Mikhaylov (2008) overlook them altogether and state accordingly: “Reif and Schmitt do not provide a theory of the European Voter” (2008:4). Only very recently, scholars started to uncover some of these micro-foundations of SOE theory and tested them using micro-level data. It is in this area that the current article aims at contributing some theoretical structure and empirical evidence.

## 2. A sketch of a micro-model of SOE voting.

The behaviour of voters in first- and second-order elections is all but independent. This is to say that some voters may support party A in election B *because* they have supported party B in election A (and because the elections differ in importance, among other things). It might be useful to start with a distinction of the behavioural alternatives that a voter faces in consecutive first- and second-order elections. There are five of them. A voter might (a) vote for the same party in both elections; (b) defect from the FOE choice in the SOE; (c) abstain in the SOE while having voted in the FOE; (d) vote in the SOE while having abstained in the FOE; and (e) abstain in both. For students of SOEs in general and of European Parliament elections in particular, the second and the third of these behavioural alternatives are the most important because they are at the base of the often markedly differing results of these elections. In this article we try to learn more about the motivations that lead to SOE defection and SOE abstention.

In doing this, we recur to three mechanisms that are known to affect vote choices. The first and perhaps most important is mobilisation: some voters need to be mobilised to

participate in an election and express a preference. Others need less prompting; this applies to citizens who are close to one of the parties, but also to voters who habitually turning out on election day (Schmitt and Mannheimer 1991). It is the early insight of Angus Campbell (1966) that certain groups of first-order voters are likely to abstain in second-order elections simply due to the lack of electoral mobilisation that is characteristic for those elections.

A second mechanism is ‘sincere voting’, or first-preference voting. Voters normally vote for the party or candidate that is most attractive to them, either by way of socialisation and habit (party identification), policy (position and/or valence issues and political competence), or candidate traits. However, sincere voting is probably not a behavioural constant but a variable. Some voters sometimes change their mode of operation from sincere (in one arena) to strategic (in another) and vice versa. If we are to understand their behaviour, it becomes important to identify the motivation of switching.

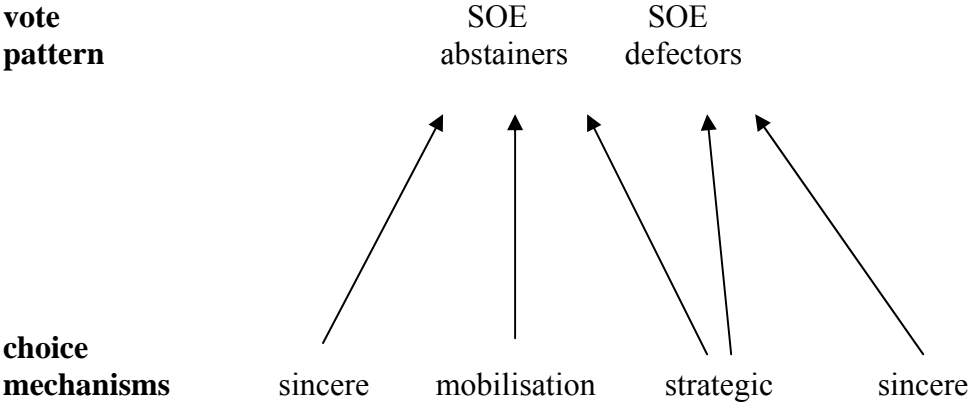
SOE theory (Reif & Schmitt 1980 etc.) identifies two versions of sincere switching, while there is only one of sincere abstention. (a) Switching from a strategic FOE to a sincere SOE vote choice might be motivated by the desire of voters to express their true first preference even if the chosen party would not gain representation. This expectation is based on the assumption that wasting ones vote in the SOE arena is not very costly – the ‘cost’ being specified in the currency of likely political consequences. (b) In addition to ‘low cost’ sincere defecting, SOE defectors can sincerely support another than their FOE party if preference formation is based on arena specific issues and policies: voters may prefer one party on European and the other on domestic politics (e.g. Rohrschneider and Clark 2007). (c) Finally, voters might be said to ‘sincerely abstain’ if on arena-specific issues all choice options are far away from them. To give an example: when all parties are Euro-positive while many voters are Euro-critical, there is simply no party for many that they could support.

The third and final mechanism is strategic voting, the latter being understood as the intentional choice of another than the most preferred choice option. There is an extensive body of literature on strategic voting (much of it initiated by Cox 1997) which however almost completely concentrates on what we may call ‘single election voting’. At the core of it are the questions about whether and to what degree particular electoral systems support or provoke strategic considerations to play a role in the process of vote choices. Voters who use strategic considerations to determine their choices in different but related elections have received less scholarly attention. There is some work, mainly in the US literature, which proposes a balancing theory for explaining differences between US presidential and midterm elections (e.g. Erikson 1988, Fiorina 1996, and Kedar 2005 for a generalised version). The

argument is that voters engage in split-ticket voting in order to ‘balance’ the political tendency of the two branches of government and thereby moderate public policies. While the legislative role of the European Parliament has been growing exponentially over the past decades, the partisan character of its decisions is obviously hard to identify for many and also probably far too limited to employ a similar argument for the explanation of voting patterns in European Parliament elections (but see Carruba & Timpone 2005). This is why ‘balancing’ was not considered as a motivation of strategic switching in the original theoretical SOE statement. However, Reif and Schmitt (1980) propose another strategic link between the vote in FOE and SOE. According to this, the intention of the European split-ticket voter is to signal discontent with the performance of the first-order government in the second-order electoral arena. These signals can be issued in a harder and a softer form. The harder version is actual defection (FOE government voters signal their dissatisfaction by supporting another party); the softer version is differential abstention (FOE government voters signal their dissatisfaction by abstaining).

