

European Parliamentary Elections and National Party Policy Change

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Abstract

Political parties seek information about public preferences to determine how much they need to change their policies as elections approach. We argue that opposition parties can use European parliamentary election results to inform themselves about public preferences. When opposition parties lose votes at the European level, they can use this information to infer that public opinion has shifted away from the party and change their national policy strategies. We also argue that not all European elections are the same and that parties should be more responsive to those European elections that are more informative about public preferences. Empirical results from 14 European Union (EU) member countries show that opposition parties use European election results and change their positions (a) when the turnout levels between national and European elections are similar and (b) when the European election is close in time to the upcoming national election.

Keywords

European parliamentary elections, party policy change, turnout rates, election timing

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“Does Europe matter?” is a question that has preoccupied students of European elections and voting behavior over the past three decades. Since 1979, the European Union (EU) member countries have held elections to elect representatives to the European Parliament once every 5 years. But do voters care about these elections? What are voters’ motivations when they go to the election booth? There is a wide-ranging literature that addresses these questions (see, for example, de Vries, 2007, 2010; de Vries, van der Brug, van Egmond, & van der Eijk, 2011; Gabel, 2000; Hix & Marsh, 2007, 2011; Hobolt & Spoon, 2012; Hobolt, Spoon, & Tilley, 2009; Hobolt & Wittrock, 2011; Reif & Schmitt, 1980; Tillman, 2004). However, an equally important question, namely whether these European elections have consequences for national politics, has received little attention. In an important study, Marsh and Franklin (1996) showed that the outcomes of national elections are systematically related to the outcomes of European elections (see also Caramani, 2006; Gabel, 2000; van der Eijk, Franklin, & Marsh, 1996). Yet, there is no cross-national study of how European elections influence parties’ national election manifestos.¹ That is what we present here. We analyze the effect of European election results on national party manifesto change, and more particularly how opposition parties use these election results to discern public opinion and change their left–right positions in their national election manifestos.

We argue that European parliamentary election results help opposition parties learn about public preferences and assist them in deciding whether to change their national election manifestos. Yet, not all European elections are alike. We show that European elections affect opposition party strategies when (a) the turnout rate in the European election is not too low compared with the previous national election and (b) the upcoming national election is close in time to the European election. European elections with turnout rates significantly lower than national elections indicate that voters do not care about these elections as much as they care about national elections, and hence, low-turnout elections are not very informative about public preferences. In addition, because the political environment changes as time elapses, political parties should respond less to European elections as the time left until the next election increases. We report empirical support for our hypotheses in 14 Western European democracies.

First, our findings have important implications for our understanding of the nature of European elections. Over the past 30 years, scholars have analyzed the second-order nature of these elections (see, for example, Hix & Marsh, 2007; Reif & Schmitt, 1980), whether these elections signify anything about national politics (van der Eijk & Franklin, 1996) and whether voters consider their EU preferences as they vote in these elections (de Vries,

2007, 2010). Our findings suggest that political parties use these election results to inform themselves about public preferences and to adjust their national election strategies. As a result, we argue that parties use these elections as markers to inform themselves about their national standing (Oppenhuis, van der Eijk, & Franklin, 1996).

Second, our results also contribute to the democratic deficit debate. According to the democratic deficit problem, the EU is not accessible for or accountable to EU citizens. One reason why the European Community initiated direct elections to the European Parliament was to solve this democratic deficit problem and give more powers to voters to elect the EU representatives and to keep them accountable. Our findings indicate that voters successfully use these elections to signal their preferences because parties appear to take lessons from these election results.

Third, our results illuminate party strategies and electoral competition in advanced democracies. And, last but not least, this article is also one of the few works examining how nonnational elections affect national-level politics. The literature on federal systems has examined the relationship between regional/state elections and national elections; however, the focus has largely been on understanding the effects of national elections on regional elections (e.g., Anderson & Ward, 1996; Kern & Hainmueller, 2006), and there is only limited attention paid to the effect of regional/state elections on national politics.² Hence, our article also contributes to this latter literature and fills a gap by examining how another type of second-order election, namely, European elections, affects the national context.

We focus on opposition party policy shifts and not on governing parties in this research for two reasons. First, manifesto pledges are more consequential for opposition parties because voters generally evaluate government parties on the basis of recent performance in office and may even hold governing parties responsible for circumstances beyond their control (Achen & Bartels, 2004). Thus, governing parties find shifting their policy positions more difficult (Cho & Endersby, 2003), and voters discount their policy pledges more than those of opposition parties (Bawn & Somer-Topcu, 2012). Opposition parties' election performance, however, largely depends on their rhetoric and pledges before the election (see Alvarez, Nagler, & Bowler, 2000, for empirical evidence from the British 1987 election). Second, a closer look at the European election results suggests that governing parties generally lose votes in these elections while electoral performance among opposition parties varies. Because of this general trend, we argue that an opposition party should take a loss at the European level more seriously than a governing party.³

European Elections and Opposition Party Policy Shifts

As the elections loom closer, the most important question political parties seek to answer is “what will work to win in this election?”⁴ Political parties must decide whether they should campaign in that district, participate on that TV show, attack that party, or nominate that candidate. One of the most important questions parties face before an election is “Which policy positions they should adopt and pursue to attract voters?”

