Assessing the Role of European Attitudes in Cross-national Research: Does the Post-Communist Context Matter?

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Introduction

Following the general trend I see emerging in some of this workshop’s papers, I layout in the following pages the main research agendas I have developed over a substantially shorter academic trajectory. My main goal when engaging in such exercise is to emphasize how an in-depth understanding of some aspects of the myriad diversity of what we call ‘Eastern Europe’ proved to be particularly informative in generating questions and answers beyond my initial case study/regional expertise.

Early in my graduate years, I stumbled upon an article on the 2004 European Parliament (EP) elections, whose assumptions and conclusions seemed problematic. As a citizen of a state that missed the 2004 wave of European Union (EU) enlargement, Romania, and, thus, witnessed the heated post-2004 political debates over the necessary reforms to allow for EU membership, I could not grasp the logic presented in the mentioned article, which stated two main points: First, EP elections are lackluster national affairs that pass unnoticed by the media and mainstream parties alike. Second, if any public debates are present in the media, they will focus mostly on domestic politics and not on EU related issues. This sense of mismatch between a theoretical perspective developed in 1980, and known as the ‘second order national election model’, and the reality of my case study accentuated in 2009 while collecting data on the first Romanian participation in the Europe-wide European Parliamentary elections. In contrast to how a ‘second order national election’ should unfold, the 2009 Romanian electoral mood displayed a European dimension.

The broader debate I ended up joining focuses on today’s perceptions of the EU as a political system that suffers from a ‘democratic deficit’ and lacks democratic representation, popular legitimacy, and democratic accountability (Van der Brug and der Eijk 2007; Smith 2005; Hix 2005; 2008). EP elections play an essential role in the debate over EU’s democratic deficit, as a critical mechanism that should allow the public to express its preferences toward European integration. However, it is argued, EP elections suffer from a fundamental flaw encapsulated in the institutional designs of the EU. As a consequence of this institutional setting, domestic political issues dominate the campaigns and not the EU related ones (Reif and Schmitt 1980). Since the composition of the European Parliament has no direct bearing on domestic politics either, all actors involved, the national parties, media and voters, it is argued, pay little attention to these elections. Thus, these Europe-wide elections become elections that literally ‘serve no/little purpose’ (Wessels and Franklin 2010). They will continue to have this meaningless sense of existence despite the increased salience and politicization of the EU (Van der Brug and der Eijk 2007).
The major project I have developed reexamines such claims of ‘useless elections’ by theorizing when, where, and why attitudes toward European integration matter for participation and vote choice at EP elections. When seeking to uncover the conditions under which voters’ EU attitudes translate into participation and party selection at EP elections across all EU member states, the post-communist countries, members of the EU, became a distinct region. A combination of different factors led to this unique position: the legacy of more than a decade in the waiting chamber of EU membership, the first experiences with participation in Europe-wide elections, the net recipient status of EU budgetary funds, the lack of basic understanding of the functioning of the EU, and the lower levels of trust in national institutions converged even in the most Eurosceptic post-communist states as Hungary and the Czech Republic. In the post-communist region, positive attitudes toward the European Union had a significant effect on participation, an effect that was larger than in the Southern European periphery or Western Europe.

Yet, as some of these initial characteristics become less relevant in the post-2009 ‘extraordinary times’ of European integration, the post-communist region may not stand out anymore as a collection of states in which still anticipate economic and political benefits accruing from EU membership. The difficulty of disentangling between national and European causes and solutions to the current economic crisis and the rise of populist rhetoric (throughout the continent) may weaken the initial legitimacy that the EU project enjoyed in the region. The next 2014 European Parliamentary elections thus may elicit behavior that will bring these states closer to a Southern periphery. The theoretical point I am trying to convey then is that my research question led me to perceive Eastern European EU member states as a cohesive bloc in European electoral behavioral studies, but this status is rather elusive as other short-term aspects may become more relevant at election times. For the rest of this essay, I elaborate on my own research agenda, emphasizing how an in-depth understanding of one case study contributed to theoretical propositions I ended up testing across all 2004-2009 EU member states.

