Theories of less important elections: explanations of electoral behaviour in European parliament elections

Michael Marsh

THEORIES OF LESS IMPORTANT ELECTIONS: EXPLANATIONS OF ELECTORAL BEHAVIOUR IN EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS

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This paper deals with the topic of theories of electoral change which is central to our whole enterprise of explaining electoral behaviour. It deals with some attempts to explain some systematic differences between behaviour at different types of elections – more and less important – in the same political system. One set of explanations has developed to account for US midterm elections and another set to deal with the recent phenomenon of European Parliament elections. Are these different accounts of different events, or are there fundamental similarities, both between what is being explained and between the explanations themselves? We seek to establish firstly how different these sets of explanations actually are, and secondly, to explore how well each accounts for behaviour in one particular empirical example, that of European Parliament elections. To begin with, however, we will point out some similarities between 'less important' elections in the US and the EU which will indicate the puzzle these theories seek to resolve.

THE PUZZLE

In the United States there are national elections every two years for Congress and every four years for the President. Congressional elections take place coincidentally with presidential elections, and again in the middle of a president's term of office – a 'midterm' election. And congressional midterm elections differ from the preceding congressional election in two respects: the president's party wins fewer votes, and turnout is lower. This pattern has endured throughout the twentieth century, almost without exception. In Europe a similar pattern characterises elections for the European Parliament. These are also seen as being less important – both to the public and the parties – than national parliamentary elections. They have taken place only since 1979 and are held every five years. Elections to parliaments within members states are held according to various timetables.

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Occasionally national and EP elections coincide (they always do in Luxembourg); more typically they do not but fall somewhere within the national parliamentary election cycle in each member state. While those elected to the European Parliament sit in European Party Groups, they are in reality elected to represent national parties, and hence it is possible to compare the performance of national parties in European Parliament elections with their performance in the preceding national election. It is also possible to compare turnout. When this is done the two patterns we observe with respect to US elections also manifest themselves: turnout is lower in European Parliament elections and the governing party (or parties) performs less well than it did at the preceding national parliamentary elections.

The theories that will be discussed here have generally sought to link the regularities in each context, to see the turnout and government or presidential loss as connected rather than separate phenomena. In the US context this is the contribution made by the theory of 'surge and decline' advanced by Angus Campbell in 1960; in the European context it is a central aspect of Karlheinz Reif's theory of 'second-order national elections'. A further common aspect of each theoretical approach is that the results of the less important election are seen as interpretable only through an understanding of something exogenous. In the US case this is the presidential election cycle; in the European case this is the national parliamentary election cycle.

In the next section we will review two sets of theory, and consider some of the developments that have taken place in each of them. Special attention will be given to two things. Firstly, what is the source of the explanation and secondly, what is the mechanism of decision-making at the level of the individual that provides the expected change. Having done that we can then move on to consider the manner in which these theories can be applied to the particular case of European Parliament elections.

THE THEORIES

Surge and decline

The original theory of Surge and Decline was presented by Angus Campbell.[1] We will call this Campbell_1. The theory seeks to explain differences in turnout and support for the president's party between midterm and preceding presidential elections in the United States. The explanation is that in presidential elections people are more likely to depart from their 'normal' pattern of political behaviour. This is because such elections are (relatively, in the US context) high stimulus elections. The higher stimulus of a presidential election promotes two types of change. First, it draws those to the polls who do not usually vote, those Campbell calls 'peripheral' voters. Lacking a strong party attachment, peripheral voters are likely to be swayed disproportionately by the circumstances of the moment to vote for the winning party. At the next midterm election, these voters stay at home, thus adversely affecting the president's party. The high stimulus also means that regular, or 'core' voters are more likely to be swayed by the advantage circumstances give to the winning party to depart from their normal partisan behaviour, only to return to their habitual behaviour in the lower-stimulus midterm. Again, this is to the disadvantage of the president's party. Presidential elections are thus a departure from an equilibrium that is restored at the subsequent congressional election.

After reviewing some individual level evidence and arguing that it does not support the classic surge and decline theory, James Campbell provides a revised version of surge and decline in which the mechanism of a higher/lower stimulus remains much the same but the impact of that on different types of voters changes.[2] We will call this Campbell_2. On the basis that the individual level evidence does not support the differential turnout of independent voters in the two types of election, James Campbell argues instead that the difference in the result is caused by the return to the midterm electorate of partisans of the losing party in the previous election ('disadvantaged partisans') who were cross-pressured by short-term forces and abstained, and the switching back of weaker partisans who defected due to the same cross-pressures. In his revised version of surge and decline

[1] A. CAMPBELL, "Surge and Decline: A Study of Electoral Change", *Public Opinion Quarterly,* 24, 1960, pp. 397-418. This was reprinted as A. CAMPBELL, "Surge and Decline: A Study of Electoral Change", pp. 40-62 in A. CAMPBELL, P. CONVERSE, W. MILLER and D. STOKES, *Elections and the Political Order,* New York: Wiley, 1966.

