In the Shadow of Brexit: The 2019 European Parliament Elections as First-Order Polity Elections?

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Abstract

European Parliament (EP) elections have traditionally been described as 'second-order national elections' in which campaigns are fought by national parties on national issues. We argue that the 2019 elections should instead be considered 'first-order polity' elections. It is not EU-level party politics or policy issues that are debated, but rather the legitimacy of the EU itself. Firstly, the EP elections have transformed into an EU 'blame game' in which national governments are punished or rewarded over their stance on European integration. Secondly, the 2019 election was about the EU's fundamental values, not just multiculturalism but also gender equality and LGBTQ rights. Finally, these first-order polity elections are driven in large part by traditional news and social media platforms. While this is a long way from the patterns of the early EP elections, they still fail in fulfilling the function of holding MEPs and European party groupings adequately to account.

Keywords: European Union; European Parliament elections; values; gender equality; news media; social media

Word count: ~~4929~~4510

Introduction

2019 marks the 40th anniversary of the first elections to the European Parliament (EP) held in 1979. The idea to elect members of the EP through universal suffrage was meant as a motor of integration and an important step towards a European democracy through direct representation of the people. The first direct elections to the EP marked a significant change from the system of delegated representation through national governments. The first

comparative analyses of the first EP elections in 1979 found, however, low turnout and electoral contests fought by national parties on the basis of national issues[1]. This accompanied a tendency to mobilise protest votes against national governments instead of empowering and holding supranational governance to account. EP elections were therefore described as second-order national elections. Since 1979, the trend of second order election campaigns has been confirmed in nine subsequent EP elections. Even though the powers of the EP have steadily been increasing, most recently through the Lisbon Treaty reforms, turnout had declined ever since 1979 and electoral campaigns remain anchored within national systems with increasing numbers of the electorate using EP elections as an opportunity to punish national governments. The prospect of 'first order' European elections fought by European parties over European issues seems like a distant dream – despite attempts to encourage left-right contestation through EP party groupings and, more recently, the *Spitzenkandidaten* process. Contestation over political leadership at the EU level has been considered a vital element of EU democracy and for the development of European political identities.

In light of these trends, prospects for the 2019 EP elections were rather gloomy. The previous elections in 2014 had seen a significant rise of Eurosceptic parties who mobilised successfully with their agenda of dismantling the European Union (EU) and 'taking back control' from Brussels. Most significantly, the 2019 elections took place *in the shadow of Brexit,* the election of US President Donald Trump and the success of other right-wing populist and far-right parties in national elections in Europe. The elections were originally scheduled to take place without the UK and the seats of British MEPs to be reallocated amongst the remaining member states. As the departure of the UK from the EU did not happen as expected on 29th March 2019, growing concern about the future of the European project was a major constraint to campaigning.

Brexit gave a new impetus to Europe's right-wing nationalists and populists (many of them, following the 2016 vote, called for their 'own' Brexit – Frexit, Ilexit, Dexit, etc.). Nationalists did well in many places – particularly Italy, France and eastern Germany – where the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) topped the poll in many areas of the former GDR. In the UK, Nigel Farage's new Brexit Party achieved the most votes with 31.7%, taking pro-Leave voters from the Conservative Party, UKIP (which nevertheless has mostly taken existing pro-Leave votes from UKIP and the Conservative Party rather than facilitating any major increase in support for Leave). Such parties will constitute approximately one third of MEPs in the EP – a more significant and larger minority than in the past. In this sense, the EP elections seem to reconfirm the overall picture of fragmentation, differentiated politicisation and renationalisation that fundamentally changes the political landscape of Europe. The success of nationalists and populists suggests that the EP may increasingly turn into a place for the representation of national interests and a disregard for common European concerns.

Yet, while this overall picture is rather bleak, we nevertheless think that EP elections campaigns have gone a long way from formerly second order elections. Compared with expectations, the far-right success across the EU was muted and limited to a small number of countries. This was also met with a pro-European and anti-populist backlash which may explain the increase in turnout across the EU for the first time in twenty years. The anti-populist vote was, however, not absorbed by the traditional mainstream party groupings, but rather led to the rise of new party coalitions in the liberal-green-alternative spectrum associated with ALDE (now renamed the Renew Party) and the Greens/EFA. Taken together, the pro-EU party coalitions will still constitute a stable two-thirds majority in the EP. We expect that politicisation across member states intensified in the shadow of Brexit, which sparked fears about the unity of the EU-27 and initiated calls to safeguard the European

project. Public opinion polls since the referendum have revealed an increase in support for the EU in other member states.

While it remains true that EP elections are rarely (although perhaps increasingly) contested on the basis of European-wide policy issues or by European parties fighting on common policy platforms, we nevertheless believe that there is a new drama inscribed into campaigning which is driven by the awareness of both the electorates and political parties that what is actually at stake is the future of the EU and of European democracies. We call these new dynamics European first order polity elections[2]. They unfold as a fundamental value conflict about EU legitimacy, how democracy and popular sovereignty should be defended and reorganised at a national and European level, and what the EU stands for in relation to a broader set of fundamental values regarding multiculturalism, gender and LGBTQ rights, and environmentalism. What is contested is thus not only the legitimacy of the EU polity, but also the legitimacy of national democracies and their role in the European political order. Within the national arenas, EP election campaigns no longer unfold as a form of 'politics' but as a polarised struggle over constitutional norms and fundamental democratic values. This polarisation along values lines has generally weakened mainstream centre-left and centre-right parties, but opened new opportunities for Green, liberal and alternative-left parties at the one end, and right-wing populist and far right parties at the other end of the new identitarian-value cleavage[3].

In the following, we firstly reflect on the 2019 elections as a move from 'second order' to what we call a first-order EU blame game. Secondly, we demonstrate the way in which this unfolded during the 2019 election as a conflict over an idea of 'liberal Europe' particularly in terms of gender equality. Finally, we argue that the dynamics of traditional and social media played a key role in facilitating the 2019 first-order polity elections.

"European" elections? From second order to first-order EU blame game

Even though the feared coup d'état by right-wing populist parties failed, the 2019 elections still mark a watershed as, for the first time, the centre-right and centre-left groupings lost their majority in the EP and will need to seek support from other parties. Nationalists and Eurosceptics will remain fragmented in the new parliament and their biggest alliance, now named Identity and Democracy (ID), is currently in fifth place just behind the Greens. Falling support for mainstream parties and the success of fringe parties is usually explained with more volatile voting behaviour in an electoral context where less it at stake, in which the vote is used as a protest against incumbent parties and governments. The protest vote in 2019 was, however, not just a backlash against domestic governments as previous elections might have been interpreted. Rather, there is a new pro- and anti- European cleavage which shaped the expression of a protest vote in 2019. For instance, national governments are no longer automatically punished by the electorate. What makes the difference is rather the European stance that is taken by national governments, with pro-European governments being punished, as in the case of France, but anti-European governments, as in the case of Italy and Poland, rewarded by voters for their confrontational style in EU politics. In the UK, the vote was fought as a *quasi*-referendum on EU membership and shaped primarily by opposition to the Conservative and Labour positions on Brexit – both losing votes to the right to Nigel Farage's new Brexit Party and to the left to the pro-EU Liberal Democrats and Green Party. It was therefore not just the governing party that lost, but also the mainstream opposition party that came in fourth place.

