

Testing the Second-Order Election Model after Four European Elections

MICHAEL MARSH*

Reif and Schmitt argued that elections to the European Parliament should be understood as second-order national elections, and advanced several predictions about the results of such elections. Those concerning the impact of government status, party size, party character and the national election cycle on electoral performance are examined here using data on four sets of European Parliament elections. In addition, the consequences of European Parliament elections for the next national election are explored. The analysis demonstrates the validity of most of Reif and Schmitt's original propositions, and further refines their analysis of the relationship between European and subsequent national elections. However, all propositions hold much more effectively in countries where alternation in government is the norm, suggesting that the distinction between first-order and second-order elections may not be so clear cut as Reif and Schmitt imagined.

The dominant paradigm for understanding elections to the European Parliament is that they are 'second-order *national* elections'. This perspective was presented by Karlheinz Reif and Hermann Schmitt following the first European Parliament elections in 1979,¹ and further elaborated and tested by Reif in the context of the 1984 elections.² Each set of elections provided only a limited

*Department of Political Science, Trinity College Dublin. Earlier versions of this article were presented at the SISE Conference on 'Le Elezioni del Parlamento Europeo 1979–1994', Pavia, Italy, October 1994 and an ECPR Workshop on 'The Impact of Institutions on Electoral Behaviour', Bordeaux, April–May 1995, and I am grateful to participants for their advice and encouragement. Thanks are also due to Cees van der Eijk, Mark Franklin, Michael J. Harrison, Michael Laver, Karlheinz Reif, Hermann Schmitt, David Sanders and two anonymous referees for their comments. Faults are of course all my own work. Copies of the datasets used in the analysis described here are available from the author on request.

¹ Karlheinz Reif and Hermann Schmitt, 'Nine Second Order National Elections: A Conceptual Framework for the Analysis of European Election Results', *European Journal of Political Research*, 8 (1980), 3–44.

² Karlheinz Reif, 'National Electoral Cycles and European Elections', *Electoral Studies*, 3 (1984), 244–55; Karlheinz Reif, 'Ten Second-Order Elections', in Karlheinz Reif, *Ten European Elections* (Aldershot: Gower, 1985), pp. 1–36. For a recent reassessment of Reif and Schmitt's original article, see Pippa Norris, 'Second-Order Elections Revisited', *European Journal of Political Research*, 31 (1997), 109–14; and Karlheinz Reif, 'European Elections as Member State Second-Order Elections Revisited', *European Journal of Political Research*, 31 (1997), 115–24. Christopher J. Anderson and Daniel S. Ward have used the term 'barometer election' to describe second-order elections, and demonstrated the impact of the national economic and political situations on German *Länder* elections and British by-elections: 'Barometer Elections in Comparative Perspective', *Electoral Studies*, 15 (1997), 447–60. One criticism of this term is that it perhaps implies sincerity on the part of the voter, and ignores the tactical considerations outlined below and discussed in Cees van der

set of observations on which to test certain predictions of the model. After four directly elected European Parliaments, more data are available and this article uses them to re-examine predictions made on the basis of the second-order model. Additionally, it is argued that countries vary in the extent to which their national elections are really first-order elections, and the implication of this for modelling the differences between European Parliament and national legislative elections is examined.

THE SECOND-ORDER ELECTION MODEL

Reif and Schmitt assert that the national arena is the most important one in European nation-states, and hence elections for national public office are normally the most salient in the eyes of parties and the public. These are thus 'first-order' elections. Other elections, such as those for local and state offices are less important. They are 'second-order' elections. In most parliamentary systems, general elections for parliament are first-order elections and those for local government bodies are second-order elections, as are elections to choose a non-executive head of state. So too are European Parliament elections. The most important distinction between the two types is that in second-order elections 'there is less at stake as compared to first-order elections'.³ Yet these second-order elections are characterized by the same party system and are fought by the same parties as first-order elections, something that makes the relationship between first- and second-order elections particularly interesting.

Reif and Schmitt go on to assert that second-order elections cannot be separated from first-order elections conducted in the same political system. Concerns which are appropriate to the first-order arena will affect behaviour in second-order elections, even though second-order elections are ostensibly about something quite different. Of particular importance is 'the political situation of the first-order arena at the moment when the second-order election is being held'.⁴

Reif and Schmitt offer three broad propositions, based on these arguments, to characterize regular differences between aggregate behaviour in European elections and previous (and subsequent) national elections:

Turnout will be lower in European Parliament elections than in national elections.

National government parties will suffer losses in European Parliament elections.

(Footnote continued)

Eijk, Mark Franklin *et al.*, *Choosing Europe? The European Electorate and National Politics in the Face of Union* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995).

³ Reif, 'Ten Second-Order Elections', p. 8.

⁴ Reif, 'Ten Second-Order Elections', p. 8.

Larger parties will do worse and smaller parties will do better in European Parliament elections.

What individual motivations underlie these electoral changes? Reif and Schmitt made no attempt to expound any complete model of individual electoral choice, but they did provide some elements which can be used to provide an explanation of aggregate patterns in terms of individual change. There are several types of change to consider. The first is that from voting to not voting. Reif and Schmitt argued that one of the crucial features of second-order national elections is that less is at stake in them. To the extent that this view is shared by the main actors in the political process – the voters, the parties and the mass media – this would serve generally to reduce the expected benefits and increase the expected costs of voting for the individual elector and we would expect fewer people to turn out.

The second change is one of party choice. Here there are two contextual factors to which Reif and Schmitt give prominence: the fact that the election does not choose a government, and the timing of the European election within each national election cycle. Each may encourage the elector to shift between casting a ‘sincere’ and an ‘insincere’ vote, and in consequence vote for a different party. The fact that European parliamentary elections, unlike national ones, involve the selection of a representative rather than a government frees voters from the need to consider such secondary implications of their votes. Voters who opt for a party in a national election because it can contribute to the formation of a government, but who prefer another party (whether on grounds of ideology, group identity or personality), may be said to cast an insincere vote. Such voters may cast a sincere vote for the party they like best in a European Parliament election. To the extent that larger parties might be expected to reap the benefits of such insincere voting in national elections, such parties would be expected to lose support in European elections with the benefits going to small, relatively insignificant parties. Reif and Schmitt describe this process of change as voters choosing to vote with their hearts rather than their heads, or ‘expressive’ voting.⁵

The circumstances of a European election might also see a voter moving in the opposite direction, from a sincere choice (in the previous national election) to an insincere one. This would occur when a voter changed party in order to send a message to their party expressing (temporary) dissatisfaction with it. (If the dissatisfaction was not temporary, the new choice would not be insincere.) Oppenhuis *et al.* and Heath refer to this type of voting change as ‘instrumental’.⁶

⁵ See also Anthony Heath, Iain McLean and Bridget Taylor, ‘How Much Is at Stake? Electoral Behaviour in Second-Order Elections’ (paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, San Francisco, 1996).

⁶ Erik Oppenhuis, Cees van der Eijk and Mark Franklin, ‘The Party Context: Outcomes’, in van der Eijk, Franklin *et al.*, *Choosing Europe?* pp. 303–29; Heath *et al.*, ‘How Much Is at Stake?’

Reif and Schmitt argued that governing parties would be particularly vulnerable to such decisions. To the extent that governments normally tend to disappoint their supporters, governments would suffer losses. Drawing on work suggesting that government popularity tended to reach its lowest point around mid-term, they suggested that losses might be greatest around this point. Hence the timing of the European election within the national election cycle would be an important factor in the performance of governing parties. Voters might also express their discontent simply by deciding not to vote.

There are of course other patterns of change: that from non-voting to voting; from insincere voting for one party to insincere voting for another party; and from sincere voting for one party to sincere voting for another. The first two of these seem unimportant in the context of the aggregate trends predicted under Reif and Schmitt's model. One seems likely to be very small⁷ – given the salience argument – and the other unlikely to lead to any distinct pattern. The last is more interesting and can be explained in two ways, only one of which derives from the second-order model. The first is that voters change their sincere preferences in terms of the national political system. If this happens it would be reflected in a European election only to the extent that national level preferences are important. The other source of such change is that voters actually have different sincere preferences in the two elections – which they might if the two were fought on different issues and with different personnel. In that case, however, the European election would be less clearly a second-order national election.

Reif and Schmitt's propositions were tested with aggregate data on the 1979⁸ and the 1984 elections.⁹ There has been little attempt to re-examine them using aggregate data on later European Parliament elections¹⁰ although van der Eijk and Franklin have used individual data on European Parliament elections in 1989 and 1994 to provide an extensive reassessment of the second-order model.¹¹ This article provides such a reassessment using aggregate data, the object of Reif and Schmitt's initial paper. Leaving aside the question of turnout, which has been dealt with elsewhere,¹² this study uses European Parliament

⁷ Jean Blondel, Richard Sinnott and Palle Svensson, 'Representation and Voter Participation', *European Journal of Political Research*, 32 (1997), 243–72.

⁸ Reif and Schmitt, 'Nine Second Order National Elections'.

⁹ Reif, 'National Electoral Cycles and European Elections'; Reif, 'Ten Second-Order Elections'.

¹⁰ Exceptions are: John Curtice, 'The 1989 European Election: Protest or Green Tide?' *Electoral Studies*, 8 (1989), 217–30; Oskar Niedermayer, 'Turnout in the European Elections', *Electoral Studies*, 9 (1990), 45–50; and Mark Franklin, Cees van der Eijk and Erik Oppenheim, 'The Institutional Context: Turnout' in van der Eijk and Franklin, *Choosing Europe?* pp. 306–31, but only the turnout studies used data from more than one election.

¹¹ Van der Eijk and Franklin, *Choosing Europe?* See also Cees van der Eijk, Mark Franklin and Michael Marsh, 'What Voters Tell Us about Europe-Wide Elections; What Europe-Wide Elections Tell Us about Voters', *Electoral Studies*, 15 (1996), 149–66.