[2] J. E. CAMPBELL, *The Presidential Pulse of Congressional Elections,* Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1993.

theory it is strong partisans who move from abstention to voting, and weak partisans and independents who switch. The key additional concept used in the revised model is that of cross-pressure. Strong partisans may find themselves cross-pressured in a presidential year, wanting to vote for their normal party but preferring the candidate of the opposition. They resolve the conflict by abstaining. Weaker partisans have no problem with the cross-pressures and simply switch parties. Campbell_2 is a revision of Campbell_1. A quite different explanation for midterm losses is the referendum theory advanced by Tufte.

Referendum theory

In sharp contrast to surge and decline, which finds the roots of inter-election decline in the upsurge at the previous election, referendum theory locates it in the record of the administration. However, as in surge and decline theory, the roots remain external to the election itself, since they are located in the record of the administration rather than of Congress. Midterm elections are essentially a referendum on the government's performance, in which voters express their approval or disapproval through voting for or against those representing the president's party. The mechanism of change lies in the decision by at least some midterm voters to reward or punish the party of the president. The election provides an occasion at which voters can signal their dissatisfaction. This view is expressed most clearly by Tufte[3] and we will refer to his theory as Tufte_1.

Tufte cites two separate measures of performance: the public's general satisfaction with the president's performance and the trends in economic indicators. His analysis uses these to predict the magnitude of swings against the incumbent party, and he shows these can be predicted with a high degree of accuracy. There is nothing in the theory of a referendum itself to explain why swings are almost always adverse, but Tufte suggests that this stems from two further trends. The first is that presidential popularity tends to decline through a term of office; the second is that the performance of the economy tends to be better at the time of presidential elections. Of course, to the extent that neither is the case, the president's party should not suffer at midterm.

[3] E. R. TUFTE, "Determinants of the Outcomes of Midterm Congressional Elections", *American Political Science Review*, 67, 1975, pp. 540-54.

Unlike surge and decline, Tufte's referendum theory does not directly link turnout and midterm loss but others have attempted to do so within referendum theory. Kernell asserts a 'negativity' hypothesis.[4] Like Tufte, Kernell sees the midterm election as strongly influenced by perceptions of the president's record but he offers a more fundamental account of why this is bad news for the president's party. According to Kernell, judgements on presidential performance are always biased in a negative direction because – as a social-psychological rule – negative impressions are always more salient than positive ones. Moreover, voters are more likely to act on negative impressions. Hence, there will be more people dissatisfied with the president than there were two years ago; dissatisfied voters will also be more likely to turn out than satisfied ones, and, having turned out, will be more likely to vote against the president's party.[5]

Second-order theories

The concept of a second-order national election has its roots in observations of electoral patterns in US midterm elections, as well as German regional elections but it was used by Reif and Schmitt as an explanation of the results of the first direct European Parliament election.[6] Reif and Schmitt point out that elections differ in terms of how important people think they are. Just as Angus Campbell assumes that presidential elections will normally be accorded greater importance than midterm elections, so Reif and Schmitt assume national general elections will be considered more important than European Parliament elections.[7] Rather than distinguish elections as such they refer to different arenas of politics, with elections to bodies in the most important arena of primary importance and elections in other arenas of lesser consequence. Given that national

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[4] S. KERNELL, "Presidential Popularity and Negative Voting: an Alternative Explanation of the Midterm Congressional Decline of the President's Party", *American Political Science Review*, 71, 1977, pp. 44-66.

[5] For a review of some other variants that I have no space to discuss here see J. E. CAMPBELL, *op. cit.*

[6] K. REIF and H. SCHMITT, "Nine Second-order National Elections. A Conceptual Framework for the Analysis of European Election Results", *European Journal of Political Research*, 8, 1980, pp. 3-44; see also K. REIF, "National Electoral Cycles and European Elections 1979 and 1984", *Electoral Studies*, 3, 1985, pp. 244-255; K. REIF, "Ten Second Order National Elections", pp. 1-36 in K. REIF (ed.), *Ten European Elections*, Aldershot: Gower, 1985; K. REIF, "European Elections as Member State Second-order Elections Revisited", *European Journal of Political Research*, 31 (1-2), 1997, pp. 115-24.

[7] Of course, if some other hierarchy was recognised this would not alter the theory itself, only the predictions that would be made on foot of it.

politics remain pre-eminent, general elections in parliamentary democracies are therefore first-order elections; all others are second-order. Voters can be expected to behave differently in the two types of elections because of their differential importance. For a start, they will be less likely to vote in second-order elections because they and the parties know that such elections are less important. When they do turn out voters will be more mindful of the political situation in the first-order arena than that of the second-order arena. First-order issues, for instance, will dominate second-order ones. In particular, voters may take the opportunity to signal their dissatisfaction with government policy despite the fact that the second-order election has no direct implications for government composition. Additionally, in making their choice voters will be more inclined to follow their 'heart' in second-order elections, whose relative unimportance-importance means there are no consequences for the voter. This explains why their behaviour may differ from that in first-order elections, in which voters follow their 'head'.