We can summarise these considerations graphically as follows:

**Graph 1**



2.1. What we know about these mechanisms.

The mechanisms that determine vote patterns in SOE cannot reliably be judged from the analysis of aggregate data. However, individual-level analyses are scarce. Based on what is available, it is not at all clear to what degree our three mechanisms are shaping multi-level

electoral behaviour. While Weber (2007) finds mobilisation clearly more important than strategic voting, his concept of mobilisation is concentrating on policy congruence and thus rather seems to measure the effectiveness of political representation than mobilisation. Moreover, SOE theory is only lightly touched upon – and perhaps rather used a straw man – in an otherwise very rich theoretical discussion. Carruba & Timpone (2005) claim that vote switching in second-order elections can at least in part be understood as a strategic – ‘balancing’ – exercise: centrist voters seem to be interested in moderating more extreme government policies through their second-order election vote. Regarding the issue of European integration, Marsh (2007) finds that the party differentials do not significantly contribute to the explanation of switching, while Rohrschneider & Clark (2007) present empirical evidence according to which vote switching is strongly motivated by European polity considerations. Hobolt et al. (2008) report that voters defect because of arena-specific issues, that is: the Euro-positive orientation of most government parties that runs counter their own more Euro-sceptical attitude. All in all, it is probably fair to say that there is hardly a consensus in the literature about the reasons for vote switching. Moreover, much the same can be said about the explanation of SOE abstentions. Some claim that abstentions are strongly motivated by Euro-critical attitudes (Blondel et al. 1997; 1998). Others arrive at exactly the opposite conclusion and see high abstention rates mainly as a function of the lack of electoral mobilisation (e.g. Schmitt & Mannheimer 1991; Schmitt & van der Eijk 2007, 2008).

## 2.2. Micro-level hypotheses about multi-level electoral behaviour in European and National elections.

In order to confront these contradictory results with fresh empirical evidence, it will be useful to formalize the various propositions – many of them already included in the first statement of SOE theory – as testable hypotheses. We separate turnout hypotheses from vote switching hypotheses and turn to the former first:

*Turnout Hypothesis 1 (mobilization).* FOE voters abstain in SOE because of the lack of politicization and mobilization (Reif & Schmitt 1980; Schmitt 2005; Schmitt & Mannheimer 1990; Schmitt & van der Eijk 2008). This hypothesis is disconfirmed if a lack of interest in the campaign and a lack of party identification does not significantly increase the likelihood of abstaining.

*Turnout Hypothesis 2 (sincere abstention).* FOE voters abstain in SOE because of their EU skepticism and the lack of viable choice options (e.g. Blondel et al. 1997). This hypothesis is disconfirmed if EU skepticism does not significantly increase the likelihood of abstaining.

*Turnout Hypothesis 3 (strategic abstention).* FOE voters abstain in order to signal discontent with the performance of their first-order party choice at the time of the SOE (Reif & Schmitt 1980). This hypothesis is disconfirmed if previous government voters who are now dissatisfied are not significantly more likely to abstain than others.

*Turnout Hypothesis 4 (cyclical signaling).* Strategic abstentions are expected to increase with decreasing distance to first-order midterm. This is so because of the tendency of government popularity to evolve in a cyclical manner, with a particular deep depression shortly after mid-term (cf. on the electoral cycle e.g. Stimson 1976). This hypothesis is disconfirmed if the likelihood of dissatisfied FOE government voters to abstain in SOE is *not* significantly increasing towards midterm, and *not* decreasing again thereafter.

*Turnout Hypothesis 5 (systemic signaling).* Strategic abstentions should increase with increasing clarity of policy responsibilities (Marsh 1998). Any signal needs an addressee; if there is no such addressee due to blurred policy responsibilities in coalition governments, strategic abstention is expected to be less prominent. This hypothesis is disconfirmed if dissatisfied FOE government voters do not abstain significantly more often in one-party government regimes.

We move on to five hypotheses about the mechanisms of vote switching. *Vote Switching Hypothesis 1 (strategic defection)* predicts that people defect from their FOE vote because of their intention to signal discontent with the performance of their previous vote choice (Reif & Schmitt 1980). This hypothesis is disconfirmed if previous government voters who are now dissatisfied are not significantly more likely to switch than others.

*Vote Switching Hypothesis 2 (cyclical signaling).* Strategic defection should increase with decreasing distance to first-order midterm. The justification for this hypothesis is the same as in *Turnout Hypothesis 4*. This hypothesis is disconfirmed if the likelihood of dissatisfied FOE government voters to defect in SOE is not significantly increasing towards midterm, and decreasing again thereafter.

*Vote Switching Hypothesis 3 (systemic signaling).* Strategic defection should increase with increasing clarity of policy responsibilities. This hypothesis is disconfirmed if dissatisfied FOE government voters do not defect significantly more often in one-party government regimes.

*Vote Switching Hypothesis 4 (sincere defection I).* Voters support a different party because they are closer to it on policy grounds. This can have at least two reasons. One is that the danger of wasting one's vote that characterizes FOEs is absent in SOEs. This danger is most obvious for voters whose first preference is a small party that must be expected to be

irrelevant for FOE government formation (Reif & Schmitt 1980 etc.). This hypothesis is therefore disconfirmed if a smaller left-right distance to the party chosen in the SOE (relative to that of FOE party choice) does not increase the likelihood of switching among SOE voters of small parties.

*Vote Switching Hypothesis 5 (sincere defection II)*. The second possible reason for sincere SOE defection is that arena-specific issues call for arena specific choices (Rohrschneider & Clark 2007). This hypothesis is disconfirmed if a smaller EU policy distance to the party chosen in the SOE (relative to that of FOE party choice) does not increase the likelihood of switching.

We will test these hypotheses separately for the West and the East of the European Union because analyses of aggregate data have suggested that second-order theory does not work well in the East (e.g. Schmitt 2005). Voter-party-alignments and party systems more generally are still very fluid the new post-communist democracies of Eastern Europe (e.g. Tavits 2005) which cannot but affect the individual reasoning that leads to selective abstention and vote switching in a different way than it does in the more consolidated electoral systems of Western Europe. We expect therefore that our hypotheses will fare differently in the “old” EU 15 and in the new member-countries.

### 3. Data and Strategy of Analysis.

For testing these nine hypotheses we use the data of the European Election Study 2004. This study comprises 26 representative mass surveys conducted after the European Parliament election of June 2004, in altogether 24 member-countries of the European Union.<sup>1</sup> While there is considerable variation in terms of survey administration,<sup>2</sup> all of these studies have implemented the same core questionnaire.<sup>3</sup> This study is part of an ongoing research programme. However, other than previous European Election Studies (EES) and the one currently prepared for 2009<sup>4</sup>, the 2004 study was in many ways a decentralised operation: translation and back-translation of the common core questionnaire, organisation and conduct

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<sup>1</sup> While Malta is the only member-country that was not covered in this study, there are two countries with more than one representative survey: Belgium (both a Flemish and a Wallon sample of voters has been interviewed) and the United Kingdom (with two separate studies, one for Great Britain and one for Northern Ireland).