Yet, finding a winning manifesto position is a difficult task for political parties. Parties have severely constrained information on what is the best position-taking strategy. Budge (1994) emphasizes the importance of uncertainty and argues that the positions parties take are a consequence of a blind-fold search. The goal of the parties, therefore, is to reduce uncertainty by utilizing available information to make a reasonable decision about their policy position.

Information is even less available for opposition parties. Although most Western democracies feature wide-ranging opinion polls on whether citizens approve of the government’s performance, there are no parallel polls asking citizens whether they approve the opposition parties’ policies. The media also largely covers stories on governing parties, reminding voters about governing parties’ performance in office and their abilities (or failures) to fulfill their promises and to stay true to their ideological principles. Much less attention is paid to opposition parties and their performance (Clark & Leiter, in press). Although it is true that opposition parties may use information about governing parties to infer about their own election prospects, politics is not a zero-sum game between opposition and governing parties, and it is rarely clear— particularly in a multiparty system— which opposition parties will benefit from governing parties’ vote losses.

In this environment, one source of information that parties use as they strategize on changing their policy positions is the previous national election results (Budge, 1994). In a previous paper, we argue that if a party lost votes in the previous election, this would indicate that its policy positions failed, and that these party should change its policy positions in its next election manifesto (Somer-Topcu, 2009). We also show in the same paper that this effect of previous elections dissipates over time and presents empirical evidence that, on average, after about 3 years since the last election, parties stop responding to the previous national election result because party elites recognize that the political environment changes over time. Although national elections lose their informational quality as years pass, one informative event for opposition parties in the years between two national elections is the European parliamentary election, which often does not coincide with a

national election. We argue in this article that European election results can signal to political parties whether they should change their positions for the next national election.

Since 1979, European parliamentary elections have given voters the opportunity to elect representatives to the European Parliament. These elections have generally been considered as an arena where national issues are debated and national strategies are tested. The national character of these elections led Reif and Schmitt (1980) to label them “second-order” elections. The second-order model considers European elections as national contests in which parties emphasize their national issue priorities and voters choose based on their evaluations of national issues (Gabel, 2000). We argue that this national focus in these elections should help parties use these election results as they formulate their national election strategies. This national character, in effect, makes these European elections a rehearsal stage for the upcoming national elections.

We therefore agree with Marsh and Franklin (1996) and Oppenhuis et al. (1996) that these elections serve as marker elections by providing information to parties on their national standings, and “to the extent that the new markers manifest changes in party standing, European elections define new strategic and tactical situations for political actors, which may change their future course of events” (Oppenhuis et al., 1996, p. 288). This has important implications for opposition parties because to improve their standings in national elections, parties require information about public preferences. European elections provide this information. As markers, European elections inform political parties about their relative standing in national politics and help them strategize for upcoming national elections.

We note that although the evidence for the national character of European elections is extensive (Hix & Marsh, 2007, 2011), an exciting new research on the European issue voting provides us with additional motivation to examine these elections as information resources. In this literature, scholars show that European integration is becoming a contentious issue, that party strategies in European elections have significant consequences for election results, and that European issues are gaining salience and affecting election results in member countries under particular contextual and individual-level factors. This European issue-voting literature (see, for example, de Vries, 2007, 2010; de Vries et al., 2011; Gabel, 2000; Hobolt & Spoon, 2012; Hobolt et al., 2009; Hobolt & Wittrock, 2011; Tillman, 2004) does not repudiate the second-order model but shows that European elections have become more salient over the past decade as European issue voting has increased. This literature concludes that voters take these elections seriously, and hence, political parties have to pay attention to these elections as well. As a result, we can expect the results

of these European elections to influence political parties as they adjust their national election positions.

How should political parties respond to these election results? We argue that a loss in a European election would indicate that public preferences diverged from parties' policy positions. Political parties should be motivated to change their national policy positions to address these losses. However, political parties experience a dilemma when their policy ideals conflict with the necessity to shift policy positions. Moving away from their preferred policy position is a risky strategy for political parties. Parties do not know how party voters and activists, who support the party mainly for its policy positions, would react to change. Parties may risk losing their donors and being depicted as opportunistic and insincere when they change their policy positions. As a result, parties would resist a change unless it is required for the sake of parties' success. A loss in the election signals to the party about the necessity for change (Budge, 1994). At the same time, we argue, following Somer-Topcu (2009), that as parties perform better in an election, they should be less inclined to change. Our first hypothesis then is that *the more votes the opposition parties lose (gain) in the European election, compared with the previous national election, the more (less) they will change their left-right manifesto positions for the upcoming national elections.*

When the goal is to understand parties' policy shifts, the practice in the existing literature has been focusing on the *direction* of the parties' policy shifts (Adams, Clark, Ezrow, & Glasgow, 2004; Budge, 1994). However, while we expect parties to change their positions in the presence of a vote loss, we do not expect any particular directional change toward left or right. When parties do poorly in European elections, some may take this as an evidence for the need to moderate policies, whereas others may decide they need to appeal to their base and radicalize their policies. Thus, the belief that their current policy position "isn't working" can lead parties to shift in either direction. And, because this decision does not imply a specific *direction* for the parties' policy shift, we choose to focus on the *magnitude* of shift.⁵

Not All European Elections Are the Same

While we have argued that opposition parties should use European election results to decide on their national policy strategies, not all European elections provide the same quality of information about public opinion. In this section, we argue that turnout rates and the timing of these elections should moderate the effects of these election results on national party behavior.