**Variation in EU attitudes across EU member states**

The aggregate public support for the integration project varied tremendously over time. After a consistent increase in the number of people who thought that their country benefited from EU membership in the late 1980s, the post-1992 years displayed steep decline. In this period of optimism, in 1979, direct elections for the European Parliament were introduced in an effort to generate more interest in EU affairs and to establish a link between citizens and decision making at European level (Marsh and Mikhaylov 2010). However, EP elections failed in these expectations and were rapidly coined as ‘second order national elections’ (Reif and Schmitt 1980), a perspective that remained essential to the literature of direct elections even for the most recent 2009 EP elections.

A more refined picture of support for EU membership across member states shows that aggregate levels of support are higher in the original six EU member states, in addition to Ireland, Greece, and Portugal. Citizens in the Nordic republics and the UK have been amongst the most Eurosceptic (Hobolt 2009). In addition, in the post-communist group, citizens in Lithuania, Romania, and Bulgaria are among the most
enthusiast supporters of the EU, while citizens in Latvia, Hungary, and the Czech Republic are among the most Eurosceptic.

Despite this regional and within regions variation, there is no straightforward relationship between EU attitudes and participation in EP elections. States with high aggregate results of positive EU attitudes do not necessarily display higher aggregate results of participation. Conversely, more Eurosceptic states do not have lower turnout rates either. Also, more pro-EU or anti-EU parties do not gain a systematic vote at EP elections in the sense that more anti-EU parties win more votes in Eurosceptic states, while more pro-EU parties win more votes in Euro-optimist states. Therefore, despite the existing cross-national and within-states variation that exists in the EU with respect to voters’ views on EU integration, EU attitudes do not translate immediately into a particular behavior.

**Case study contributions: Romania**

My project of linking EU attitudes to electoral behavior at EP elections started with an intuition that a particular case, Romania, defied the conventional wisdom about EP elections as ‘second order national elections’. In my attempt of discerning between citizens’ national and EU-related reasons for participation and party selection in first Europe-wide EP elections, I focused on three different components: voters’ EU attitudes, the EU debates present in the media during the EP electoral campaign, and the clarity of parties’ positioning on EU integration. The particular expertise I held as a Romanian citizen, the language skills, background, and the historical knowledge, greatly enhanced the quality of fieldwork and allowed me to uncover the causal mechanisms that linked EU attitudes and behavior at EP elections at least for this particular case.

I argued that a few regional characteristics, relevant to my case study and later to the post-communist region, need to be closely considered: the perception of the first EP elections as ‘second order national’ elections, the particular meaning of EU membership, and the party system characteristics. First, Romanians, as part of a state that had recently joined the EU (in 2007), were less aware of the perspective that EP elections are second order national elections. Moreover, as citizens of a new member state, Romanians were less familiar with the EU decision-making process, and thus less equipped to judge the relative position of the EP in the EU decision-making process. In fact, they considered the EP elections’ results just as important as the national elections’ results. The European Election Studies (EES) 2009 survey in Romania yielded that 67.33% of respondents consider both elections equally important, 18.26 % of respondents consider the EP electoral result as more important than the national one, and only 15.41% of respondents consider the national outcome as more important than the EU one (EES 2009, Voter Survey Data 2011). It seemed therefore, that only 15% of respondents followed the ‘second order national election’ logic, which, as mentioned before, attributes less importance to the EP electoral outcome when compared to the national one.

In addition, citizens viewed the EU membership in a predominantly positive light with only 6% of the Romanian respondents answering that the “EU membership is a bad thing” (ibid). As Cichowski (2000) explains, the post-communist citizens associate with the EU membership the fulfillment of two goals:
one economic, in which the EU is perceived as the guarantor of a long-desired economic well-being, and one political, in which the EU is the guarantor of democracy itself via the institutionalization of democratic norms, values, and institutions. The post-communist citizens the and Romanians in particular may not perceive the EP elections as decisive neither for national nor for EU related politics but they may consider these elections as important for both political processes.