<sup>2</sup> In many of the Western European EU member-countries, a telephone survey methodology was used. By contrast, in many of the new Eastern member-countries face-to-face interviews were preferred. In Ireland, Italy and Sweden, a postal survey was conducted.

<sup>3</sup> With some variation in terms of completeness; the Swedish and the Lithuanian survey in particular, if for different reasons, could only administer some part of the common core questionnaire.

<sup>4</sup> The name of the 2009 European Election Study is ‘Providing an Infrastructure for Research Into Electoral Democracy in the EU’ (PIREDEU). It is prepared as a ‘Design Infra-Structure’ supported by the EU Commission under FP7.

of the interviewing, local data file preparation and, last but not least, the funding of all of this was part of the duties of national study directors.<sup>5</sup>

In the present article, we utilise only a few of the many indicators of this study. These are the recall of respondents' vote choice in the European Parliament election of June 2004 as well as that of the preceding national legislative election; their party identification and interest in the campaign; the evaluation of the performance of the national government; the evaluation of EU membership; respondents' self-placements and placements of the nationally relevant parties on the left-right dimension<sup>6</sup> and on the pro-anti-EU dimension<sup>7</sup>.

We have added a number of context variables to the micro-level dataset. On the party level, we identified whether respondents in the national legislative election voted for one of the parties that after election formed government; the size (in percent of the valid vote in the preceding FOE) of the party or the parties that respondents report to have voted for in both elections; and the objective position<sup>8</sup> of the party or the parties that respondents report to have voted for in both elections, both in terms of the left-right dimension and the pro-/anti Europe (or integration-independence) dimension. On the level of the political system, we identified the 'place' of the European Parliament election within the national electoral cycle, more in particular how close or distant it was placed to the previous or following FOE; and whether a country is run by a government coalition or a single-party government. The details on the

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<sup>5</sup> These national study directors are: Günther Ogris (Austria), Marc Swyngedouw and Lieven de Winter (Belgium), James Tilley (Britain) and John Garry (Northern Ireland), Bambos Papageorgiou (Cyprus), Lukas Linek (Czech Republic), Jorgen Goul Andersen (Denmark), Alan Sikk and Vello Pettai (Estonia), Mikko Maatila and Tapio Raunio (Finland), Pascal Perrineau and Bruno Cautres (France), Hermann Schmitt and Andreas Wüst (Germany), Ilias Nikolakopoulos and Eftichia Teperoglou (Greece), Gabor Toka (Hungary), Michael Marsh (Ireland), Renato Mannheim and Roberto Biorcio (Italy), Ilze Koroleva (Latvia), Algis Krupavicius (Lithuania), Patrick Dumont (Luxembourg), Cees van der Eijk (the Netherlands), Radoslaw Markowski (Poland), Pedro Magalães (Portugal), Olga Gyarfalova (Slovakia), Niko Tos (Slovenia), Juan Diez Nicolas (Spain), and Sören Holmberg (Sweden). For more information on the specifics of the 2004 surveys, see [www.europeanelectionstudies.net](http://www.europeanelectionstudies.net).

<sup>6</sup> The question wording goes as follows: "In political matters people talk of "the left" and "the right". What is your position? Please indicate your views using any number on a 10-point-scale. On this scale, where 1 means 'left' and 10 means 'right', which number best describes your position? ... And about where would you place the following parties on this scale? How about the Labour Party? And ...". The Belgian survey did not ask this question which is why Belgium can not be included in some of our analysis. aaa

<sup>7</sup> The question wording goes as follows: "Some say European unification should be pushed further. Others say it already has gone too far. What is your opinion? Please indicate your views using any number on a 10-point-scale. On this scale, 1 means unification 'has already gone too far' and 10 means it 'should be pushed further'. What number on this scale best describes your position? ... And about where would you place the following parties on this scale? How about the Labour Party? And ...". Note that in the Swedish study an eleven point scale (from 0 to 10) was used in asking respondents whether they agree with or oppose Sweden's EU membership, and where they locate the Swedish parties on this scale.

<sup>8</sup> 'Objective' party positions are identified as the central tendency (arithmetic means) of the respondents' individual perceptions of party locations on both dimensions. There are two reasons for utilising these objective rather than the subjective ones: (a) endogeneity (quite irrespective of the policy dimension on which party positions are to be evaluated, people tend to draw preferred parties closer to themselves and push others farther away); and (b) n of cases (many people can not locate all the parties, in particular the smaller ones).



construction of the variables that play a role in the following tests are documented in an appendix to this article. It will therefore suffice here to just explain the basic ideas.

We start with the dependent variable. What we try to do is to identify inter-election vote patterns as outlined above. The identification of such vote patterns, strictly speaking, requires panel surveys which we do not dispose of at this time. What we have, instead, is recall questions (at one point in time) about vote choices in successive elections. Their validity is less than perfect because memory is fading with growing distance to the event, and wishful thinking coloured by the opinion climate of the day is likely to take over (e.g. van der Eijk & Niemöller 1979; Waldahl & Aardal 1982, 2000). The recall of the vote for multiple elections (in one survey) is therefore clearly inferior to panel surveys (multiple surveys) with fresh questions posed repeatedly to the respondent in the vicinity of (i.e. shortly after) the behavioural act.

There is one additional complication regarding the determination of inter-election vote patterns. It originates in the fluidity of party systems, which is particularly aggravated in the young democracies of Eastern Europe. The problem arises when choices options in one election are no longer available in the next because parties in between have split or merged or simply disappeared. In order not to overestimate the number of defectors, great care has been taken to identify the political origins of new parties and to code respondents as stable voters whose present vote for a new party goes along with a previous vote for one of the constituent parts of it.<sup>9</sup>

The methodological problems associated with the recall of the vote in multiple elections (in one survey) must be expected to lead to an overestimation of stable voters. Our painstaking recoding of vote patterns in fluid party systems as far as possible avoids the overestimation of vote switchers. What we know about the over-reporting of electoral participation suggests, in addition, that the relatively few abstainers that our surveys identify are real abstainers while many voters are true non-voters (e.g. Traugott & Katosh 1979; Bernstein et al. 2001). In sum, there are reasons to believe that the two categories of our dependent variable that we are most interested in – SOE defectors and differential abstainers – are rather crisp and clean, while stable voters – our reference category in many of the following analyses – are most likely being overestimated.