A quick look at the turnout rates of European elections shows that voters often abstain in greater numbers in these elections compared with national

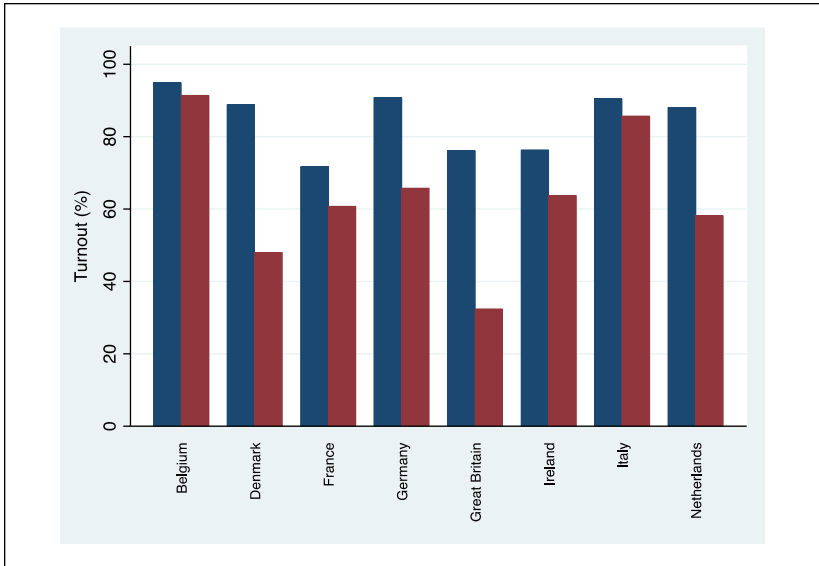


Figure 1. The turnout rates in the 1979 European elections (in red) and in the preceding national elections (in blue).

elections. Even the turnout rates of the first European election in 1979, which attracted more people than ever, were all lower than their respective national rates. Figure 1 shows a comparison of the turnout rates in the 1979 European elections and in the preceding national elections in all countries except Luxembourg, where the European and national elections took place on the same day and had the same turnout rates.⁶ The trend was similar in European elections that followed the original 1979 elections.

There is an extant literature examining the contextual and individual-level factors behind the low turnout rates.⁷ Regardless of what motivates people to abstain, low turnout rates in these elections—relative to the turnout rates in national elections—would negatively affect the informational content of these elections for political parties. Opposition parties will garner less information about public opinion and may be less confident about drawing inferences about how policy changes will affect their subsequent support in national elections when only a small proportion of the voting population turns out to vote. We therefore expect that *as the difference in turnout rates between the European election and the preceding national elections increases, opposition parties should be less responsive to those European election results.*

Despite the generally low turnout rates for European elections, we also observe a substantial variation in these turnout rates. In Germany, there was an impressive 37% turnout difference between the 1999 European election and the previous federal election in 1998. Yet, the turnout difference between the 1994 European election and the federal election in 1990 was only 18%. Similarly, in Ireland, the differences in turnout rates between the national elections and the European elections that follow them have ranged between 4% and 25%. These variations may be due to different contextual and individual-level factors (see Footnote 7). Nevertheless, we expect opposition parties to be generally less responsive to those European elections where the turnout rate differs dramatically from the turnout rate of the previous national elections.

In addition to turnout rates, the timing of European elections also matters for party behavior. European elections have a fixed schedule. They have been held in June once every 5 years. This means that they usually do not coincide with the national elections. We argue that European elections that occur near to the date of the next national election are more informative of public preferences.⁸ This argument is also consistent with the “marker-elections” theory of Oppenhuis et al. (1996). Accordingly, European elections that are held immediately following a national election are “throwaway elections.” These elections do not have significant national consequences, and political actors should largely ignore these election results. However, European elections that are held shortly before the subsequent national election are “marker-setting elections”: “In this situation the marker set by the previous national election has become obsolete, and politicians will regard the results of the European election as a new indicator of their own and other parties’ electoral strength” (Oppenhuis et al., 1996, p. 301; see also Ferrera & Weishaupt, 2004). We therefore expect that *opposition parties should be more responsive to European elections results when these elections are closer in time to the subsequent national elections.*

Research Design

To test our hypotheses, we need information on (a) shifts in parties’ policy positions between national election manifestos for our dependent variable, (b) vote shares of parties in European elections relative to their performances in the previous national elections to test how electoral performance in these European elections affects policy shifts, (c) turnout rates in national and European elections, and (d) the timing of European elections in the national election cycle to test our conditional hypotheses. We collected the data on European election dates, turnout rates, and party vote shares using official

election data. National party manifesto positions come from the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP).