¹² Franklin, van der Eijk and Oppenheim, 'The Institutional Context'.

elections between 1979 and 1994 to re-examine Reif and Schmitt's propositions about which parties win and lose votes.¹³ It starts by looking at the performance of governments and then examines the performance of individual parties. The final section examines the significance of European elections for national politics by looking at the impact of the European Parliament election performances on the subsequent national election.

Data for the analysis that follows are aggregate national results, taken from standard sources.¹⁴ Comparison of national and European election results at the level of parties is made difficult by the rise of new parties, the disappearance of old ones and various temporary and permanent amalgamations. The primary rule followed here was to make the parties fighting European elections and winning at least 1 per cent of the vote the unit of analysis. However, parties which *only* fought European elections were grouped with 'Others', as were parties with less than 1 per cent of the vote. Exceptions were made, when possible, for parties which may have won more than 1 per cent at adjacent national elections. When parties changed over the course of time (from previous national to subsequent national elections), I have tried to maintain comparability by grouping parties who later allied, or formed a single party. The results of all this are that the data used probably slightly understate the degree of electoral change. In addition, the absence of data, and particularly comparable national and European data, on the smallest parties means these are effectively excluded from the analysis – and all groups of 'Others' were excluded from the calculations which follow.¹⁵

¹³ A preliminary look at some of the analysis can be found in Michael Marsh and Mark Franklin, 'Understanding European Elections 1979–1994', in van der Eijk and Franklin, *Choosing Europe?* pp. 23–45, but what follows is considerably more extensive in scope and draws on a broader data set of post-1994 general elections.

¹⁴ National election data is from Thomas T. Mackie and Richard Rose, *The International Almanac of Electoral History*, 3rd edn (London: Macmillan, 1990), updated by results in the Political Data issues of the *European Journal of Political Research* since then. European election data is from the several collections by Mackie: Thomas T. Mackie and F. W. S. Craig, *Europe Votes 1* (Aldershot: Gower, 1980); Thomas T. Mackie and F. W. S. Craig, *Europe Votes 2* (Aldershot: Gower, 1985); Thomas T. Mackie, *Europe Votes 3* (Aldershot: Gower, 1991). Data for 1994 was obtained from the European Parliament. Data on governments come from Jan Woldendorp, Hans Keman and Ian Budge, eds., 'Political Data 1945–90', *European Journal of Political Research*, 24 (1993), 1–20. Only those countries which participated in the 1994 European elections above have been included. Hence there is no data here on recent Finnish, Austrian and Swedish elections to the European Parliament.

¹⁵ In fact, the 'Others' category of parties did particularly well in European elections. Much of this can be accounted for by the Danish experience, where the party system actually undergoes a significant change for European elections.

GOVERNMENTS

One of the most widely accepted features of European Parliament elections is that they manifest a swing against governments. Reif and Schmitt suggested three major reasons for this:

The loss of discontented supporters who might choose to abstain or support other parties to protest against the government.

The loss of discontented supporters who now prefer some other party and vote for it.

The loss of tactical supporters who vote for government parties only in national elections.

Whilst the last of these groups might be expected to defect whenever a European parliamentary election was held, the other two groups could be expected to vary in size over the national election cycle. Citing work by Tufte and by Miller and Mackie¹⁶ that suggested the existence of popularity cycles for governments, Reif and Schmitt suggested government losses in European elections would reflect a typical cycle of popularity which would be lowest at mid-term. Defining CYCLE as the proportion of the national election cycle which had elapsed when the European election was held, Reif suggested that a quadratic function of the CYCLE term (CYCLE²) provided a good fit to the data, but also suggested that a cubic function (CYCLE³) performed well and captured the post-election honeymoon period of governments.¹⁷ Both quadratic and cubic forms may be a little too generous to governments, which, as Paldam has noted,¹⁸ tend to suffer the costs of governing by losing votes at subsequent elections. A simple CYCLE term would capture the possibility that discontent trended downwards over the period of office.

What is not clear is why discontent manifested against governments should take a cyclical form. Mueller's argument that governments tend to upset their particular coalition of minorities¹⁹ may explain the overall costs of governing, but what explains the 'backswing'? Alt suggested that its roots lie in a political business cycle,²⁰ although empirical support for this concept has been at best

¹⁶ Edward R. Tufte, 'Determinants of Outcomes of Midterm Congressional Elections', *American Political Science Review*, 69 (1975), 812–26; William Miller and Myles Mackie, 'The Electoral Cycle and the Asymmetry of Government and Opposition Popularity', *Political Studies*, 21 (1973), 263–79.

¹⁷ Reif, 'National Electoral Cycles and European Elections', pp. 247–50.

¹⁸ Martin Paldam, 'The Distribution of Electoral Results and the Two Explanations of the Costs of Ruling', *European Journal of Political Economy*, 2 (1986), 5–24.

¹⁹ J. E. Mueller, 'Presidential Popularity from Truman to Johnson', *American Political Science Review*, 64 (1970), 18–34.

²⁰ James Alt, *The Politics of Economic Decline* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

patchy.²¹ Reif himself suggested that manifestations of discontent are muted towards the end of the cycle because voters make a more realistic assessment of the alternatives to the present government. Oppenhuis *et al.* proposed a different model under which voters had more incentive to defect tactically as the previous election receded and the next one approached because the European Parliament election would loom larger in the mind of politicians as a pointer to the next national election.²² This too would be captured by the untransformed CYCLE term.