Third, the transitioning party system with weak party attachment and unstable electoral markets diminished voter capabilities of differentiating among mainstream parties along the left-right ideological dimension and the EU positions. In the post-communist context, parties frequently split, dissolve, become extinct, and do not stand for clear identifiable values or programs, and do not permit clear choices (Birch, 2003). These characteristics impede a smooth functioning of theoretical models developed and applied in Western democracies, which assume clear identifiable positions on the left-right ideological continuum and the EU integration, and clear and stable preferences from one type of election to another. For instance, when one forwards arguments of strategic or sincere voting across national and EP elections, one assumes that the same supply of parties exists across the two elections. What the post-communist context may display though is a new party offering at EP election that did not exist at the national election, and vice-versa. Often times, a new preference at EP elections may mean that voters changed their preference (voter volatility) or that a preferred party does not exist anymore (party volatility) (Tavits, 2008a &b).

Three findings became essential when unfolding the electoral dynamic at first Europe-wide EP elections in Romania: two belong to voters’ attitudes and one belongs to the party supply side. On the electoral demand side, citizens’ attitudes toward EU integration, which focus on utilitarian perspectives and emphasize the benefits accruing from EU membership, were important factors for turnout. There was a clear EU component associated with the act of participation at least, if not for party selection also. Almost two thirds of the 150 voters surveyed on Election Day mentioned ‘hopes for a change’ toward a ‘better life’ as short or long term outcomes, for immediate or future generations. Sometimes, concrete examples were given on how EU membership could benefit Romania and its citizens. The EU issues highlighted referred to ‘structural funds’, ‘help with the fight against corruption’, and the ‘possibility of traveling and studying freely in the EU’ (summer 2009 interviews in Romania).

Second, the strategic behavior of punishing governing parties predicted by the ‘second order election’ model seemed to be lacking in this case. The 150 interviewees emphasized that the European Parliament elections were perceived as equally important to the national elections: If national elections would assure representation at the national level, European Parliament elections would be responsible with the same issues at the EU level. Voters believed that their preferred party, which may or not be the same as the one in the previous national election, constituted the best representation that Romania would have in the EU structures.

Third, on the supply side, all candidates and mainstream parties emphasized the importance of ‘pursuing national interests’ in European Parliament’s political groupings. While not necessarily policy oriented, mainstream candidates and parties’ messages insisted on the importance of large participation
at this ‘symbolic’ election. For instance, the Romanian President argued that ‘large participation’ in the election represents ‘a sign of respect for what the EU has done for us and for what the EU committed to do in the future’ (Vaida 2009). Similarly, the main leader from the opposition, the Social Democratic Party candidate for this election, declared: ‘High turnout means that Romania is taking seriously its role in Europe (...) and higher turnout than its neighbors, such as Bulgaria or states as Italy and the Netherlands will improve Romania’s image as a state seriously interested in the integration project’ (Severin 2009). In sum, the analysis on the campaign coverage illustrated that mainstream parties did not differentiate among their positions on EU integration. At most, they singled out that a vote for the fringe nationalist party, the Greater Romania Party (PRM), would be a wasted vote. The Greater Romania Party, which was perceived by voters and experts alike as the most anti-EU party, did not engage in EU debates and focused instead on national politics and the fast approaching presidential elections.

**Developing a new theory of EU attitudes and voting behavior across three EU regions**

I considered the case study to be a preliminary stage meant to single out critical components in generating a new theory on electoral behavior at EP elections, theory that will combine elements from behavioral theories developed for EU referendums and national elections. The conceptual starting point of the theory was related to voter EU attitudes. I assumed first that EU citizens hold ‘real’, but latent attitudes toward EU integration but these latent attitudes shape behavior at EP elections only if they are brought to surface by party elite competition over EU integration. Second, voters consider the possibility of voting based on issues coming from the EU arena *only if parties underscore competing positions* with respect to the EU, i.e. EU politicization is high. If all parties promote a similar position on what EU membership means for the state, i.e. EU emphasis is high, the salience of the EU issue increases for voters, but they may not be able to distinguish among parties’ positioning on EU integration. In a nutshell, to be able to cast a vote at EP elections based on EU attitudes voters need to understand where domestic parties stand on EU integration. Only when *clarity* is achieved via partisan competition will voters be able to link EU attitudes to their EU related party preference.