For our dependent variable, we rely on the left–right positions provided by the CMP data. The CMP data code the proportion of the election manifestos dedicated to 56 different issues. Using 26 of these issues, the scholars in this project developed an index of left–right positions of parties for each party’s manifesto in each election year, which has been widely used in the literature to examine changes in party left–right policy positions (e.g., Adams et al., 2004; Budge, 1994; Somer-Topcu, 2009). This left–right scale potentially ranges from -100 to $+100$ with negative (positive) values indicating a more left-wing (right-wing) position.⁹

For two reasons, our focus is on the left–right scale, and not on another dimension, such as the European integration positions of political parties. First, our focus is on national-level policy shifts of parties, and the left–right scale continues to be the most salient dimension of party competition in Western Europe (Budge, Klingemann, Volkens, Tannenbaum, & Bara, 2001; Klingemann, Volkens, Bara, Budge, & McDonald, 2007). Second, despite the growing literature on European issue voting, there is strong evidence that national political debates, and hence, the left–right scale significantly determines the European election results. In a special issue of *Comparative Political Studies*, Marks and Steenbergen (2002) state that “a left–right dimension appears to underlie the opinions, stances, and behavior of citizens, social movements, and political parties” at the EU level (p. 889). In addition, the special issue articles also show that political actors assimilate other European integration issues with the left–right scale (see, for example, Gabel & Hix, 2002; see also Marks, Wilson, & Ray, 2002).

Our dependent variable is the magnitude of left–right policy shifts in parties’ national election manifestos. We used the left–right positions of the parties from the CMP data and calculated the absolute changes in these left–right policies between the previous national election (at time $t - 1$) and the current national election (at time t).¹⁰ As we stated before, because we do not have clear expectations for the direction of change, we focus on the *magnitude* of the focal party’s left–right shift rather than the *direction* of this shift.

The main independent variable is the change in each party’s vote share between the previous national election at time ($t - 1$) and the European election that occurred between the current (t) and the previous national elections ($t - 1$) (*EU Election Vote Change*).¹¹ Instead of using the change in raw vote shares, we calculated weighted vote changes, weighing them by parties’ national vote share at time ($t - 1$). To achieve this, we divided the raw change in vote shares by the vote share of each party in the previous national

election.¹² We opted for this weighted measure to account for the possible different effects of, for instance, a 3% vote loss for a party with 40% of vote share at the national level versus the same amount of vote loss for a small party with 10% vote share. We expect this 3% loss to be a more devastating signal for the smaller party, which in this case lost more of its existing vote share.

To test the hypotheses that not all European elections are the same, we created two variables that measure (a) the difference in turnout levels between the European election and the previous national election at time ($t - 1$) (*Turnout Difference*) and (b) the number of months between the European election and the upcoming national election at time (t) (*Time Difference*). The turnout rate difference is calculated by subtracting the previous national election turnout rate from the European election rate in the same country, and ranges between -48% in Britain (between the 1997 national parliamentary election and the 1999 European election—the respective turnout rates were 71.3% at the national level and 23.3% at the European level) and $+2\%$ in Greece (between the 1981 national parliamentary election with a 78.6% turnout rate and the 1984 European election with a 80.6 turnout rate).

To test the effect of the timing of European elections, we calculated the raw number of months left to the next national election following each European election. We had several countries that had 3 months between the European election and the next national election, the minimum time difference in our data set. The longest time difference was in Britain where the national election in 1983 took place 4 years after the 1979 European election.

In addition to the weighted vote change between the previous national election and the European election, we also include in our models the weighted vote change between two national elections at time ($t - 2$) and ($t - 1$) (*National Election Vote Change*). Following the argument of Budge (1994) that previous national election outcomes provide information to political parties, We previously showed that political parties change their left–right positions based on the signal they receive from the previous election (Sommer-Topcu, 2009). Independent from their European performances, we contend that parties' national election performances may still provide a signal for political parties, albeit a weaker one because of the new information provided by European elections. Therefore, we add the weighted vote change between national elections $t - 2$ and $t - 1$ into our model as a control variable.

Another control variable we add is the effective number of parties (*Effective Number of Parties*). Empirical evidence suggests that political parties rarely leapfrog each other on the left–right ideological dimension

(Adams, 2001; Budge, 1994). By adding the effective number of parties variable, we can control for the space limitation implicitly imposed on parties as they move positions. We expect that as the effective number of parties in the system increases, it will become harder for parties to shift their positions. We used Laakso and Taagepera's (1979) formula to calculate the effective number of parties ($1/\sum \textit{seat}_j^2$), where *seat_j* refers to the seat shares of each party in a particular election.¹³

We also include the lagged dependent variable (the lagged magnitude of change in left–right position; *Lagged Absolute Left–Right Shift*) in every model for theoretical and methodological reasons. Theoretically, we should expect political parties that changed their positions significantly to have some organizational flexibility to continue shifting their positions in the following elections. In addition, Budge (1994) shows that party elites have electoral incentives to shift their party's policies in the opposite direction from their shifts in previous election, when they lose votes. This implies a positive relationship between the previous and current absolute policy change. In addition, the Lagrange multiplier test indicates a serial correlation problem for the model without the lagged dependent variable but fails to reject the null hypothesis of no serial correlation with the lagged dependent variable.¹⁴

Finally, we also include European election fixed effects into the model to control for the changing effects of different European elections on party policy shifts (Spoon, 2012). Given the increase in the salience of European elections over time (Tsebelis, Jensen, Kalandrakis, & Kreppel, 2001) and the evidence of increasing EU issue voting for the more recent European elections (de Vries, 2010), we would expect increasing impact of European elections on parties over time. The first European election in 1979 is set as the reference category.¹⁵

Because we analyze opposition parties' behavior, we test our models only on opposition parties between two national elections. We use Woldendorp, Keman, and Budge (2000) to classify political parties as governing versus opposition parties, and updated these data to 2010 using the Keesing's World Archives and other online resources. Our data are composed of 14 Western European countries and cover the period between the first European elections in 1979 until 2010. We exclude all concurrent elections from our data for two reasons. First, a concurrent election cannot affect the national electoral strategies of opposition parties because they occur on the same day. Second, we do not expect them to influence the strategies for the next national election either because political parties would use national election results instead to update their perceptions and shift their policy positions. This means that we focus only on 14 of 15 Western European members of the EU. Luxembourg drops out from the data given the concurrent European and national elections for

the whole time period. To test our hypothesis, we ran ordinary least squares (OLS) regression with robust standard errors clustered by election. Clustering controls for possible correlations between parties within a specific interelection period in a specific country.

Results

Table 1 reports the results showing the effects of European electoral performance on party policy shifts. Column 1 tests the effects of European election outcomes on the (left–right) policy shifts of opposition parties without controlling for the additional European election–specific factors of turnout and time differences. The main variable of interest in this model is the *EU Election Vote Change* variable, which measures the weighted change in the vote share of parties between the previous national election and the European election.

Consistent with our first hypothesis, the negative coefficient for the *EU Election Vote Change* variable indicates that parties change their left–right positions more as they lose votes in the European election compared with the previous national election. However, the standard errors are larger than expected, indicating a statistically insignificant relationship. Although this result may seem disappointing, we were not particularly surprised given that we have not yet controlled for the contextual factors related to different European elections.

Columns 2 and 3 in Table 1 report coefficient estimates for the model specifications that are designed to evaluate the conditioning effects of the differences in turnout levels between the EU election and the previous national election at time $(t - 1)$, and the differences in time between the European election and the upcoming national election (t) . The *EU Election Vote Change* variable in the Turnout Model (column 2) shows that when there is no turnout difference between the European election and the previous national election (*Turnout Difference* = 0), there is a statistically significant and negative relationship between *EU Election Vote Change* and the dependent variable of absolute left–right policy change, supporting the hypothesis. This effect dissipates as the difference between the turnout levels increases (as the *Turnout Difference* variable takes more negative values).¹⁶ The Time Model in column 3 shows that the effects of the European election results on opposition party policy changes are the strongest when a national election immediately follows a European election (*Time Difference* = 0). The effect dissipates as the time period between the European election and the next national election increases (as the *Time Difference* variable takes higher values).

Table 1. Analyses of the Hypotheses.

	Simple model	Turnout model	Time model	Combined model
EU election vote change (weighted)	-1.134 (1.337)	-6.787** (2.778)	-6.656** (2.304)	-10.826** (3.556)
Turnout difference		0.084 (0.067)		0.088 (0.068)
EU Election Vote Change × Turnout		-0.203** (0.097)		-0.178** (0.089)
Time difference			0.002 (0.060)	0.014 (0.063)
EU Election Vote Change × Time			0.193** (0.084)	0.164** (0.080)
Control variables				
National election vote change (weighted)	-1.812 (1.432)	-1.764 (1.411)	-1.781 (1.472)	-1.703 (1.456)
Effective number of parties	-0.803* (0.419)	-0.908* (0.457)	-0.824* (0.423)	-0.937** (0.460)
Lagged absolute Left-Right change (lagged DV)	0.213** (0.058)	0.198** (0.059)	0.218** (0.057)	0.204** (0.058)
Constant	12.909** (2.245)	15.687** (3.528)	12.911** (2.789)	15.518** (3.711)
N/Adjusted R ²	199/.03	199/.04	199/.03	199/0.04

The dependent variable is the absolute change in the party's policy position between elections $t - 1$ and t (*Absolute Left-Right Change*). The models also include European Election Year fixed effects (not reported). Numbers in parentheses are the robust standard errors clustered by national election. The results are based on a two-tailed test.

* $p < .10$. ** $p < .05$.

Figure 2 displays the marginal effects of vote changes on party policy shifts for different values of *Turnout Difference* and *Time Difference*. The left graph for turnout effects shows that the effect of *EU Election Vote Change* on policy change is negative and statistically significant up to about -23% turnout difference between the European election and the previous national election (there are 88 cases out of 199 with a turnout difference less than 23%). From the right graph, we can see that the effect of European elections is only statistically significant if the European election is less than 24 months before the upcoming election (there are 93 cases with a time difference of less than 24 months). Substantively, these results suggest that when the turnout difference is less than 23% or when the time to the next election is less than 24 months, opposition parties on average change their positions more as they lose votes, and the effect strengthens as the turnout differences and the time periods between the European election and the upcoming national election decrease.¹⁷