Research on the economic origins of discontent with governments, as manifested in election results and opinion poll series, has brought the recognition that not all governments are equally likely to be held responsible and punished for perceived inadequacies.²³ Critical to the idea of a second-order election is the fact that such elections are not about the choice of national government. This is assumed to be uppermost in voters' minds in a general election, and hence, when freed from this, as an immediate consequence a voter's behaviour takes a different course. Reif has suggested that whether or not national party systems were bi-polar would have implications for the performance of government parties at European elections.²⁴ It is widely recognized that in several countries of Europe the relationship between elections and government formation is extremely opaque. Voters in the Netherlands, for example, will seldom know what the consequence of any particular result is for government formation. Moreover, with a large centre party traditionally a fixture in government, any change in coalition partner is likely to have only a marginal impact on policy. By contrast, in Britain or Germany the pattern is one of at least potential alternation in power driven by election results. This being so, it seems arguable that the difference between national and European elections will be of a different order in countries where elections are about government from those where they are more expressions of political identity.

There is one further variable to be considered: the passage of time across all countries. There have now been four sets of European Parliament elections, with rather more positive expectations about the significance of such elections surrounding those in 1979 than those of 1994. Turnout has certainly declined across the four elections. Possibly people have increasingly come to assume that these elections do not matter. If this is so, we might expect second-order effects to be heightened and so should include a variable denoting the passage of 'European' time in any specification.

²¹ Michael S. Lewis-Beck, *Economics and Elections: The Major Western Democracies* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988), chap. 9.

²² Oppenhuis *et al.*, 'The Party Context', pp. 301–4.

²³ Lewis-Beck, *Economics and Elections*; G. B. Powell and G. D. Whitten, 'A Cross-National Analysis of Economic Voting: Taking Account of Political Context', *American Journal of Political Science*, 37 (1993), 391–414; P. Nannestad and Martin Paldam, 'The vp Function: A Survey of the Literature on Vote and Popularity Functions after 25 Years', *Public Choice*, 79 (1994), 214–45; Christopher Anderson, *Blaming the Government: Citizens and the Economy in Five European Democracies* (London: M. E. Sharpe, 1994).

²⁴ Reif, 'Ten Second-Order National Elections', p. 13.

There are several problems to be resolved before proceeding to the analysis of the data. One is the treatment of the six coincident national elections. Reif leaves them out altogether and I have followed him.²⁵ A second is defining the timing of the European Parliament election in national terms. This is done by calculating the proportion of the interval between adjoining national elections which had elapsed when the European parliamentary election took place.²⁶ A third problem is classifying alternation. Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Italy (until 1994) were coded as instances of non-alternation on the basis that changes in the composition of government and its policy outlook have generally been minimal and of a kind hard to predict from the actual pattern of gains and losses in elections, or from any likely pattern. Denmark could also be said to experience difficulties in coalition building, but the existence of a significant degree of genuine alternation, and the policy differences between governments containing Social Democrats and those containing Conservatives separates the Danish experience from that elsewhere.²⁷

These considerations of national timing, alternation and different European parliaments are included in Model 1:

$$\text{GOVCHANGE} = a + b_1 \text{CYCLE} + b_2 \text{CYCLE}^2 + b_3 \text{CYCLE}^3 + b_4 \text{EP} \quad (1)$$

where GOVCHANGE is the change in the percentage of the vote won by government parties between a European election and the previous national election, CYCLE denotes the proportion of the interval between adjoining national elections which had elapsed when the European Parliament election took place, and EP is a number from 1 to 4 denoting the number of the directly elected European Parliament.

This model was estimated using ordinary least squares (OLS) regression for all countries but none of the cycle terms proved significant at even the 0.10 level.²⁸ Dropping the weakest term, CYCLE³ and re-estimating the model proved

²⁵ When concurrent elections are included and the CYCLE³ term dropped the results from a model comparing the European result to that at the *previous* general election are similar to those in Table 1 (standard errors are shown in brackets; $R^2 = 0.35$):

$$\text{GOVCHANGE} = 9.28 - 36.32 \text{CYCLE} + 29.89 \text{CYCLE}^2 - 2.67 \text{EP}$$

(3.53) (12.97) (10.95) (0.85)

²⁶ The semi-presidential nature of the system in France raises some difficulties for applying the second-order model. The decision was made to identify governments with cabinets, and national elections with legislative elections, effectively treating France as a normal parliamentary system. Whilst this simplification ignores much of the dynamics of party competition there is no evidence in the residuals from the analyses below that France is (consequently) a particularly deviant case.

²⁷ Michael Gallagher, Michael Laver and Peter Mair, *Representative Government in Modern Europe* (London: McGraw-Hill, 1995).

²⁸ Reif's model did not predict government loss as such but government loss adjusted for the decline that would have been predicted on the basis of a linear decline from the previous to the next national election. In this way Reif tried to remove what I have called the decline in 'sincere' support for the government from the tactical shifts and loss of 'insincere' voters. Results from this formulation are similar to those shown in Table 1 except that the EP variable is weaker. I have chosen to model government loss directly rather than make the assumption of linear changes in government support.