Table 1 summarizes the theoretical discussion. Considering the two dimensions of how parties may focus on EU integration at EP elections, i.e. emphasize and politicize EU integration, I envisioned different dynamics of how the EU Arena matters for electoral behavior. For electoral behavior I distinguished between participation and party defection, which means selecting a different party at EP election than at the previous national election. I considered two levels for EU emphasis and EU politicization at the party level: low and high. Therefore, when both EU emphasis and EU politicization are high, voters base their electoral behavior (participation and party selection) on EU attitudes. This implies a EU related campaign in which parties take competing positions. When EU emphasis is high but EU politicization is low, voters base only their participation on EU attitudes. In this case, the campaign is somewhat EU related but mainstream parties in particular do not engage in EU debates. When EU emphasis and EU politicization are low, EU attitudes have no effect on electoral behavior at EP do not matter at EP elections.
Table 1. Theoretical summary on the conditional nature of European Union (EU) arena voting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EU Emphasis</th>
<th>EU Politicization</th>
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<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>No effect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>Difficult cases</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Participation –YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Party defection-NO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>Participation- YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Party defection-YES</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Working with this matrix of EU emphasis and EU politicization at the party level and with data from the last two 2004 and 2009 EP elections, I moved next to layout expected regional differences in how EU attitudes affect voting behavior. The first distinction I operated was between former communist states and others. Here, specific perceptions of EU membership as the fulfillment of a long-term, historic goal of ‘returning to Europe’, an expected EU driven increase in the accountability of national political elites, and the weak party institutionalization significantly shaped the role that EU political and economic attitudes played in the region. In the post-communist states, citizens’ attitudes toward European integration (which I refer to as political attitudes) and citizens’ perceptions of economic gains or losses from the EU (which I refer to as economic attitudes) significantly affected voter decisions to participate in the last two waves of EP elections. They did so as much as other domestic issues, such as evaluations of the national economy and the national government. As expected, these EU attitudes had no effect on party deflection.

The second regional distinction I operated across EU was between older members, richer states that are net contributors to the EU budget versus more recent members, poorer non-communist states, which are mostly net receivers of EU funds. I showed, therefore, that high levels of EU emphasis and EU politicization were achieved in the first category. The West was the region where EU attitudes shaped electoral behavior, as both participation and party defection. In the South, EU attitudes had only a minimal effect on electoral behavior, as a region where EU related issues, as both dimensions of EU emphasis and EU politicization, were completely missing from public debates, especially in 2004 and less so in 2009.

To empirically illustrate how citizens in the post-communist region differed systematically than citizens in Southern and Western Europe in their ability to differentiate among parties’ EU integration positions and left-right ideological stances, I calculated each party’s entropy for all parties that participated in the 2004 and 2009 elections across 20 member states. Entropy, usually referred to as Shannon’s entropy, is a measure of uncertainty, of unpredictability, developed initially in the theory of communication (Shannon 1948) and applied in a voting behavior context by Gill (2005). On benefit of this measure is that it allows one to take into account the ‘don’t know’ category, which is substantially larger in the post-communist region than in the rest of Europe. The survey question that uses voter and party positions on EU integration is the following (a similar question is used for the left-right ideological dimension).
Some say European unification should be pushed further. Others say it already has gone too far. What is your opinion? Please indicate your views using a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means unification ‘has already gone too far’ and 10 means it ‘should be pushed further’. ‘And about where would you place the following parties on this scale?

If all voters give the same answer with respect to party’s X positioning, the entropy for party X is zero. If voters cluster around some values the entropy increases, and if all options are equally likely, i.e. voters’ answers are equally distributed along the twelve options, the entropy is maxim. Larger values indicate thus higher aggregate uncertainty in the electorate with respect to where that particular party stands on the left-right ideological dimension and the EU integration. I calculate the party entropy for each dimension, left-right and EU, for all parties listed in the EES database in 2004 and 2009. In total there are 160 parties in 2004 and 166 parties in 2009, with an average of 8 parties per country.