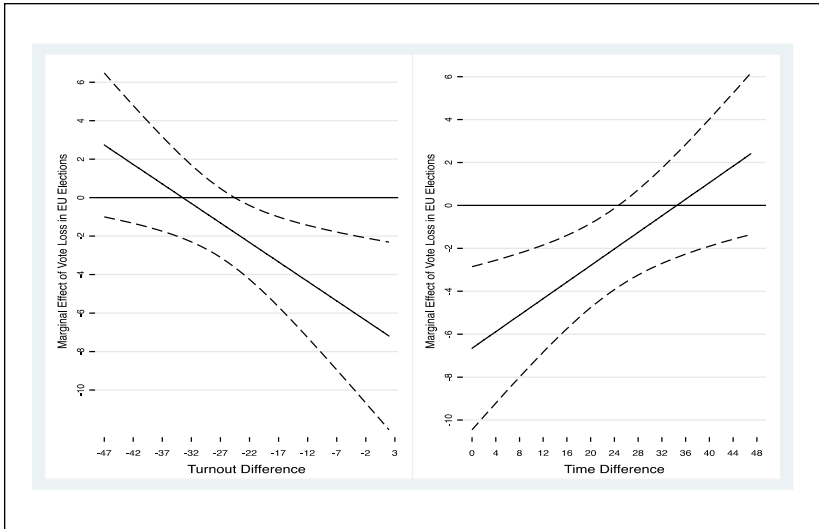


Figure 2. The moderating effects of turnout and time on the relationship between European election vote change and national manifesto left–right policy change. These figures are based on the Turnout and Time Difference Models from Table 1 (columns 2 and 3, respectively). The solid lines in the figures show the marginal effects of one unit change in the *EU Election Vote Change* variable on the dependent variable of party policy shifts for different values of turnout difference and time difference. The dashed lines are the standard errors, which are calculated using 90% confidence intervals.

Finally, column 4 in Table 1 combines Turnout and Time Models in one model. The results continue to support both hypotheses. The coefficient for the *EU Election Vote Change* variable (−10.8) shows that when turnout and time difference are zero, political parties change their positions more as they lose votes.¹⁸

Interpreting the substantive effects of vote change on party policy shifts is not straightforward given that the vote change variable is a weighted variable (weighted by the previous vote share of the party). We see that the coefficient is around −11 when the turnout and time differences are 0 in column 4. As a hypothetical example, if we focus on a party with a 20% vote share in the previous election, this −11 coefficient suggests that if that party *lost* 10% of its vote share in the European election, the magnitude of its subsequent left–right policy shift at the subsequent national election would be about 11 points greater than if the party’s vote share had *increased* by 10% in the European election.¹⁹

In all models, the lagged dependent variable (*Lagged Absolute Left–Right Shift*) is statistically significant and positive, showing that if the parties substantially changed their policies at the previous election, they also tended to substantially change their positions at the current election. The coefficient estimate on the *Effective Number of Parties* variable also displays the expected effect, showing that as the effective number of parties in a system increases, parties find it more difficult to shift their positions. Finally, the *National Election Vote Change* variable that measures the change in vote shares between the two previous national elections is negative, as expected, but not statistically significant. Given the structure of our data, a European election followed all these national elections. As a result, it is not surprising to see that previous national election results do not significantly affect party policies once there is a more informative European election in between two national elections. The European election year fixed effects are not reported in Table 1. The Supplementary Document presents the full set of results for the fixed effects. None of the coefficients for election years are significant, indicating that specific European elections do not affect party policy shifts when we control for the party performance, time difference, turnout difference, and the other variables in the model.²⁰

We also estimated additional models to evaluate the robustness of our results. Research has shown that there are differences between niche and mainstream parties in regard to whether and how much they change their left–right positions in response to signals. Adams, Clark, Ezrow, and Glasgow (2006) show that niche parties are less likely to respond to public opinion shifts on the left–right scale, and Ezrow, de Vries, Steenbergen, and Edwards (2011) present empirical evidence for the hypothesis that niche parties respond only to the preferences of their own supporters, whereas mainstream parties are more responsive to the preferences of the entire electorate. Given these documented differences between niche and mainstream party behavior, we added the niche party status as a control variable into our model. We define niche parties using the typology of Meguid (2005). Therefore, we classify parties that belong to the Green, ultraright, and special issue party families as *niche* parties.

Beyond the party-level effects, one may also argue that in countries where the national and European elections differ in terms of the electoral system, electoral thresholds, characteristics of candidates, party lists, and so on, we may observe differences in how parties respond to these elections results. A clear example is the British case. Although national parliamentary elections in Britain distribute seats using the plurality system in single-member districts, European elections employ a proportional formula. These different electoral systems may lead to widely different election results between the

national and European elections. In such an environment, political parties may not use these elections results as indicators of public preferences for their national policy strategies. To test these effects, we added country fixed effects to the models in columns 1 and 2 in Table 2. These models also have the niche party dummy variable as a control variable.²¹ Our results from Table 1 stay robust with the addition of these country dummies and the niche party variable.²²

As a final model, we tested whether possible measurement error associated with the Comparative Manifesto data influences our results. Although Benoit, Laver, and Mikhaylov (2009) criticize the CMP data by arguing that the data set provides no measures of uncertainty, they also show that the general effect of this noise may be an attenuation bias in key coefficients, and hence, the results without controlling for measurement error would produce conservative estimates. We replicated our Turnout and Time Difference Models from Table 1 with “errors in variables” (EIV) analyses by specifying the degree of reliability of the observed values of the CMP-based independent variable (*Lagged Absolute Left–Right Shift*) at .7. Here, reliability is defined as the correlation between the measured values of the variable and the true or underlying values. Columns 3 and 4 in Table 2 show these results and continue to support our hypotheses.

Conclusion

Do European elections have consequences for the national election strategies of political parties? Our empirical results from 14 Western European democracies between 1979 and 2010 showed that when opposition parties lose votes at the European level, they change their national election manifesto positions. However, this effect exists only if the turnout rates are not too low at the European level in comparison with the national level, and when a particular European election and the following national election are not too far apart in time.