Again, the theory reflects its time and place. Although Reif and Schmitt do not develop as such a theory of the voter, some points are implicit in what they say. Essentially, at the core of first-order theory is a much more strategic voter than the one at the heart of second-order theory. And implied in this notion is one of a voter who has a preference structure across two or more parties with more than one non-zero element. In other words, a voter does not simply support one party and reject the rest.

This strategic aspect can be further developed. Reif and Schmitt suggested that governments would perform particularly poorly when second-order elections occurred at midterm. The rationale for this essentially follows Tufte. It is a normal nadir of government popularity, brought about by a combination of political and business cycles, and the inevitability of unrealised expectations. However, this is disputed by Oppenhuis *et al.* who reject the inevitability of such popularity cycles and instead focus on the importance of the election as a signalling device.[8] This is also a function of the time since the last general election, and the time expected until the next one. When a second-order election follows close on, or is simultaneous with, a general election, it passes almost unnoticed. Hence turnout will be particularly low soon after a general election. Those who do vote will please themselves, voting with the 'heart'. However, when a second-order election takes place on the eve of a general election, its

[8] E. V. OPPENHUIS, C. van der EIJK and M. FRANKLIN, "The Party Context: Outcomes", pp. 287-305 in C. van der EIJK and M. FRANKLIN (eds), *Choosing Europe? The European Electorate and National Politics in the Face of Union*, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1996.

importance as a sign of what will happen at that general election is considerable. In such circumstances turnout will be higher (relative to other second-order elections) and voters are more likely to signal their discontent with a party or government.[9] The 'referendum' element of second-order elections is thus contextually located, not by levels of government dissatisfaction or economic trends but by the timing of the second-order election in the first-order election cycle. Of course voters still need a reason to voice dissatisfaction, and the explanation for the degree of it would not differ from the accounts offered by referendum theorists.

A second development of second-order theory is the suggestion that the differential importance of elections is better represented by a continuum than by a categorisation.[10] Not all second-order elections are equally unimportant but not all first-order elections are equally important either. In fact, where general elections have few implications for the choice of government, because a system of consociational democracy operates for instance, then they may differ little from second-order elections in the same system. Perhaps only in countries where general elections are expected to bring about some alternation of government control does it make sense to see local or European parliament elections as second-order.

Having outlined various theories we now turn to examine their relative value in accounting for features of European Parliament elections. The following analysis deals largely with the central point at issue between the competing theories, the explanation of government losses. It deals only indirectly with turnout, in as much as differential turnout is essential to such explanations. This paper does not deal with the shift in votes from large to small parties since none of the US theories address the problem of change between parties independently of change between government and opposition – for obvious reasons.

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[9] *Ibid.*

[10] C. van der EIJK, M. FRANKLIN and M. MARSH, "What voters teach us about Europe-wide elections: What Europe-wide elections teach us about voters", *Electoral Studies*, vol. 15, n°2, 1996, pp. 149-66.

EXPLAINING GOVERNMENT VOTE LOSS IN EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS

Aggregate data analysis

We will start with the aggregate data on government performance in European Parliament elections. What we want to know is how well the different theories can account for the pattern of government losses in European Parliament elections. A number of concepts used require operationalisation:

- Government loss: the difference between the percentage vote in the European election and the last national election.
- Normal vote: the percentage vote at the national election before last.
- Election cycle: the timing of the European election within the term defined by the two adjoining national elections. This variable ranges between 0 and 1. Where the date of a succeeding national election is not known it has been estimated according to the normal pattern of a country.
- Economic record: the change in GDP, unemployment and inflation in the calendar year prior to that in which the European Parliament election takes place (which is always in June).
- Alternation: the existence of a norm that elections may bring about substantial change in the partisan control of the government. We judge here that this exists in all EU countries other than Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Italy (prior to the system upheaval of the early 1990s).

Specific hypotheses, derived from the discussion above, are as follows:

- H1.1 Government losses will be a function of the surge at the previous general election: *i.e.* the difference between that election and the preceding national election (Surge and decline).
- H1.2 Government losses will be a function of the economic performance in the previous year (Referendum).
- H1.3 Timing of election within the national cycle is important for defection rates (Second-order).

