

Robert Harmsen/Joachim Schild (eds.)

Debating Europe

The 2009 European Parliament Elections and Beyond



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Introduction: National European Discourses and the 2009 European Parliament Elections

Robert Harmsen and Joachim Schild

The second-order model and its limits

A vast literature has developed on European Parliament (EP) elections since the first direct elections to the assembly were held in 1979. Much of that literature has been concentrated around (aspects of) the second-order hypothesis seminally advanced by Reif and Schmitt (1980) in the immediate aftermath of the first direct elections. Their model of EP consultations, essentially arguing that they have assumed the form of a secondary arena of national partisan competition with an attendant series of properties including lower turn-outs and a greater propensity for voters to opt for smaller and 'protest' parties, has proved of an exceptional durability. Although other scholars have both qualified aspects of the model's application (Marsh 1998) and sought more fundamentally to challenge its core postulates (Frogner 2000), the second-order model continues to enjoy a central place in structuring the literature around EP elections. The underlying subsidiary character of the election has, moreover, further appeared largely unaffected by the growing powers and policy influence of the parliament itself in the intervening three decades; the most significant departures from the model emerge as those attributable to the differing (and less predictably cyclical) dynamics of the more recently established party systems of the new post-communist member states, rather than as deriving from changes in the patterns of voting behaviour in the European Union's (EU's) older western members (Schmitt 2005).

The core postulates of this model would appear again largely (if not uniformly) to have held in the 2009 elections. Nevertheless, it remains that the prevailing concern in the literature with variously testing or contesting the second-order model significantly obscures important research questions which may be raised by or through the study of EP elections. In particular, the framing of issues surrounding the project of European integration itself by parties during EP elections has received surprisingly little attention. Proponents of the second-order hypothesis largely limit themselves to underlining the general 'protest' character of EP elections to the detriment of governmental or mainstream parties, without analyzing in depth the specific character of such protests relative to European or other concerns. Critics of the thesis, by way of contrast, focus more on the extent to which a distinctive, (partially) autonomous arena of partisan competition has been opened by EP elections, but remain within an overall research design which does not readily lend itself to the detailed exploration of how 'European' (or other) issues are handled by the parties concerned. Yet, in both cases, this is to neglect the extent to which EP elections, if not generally 'about Europe' on classic measures of competitively relevant issue sali-

ence, nonetheless offer singularly privileged occasions for observing patterns of national European discourses seeking both to contest and to legitimate the wider project of European integration.

As Mair (2000) has insightfully noted, widespread *misunderstandings* by national electorates of the division of competence between the European and the national levels lead to issues of the nature of the integration project and the powers of the European Parliament – ultimately arbitrated by national governments as the ‘masters of the treaties’ – assuming a much higher relative prominence in European than in national elections. This, coupled with the general ‘protest’ potential accurately identified by the second-order model, has also created a situation in which, paradoxically, EP elections have proved particularly fertile ground for Eurosceptic parties. Parties such as the United Kingdom Independence Party, the *Mouvement pour la France*, the June Movement and the People’s Movement against the EU in Denmark, and the June List in Sweden have enjoyed success in winning seats in Strasbourg/Brussels, while remaining largely shut out of (or choosing not to contest elections for) national parliamentary chambers (Harmsen 2007). Beyond the current situation, it is further worth noting the identification by two prominent scholars (van der Eijk and Franklin 2004), on the basis of data from the 1999 European Election Survey, of the so-called ‘sleeping giant’ hypothesis – noting the stronger orientation of surveyed voters along a ‘pro-/anti-integration’ line of demarcation than relative to a traditional left/right spectrum. This creates, at a minimum, a potential for a significant disturbance of the existing terms of party competition along a secondary issue dimension – and a further reason, beyond van der Eijk and Franklin’s own primary concern with the national political arena, to look more closely at the formulation of European issues in the particular context of EP election campaigns.

Mapping national European discourses

It is against this background that the present project was conceived. It is intended as a complement to more ‘classic’ studies of EP elections (see, for example, Lodge 2010), distinctively focusing on debates surrounding European integration as seen both in and through national campaigns. To this end, our national contributors, beyond providing a brief summary of the results in their country, have been asked to look at both: 1) the European discourses deployed by parties during the 2009 election, with reference to both formal party manifestos and wider public/media discussion and 2) the more general recent development of national discourses on European integration. This allows, in the conclusion to this volume, for a double mapping exercise – seeking to probe the possibilities and limits of transnational political debate within the frame of the EP election itself, while also attempting to identify potential ‘clusters’ (Börzel and Risse 2000) of discursive practice and evolution across (sub-) groups of member states over time.

As regards European debates within the immediate framework of the campaign, our contributors were asked to examine the presence and content of European issues in relation to four broad thematic axes. These axes sought to capture the specifically ‘Eurosceptic’ dynamics which have paradoxically (as noted above) become something of a hallmark of EP contests, as well as highlighting markers of the wider politicization of European issues (Crespy and Petithomme 2009) including the potential development of more robust ‘pro-European’ discourses. These four axes are as below:

- *‘Sceptical’ and ‘critical’ discourses surrounding the political project of European integration*

This thematic category focuses particularly on critiques surrounding the ‘elitist’ character of the process, the ‘democratic deficit’, generalized concerns about the ‘intrusiveness’ of European policy (non-respect of subsidiarity), negative views of the EU’s global role, and criticisms leveled at the domination of particular (usually the larger) member states.