This is the first study, to our knowledge, that examines how these European election results affect parties’ national policy shifts. Despite the existing studies showing increasing salience of these elections for voters and importance of these elections for national election results, there has not been any work examining how these European elections affect national actors’ national strategies. As a result, as we indicated in the introduction, this article makes important contributions to the literature on European elections by showing that these elections serve as marker elections and help parties use the information from the elections as they strategize for their national manifestos. The results also have important implications for our understanding of national

Table 2. Sensitivity Checks.

	Niche party and Country effects		Measurement Error tests	
	Turnout model	Time model	Turnout model	Time model
EU election vote change (weighted)	-6.321** (3.113)	-6.022** (2.386)	-6.312* (3.283)	-6.725** (2.247)
Turnout difference	-0.001 (0.123)		0.082 (0.071)	
EU Election Vote Change × Turnout	-0.194* (0.097)		-0.189* (0.101)	
Time difference		-0.029 (0.064)		0.005 (0.069)
EU Election Vote Change × Time		0.183** (0.091)		0.198** (0.087)
Control variables				
National election vote change (weighted)	-1.450 (1.373)	-1.426 (1.429)	-1.543 (1.301)	-1.534 (1.625)
Effective number of parties	-2.432** (0.901)	-2.042** (0.941)	-0.886 (0.530)	-0.797* (0.458)
Lagged absolute Left-Right change (lagged DV)	0.102 (0.069)	0.123* (0.066)	0.289** (0.101)	0.317** (0.095)
Niche party (0: Mainstr., 1: Niche)	2.060 (2.323)	1.605 (2.349)		
Constant	21.482** (6.722)	21.308** (5.651)	16.283** (4.163)	12.602** (2.934)
N/Adjusted R ²	199/.08	199/.07	199/.11	199/.10

The dependent variable is the absolute change in the party's policy position between elections $t - 1$ and t (*Absolute Left-Right Change*). The models also include European Election Year fixed effects (not reported). Numbers in parentheses are the robust standard errors clustered by national election. The results are based on a two-tailed test. Columns 1 and 2 report the Turnout and Time Difference Models from Table 1 and include a niche party dummy variable and country fixed effects (not shown). Columns 3 and 4 report the results for the same models setting the reliability of the lagged dependent variable in the model at .7. * $p \leq .10$. ** $p \leq .05$.

party strategies and party competition and for studies on other nonnational contests, such as the effects of state elections on national elections in Germany and other federal systems (Bechtel, 2012) as well as for the literature on the effects of by-elections in Britain on national actors (Norris, 1990).

But, do parties benefit from these policy shifts in response to European elections? This is an interesting question that should be examined in future research. We may expect that these strategies should enhance the national support of parties that responded to the outcome of the previous European election. In that case, as long as the parties change their positions in response to these elections, and especially if they change them in the direction of their

supporters or of public opinion more generally, they should increase their vote shares; however, more research is needed to answer this question.

Similarly, we can also examine whether national election results affect European manifesto strategies of political parties. Although political parties used to care less about their European manifestos and campaign less intensively for these elections, we know from the literature that European elections are becoming more salient for voters and political parties. Given the recent debates on the Constitutional Treaty and the economic crisis in the EU, we can expect even more emphasis put on European election strategies by political parties. It would not be surprising then to see political parties use their national-level information on public preferences to change their positions in their EU manifestos to increase their vote shares in European elections.

Last but not least, one can also examine how the campaign context of European elections and the media attention paid to these elections mediate the results we find in this article. We know from the literature that the campaign context for a European election affects the voting behavior in these elections (de Vries et al., 2011; Hobolt et al., 2009; Hobolt & Wittrock, 2011). We may expect European elections with higher media attention to more strongly affect national party strategies. Future work would benefit from incorporating the campaign environment into the analysis and can examine how high-information contexts affect national party strategies in response to European elections.

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Notes

1. Scholars have examined the Europeanization of national parties and their programs (see, for example, Ladrech, 2002), that is, how and how much political parties talk about and campaign on Europe. Yet, most of these works have been single country case studies (see, for example, Marliere, 2001; Raunio, 1999). In two of the few cross-national works on the topic, Pennings (2006) skillfully examines the general impact of European Union membership on national election manifestos, and Spoon (2012) shows the extent to which political parties emphasize the European integration issue in their European manifestos.
2. Samuels (2000) shows the importance of gubernatorial elections in Brazil for national politics, and in the European context, Bechtel (2012) examines how German state elections affect national vote choice.
3. Our data show that about 70% of all governing parties lost votes in European elections while about half of the opposition parties did. We also replicated our results for governing parties in the Supplementary Document. As expected, European elections do not have any significant effects on governing parties. One may also question why opposition parties should use the European election results because it is very likely that they lost in the previous national election. Should not previous national election results matter more? We note that, first, only 54% of all opposition parties in our data lost in the previous election. Hence, for a significant number of opposition parties that gained votes in the previous national election, a vote loss in a European election should be quite informative. Second, we control for previous national election losses in the analyses below and show that keeping the national performance fixed, there are significant effects of the European election results on these parties.
4. We note that “winning” in an election may have different connotations for different political parties. While for some parties, particularly those contesting plurality-based elections, winning means becoming the majority party, other parties may evaluate having enough seats to pressure the government as a win (Muller & Strom, 1999).
5. Nevertheless, we tested our model using also the direction of change as the dependent variable. Not surprisingly, there was no clear directional change in response to the European election outcomes. These results are available on request.
6. As we explain below, we drop those concurrent national and European elections from our analyses.
7. At the aggregate level, scholars have shown, for instance, that technical details of these elections such as the timing of the election with respect to other elections in a particular country, whether there is weekend voting or compulsory voting rules, and specific electoral formulas significantly affect the turnout rates (see, for example, Mattila, 2003). At the individual level, Hobolt, Spoon, and Tilley (2009) show that voter characteristics such as age, social class, party identification, and policy distances, as well as the campaign tone, significantly affect the likelihood of abstaining.