Table 1 shows the result of the complex recoding process of FOE and SOE vote recalls into an inter-election vote pattern. Stable voters – much as expected – are the strongest

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<sup>9</sup> We wish to acknowledge the help of the national study directors of the 2004 European Election Study in this process. Without their expertise and support we certainly would not have been able to determine inter-election vote patterns as accurately as we believe we did.

category (34%), followed by differential (24%) and consistent abstainers (22%). Those reporting different choices in each election are a rather small group (14%), with only the somehow ‘accidental’ SOE voters who abstained in the preceding FOE counting less (6%). Sable voting and defecting is considerably less frequent in the new Eastern member countries, while differential and particularly consistent abstention is much more common there. This is the vote pattern that we analyse in this article.

Table 1

Inter-Election Vote Patterns  
Linking Voting Behaviour in First-Order National Elections  
and Subsequent European Parliament Elections  
(figures are percent)

	West	East	all EU
R chose the same party in both elections	36	20	34
R chose a different party in one	15	10	14
R did not vote in SOE but in FOE	23	29	24
R did not vote in FOE but in SOE	6	7	6
R did not vote in either election	20	34	22
weighted N of cases	24189	4454	28644

Source: European Election Study 2004. Weighted data are reported. The effect of the weighting is that national sample sizes are adjusted to the relative contribution of national populations to the EU citizenry. Lithuania and Malta are not included in this calculation because of missing data.

Turning to the independent variables predicting differential abstentions, we use party identification (dichotomous) and interest in the EP election campaign (dichotomous) as indicators of non-voting due to (a lack of) mobilisation; the evaluation of EU membership of one’s country (dichotomous) as indicator of sincere non-voting; the evaluation of the national government (dichotomous), a FOE vote for a government party (dichotomous), and the interaction of the two as indicators of strategic non-voting (‘signalling’); the distance of the EP election from the closest FOE (in percent of the maximal distance at mid-term) and the interaction of this distance with ‘signalling’ as an indicator of the cyclical nature of strategic non-voting; and finally whether a country’s government is formed by a single party or a coalition of parties (‘clarity’) and the interaction of this with ‘signalling’ as an indicator of the institutional reinforcement of strategic non-voting.

Models of vote switching between FOE and SOE use identical indicators of strategic switching, but different ones for sincere switching. Our predictors of sincere switching have been build following the tradition of smallest distance voting models. According to these, voters are expected to support the party whose policy positions are closest to their own (c.f. Downs 1957 for the basic statement of these models). Following this perspective, sincere switching should be indicated if the SOE party that a vote switcher supports is closer to her or him than the party he or she supports in the FOE. We use both the left-right dimension and the pro-/anti-EU dimension as the two most relevant policy dimensions structuring the EU political space (e.g. Hix et al. 2007). In addition, we determine the difference in the size of the parties that vote switchers support, and interact with it the difference in the left-right distance to each of the two parties.

We test our hypotheses, finally, with logistic regressions. Again, turnout hypotheses are treated first, vote switching hypotheses second. For both, we test a sincere model, a strategic model, and a combined model. In order to make the interpretation of the logistic regression coefficients more intuitively accessible, we will graphically represent the predicted probabilities. Predicted probabilities of vote switching were calculated by letting our independent variable of interest vary while keeping all other independent variables at their means.

## 4. Findings.

### 4.1. Differential abstentions in European Parliament elections.

Differential abstentions in European Parliament elections are indeed very much a result of a lack of mobilisation, as predicted in the first turnout hypothesis. Both interest in the EP election campaign and party identification are strongly decreasing the likelihood of abstaining, with party identification having a stronger effect in the West and campaign involvement a stronger effect in the East (Table 2). Actually, the two mobilisation variables – as simple as they are – are mightier predictors of electoral participation than the indicators of sincere and strategic abstentions that we turn to.

Is there a sincere component in the motivation of European Parliament abstainers who report to have voted in national FOEs? The answer is again: Yes, there are sings of sincere non-voting in European Parliament elections. Negative evaluations of the membership of one's country in the European Union increase the likelihood of abstaining even if controlled

Table 2

Determinants of Differential Abstention in Multi-Level Elections  
(figures are B's, standard errors, and Nagelkerke's pseudo RSQ)

	Sincere		strategic		combined	
	West	East	West	East	West	East
Intercept	-.42**		-1.63**	.75**	-1.26**	.76**
	.05		.10	.17	.12	.19
party identification (yes)	-1.04**	-.76**	-	-	-1.04**	-.59**
	.05	.08			.06	.08
interest campaign (none at all)	.89**	1.42**	-	-	1.06**	1.45**
	.05	.10			.06	.10
EU membership (bad)	.83**	.51**	-	-	.52**	.59**
	.05	.08			.06	.08
voted FOE govt party (yes)	-	-	-.33**			
			.08			
evaluation nat gov't (bad)	-	-	-.33**		-.23*	
			.08		.09	
signaling: govt vote*govt eval	-	-		.81*		
				.36		
distance SOE to FOE (% max distance)	-	-	1.38**	-.86**	1.21**	-1.13**
			.11	.16	.12	.18
clarity: single party government	-	-	.61**		.39**	
			.08		.08	
signaling* distance	-	-	1.32**		1.32**	
			.36		.39	
signaling*clarity	-	-	.70*		.66*	
			.28		.30	
weighted N of cases	9589	3372	8417	3309	8198	3087
percent missing §	9	7	20	9	22	15
Nagelkerke's Pseudo RSQ	.17	.18	.09	.08	.22	.23

Source: European Election Study 2004. Analyses are based on weighted data. The effect of the weighting is that national sample sizes are adjusted to an equal number of 1000 cases. Lithuania and Malta are not included in the analysis because of missing data. Significance levels are .005 (\*\*) and .05 (\*). Insignificant effects are not shown. § This analysis is based on respondents who 'abstained in SOE but voted in FOE' plus those who 'voted the same in both elections' (the latter being the reference category).

for mobilisation effects,<sup>10</sup> much as we predicted in our second turnout hypothesis. Moreover, this effect is robust in the sense that it persists (if at a lower level in the West) even after controlling for strategic motivations of differential abstention. However, as stable and robust as this effect is in the 2004 data, it is at the same time not very strong. Low turnout in European Parliament elections therefore does not indicate the crisis of legitimacy of EU politics that journalists all over Europe shortly after EP elections regularly want to see in it.

What about strategic abstentions as specified in our remaining turnout hypothesis? The brief answer is: there is some of it in the West of the Union, but only very little in the East. Dissatisfied FOE government voters are somewhat more likely to abstain in European Parliament elections, both in the West and in the East. And in the West of the European Union, but not in the new Eastern member countries, their likelihood of abstaining increases with growing distance to the closest – previous or upcoming – FOE. This finding nicely corresponds with an aggregate data analysis that could not identify a proper electoral cycle in the development of government parties' popularity in the East (Schmitt 2005). This was understood to result from the still rather weak voter-party-alignments in these young democracies (e.g. Tavits 2005). Our fourth turnout hypothesis about the cyclical nature of signalling discontent in SOE with FOE government performance is therefore disconfirmed in the East, and finds support only in the Western member countries of the Union which are all based on a consolidated electoral and party system.

Our fifth and final non-voting hypothesis finds some support in the West of Europe too: differential abstentions are significantly more likely in single-party government systems. Accordance to our expectation, clear responsibilities for public policy seem to be strengthening the strategic gesture of signalling discontent through electoral abstention. We note here that the fact that no effect is reported for Eastern Europe merely signifies that single party governments did not exist there at the time of the 2004 European Parliament election.

Summing up what we have learned about the turnout hypotheses of second-order election theory, we first need to underline once more the importance of mobilisation. People mainly abstain because there is less at stake, and because they are uninterested in whatever there is in terms of an election campaign. Party ties are more important in the West, campaign interest is more important in the East of Europe. Sincere abstentions, that is: non-voting out of

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<sup>10</sup> Political involvement – indicated here by the interest in the campaign and by party identification – is causally prior to electoral participation than European attitudes because the latter is an effect of the former in the sense that politically interested and involved citizens are more likely to support the politics of European unification than the politically alienated. Moreover, political involvement affects the likelihood of electoral participation in any election while European attitudes – if at all – affect the likelihood of participation in European Parliament elections.

opposition against Europe, does also exist, but is comparatively less important. Strategic abstentions signalling discontent with the first-order government are equally less important; in the West, they increase as a function of the electoral cycle with growing distance to the FOE and under single-party governments.

#### 4.2. Voting for another party in European Parliament elections.

Are vote switches in SOE based on sincere choices? The first two columns of Table 3 provide some answers to this question. We find again characteristic differences between Western and Eastern Europe. In the West, those who defect from their previous choice tend to switch to a party which is closer to them on European policy grounds. And while their SOE party is *generally* more distant to them than the FOE party was on the left-right dimension, this is the other way around among those whose SOE party is smaller. In other words: the smaller the SOE party is that vote switchers choose, the closer they are to it on the left-right dimension. This is illustrated by the predicted probabilities of vote switching as reported in Graph 2. All of these effects are highly significant and fairly substantial, and they support both of our sincere switching hypotheses.

Things look very different again for the new Eastern member countries. There, the two parties that respondents report to have voted in the two elections under study do not differ significantly in terms of their left-right position (cf. Graph 2 again). Voters are equidistant to them, so that this cannot be causing any of the switching. They are *generally* switching to a party that is farther away from them on the pro-/anti-Europe dimension, which is counter-balanced by those whose SOE party is smaller than the FOE party was. The smaller the SOE party relative to the FOE party, the smaller again the voter-party-distance in terms of Europe. What we have identified in the West as sincere switching on the left-right dimensions seems to repeat itself in the East on an even larger scale for the pro-/anti-Europe dimension. Supporters of small parties are relieved in a SOE from the pressure for a strategic vote and support the party they are closest to – which in the Eastern member-countries seems to be a small anti-European party that SOE switchers may have abandoned in the FOE in the interest of an effective contribution to government formation (cf. predicted probabilities in Graph 3).

Sincere switching between FOE and SOE is an important mechanism of multi-level vote choices. But there is also strategic switching at work. Signalling discontent with the incumbent government is an important motivation both in the West and the East, clearly more

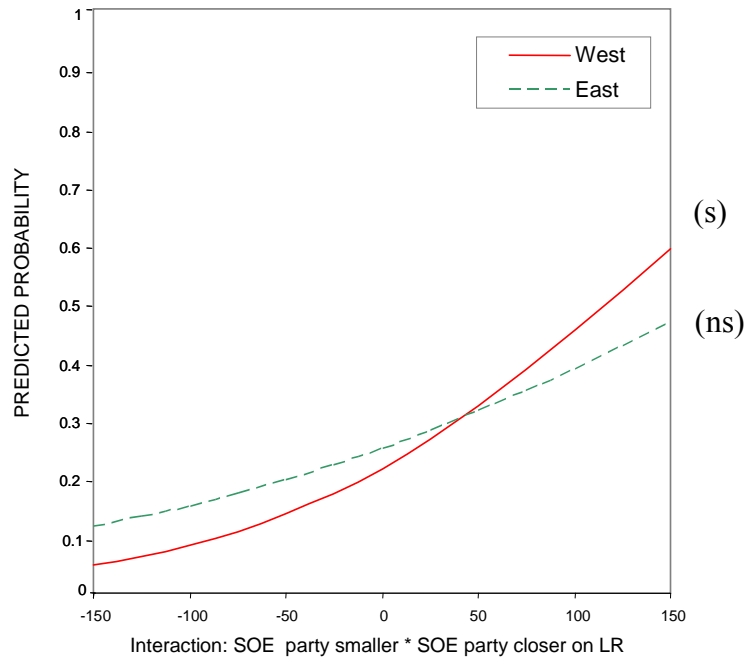
Table 3

Determinants of Vote Switching in Multi-Level Elections  
(figures are B's, standard errors, and Nagelkerke's pseudo RSQ)

	Sincere		strategic		combined	
	West	East	West	East	West	East
Intercept	-1.55** .03	-1.57** .07	-0.93** .10		-1.02** .12	
SOE party closer on LR ( $\Delta$ distances R-party)	-.27** .05		-	-	-.19** .05	
SOE party closer on Europe ( $\Delta$ distances R-party)	.23** .06	-.59** .16	-	-	.23** .06	-.57** .18
SOE party smaller ( $\Delta$ % vote share in FOE)	.09** .00	.18** .01	-	-	.09** .00	.16** .01
interaction SOE party smaller*closer on LR	.01** .00		-	-	.01** .00	
interaction SOE party smaller*closer on Europe		.04** .01	-	-	-.01* .00	.04** .01
voted govt party FOE (yes)	-	-	-.54** .09	-.43* .17	-.72** .11	
evaluation nat gov't (bad)	-	-	-.20* .08	-.61** .16		-.69** .23
signaling (govt vote*govt eval)	-	-	1.01** .24	1.11* .40		
distance SOE to FOE (% max distance)	-	-	.31* .11	-1.17** .21		-1.25** .30
clarity (single party government)	-	-	-.54** .09		-0.94** .12	
signaling*distance	-	-	.75* .29	1.50** .48	1.25** .36	2.67** .81
signaling*clarity	-	-	1.70** .28		1.87** .35	
Weighted N of cases	6956	1818	8023	2207	6470	1697
percent missing §	26	24	15	8	31	29
Nagelkerke's Pseudo RSQ	.22	.32	.09	.15	.27	.39

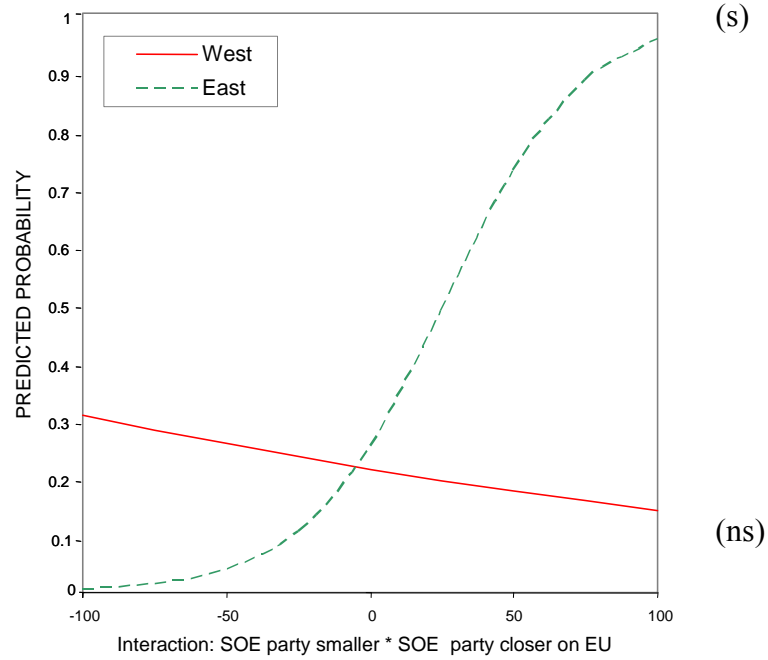
Source: European Election Study 2004. Analyses are based on weighted data. The effect of the weighting is that national sample sizes are adjusted to an equal number of 1000 cases. Lithuania and Malta are not included in the analysis because of missing data. Significance levels are .005 (\*\*) and .05 (\*). Insignificant effects are not shown. § This analysis is based on respondents whose party choice in the SOE differed from that in FOE plus those who voted the same in both elections (the latter being the reference category).

Graph 2  
 Probabilities of Vote Switching Due to Party Size and Left-Right Distance



Legend: Displayed are predicted probabilities of vote switching due to the interaction of the difference in size between FOE and SOE parties \* the difference in the LR-distances to FOE and SOE parties. “s”=significant; “ns”=not.

Graph 3  
 Probabilities of Vote Switching Due to Party Size and EU Distance



Legend: Displayed are predicted probabilities of vote switching due to the interaction of the difference in size between FOE and SOE parties \* the difference in the EU distances to FOE and SOE parties. “s”=significant; “ns”=not.



important than we have seen it with regard to differential abstention. It seems that those who dearly want to teach their government a lesson are more likely to support another party than simply to abstain; from a psychological point of view this is all but implausible. Moreover, both in the West and the East of Europe, this ‘signalling discontent’ gesture significantly increases the closer a SOE is to the midterm of the national electoral cycle (cf. predicted probabilities in Graph 4). Only in the West it finally is strongly accentuated among voters whose government is run by one party rather than a government coalition (cf. predicted probabilities in Graph 5).

Much as before in the analysis of differential abstentions, we note again that the two motivational syndromes to deviate from the FOE vote are quite independent from one another. This is indicated by the fact that our logistic regression coefficients hardly lose power of significance if we move from a sincere over a strategic on to a combined model in which all the predictors are tested. This seems to suggest that all the different motivations and intentions are at simultaneously at work – presumably in different groups of voters.

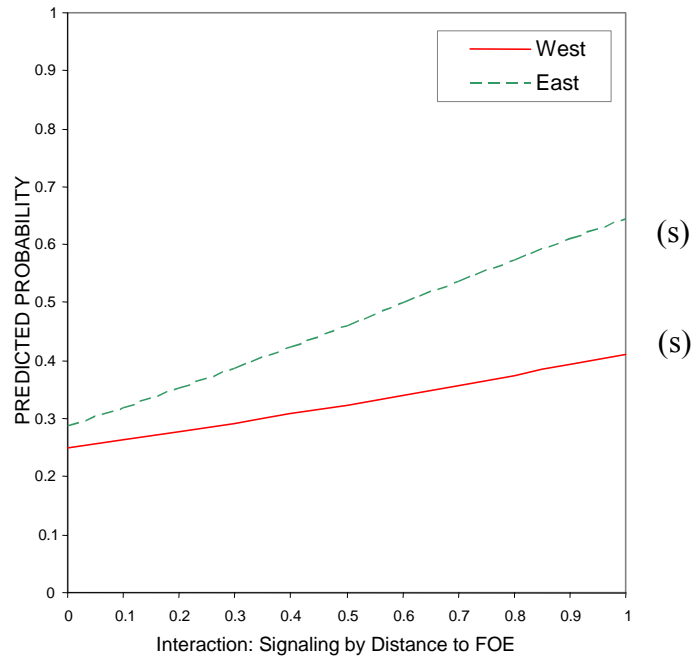
## 5. Summary and perspectives.