- *‘Sceptical’ and ‘critical’ discourses surrounding the social and economic project of European integration*

This second category encompasses contestations of European integration rooted in a sense of its excessively ‘neo-liberal’ or, conversely, its unduly ‘interventionist’ character. This rubric is also concerned with the wider theme of the discursive handling of globalization and its relationship to European integration (the latter potentially, again, variably seen as being a vector for undesirable change or as an impediment to necessary reform by its critics).

- *‘Sceptical’ and ‘critical’ discourses focusing on the preservation of national identity*

Such discourses express fears or anxieties that the development of European integration is undermining (sub-)national particularities or ‘exceptionalisms’. The issues touched upon here are also those which have been identified by Kriesi et al. (2008), who have highlighted the emergence of a more general, secondary ‘integrationist/demarcationist’ divide in European politics. ‘Demarcationists’, within this frame of reference, seek to ‘close’ or reinforce the boundaries of the national polity against external influences such as globalization, European integration and immigration.

- *Prevailing national ‘pro-integrationist’ discourses*

Under this heading, contributors were asked to explore the discourses deployed by national elites to legitimate the project of European integration in countervailing reference to the three strands of critical discourse identified above. Such discourses would thus encompass broad support for the political project of European integration (including explicitly ‘federalist’ discourses), a stronger global role for the EU, ‘Social Europe’, a ‘Green New Deal’, the further development of European citizenship, etc. Beyond the discourses deployed, a further

area of enquiry here concerned the extent to which national elites were (at all) willing to invest themselves in the area, either making the case for European integration in broad terms or campaigning for more selective policy developments.

These themes receive detailed treatment within a flexible framework in the individual country chapters. We also asked our contributors to complete an experts' survey giving their assessment of the presence or absence of key themes as regards their national case. The results of this survey are reproduced in tabular form as an annex to the conclusion.

The second main dimension of the project widens out this focus, so as to place the campaign discourses within a broader consideration of the evolution of national European discourses over time. In this, the present project seeks to contribute to a more general 'discursive turn' in European Union studies (Wæver 2009), which has included seminal work on the formative influences shaping national representations of the European project (Díez Medrano 2003), as well as analyses of the deficiencies of existing national legitimating discourses stemming from the relative, and arguably strategic non-engagement of national political elites (Schmidt 2006). More particularly, the present project builds on the earlier work of the two co-editors who have, in the Dutch (Harmsen 2008) and French (Schild 2009) cases, sought to explain recent more 'critical turns' in national European debates, and the manner in which these discursive evolutions may be related to wider repositionings relative to an evolving European reality.

It is this concern with the temporal evolution of national European discourses that, indeed, provides the structure for the book. The first five chapters examine the cases of five of the six founding member states. This is followed by four chapters which look at a representative selection of four West European 'latecomers' (Denmark, the United Kingdom, Spain, and Finland). The four countries chosen span the successive phases of West European enlargement, as well as including a balance of what are conventionally regarded as 'Eurosceptic' and more 'Europhile' states. Finally, the last four chapters take in a representative sample of Central and East European newcomers to the EU. The countries chosen include three 2004 entrants (the Czech Republic, Latvia, and Slovakia) and one 2007 entrant (Romania), extending across the Balkan, Baltic, and Visegrád countries.

The conclusion ties these different elements together. After contextualizing the thirteen cases presented using data sets from Eurobarometer and from the European Election Studies, it returns to the two central questions posed at the outset: that of the possibilities and limits of a genuinely pan-European political debate, and that of whether 'discursive clusters' of countries may be identified. As regards the former, there is at best limited evidence. Here, the implications of the now significantly internalized second-order model for the impoverishment of political debate will become readily apparent. The more general representations of European integration found across our thirteen country cases, however, present a rather richer tableau. In this latter respect, partly following Goetz's (2006) suggestion that national cluster-

ing may occur on the basis of the time of EU accession relative to domestic development and to the phase of European integration, two subsets of cases come to the fore. On the one hand, attention is focused on the five founding member states presently covered. Here, the central question is that of the extent to which one may delimit a shared ‘critical’ trajectory, reflecting the exhaustion of the initial post-war impetus for the integration project (‘peace and prosperity’) together with the possible dilution of a sense of social, economic, or political cohesion within a now much wider entity. On the other hand, the experience of the new member states is also highlighted. The central question as regards these states is that of their full ‘integration’ into the integration project – i.e. the assumption of a role as a full actor in EU decision-making processes, rather than continuing to view ‘Europe’ as an essentially external, if salutary vector for change (in a transplanted form of the *‘vincolo esterno’*). Between these two groupings, as will be shown, a more variable picture emerges – with significant evolutions in some cases (to varying degrees, the two Nordic countries presently included), but also relatively stable ‘Europhile’ (Spain) and ‘Eurosceptic’ (UK) national discursive frames.

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