TABLE 1 *Impact of the National Election Cycle on Support for Combined Government Parties in Alternation and Non-Alternation Countries*

	All	All	Alternation	Non-Alternation
Constant	7.33** (3.19)	8.04** (3.39)	11.68** (4.39)	1.69 (1.92)
EP	-2.49*** (0.84)	-2.43*** (0.85)	-2.47** (0.94)	-2.04** (0.80)
CYCLE	-21.78** (8.51)	-31.1** (13.18)	-50.69*** (15.89)	6.46 (8.61)
CYCLE ²		22.89 (12.51)	39.03** (18.84)	-7.98 (8.40)
CYCLE ³	15.18* (8.48)			
R ²	0.39	0.39	0.49	0.68
F ratio	7.05***	7.11***	7.21**	4.24**
SEE	5.54	5.25	5.47	1.95
N	37	37	27	10

* $p \leq 0.10$ ** $p \leq 0.05$ *** $p \leq 0.01$

Notes: A case is combined government parties in a European Parliament election. Cell entries in parentheses are standard errors.

to be much more satisfactory but dropping CYCLE² and re-estimating proved almost as good (the standard error of estimation (SEE) is marginally bigger and the *F* ratio marginally smaller) with both formulations providing an *R*² of 0.39, and all terms are significant at the 0.10 level. (If allowance is made for the biggest outlier – Denmark, 1994 – the variance explained rises to 49 per cent and all terms are significant at the 0.02 level.) Table 1 shows these results plus those from separate regressions for alternation and non-alternation countries using the simpler quadratic function.

The EP coefficient is the strongest, showing that government support drops on average by around 2.5 per cent with each successive parliament. It is unlikely that this is due to a general decline in the popularity of governments since there is no similar decline in the support given to incumbent parties at general elections in this period. The simple correlation between European Parliament number and average losses suffered by governments from the previous general election is -0.49 for European elections and only -0.15 at general elections.

The impact of the election cycle is also considerable, as evidenced by the various cycle terms. The second-order polynomial model described a pattern of government performance worsening through the cycle before eventually levelling out and improving slightly at the end of the cycle. For instance, at the

midpoint of the cycle, $CYCLE$ (value at 0.5) indicates a loss which is -15.55 ($-31.1 \cdot 0.5$) greater than at the start of the election cycle, whilst the $CYCLE^2$ term (value at 0.25) indicates a gain of 5.72, giving a net loss of -9.82 . This worsens slightly to -10.55 over the next two tenths of the cycle only to improve to -8.21 at the end.

Contrasting alternation and non-alternation countries, the cyclical model proves rather more useful in the case of the former, as was expected. R^2 is 0.49 and all terms are significant at the 0.05 level. Amongst non-alternation countries neither cycle term is remotely close to conventional levels of significance, and even if we use only one or other of them the position is not much improved. Only if we employ a single cycle variable and leave out the EP variable does either time coefficient come even within the 0.10 level of significance. Otherwise only the EP coefficient is strong, indicating government losses increasing by 2 per cent at each set of European Parliament elections. Whilst both groups of countries have small numbers of cases, there does seem to be a striking difference between them in terms of the impact of the national cycle on government election performance.

One limitation of this analysis is a failure to differentiate losses to governments that stem from the government popularity cycle from those that stem from party size, since large parties are also expected to perform relatively badly in second-order elections. John Curtice makes this point to qualify his findings that all governments lost votes in 1989, arguing that 'if the European elections were bad news for governments, they were rarely good news for oppositions either,' when judged on the performance of the principal opposition parties.²⁹

PARTIES

When the analysis is directed at individual parties rather than governments there are three main empirical patterns to examine:

The shift in support from big to small parties.

The shift in support from government to non-government parties.

The shift in support from more central to more extreme parties.

There are obvious inter-relationships between these three possible tendencies – government parties tend to be larger and more central for instance – so there is a need for multivariate analysis.

Size: Reif suggested a shift in support from big to small parties but did not specify any particular model of this movement. It could simply be a linear function, or something more complex. Bearing in mind our discussion of why some parties lose votes through the defection of insincere supporters, a cubic

²⁹ Curtice, 'The 1989 European Election', p. 225.

function has some appeal. This allows for a redistribution of votes from larger to smaller parties and stability for intermediate sized parties, on the assumption that only the much larger parties attract many tactical, insincere voters. This allows big parties to lose votes and smaller parties to win them without specifying what is big and what is small. This gives model 2:

$$\text{EPTYCHANGE} = a + b_1 \text{PGE} + b_2 \text{PGE}^3 \quad (2)$$

where PGE is the percentage vote for the party at the previous general election.

Government: the tendency of governments to lose votes might be expected to have an impact on the votes for individual parties in the government. I have modelled this with a new term TIME which reflects the non-linear relationship shown in Table 1, plus dummy variables for government and opposition parties in case the magnitude of the effect is different for the two groups.

$$\text{EPTYCHANGE} = a + b_1 \text{PGE} + b_2 \text{PGE}^3 + b_3 \text{TIME}^* \text{G} + b_4 \text{TIME}^* \text{OP} \quad (3)$$

where G is a dummy variable which takes the value 1 when the party is in government and OP is a dummy variable which takes the value 1 when the party is in opposition, TIME is a measure which increases in linear fashion from 0 to 1 up to the midpoint of the cycle and remains at 1 thereafter.³⁰

Model 2 can be estimated by OLS.³¹ If Reif and Schmitt are right, the coefficients measuring the impact of party support at the previous general election will be significant and negative. If the cubic form is also negative and significant it suggests that, while big parties lose and small parties gain, the relationship between party size and losses is other than linear. Columns 1 and 3 of Table 2 show the results. It is evident that the cubic term fits better in the group of countries with alternation; it is at least significant at the 0.10 level, and both linear and cubic terms have the expected sign. In contrast, neither term is at all significant in non-alternation countries. What is more important here is that the respective R^2 terms are 0.31 and 0.03. This supports the proposition that the relationship between party size and change exists only in countries which expect to experience alternation in government.³² Predicted vote changes on the

³⁰ This is a somewhat crude representation of the relationship described in Table 1. However, it captures the essence of that pattern and has the added advantage that it allows us to model the relationship with one variable rather than two, and requires only two interactive terms in Model 3 rather than four.

³¹ Because of significant heteroscedasticity in the residuals it was inadvisable to use the ordinary calculation for standard errors. Instead, robust standard errors were computed by STATA, using the procedure outlined in H. White, 'A Heteroscedasticity-Consistent Covariance Matrix Estimator and a Direct Test of Heteroscedasticity', *Econometrica*, 48 (1980), 817–38. These tend to be larger than the OLS standard errors.

³² The addition of a quadratic term to Model 2 makes a clear improvement both to the explained variance and to the significance of all coefficients in the case of non-alternation countries and to the significance of coefficients in the remainder. Whilst there is no reason to expect this pattern it does provide a much better fit for non-alternation countries. The pattern is one in which the middle-sized parties – around 30 per cent – lose less than parties both smaller and larger, though why that should be so is not obvious.

basis of this analysis show that it is very small parties (up to about 4 per cent) who tend to gain in European Parliament elections. Parties winning between 4 per cent and about 30 per cent in the previous national election may lose a small number of votes, but there is little difference between national size and European vote amongst these parties. However, the larger parties, those over 30 per cent, lose votes with the drop becoming much steeper for the very large parties. This provides more definite information about the relationship between party size and European election fortunes. In particular, it indicates how small are the 'small' parties that tend to gain votes, and how big are the 'big' parties that tend to suffer significant losses. The thresholds are different from those assumed, for instance, by Curtice,³³ who followed Reif³⁴ and identified small parties as those with less than 15 per cent of the vote. Arguably the results here demonstrate not a shift from large to small parties but rather a shift from very large to very small ones.

Columns 2 and 4 show the results from Equation 3, which includes terms allowing for different effects at different points of the electoral cycle and for government and opposition. It is expected, at least for countries where alternation is the norm, that the interactive term involving Government and Time will be negative and that involving Opposition and Time will be positive, indicating that government parties lose more support as the election cycle unwinds (up to the midpoint) and opposition parties gain correspondingly. While both signs are as expected, only the term involving governing parties is significant and then only for alternation countries, where R^2 is increased from 0.31 to 0.37. The estimate is that, in alternation countries, government parties win 2.8 per cent fewer votes at mid-term and beyond than at the beginning of the election cycle. Dropping the least significant term (last national election vote) considerably strengthens the cubic term and makes it significant at the 0.001 level but makes relatively little difference to this or other estimates.

Reif also suggested that certain types of parties would gain seats, notably more extreme parties.³⁵ Extremism is hard to define. Looking at the residuals from the analysis in column 3 of Table 2 gives little evidence of any such pattern of success for any party type, including extreme left or extreme right. Green parties did a little better when all other factors are taken into account but significance was again only close to the 0.05 level, not above it. Discussing the widespread increase in support for Green parties in 1989, Curtice asked how much of this was a 'small party' effect and how much a Green tide, and demonstrated that most of the swing to small parties was to Green ones.³⁶ The answer here, based on four elections, seems to be that there is only a modest case that Greens have won consistently more support at European elections than might be expected for small parties generally, at least in countries with alternation.

³³ Curtice, 'The 1989 European Election', p. 224.

³⁴ Reif, 'National Electoral Cycles and European Elections', p. 249.

³⁵ Reif also suggested new parties could do well. If we define a new party as one which did not contest the previous election we have only four cases, too few for analysis, although these do average a European vote of over 2 per cent.

³⁶ Curtice, 'The 1989 European Election', p. 227.

TABLE 2 *Predicting Change in a Party Vote at European Parliament Elections Compared with Previous General Elections for Alternation and for Non-Alternation Countries*

	Alternation		Non-Alternation	
	Equation (2)	Equation (3)	Equation (2)	Equation (3)
Constant	1.23*** (0.34)	0.60 (0.74)	0.67 (0.36)	0.60 (0.57)
Last general election	-0.084 (0.063)	-0.06 (0.06)	-0.07 (0.05)	-0.04 (0.06)
Last general election ²	-0.000063* (0.000033)	-0.000052* (0.000032)	-0.000047 (0.000041)	0.000029 (0.000056)
Government × time		-2.80* (1.50)		-0.71 (1.01)
Opposition × time		1.15 (0.95)		0.02 (0.60)
R ²	0.31	0.37	0.03	0.04
F ratio	46.0***	28.7***	1.42	1.03
SEE	4.34	4.17	2.04	2.05
N	203	203	104	104

* $p \leq 0.10$ ** $p \leq 0.05$ *** $p \leq 0.01$ **** $p \leq 0.001$ (two-tailed test).

Notes: A case is a party in a European Parliament election. Cell entries in parentheses are White's heteroscedasticity-consistent standard errors.

THE NEXT NATIONAL ELECTION

General elections are judged normally by their consequences for government formation, but European Parliament elections do not give rise to a government, even indirectly. Reif suggests mischievously that European Parliament elections are in danger of becoming 'third-order elections' with barely more relevance than a public opinion poll.³⁷ What then, if any, are their consequences? Are they so irrelevant? They may not say much about the European Union (EU), but do they say anything about national politics? The idea that European Parliament elections are second-order *national* elections, and therefore fought on national issues but lacking national salience, suggests no particular implications for the domestic impact of such elections. Observers of European elections have pointed to significant national consequences of European elections.³⁸ This is not the place to review such particularistic claims, but we can examine the link between the gains and losses parties make in European elections (relative to previous national elections) and their performance at the next national election.

³⁷ Reif, 'National Electoral Cycles and European Elections', p. 253.

³⁸ See the individual country chapters in van der Eijk and Franklin, *Choosing Europe?*

How should the relationship between a European election and the next national election be best modelled and explained? Consider first a simple model in which the gains or losses made by a party between adjacent national elections is a linear function of the gains or losses in the intervening European elections:

$$\text{NPTYCHANGE} = a + b \text{ EPTYCHANGE} \quad (4)$$

where NPTYCHANGE is the difference between a party's support in adjacent national elections.

Given earlier arguments, that an insincere component in party support in national elections may not exist in European Parliament elections, we should expect those parties losing votes in a European election to retrieve at least some of them in the next national election. Also, to the extent that adverse European election results derived from tactical voting against the party by disaffected supporters, that support should return. Hence the coefficient for EPTYCHANGE should be less than 1. However, there is no reason to suppose that any changes of loyalties by sincere voters could be retrieved, so we would expect the coefficient to be greater than 0. To the extent that such a shift of voters is ongoing, and continued after the European election, a different model suggests itself:

$$\text{NPTYCHANGE} = a + b \text{ TREND} \quad (5)$$

where TREND indicates the linear continuation of the trend indicated in the swing at the European election for the remainder of the inter (national) election period.

Such a linear projection would be inappropriate if we allowed for the fact that parties might take action in the event of poor European election performances intended to correct the downward slide in its fortunes. If we assume the likelihood of such corrective action will be a function of the degree of European election losses, this could be modelled by a cubic function, which would allow parties which suffered very heavy losses to make up a higher proportion of them in a national election than a party which suffered smaller losses. Hence:

$$\text{NPTYCHANGE} = a + b_1 \text{ EPTYSWING}^3 \quad (6)$$

All of these elements can be combined in a general model (7):

$$\text{NPTYSWING} = a + b_1 \text{ EPTYCHANGE} + b_2 \text{ EPTYCHANGE}^3 + b_3 \text{ TREND} \quad (7)$$

Table 3 shows OLS estimates³⁹ for Models 4 and 7 for groups of countries with and without alternation.⁴⁰ For countries with alternation the simple Model 4 including only EPTYCHANGE gives an R^2 of 0.29 which may be compared with 0.17 for non-alternation countries. Coefficients for EPTYCHANGE are 0.40 and 0.51 respectively. European election results appear to provide a better guide to the next national election result in countries with alternation, but it is clear that

³⁹ Again, because of heteroscedasticity, White's heteroscedasticity-consistent standard errors are used. See fn. 31.

⁴⁰ Estimations of Models 5 and 6 add nothing that could not be expected from the results in Table 3 and thus have not been shown.

TABLE 3 *Predicting Change in a Party's Vote at the Subsequent General Election Using Change at European Parliament Elections: Alternation and Non-Alternation Countries*

	Alternation		Non-Alternation	
	Model (4)	Model (7)	Model (4)	Model (7)
Constant	0.16 (0.22)	0.06 (0.22)	- 0.16 (0.22)	- 0.16 (0.22)
EPTYCHANGE	0.40**** (0.07)	0.53**** (0.11)	0.52**** (0.15)	0.51** (0.24)
TREND		- 0.003 (0.018)		0.01 (0.01)
EPTYCHANGE ³		- 0.00069** (0.00034)		- 0.0033 (0.0159)
R ²	0.29	0.32	0.17	0.17
F ratio	30.3****	13.1****	12.3****	4.1***
SEE	3.20	3.19	2.18	2.19
N	190	190	96	96

* $p \leq 0.10$ ** $p \leq 0.05$ *** $p \leq 0.01$ **** $p \leq 0.001$ (two-tailed test).

Notes: A case is a party in a European Parliament election. Cell entries in parentheses are White's heteroscedasticity-consistent standard errors.

the subsequent changes are more muted versions of European swings than are those in countries without alternation, although in both sets of countries changes between national elections are much smaller than those manifested at European parliamentary elections.

The weakness of the TREND term in Model 7 shows it is not useful to view European election results as marking a point in an ongoing process of linear improvement or decline in a party's fortunes. Adding the EPTYCHANGE³ term also makes little difference to the explained variance or the SEE in either set of countries, though its coefficient is significant at the 0.05 level in those with alternation, hinting at a tendency for extra support to swing back to those parties which do particularly poorly in the European election. However, the effect is relatively slight compared with that of the simple linear term. A feature of the cubic term's coefficient worth noting is that its sign is negative, indicating a corrective process. A positive sign would have indicated that a particularly poor European performance presaged a national result that was even worse – something suggested by Reif.⁴¹ It is clear that this is not the case.⁴²

⁴¹ Reif, 'Ten Second-Order National Elections', p. 13; Reif, 'National Electoral Cycles and European Elections', p. 247.

⁴² A further analysis was conducted to see if predictions of the subsequent national election could be improved if some part of the European election results were to be 'discounted' by making alliances for the timing of the European election in the national election cycle. However, terms constructed

CONCLUSIONS

This article has used the experience of four sets of European elections to assess a number of descriptive propositions made by Reif and Schmitt after the 1979 elections. The results of the analysis conducted here suggest the following:

1. European Parliament elections have manifested a pattern of anti-government swing. There are election cycle effects on government support manifested at European Parliament elections. However, while government losses are greatest around mid-term, thereafter they tend to level off rather than diminish as the cycle continues. Moreover, these losses have increased with each set of European Parliament elections in a manner not explicable in terms of increasing government losses in general elections.
2. European Parliament elections have seen a shift of votes from bigger to smaller parties. Gains are most obvious amongst the very small parties (less than 4 per cent) and the losses most obvious amongst the larger parties – those over 30 per cent. Moreover, some degree of differential performance by government and opposition parties according to the stage of the national election cycle at which the European elections take place can be seen. However, there are no strong patterns of increased support for certain types of parties that can be seen at all elections.
3. European Parliament elections are pointers to subsequent general elections. The swings that manifest themselves at the former are not unconnected to those which appear at subsequent national elections although changes are generally more pronounced in European elections.
4. In general these results are much more characteristic of countries where there are norms of government alternation. It is arguable that national elections in such countries are more obviously about the formation of governments and so more closely resemble the ideal first-order election. Hence, second-order elections, such as those for the European Parliament, differ from them in more predictable ways. Elsewhere, the difference between general and European elections is less clear-cut: there are softer anti-government swings, there is less consistently a big to small party swing, and European election results are closer approximations of subsequent national results.

All this underlines the essential insight of the second-order election model, which is that European Parliament elections take place within a wider political context and that their results can be understood in such terms. Models based on the propositions of the second-order election theory do explain significant amounts of variance in the performance of parties and government in European Parliament elections. Such models perform more effectively in countries where

(F-note continued)

along the lines of those in Model 3 were not at all significant when added to Models 4 or 7. This suggests that while the national election cycle may affect the result of the European election, the result once known acquires a political significance of its own.

the first-order elections generally have a direct and significant impact on government formation, and where, in consequence, differences in the relative importance of general elections and European elections are greater.⁴³ This is not of course to say that the EU is entirely irrelevant for the results of European elections. Arguably the models here are not fully specified, and various EU related factors might add to the overall explanation, or even render some results weaker than they appear here. However, the inclusion of a variable denoting degree of national support for the EU (not reported) did not prove significant when added to any of the analyses in Table 1. If anti-government swings are related to something European they are no more pronounced in more pro-European than anti-European countries.

Two additional points emerging from this analysis should also be emphasized. First, in terms of incumbent party losses, European elections are becoming increasingly serious for governments. If the trend were to continue there would at some point be a serious absence of MEPS from governing parties. Secondly, European parliamentary election results have some independent effect on subsequent national politics. The parties themselves generally work to make European elections second-order national elections.⁴⁴ In doing so, they seek to win national advantage. However, it is clear that European elections are in consequence having a considerable and perhaps increasing impact on national politics, beyond what was envisaged in describing them as merely second-order national elections.

⁴³ In a variation on this theme, Heath *et al.*, 'How Much is at Stake?' contrasted voter behaviour at different types of second-order election in Britain and suggested differences owed much to what was at stake.

⁴⁴ Van der Eijk and Franklin, *Choosing Europe?*; and Rudy Andeweg, 'The Reshaping of National Party Systems', in Jack Hayward, ed., *The Crisis of Representation in Europe* (London: Frank Cass, 1995), pp. 58–78.