We have estimated a model including cycle and cycle squared, allowing for a greater loss around midterm, as well as surge and economic record. We have done so firstly for all countries, excluding only those with concurrent national and European Parliament elections, and secondly for

only those countries that normally experience a pattern of governmental alternation on the basis that it is perhaps only in such countries that the idea of a second-order election damaging governments makes sense. This analysis essentially replicates and extends a previous analysis that covered only those European Parliament elections between 1979 and 1994.[11] This analysis includes all European Parliament elections to date. We also included dummies for the five directly elected European Parliaments to date to control for time differences.[12]

The results confirm previous work in demonstrating the importance of the timing of the election, and supporting the quadratic function of the timing of the degree of government losses.[13] Estimates in the simplified form of the model for countries with governmental alternation are very similar to those for the 1994-99 period: -47 as against -51 and 41 as against 39. Similarly, for all countries estimates are -33 as against -31 and 29 as against 22. This means that after a quarter of the cycle governments could be expected to lose 2.0 percent of their national election support, 6.6 percent at midterm and 5.2 percent at the three quarter mark.[14] Neither cycle term was significant when the analysis was limited to the countries without alternation (not shown). Additionally, the variables designed to examine surge and decline and referendum theories proved not significant in any specification. Surge has no effect, nor does GDP, nor the alternative economic indicators (not shown).

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[11] M. MARSH, "Testing the Second Order Election Theory after four European Elections" *British Journal of Political Science*, 28, 1998, pp. 591-607.

[12] In a previous analysis the EP variable was included in the regression analysis. This reflected the tendency of anti-government swings to increase since 1979 (*ibid.*, p. 603). 1999 proved an exception to this trend, necessitating the use of dummies here instead.

[13] *Ibid.*

[14] Oppenhuis *et al.*'s signalling theory does provide some alternative, and offers some ideas on what sort of defection might take place. Alternative specifications of the models in Table 1, using time since the last election, or time until the next proved insignificant. If both terms are entered results are better than those for cycle, suggesting a roughly similar set of predictions but in a much less elegant fashion.

Table 1. Importance of national election cycle, previous surge and economic performance of government vote loss in European Parliament elections: OLS estimates.

	European Parliament elections in countries with governmental alternation				All non-concurrent European Parliament elections			
	b	se	b	se	b	se	b	se
Cycle	-39.6	16.4*	-47.4	15.3**	-27.3	13.9	-33.2	13.3*
Cycle Squared	35.8	15.8*	41.0	14.6**	25.3	13.4	29.4	12.8*
Surge	0.02	0.2			-0.1	0.1		
Record (GDP)	-0.20	0.6			-0.5	0.5		
Constant	1.2	4.0	7.3	3.4	0.4	3.5	0.6	
R^2	.23		.23		.22		.21	
F	2.36*		3.36**		2.71*		3.27**	
	(8,29)		(6,34)		(8,40)		(6,45)	
N	38		41		49		52	
Root MSE	5.93		6.04		5.85		5.07	

Notes: * sig at .05 ** sig at .01
Dummies included for the European parliament (1-5) included with the 1979-84 as the reference category but results not shown.

At least at the aggregate level these results demonstrate the strength of the second-order theory in predicting government vote loss moderately well and much better in those countries where it would be expected to be more appropriate, *i.e.* those with a norm of alternation. They also indicate a weakness, in the European context, of basic referendum and of surge and decline theories. Admittedly, the referendum test is a very crude one that could easily be bettered, but it closely parallels Tufte's original analysis. Information on government popularity might be more appropriate, but that is not available for all elections. The surge indicator is also crude. Another operationalisation was also tried: averaging across three general elections with the previous general election as the mid-point of the three. This allows for some trend in parties' support over time. However, it also failed to produce significant estimates.

Individual level analysis

These 'success' of second-order theory in this context is unsurprising, and in line with previous work at this level. Moving to the individual level is more challenging as it brings into question not so much what is happening but who makes it happen. In particular we want to

observe the pattern of voter mobility across the two elections (general to EP) and see how well it matches the expectations of the various theories already discussed.

Specific expectations, again derived from the discussion above, are as follows:

- H2.1 That most of the change is away from the government (Surge and decline: Campbell_1).
- H2.2 That government will lose more votes to non-voting than opposition parties, and many more voters will switch parties away from them than towards them (Surge and decline: Campbell_1).
- H2.3 Independent voters are less likely to turn out at European elections than general elections, relative to partisans (Surge and decline: Campbell_1).
- H2.4 Low interest voters are more likely to switch or abstain from government parties (Surge and decline: Campbell_1).
- H2.5 There should be a higher defection of partisans at general elections than European elections (Surge and decline: Campbell_1).
- H2.6 Opposition partisans who abstained last time will rejoin the opposition side (Surge and decline: Campbell_2).
- H2.7 Weak opposition partisans who voted for the government last time will return to the opposition (Surge and decline: Campbell_2).
- H2.8 There should be a shift away from the government by voters dissatisfied with its record (Referendum).
- H2.9 Satisfied government supporters abstain more then dissatisfied ones who are more likely to switch (Referendum).
- H2.10 Shift away from government is greater when there is another favoured party (Second-order).
- H2.11 Second-order concerns are not relevant: *i.e.* European attitudes do not affect voters' decisions to switch (Second-order).

Data for this section is from a study of the 1999 elections.[15] Between 500 and 3000 voters in each country were interviewed by telephone immediately after the 1999 elections. (300 were interviewed in Luxembourg

[15] This study was designed and organised by Wouter van der Brug (Amsterdam), Pilar del Castillo (Madrid), Cees van der Eijk (Amsterdam), Mark Franklin (Trinity College, Hartford CT), Renato Mannheimer (Genova), Michael Marsh (Dublin), Hermann Schmitt (Mannheim) who co-ordinated the efforts of the group, and Colette Ysmal (Paris). It was funded largely by the Dutch NWO, the Spanish National Science Foundation, the Universities of Mannheim and Amsterdam, and Trinity College, Hartford.

but this country has been excluded from what follows as the two elections occurred simultaneously). Country samples have been weighted so that each sums to 500. Operationalisations are as follows:

- Vote change: differences between recalled vote at the last national election and reported EP vote[16].
- Partisanship: Feeling of being close to a party, measured on a 4-point scale: not close, sympathiser, quite close, very close. This is coded from -3 (very close to opposition party to +3 (very close to government party) with not close as zero.
- Government popularity: approval or disapproval of the government's record to date, running from -1 (disapproval) through zero (DK) to +1 (approval).
- Multiple party preferences: these are measured by the 'probability to vote for party x' questions (PTVs) standard in European Parliament election studies as well as several national election studies.[17] Respondents are asked for each party how likely is it that they would ever vote for this party, with responses on a 10-point scale from 1-10. Three measures are calculated from this. The first is a measure of support for a/the government party and is the highest PTV for a government party. The second is an equivalent measure of support for an opposition party. The third is simply the difference between the two, scaled from -9 (PTV=10 for an opposition party, no more than 1 for any government party) to +9 (PTV=10 for a government party, no more than 1 for any opposition party).
- Views on Europe: item on attitude to Unification which uses a 1-10 point scale to indicate whether integration has gone too far or should be pushed further. This is recoded here as a 10 point scale from -4.5 (too far) to +4.5 (further). Respondents were also asked to place each party on this scale and we have used the same technique as explained with respect to differences in party preferences to measure the perceived difference between government and opposition on Europe.

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[16] An alternative operationalisation would be to contrast the EP vote with vote in a hypothetical general election at the same time. This was used by E. V. OPPENHUIS, C. van der EIJK and M. FRANKLIN, *op. cit.* It has the advantage of removing the bias of recall data (see note 19) but the disadvantage of being subject to the same second-order effects of any opinion poll taken between elections. However, Oppenhuis *et al.*'s findings on the existence of switching and abstention contributing to government party losses are similar to those in the analysis here (below). A more complete comparison of the consequences of the alternative operationalisations will be the subject of further work.

[17] See J. TILLIE, *Party Utility and Voting Behavior*, Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis, 1995; C. van der EIJK and M. FRANKLIN (eds), *op. cit.*

- Political interest: Four point scale self-assessed interest in politics from none (0), a little, somewhat to very (4). Missing values were coded 0.

Table 2 contains the evidence of voters' movements between the two elections, general (GE) and European (EP), showing in each case whether they voted for a government party, an opposition party, or did not vote.[18] We can see from Table 2 that the government parties lost a higher proportion of votes than did the opposition – retaining only 48% of their votes (21/44) as opposed to the opposition's 67% (29/43). From the cells we can also see that erstwhile government supporters are also more likely to abstain than they are to defect (17:6). Amongst clear non-habitual voters (*i.e.* those in the second column) the government did better last time than the opposition, 17 to 12. All this is in accordance with the Campbell_1 (H2.1; H2.2). There is relatively little evidence of significant shifts from abstention to voting as might be expected from Campbell_2 (H2.6), although what shifts there were did benefit the opposition (by 2 to 1).

Table 2. European Parliament election vote and recalled national election vote

	European Parliament election vote		
Recalled national vote	Opposition	None	Government
Opposition	29	12	2
None	2	10	1
Government	6	17	21

Cells: % of total
Note: Weighted to equalise country size

Surge and decline theories also direct attention to the party attachments of voters, arguing that tendencies to stay, abstain or switch vary across different categories. We thus need to know something of the character of the voters in the different cells. Table 3 makes this clearer, showing the voter transition matrix in Table 2 by party attachment, coded here as simply -1 (opposition), 0 (none) and +1 (government).

[18] In the countries covered here the actual average loss by governments was 6.5% from their previous general election vote. Here it is 11%. This may reflect sampling error but almost certainly also arises from systematic inequalities in people's recall which are now well known. In particular, they tend to forget votes for now unpopular parties or governments.

Table 3. Recalled national vote by party attachment and European parliament vote

	European Parliament election vote			
Recalled national vote Party attachment	Opposition	None	Government	N
Opposition				
Opposition	79	19	2	1271
Independent	57	37	6	1144
Government	38	35	26	65
TOTAL	68	27	5	2475
None				
Opposition	43	55	2	100
Independent	11	82	6	597
Government	2	73	25	82
TOTAL	15	77	8	780
Government				
Opposition	47	42	11	136
Independent	19	45	35	1052
Government	5	33	62	1270
TOTAL	13	39	48	2458

Note: cell entries are row percentages. Ns are weighted to equalise country size

Campbell_1 (H2.3) would lead us to expect independents who voted for the government in the national election to abstain in the European Parliament election, whereas partisans who crossed over should return. This is what we find. Of 1052 independents who voted for the government last time, 45% abstained in the European election and more stayed with the government (35%) than switched (19%). Partisan defection was rare in the general election but of the 136 'disadvantaged' partisans who defected to the government last time, 47% returned, compared to only 11% who stayed and 41% who abstained. Campbell_2 (H2.6) predicts partisans of the non-government party should move from abstention back to their party. However, there are only 100 of them and, while 44% returned, 55% continued to abstain. Campbell_2 (H2.7) also predicts that independents should switch back from the government, but as we have seen this was less common than abstention.

A further expectation from Campbell_1 (H2.5) is that there should be more defections – that is, those identifying with one party but voting for another – in general elections than in European ones. The numbers are very small here. Only 201 partisans defected in the national election and 84 in

the European election, giving 7% defections (as a percentage of partisans voting) and 4% in the European election.

On the whole these results suggests the original theory, Campbell_1 is more useful here than the revised one, Campbell_2.

While this detailed analysis is necessary to test some ideas of surge and decline theory, and to give some idea of the numbers involved, a more general and multivariate analysis is preferable to consider the other expectations. Such an analysis also allows us to control for the country factor in our data set. We are particularly interested in those voters in the first and third rows, those who respectively voted against or for the government last time, and in how their behaviour in this 1999 election is related to characteristics like partisanship, satisfaction, and their views on Europe.

Taking each row in turn we could simply regress the pattern of 1999 behaviour of our characteristics, controlling for country, using standard OLS regression. Apart from concerns about the distribution of the dependent variables, a central problem would be the need to assume that the characteristics that lead to abstention were also those that lead to switching parties. This may be the case, but the assumption seems unwise to make at this point, especially since in many of the expectations above abstainers and switchers are expected to behave differently. For that reason we have chosen to use multinomial logit which allows a categorical variable to be regressed on a number of independent variables.

Table 4 contains a set of odds ratios which indicate the odds first of shifting and second, of abstaining, rather than staying with the government party (this is the reference option). So a shift of one point in government approval (*e.g.* from 0 to 1) lowers the odds of an erstwhile government supporter shifting to the opposition to 0.89:1. A shift from -1 to +1, the maximum, would drop it to 0.78:1 and as the standard error indicates, this is not quite enough to be significant (p actually equals .18). In Table 5 the odds ratios apply to the likelihood of switching, or abstaining relative to staying with the opposition. The odds ratios of 1.56:1 and 1.26: 1 indicates a one unit shift in approval makes someone 56% more likely to switch to the government and 26% more likely to abstain, having voted for the opposition last time. These are significant estimates.

We can use these two tables as evidence in relation to our expectations outlined earlier, starting again with those from surge and decline theory. Partisanship is linked to abstention/defection patterns. As partisanship inclines towards the government it seems to have more impact on defection (0.61) than abstention (0.82), but both become less likely.[19]

On interest (H2.4) it is apparent that less interested voters are much more likely to abstain than stay (0.60:1). This holds for both government (0.60:1) and opposition (0.65:1) parties, although the effect is a little stronger for government parties, suggesting again that they lose more from the abstention of voters who are less interested in politics.

Table 4. Characteristics of vote switchers from government parties: multinomial logit estimates

	Voted Government Last General Election			
	European election voted opposition		European election non voter	
	Odds ratios	SE	Odds ratios	SE
Variables				
Approval of government	0.89	0.07	0.86	0.05
Attitude to Europe	0.88	0.03***	0.93	0.02***
Party differential on Europe	1.02	0.03	1.03	0.02
Partisan attachment to govt party	0.61	0.04***	0.82	0.03***
PTV_maxDif	0.75	0.02***	0.87	0.01***
Interest in politics	1.07	0.11	0.61	0.04***
Pseudo R^2			0.23	
Log likelihood			-2345	
N			3087	

[19] The means of the different groups reinforce this point. Loyal government supporters average 1.5 on the party attachment scale. Abstainers have weaker attachment, averaging 0.92. Switchers, however, average 0.05. These results are closer to Campbell_1 than Campbell_2.

Table 5. Characteristics of vote switchers from non-government parties

	Voted Opposition Last General Election			
	European election voted government		European election non voter	
	Odds ratios	SE	Odds ratios	SE
Variables				
Approval of government	1.56	0.11***	1.26	0.08***
Attitude to Europe	1.02	0.03	0.95	0.02*
Party differential on Europe	1.03	0.03	1.05	0.03*
Partisan attachment to govt party	3.50	0.22***	2.64	0.17***
PTV_maxDif	1.41	0.03***	1.31	0.02***
Interest in politics	1.07	0.09	0.65	0.05***
Pseudo R^2			0.48	
Log likelihood			-2707	
N			4766	

Expectations H2.8 and H2.9 from referendum theories offer two different possibilities: that defection or abstention from the government is a function of approval (Tufte), and that abstention is not a function of approval but that defection is (negative voting). Results are inconclusive but if anything they point to the weakness of negative voting theory. There is the expected tendency for voters to leave the government when they are dissatisfied but, as we have already illustrated above, this is hardly very strong. There is no sign at all of negative voting, which would require a link between disapproval and switching but not between disapproval and abstention. Respective odds ratios of 0.89 and 0.86 are not significantly different when the negative voting hypothesis would require them to be very different. Less expected, however, is that approval does help governments. This is clear from the Table 5 which shows that voters who recall voting for the opposition in the national election and who are satisfied with the government are much more likely to leave their former party – either to abstain or shift.

Second-order theory rests on the assumption that voters have preferences across a number of parties and that different elections provide different contexts in which they select from their set. The PTV_diff variable uses this insight, measuring the differential utility of voting for different parties, in this case government or opposition.[20] A low value for this variable indicates a low government-opposition differential, a high value indicates that one is preferred to the other by a big margin. We would expect (H2.10) that those who shift will have a lower party differential. This is the case. An increase of only 1 point in the differential (running from -9 to +9) reduces the chances of defecting from the government side by 50%. Similarly, on the opposition side, it increases the chance of moving from opposition to government by almost over 40%. The differential has a much weaker impact on abstention, where a 1 point change alters the odds by about 25-30%. Arguably, abstention is the option of people who have no other party to vote for.[21]

Perhaps the most striking result of all, however, is that with respect to European attitudes, something that second-order theory suggests should be irrelevant. Hypothesis H2.10 is certainly not confirmed in this data which show negative attitudes to Europe driving voters who voted for the government last time to switch or abstain. A 1 point decline on the European attitude scale (which runs from -4.5 to +4.5) makes a voter 24 percent more likely to switch (0.88) or 14 percent more likely to abstain (0.93). Hence a voter strongly opposed to more integration would be almost 200 per cent (9*24) more likely to change their vote than one who was strongly in favour and over 100 per cent more likely to abstain. Positive attitudes pull people away from the opposition too. As it happens government parties were more supported at the last set of general elections by pro-Europe voters than were opposition parties: the mean attitude to Europe on the scale used here was 0.39 to the opposition's 0.20. In the

[20] One objection that might be raised here is that the PTV-based variables and the government satisfaction variable are doing much the same job, and that the importance of the PTV variables in fact supports the referendum case. While there is some truth in this, in fact the variables are not highly correlated. Pearson's r is only 0.3 between each of the PTVs and government satisfaction, and the multiple correlation is no greater. The weakness of the government satisfaction variable is certainly not due to any severe problem of multicollinearity. Dropping the PTVs strengthen government satisfaction, but depresses the R^2, while dropping government satisfaction has little impact on R^2.

[21] If we look at the means for each of the different groups who voted for the government last time, the party differential for those who stayed with the government is 3.5, for those who abstained is 2.2 and for those who switched is -0.8. The equivalent figures for those who voted opposition last time show a similar pattern: stayers -3.87, abstainers -3.05 and switchers -0.14.

European Parliament elections the difference increased: 0.74 to 0.29 – half a point on the scale. Non-voters too are much less pro-European in European elections than in general elections, 0.08 as against 0.46.

What is problematic about this significant shift is that it is unrelated to the perceived party differential on Europe. We would have expected the shift to be more pronounced amongst those who see the opposition as closer to their own position on Europe than is any government party, yet this is not the case. The inclusion into the model of a variable indicating whether a respondent is closer to a government party than any opposition party proved generally insignificant, except in the case of abstention from opposition supporters.[22] It appears that voting against the government, or abstaining, is often an anti-European act, which is carried out regardless of whether the government or opposition is closer to the voter on the issue!

DISCUSSION

In his original formulation of surge and decline theory Campbell suggested that although the theory was specifically intended to illuminate well-established patterns in US political behaviour it was likely that:

> *the basic concepts [...] – political stimulation, political interest, party identification, core voters and peripheral voters, and high- and low-stimulus elections – are equally applicable to an understanding of political behaviour in other democratic systems.*[23]

This paper has sought to examine Campbell's theory as well as some of its successors and developments and contrast them with the theory of second-order elections on the basis that all seek to explain the comparable patterns of regularity in different political systems. We explained the differences between the several theories. These lie chiefly in different conceptions of what motivates the average voter, with later theories allowing for more

[22] In case the party attachment and PTV items were acting as intervening variables in the relationship between proximity on Europe and defection these were dropped, but the proximity variable was still insignificant. Only by dropping all variables other than the European ones and country was a significant coefficient (p=.027) obtained for switching against the government but even this effect was quite small, at most increasing the chances of a switch by 40%.