Table 2. One-way ANOVA (analysis of variance) of entropy mean differences across three regions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>2004 LR Mean est. (se)</th>
<th>2004 EU Mean est. (se)</th>
<th>2009 LR Mean est. (se)</th>
<th>2009 EU Mean est. (se)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Post-Communist</td>
<td>2.08 (.03)</td>
<td>2.23 (.01)</td>
<td>2.16 (.02)</td>
<td>2.32 (.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South</td>
<td>-.12*(.04)</td>
<td>-.01 (.01)</td>
<td>-.11**(.04)</td>
<td>-.03*(.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West</td>
<td>-.10*(.04)</td>
<td>-.09***(.02)</td>
<td>-.12**(.04)</td>
<td>-.13***(.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DF</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 presents the results of a one-way ANOVA test designed to test whether the mean regional entropy in the post-communist area is different than the mean entropy in the South and in the West. Table 2 illustrates that left-right mean entropy is lower than the EU one, a relationship that holds in all states (not showed here) and not only at the regional level. In addition, we notice mean entropies in the West are lower than mean entropies in the South or post-communist states. We can see that the highest uncertainty for the overall party system is in the post-communist region, in 2009 for the EU dimension (2.32). The South and the West display lower entropies in both elections. For example, in 2009 the West mean entropy for the EU dimension is .13 lower than the one in the post-communist region. The difference is significant at .001 level. We also notice that if differences between the post-communist region and the West are large for the EU dimension, the ones between the South and post-communist area are not. In fact, the regional mean party entropy for the EU dimension in the post-communist region is larger than the one in the South and the difference is statistically significant at .05 level in 2009, but not in 2004. In sum, this brief analysis points to the overall difficulties that citizens in the post-communist states have in identifying and positioning their parties on the left-right and the EU dimensions. Yet, as previously argued, understanding where parties stand on these issues is a key component of the second order national election theory.
Conclusions

The main contribution of my research was to highlight that the diversity that characterizes the EU member states is essential when theorizing about the patterns of voting behavior during EP elections. The EU represents a supranational political system with 28 member states that are substantially different in terms of within-states characteristics and state-EU interactions. As within-states characteristics important for electoral behavior research were differences related to party systems characteristics, the presence or absence of parties with clear anti-EU stances and EU debates, and the economic development; as EU-state interactions relevant were the duration of EU membership and exposure the several waves of EP elections, the understateing of EU policy making process, and most importantly, the economic contributions to the EU budget. Given the interaction of these factors, the post-communist states became a distinct category, as a region where parties did not necessarily advance competing policy positions on EU integration and yet EU attitudes had a significant effect on participation. Similarly to the post-communist region, the Southern periphery had no EU integration policy debates but EU attitudes elicited no effect on participation. Finally, debates over EU integration were particularly meaningful in the Western European states.

Yet, the 2004-2009 years I considered are substantially different than today’s extraordinary times of EU development. The economic crisis that hit Europe very hard since 2009 and especially the financial crisis in the Eurozone area led to an unprecedented level of EU politicization, during national elections for now, aspect which was relatively absent from a previous pre-crisis time. For instance, European leaders campaigned during the 2012 French election and supported different candidates: Angela Merkel (Germany) and David Cameron (UK) campaigned for the center-right candidate Francois Sarkozy, while the Belgian socialist prime-minister, Elio Di Ruppo, supported the socialist Francois Hollande. The stake of that French national election was in fact European given the question that the EU leaders were addressing at the time: specifically, how to respond to the Eurozone crisis with a unanimous austerity-focused voice. Similarly the 2012 Greek national election was interpreted as a ‘pro-euro’ vote. Faced with two polarized choices, a pro-bailout rightwing coalition versus an anti-austerity radical left coalition, the Greek voters decided, in one of the closest and most watched national elections with far implications for EU integration ‘for the Greece to remain in the euro’.

These recent developments, and others not mentioned here, speak about the interconnectedness, especially in the Eurozone area, of EU states that share a common currency and lost supremacy over monetary policies. While the Eurozone area does not include all EU states, and therefore, the increased EU politicization may not apply to all EU, it is still unclear what the implications of these unprecedented levels of EU politicization are for the previous regional differences I pointed to of post-communist states, Southern Europe, and Western Europe. Thus, will it be possible to speak of Eastern European states as a cohesive bloc during the 2014 EP elections or will other factors, such as membership to the Eurozone area and debt levels, outweigh what I thought to have mattered in 2004-2009? I think that only future research will answer this question, but for now, it is important to point to the difficulty of justifying Eastern Europe as an a priori region.
References:


