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## **National European Debates and the 2009 European Parliament Elections**

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### *Background*

A vast literature has developed on European Parliament 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 (cf. Marsh 1998) and sought more fundamentally to challenge its core postulates (cf. 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’ CEEC member states, rather than as deriving from changes in the patterns of voting behaviour in the EU’s ‘older’ western members (Schmitt 2005).

While the 2009 elections appeared to fit within these now well-established trends, 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 analysing 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 salience, 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 EP – 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*, and the 'June Lists' in both their Danish and Swedish variants 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. 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.

#### *Workshop Format and Contribution*

It is against this background that the present workshop on 'National European Debates and the 2009 European Parliament Elections' is conceived. It brings together recognised experts on fourteen member states, encompassing the founding members of the EEC, as well as a selection of later West European and CEEC entrants. Each national paper will survey the European discourses deployed by parties during the 2009 election, with reference both to formal party manifestos and major speeches or other interventions

by party leaders during the campaign. The papers should further situate the immediate context of the campaign relative to the more general, recent development of national debates surrounding European integration.

Although the format will retain a degree of flexibility so as to allow for the appropriate treatment of national specificities, contributors will be encouraged to develop their treatment of national party positioning relative to the five-fold categorisation of 'Euroscepticisms' outlined in earlier work by one of the workshop co-organisers (Harmsen 2005, 2007). This descriptive topography of the phenomenon suggests a spectrum of oppositions to or about European integration running from the 'normal politicisation' of EU policy areas by mainstream parties through to the expression of fundamental oppositions to the project of European integration itself either by dedicated 'Eurosceptic' parties (see above) or by more broadly established 'protest parties' situated towards the relative margins of national party systems (cf. Taggart 1998).

The intention is thus to elicit, at this first stage, fully drawn portraits of the range of oppositions to and criticisms of the EU in each national case, as well as to provide a corresponding sense of the (non-)engagement of national political elites in seeking to provide a countervailing discourse of legitimation for the European project (cf. Schmidt 2006). The analysis of this wider discursive shaping (and its longer term evolution) will be informed by the earlier work of both co-organisers on the shifting terms of national European discourses and attendant policy implications, notably in the cases of France (Schild 2008) and the Netherlands (Harmsen 2008).

The workshop will then allow for the confrontation and systematic comparison of these differing national experiences. Thematically, comparisons will be drawn across four principal axes. The first such axis concerns discourses surrounding *the political project of European integration*, surveying the extent and nature of 'sceptical' or 'critical' discourses evoking such themes as the 'democratic deficit' or the (perceived) 'elitist' character of the process. Second, corresponding attention will be paid to 'sceptical' and 'critical' discourses concerned with *the social and economic project of European integration*, encompassing contestations of the process rooted in a sense of its excessively 'liberal' or, conversely, its unduly 'interventionist' character. This rubric will further permit an exploration of the discursive handling of the wider theme of globalisation and its relation to the European integration process (the latter potentially, again, variably being seen as a vector for undesirable change or as an impediment to necessary reform by its critics). Third, 'sceptical' and 'critical' discourses focused on *the preservation of national identity* and on the threats putatively posed by European integration to the maintenance of national particularities or 'exceptionalisms' will be highlighted. Fourth, the main similarities and differences in *prevailing national 'pro-integrationist' discourses* will also be catalogued, with attendant attention further devoted to the extent to which differing national elites proved willing to invest political capital in such exercises in legitimation.

This thematic cataloguing should in turn, finally, facilitate a more literal 'mapping' exercise – with a particular view to exploring whether, drawing on an insight

from the Europeanisation literature, significant instances of ‘clustered convergence’ (Börzel and Risse 2000) may be found (i.e. the identification, in the present case, of distinctive patterns of the framing of European issues which appear to be significantly shared by definable sub-sets of member states). The working hypothesis of the co-organisers is, in this respect, that the careful, systematic examination of national European debates is likely cast into relief the existence of a ‘core’ group of member states, significantly defined by (but not entirely corresponding to) the six founding members of the EEC. It is hypothesised that broadly similar discursive contours will be found in these countries, reflecting shared conceptions of European political and social models, as well as shared anxieties about the continued viability of such models in the context of both global pressures and the altered political dynamics of an enlarged EU. These contours, moreover, will be seen to differ significantly from the expressions of ‘Euro-scepticisms’ and ‘pro-European’ stances in (most of) those member states who joined the E(E)C/EU at later stages (with further significant differences again appearing as between such states). It is on this basis that the selection of cases has been made, encompassing the ‘Original Six’, together with a comparable sample of countries drawn from later enlargements which includes those generally seen as enjoying both broadly ‘pro-European’ and ‘Euro-sceptic’ reputations.

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