SOE theory as originally proposed by Reif and Schmitt (1980) is mainly concerned with election results and why they differ so markedly between FOEs and SOEs. Reasons for this difference can be specified at the macro- and the micro-level. The main macro-level reason is that ‘less is at stake’ in a SOE because no real (first-order) government is formed as a result of it. This has been widely recognised in the literature. Less attention has been paid to the micro-foundations of SOE theory, that is: the hypotheses about the motivations and intentions of individual voters that drive their behaviour in a SOE – relative to what they have done in the preceding FOE. The purpose of the present article was to restate these microfoundations of SOE theory in the form of testable hypotheses and subject them to a rigorous empirical examination.

We started from a distinction of the behavioural alternatives that present themselves to the voter at a SOE following a FOE. We identified five of them, and two critically important ones: differential abstention and SOE defection. These two are so particularly important because they are at the origin of the characteristic difference between FOE and SOE results.

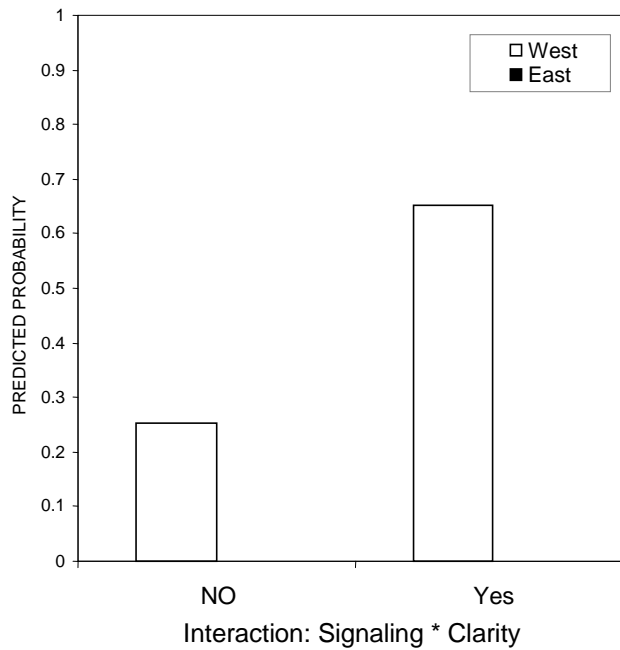
We moved on to mechanisms of vote choice and discussed what mobilisation does for SOE choices and how sincere and strategic mechanisms of vote choices are affecting the multi-level vote. All of this led to ten hypotheses, some focussing at the individual-level,

Graph 4  
 Probabilities of Vote Switching Due to Signaling and Distance to Midterm



Legend: Displayed are predicted probabilities of vote switching due to the interaction of the criticism of govt voters \* distance to FOE midterm. “s” = significant; “ns” = not.

Graph 5  
 Probabilities of Vote Switching Due to Signaling and Clarity



Legend: Displayed are predicted probabilities of vote switching due to the interaction of the criticism of govt voters \* clarity of national government responsibility.

some at micro-macro-interactions. What we found, in a nutshell, is this: SOE defection is better understood than differential abstention; and sincere explanations of the multi-level vote are more powerful than strategic ones.

All happens at once. There are some sincere abstainers who do not turn out in European Parliament elections because they are ‘opposing Europe’ (Szerbiak & Taggart 2008). But, as we have found in earlier work (Schmitt & Mannheimer 1990; Schmitt 2005; Schmitt & van der Eijk 2007, 2008), the effect of this motivation on multi-level voting behaviour is rather modest.<sup>11</sup> More numerous are those sincere abstainers who simply do not care about the election, those who abstain because of a lack of general (i.e. partisan) or SOE specific (i.e. campaign interest) political involvement.

Strategic abstentions also have a role to play, if only a minor one, and only in the ‘electorally consolidated’ West of the European Union.<sup>12</sup> Here we find that former government voters that are now dissatisfied tend to abstain significantly more often as a function of the FOE electoral cycle. Compared to the electoral cycle, the clarity of policy responsibility is a less important factor for strategic abstentions: they are more likely (i.e. numerous) in one-party government systems, but not terribly much.

SOE defection is again more ‘sincere’ than ‘strategic’. In contrast to the findings of Holbalt c.s. we find, in the West of the European Union, two different motivations of sincere switching at work: some voters abandon their FOE choice indeed because of arena-specific (‘European’) issues while others ‘come home’ in the SOE to their ideologically closest party (which they seem to have abandoned in the preceding FOE due to first-order arena pressures for a strategic choice). In the East, the left-right calculus appears to be less important for sincere switching while the European Union issue seems to be more important and is in a way replacing the Western left-right cues as a behavioural motivation.

The little there is about strategic defection manifests itself both in the West and the East of the European Union. Our findings suggest that signalling discontent with first-order government at the time of the SOE is an issue in multi-level voting, both in the West and the East of the European Union. As a modifier, the FOE cycle seems to pay a somewhat stronger

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<sup>11</sup> Having said this we note, however, that the more precise definition, compared to earlier work, of the phenomenon that we try to explain – SOE non-voting on the background of FOE participation rather than general SOE non-voting – tends to increase somewhat the SOE-specific (here: Euro-sceptical) component in the motivational syndrome of SOE abstentions.

<sup>12</sup> Note that our judgements - here and again further down - about the relative numerousness of strategic vs. sincere motivations for vote switching obviously assumes that the indicators we employ are not only valid but exhaustive. The latter is of course hard to prove and we therefore hasten to admit that our qualification rests upon somewhat heroic assumptions.

role in the East of the Union, while the clarity of responsibility for public policy is clearly more important in the West.

Where do we go from here? One important direction is certainly the strife for better data. Better data are panel data. What we really need in the research area of multi-level electoral behaviour are re-interviews of the same voters after successive FOEs and SOEs. Only such panel survey data can avoid the imperfections in the recall of party choice in previous elections that are caused by failing memory and the attraction of the opinion climate of the time of the SOE (when, as in our study, the poll is conducted). The problem with this is of course the cost of survey administration because panel surveys are considerably more expensive than 'simple' cross-section surveys are.

Another direction for further work is the inclusion of more and possibly more powerful context characteristics. What we tried to control for in the present article are basically three conditions of multi-level electoral behaviour: (a) the degree of consolidation of voter-party alignments (by separate analyses for Eastern and Western EU member countries); the timing of a SOE in the FOE electoral cycle (by way of micro-macro interactions); and the clarity of policy responsibility (micro-macro interactions again). Likely additional 'conditions' impacting on individual behaviour in multi-level electoral contexts are both of an ideological and an institutional character. We are thinking here of some measure of ideological polarisation and the details of the electoral system, more in particular the district size.

Last but not least: European Parliament elections are not the only kind of SOE that there are. In future work we intend to confront the hypotheses that we derived from second-order elections theory with empirical evidence from *Bundestags-* and *Landtagswahlen* in Germany, nation-wide elections and elections in the autonomous regions in Spain, presidential and parliamentary elections in Portugal and Poland, and so on. This will allow us to generalise with greater confidence on the behavioural mechanisms that render SOE results so different from those of FOEs.

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## 6. Appendix.

The purpose of this appendix is to describe the independent variables at the individual, party and system level, and document details on how they are computed.

Appendix Table  
Independent Variables: Descriptive Statistics

	No	Yes	Mean	Standard Deviation	Min.	Max.	N
<b><i>Individual and party variables</i></b>							
Party Identification (yes)	41	59	-	-	-	-	28861
Interest in Campaign (none at all)	27	73	-	-	-	-	25368
EU membership (bad)	58	42	-	-	-	-	25854
Voted for party in Nat Gov (yes)	53	47	-	-	-	-	20255
Evaluation of Nat Gov (bad)	43	57	-	-	-	-	21403
SOE party closer on LR ( $\Delta$ distances R-party)	-	-	.00	0.83	-6.64	5.42	10730
SOE party closer on Europe ( $\Delta$ distances R-party)	-	-	.03	0.64	-5.92	5.75	10221
SOE party smaller ( $\Delta$ % vote share in FOE)	-	-	2.71	11.06	-48.9	45.4	13326
<b><i>System level variables</i></b>							
Clarity	20	80	-	-	-	-	24
Distance SOE to FOE	-	-	.66	.30	0	1	24

Individual and party level variables.

*Party Identification*, *Interest in Campaign*, *EU membership*, *Voted to party in National Government*, and *Evaluation of National Government* are dichotomous variables. *Party Identification* is coded (1) when the respondent reports feeling close to a particular political party (from a country-specific list), and (0) in all other cases, including missing values or lack of response.<sup>13</sup> *Interest in Campaign* is coded (1) when a respondents indicates being “not at all” interested, and (0) in the cases of being “very”, “somewhat” and “a little” interested.<sup>14</sup> *EU membership* is coded (0) when respondents evaluate EU membership of their country as a

<sup>13</sup> The question wording goes as follows: “Do you consider yourself to be close to any particular party? If so, which party do you feel close to?”

<sup>14</sup> The question wording is: “Thinking back to just before the elections for the European Parliament were held, how interested were you in the campaign for those elections: very, somewhat, a little, or not at all?”



“good thing”, and (1) if EU membership is judged to be a “bad thing” or “neither”.<sup>15</sup> Whether a respondent voted for a FOE govt party is a composite indicator, computed from the previous FOE vote recall and contextual information on the parties forming government after that election. This indicator is coded (1) when respondents in the previous FOE voted for one of the parties that after this election formed the national government, (0) in the case of a national vote for another party, and (missing) in the case of a missing value in national vote recall. Finally, *Evaluation of National Government* is coded (1) when the interviewee “disapproves” of the government’s record to date, and (0) in the case he or she “approves”.<sup>16</sup>

*SOE party closer on LR* and *SOE party closer on EU* are quantitative continuous variables that express the relative distance of each elector regarding the party or parties he or she has chosen, respectively, in the recent SOE and the previous FOE. *SOE party closer on LR* is computed as the absolute distance on the left-right scale of each voter from his or her FOE party choice, minus the absolute distance on the left-right scale of each voter from his or her SOE choice.<sup>17</sup> The same logic applies to *SOE party closer on EU*.<sup>18</sup> Positive values of both indicators indicate that voters are closer to their SOE choice, either in terms of LR or EU. Values close to 0 indicate that voters are equidistant to their SOE and FOE party choice, and negative values indicate that voters are closer to their FOE than to their SOE choices.

*SOE party smaller* is also a quantitative continuous variable that compares the size (in terms of their FOE share of valid votes) of parties chosen at FOE and SOE. More in particular, *SOE party smaller* is computed as the difference of FOE party size minus SOE party size. Then, positive values indicate a choice for a bigger party at FOE; a value of 0 indicates that FOE and SOE parties are identical in size; and negative values indicate a choice for a bigger party at SOE.

System level variables.

*Distance SOE to FOE* is a quantitative continuous variable that reflects the distance in time from SOE to the previous or next FOE, expressed in a scale from “0” to “1”. Values near to “0” indicate that SOE was held close to a previous or next FOE. Values near to “1” signal that SOE elections were held close to the mid-term of the national (first order) electoral cycle.

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<sup>15</sup> The question wording goes as follows: “Generally speaking, do you think that [country’s] membership of the European Union is a good thing, a bad thing, or neither good nor bad?”

<sup>16</sup> The question wording goes as follows: “Let us now come back to [country]. Do you approve or disapprove the government’s record to date?”

<sup>17</sup> Voters’ left-right and EU positions are determined by their self placement in each case on a 10 point scale while party positions are determined by the arithmetic mean of respondents’ placements of national parties on the same scales. See footnotes 6 and 7 for the specifics of the question wording and national deviations from the core questionnaire.

Finally *Clarity* is a dichotomous variable that is coded (1) in the case of a single party government at national government and (0) in the case of a coalition government.