8. This argument is consistent with Somer-Topcu (2009) who shows that as time elapses since the previous national election, these past national election results lose their salience for party policy-taking.
9. Expert surveys and public opinion data have been proposed as alternative sources to measure party position. Nevertheless, they do not cover the range of issues, countries, and the time period that the CMP data cover. Moreover, the CMP party program codings generally correlate with other widely used data sets on party positioning, such as expert surveys, party placements of election survey respondents, and other word-scoring techniques (Hearl, 2001; Laver, Benoit, & Garry, 2003). Recently, there is a growing literature suggesting that noise in the data can be a problem for the empirical tests of the data (Benoit, Laver, & Mikhaylov, 2009). We test the robustness of our results for different levels of reliability for the CMP data in the sensitivity checks section below.
10. We focus on the policy shifts between two national elections manifestos, and not on the shifts between a European election manifesto and the following national election manifesto to calculate our dependent variable because, first, despite the fact that parties write and campaign on their own European-level manifestos, there is increasingly more contamination of these manifestos from the Europarty and from the manifestos of other parties in the same party family, which join forces in the European Parliament (Hertner, 2011). Second, voters and media pay less attention to these European manifestos. There is very limited if any coverage of European elections and manifestos in the media (de Vreese, Banducci, Semetko, & Boomgaarden, 2006).
11. If there was no European election between two national elections, we dropped the party positions in those national elections from our analyses.
12. The formula for the weighted vote change variable is as follows:

$$\frac{EUvote_i - National_vote_{i-1}}{National_vote_{i-1}}$$
13. The Supplementary Document reports the descriptive statistics for the variables.
14. As a sensitivity check, we ran our models dropping the lagged dependent variable and instead using a generalized least squares method with AR1 correction. The results are consistent and even stronger for this specification, and available on request.
15. We replicated our models dropping these fixed effects and the results stay robust.
16. One may argue that compulsory voting would artificially increase the turnout rates. Indeed, we see that the turnout rates have been highest in compulsory voting systems of Belgium, Italy (until 1993 when the rule was lifted), and Greece (until 2000 when the rule was lifted). To control for this artificial effect, we added a dummy variable for these compulsory systems and replicated the main model. The results were consistent with the original model. In addition, regardless of how artificial the turnout levels are in these countries, because parties do not have any basis to judge what would happen to the turnout rates if there was no compulsory voting, they should still pay increased attention to these elections.

17. In our data, only 45 cases have less than 24 months left *and* less than 23% turnout difference. In addition, there is a very low (-0.11) correlation between the turnout difference and election timing. Therefore, we are confident that these models do not test the different measures of the same common variable but separately contribute to our understanding of the effects of these elections on party behavior.
18. One may ask whether the time and turnout differences interactively condition the effect of vote changes on party shifts. To test this possibility, we ran a triple interaction model with an interaction variable between the time difference, turnout difference, and vote change variables. The results, which are reported in the Supplementary Document, suggest that time and turnout differences separately and not interactively condition the relationship between votes and policy shifts.
19. This 11-point effect may not seem significant given that the left–right scale can potentially range between -100 and $+100$. Yet, the mean and median absolute change values in the data are 11.45 and 8.68, respectively, with a standard deviation of 10.89. In addition, the magnitude of the coefficient is in line with the findings of Adams, Clark, Ezrow, and Glasgow (2006) and Somer-Topcu (2009) who present results showing that parties can alter their positions only in small steps over time.
20. We note that although the adjusted R^2 values might seem small, overall they are in line with other studies using the Comparative Manifesto Project left–right locations of parties as the dependent variable (see, for example, Adams, Clark, Ezrow, & Glasgow, 2004; Adams & Somer-Topcu, 2009).
21. We also tested the effects of two additional party-level factors: party size and the governing history of a party (i.e., whether the party ever was in government). In various models, we first included them as control variables, and then, we also tested their conditional effects by creating triple interactions of each party-level factor with our interaction variables and by adding all individual and double-interaction variables into the models. None of these party-level factors affect party shifts or condition our main relationship between votes, turnout levels, and time, and party shifts. These results are reported in the Supplementary Document.
22. Regarding the country fixed effects (not reported), none of the country effects reach to the conventional statistical levels in the Turnout Model, and Spain and the Netherlands appear to change their positions less compared with the base country of Sweden in the Time Model but only at the 90% confidence level. We also reestimated our models by excluding Britain and also by jackknifing one country at a time (these results are available on request). These models produced consistent and robust effects of European election results on party policy shifts.

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