[23] A. CAMPBELL, *op. cit* (1966), p. 62.

strategic, 'rational' behaviour than the earlier ones, but they also lie in the behaviour that each was developed to explain. Surge and decline and referendum theories focus on behaviour in a two-party system with a separation of powers and an electorate which is easily categorised as identifying with one party or another. In parliamentary democracies none of these conditions applies. Two-party systems are rare, even if they are liberally defined; there is no separation of powers,[24] and party identification, as the concept is understood in the US, is much less easily separated from immediate voting intentions. Nonetheless, the assumption with which this paper began was that such theories are at least potentially applicable in the different circumstances. Second-order election theory has grown out of this literature but offers explanations for matters outside the normal ambit of US focused studies, such as the shift of votes from larger to smaller parties, as well as adapting previous insights to understanding electoral change in sub- and supra- national elections.

In assessing these various theories in terms of their contribution to understanding behaviour in European Parliament elections we have chosen to focus only on one type of electoral change: that between the national government and the national opposition. We have generally ignored the issue of turnout, and the much more complex question of change between parties. While this clearly limits the comparison between the theories it has the advantage of taking a pattern which is more directly analogous to US midterm election changes by imposing a two-group, if not two-party system on European elections.

CONCLUSIONS

The expectations derived from surge and decline theory are only in part confirmed by the data. First of all, there is mixed evidence that government losses can be seen as a consequence of voters returning to 'normal' behaviour. Aggregate losses are not linked to the size of a surge at the previous election. However, it seems that defections by partisans were more apparent in general election than European elections, a finding which runs counter to some popular wisdom that European elections are contexts in which partisanship counts for little. We also see at individual level that independent voters are more likely than others to abstain at the lower stimulus election, and that partisanship is linked to shifts in and out of the voting public in some of the expected ways, although it is evident that

[24] Although of course in the context of a European Parliament election the difference is less important.

'peripheral' voters alone are not responsible for the losses suffered by governments. Of course these findings may be distorted by the fact that we have only recall evidence for the last national election, and must assume no change in partisanship or PTV differentials, perhaps a somewhat heroic assumption. Even so, the distortions in recall might be expected to strengthen links between partisanship and recalled choice rather than weaken them and the evidence here should certainly not be discounted on that point. In general the findings give more value to Campbell's original formulation that his namesake's revised version. While not every expectation is fulfilled, nor can all be dismissed.

Referendum theory and its developments generally performs less well. The aggregate data showed no sign that the economy mattered, and the individual level analysis revealed at best extremely weak results with respect to government popularity.[25]

Evidence with respect to second-order theory confirms previous analyses at aggregate level on the importance of timing for the extent of government losses, a result obtained even when the economic record in controlled for. These controls could certainly be specified in a more sophisticated way. However, if the result is accepted it raises the important question as to why voting with the heart rather than the head disadvantages the government. In our analysis this is probably a consequence of the fact that the opposition is more fragmented than the government. Vote switching is thus more likely to hurt the government than the opposition. This does not explain why the degree of loss follows the cyclical pattern that it apparently does.

The individual level findings provide further support for the idea that voters have a set of party preferences, rather than a single loyalty. Voters with another option are more likely to defect than abstain. However, the most striking finding relates to the significance of attitudes to Europe on defection and abstention. A central tenet of all the theories reviewed here is that midterm or second-order elections are not quite what they seem, and nowhere is this more evident than with the conception of a European Parliament election as a second-order national election – an election about national concerns and not about Europe at all. The evidence here suggests the need for some qualification of that view. Europe does seem to matter to

[25] Mixed results have also been found in the US context: R. NIEMI and H. WEISBERG (eds), *Controversies in Voting Behaviour*, Washington DC: CQ Press, 1993, p. 209.

some voters. A puzzle is the absence of evidence that defection is prompted by a perception that the 'other party' is closer to the voter on the European issue. Rather 'Europe' is tied up with the government, and disaffection with Europe means disaffection with the government. This is slightly different to a tendency observed in previous years of disaffection with the government manifesting itself in a vote against Europe.[26] More research is needed to ensure this is a different pattern and not just a different result generated by a different methodology but if it is true it marks a departure from past behaviour.

While this result certainly offers food for thought about European elections, the main concern here has simply been to review theories of lower stimulus elections, to explore differences and similarities between them, and assess what each can tell us about one particular set of low stimulus elections. Most of them offers something of value, although some have a wider potential than others. Integrating them into a new super theory however would be problematic, in as much as each is driven by a different mechanism, and different interpretation of why people vote as they do.

Further references

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[26] *E.g.* M. FRANKLIN, M. MARSH and L. McCLAREN, "Uncorking the Bottle: Attitudes to Europe in the Wake of Maastricht", *Journal of Common Market Studies,* 32, 1994, pp. 455-472.