The development of this pro- and anti-EU cleavage means, however, that the domestic arenas can no longer be considered in isolation from each other. Pro- and anti-European campaigns do continue to be fought primarily in the national arena. The election in the UK,

for example, was almost exclusively a contest between the national mainstream parties –
Labour, the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats – alongside the Greens, the new Brexit
Party and ChangeUK. Nevertheless, there are signs of transnational mobilisation, with the
main representatives promoting such debates not only becoming European public figures but
also actively engaging in European coalition-building. For example, the Italian Minister of
the Interior Matteo Salvini demonstrated efforts to mobilise a transnational far right campaign
in coalition with Poland, Hungary, France, Denmark and Austria. Campaigns against the
national far-right and right-wing populist parties are also frequently supported by
transnational coalitions of pro-European forces. In the UK, there were some attempts by the
Labour pressure group Labour for a Public Vote to 'Europeanise' their campaign messages to
support the election of a centre-left Commission President in Franz Timmermans[4]. Despite
the primarily national dimension of the elections, then, there is also a European arena of
contestation that shapes the pro- and anti-European attitudes of the voters that become salient
during the elections.

Talking of EP elections as 'second order' therefore fails to recognise an important
aspect of the 2019 election in which EU constitutional politics became salient. The
campaigns are fought not just on national issues, but revolve more fundamentally around
questions of the basic legitimacy of the EU as a political project. Despite the fact that the EP
is not the arena for the negotiation of EU constitutional politics and Treaty change, the EP
elections were considered as a sensor for the 'state of the Union' and the degree to which
legitimacy was attributed to the EU. From a historical perspective, EP elections have always
been understood as a large-scale societal experiment with citizens as guinea pigs to test the
viability of a European social and political order. What was to be tested in this experiment
was the possibility of building a social constituency for Europe: the belief that constitutions
could design a new type of society and that democracy could be incrementally introduced,

combatting voters' apathy over time, raising public awareness for Europe and ultimately enhancing EU legitimacy by socialising the EU citizen. The 2019 election demonstrated that these transnational dynamics of campaigning are increasingly turning into a European-wide blame game particularly in relation to EU-wide crises, where not only EU institutions but also foreign governments or whole countries and their populations are targeted as culprits for failures in economic performance or so-called uncontrolled migration. Such blame games are, however, about fundamental disagreements about long-term solutions of crises that affect the whole of Europe and are transformed into debates about national and EU sovereignty.

On the anti-EU side, nationalists/populists attempt to gain short term advantage from the situation by using aggressive rhetoric against the EU or other member states and mobilise for national sovereignty, but in the long run still keep a European debate going, in which responsibilities are attributed and shared solutions sought. Le Pen's National Rally, for example, connect the immigration issue to the EU's powers over national borders and migration policies and call for the restoration of unanimity in EU decision-making. On the pro-EU side, however, the EP elections were also used to mobilise support for the EU or to call for an intensification of integration in particular sectors as a solution to crisis. The European Greens, for example, call for European-level economic integration and policies such as a European unemployment benefit as a progressive and European response to the Euro crisis. Instead of punishing national governments according to the logic of second-order elections, such blame games turn voters against the EU, attributing it with responsibility, for instance, for rigid financial policies or border control policies. European elections would still be a protest vote, but one that is expressed against the EU and against the choices made by national governments in support or opposition to the EU. EP elections therefore become an opportunity to mobilise resistance against EU elites and against the allocation of EU power and sovereignty. EP election campaigns reflect, in this sense, a crisis of democratic

legitimacy and of the liberal nation-state that seeks responses to the various global challenges, particularly economic and financial instability, new security threats and new waves of migration and internal diversity. Yet, the dynamics of first order polity elections revolve not just around the relative balance of sovereignty between the EU and member states, but are also driven by a surging European conflict of values.

Liberal Europe? EP Elections as a Fundamental Value Conflict

Within the EU blame game, anti-EU discourse is used to raise an illiberal agenda that is also directed against migration, minority rights and democratic freedoms. Party positions and public attitudes towards European integration have long overlapped with the divide between inclusive vs. exclusive identities and social liberal vs. authoritarian values[5]. The 2019 elections demonstrate that there is no longer a consensus over so-called EU fundamental values such as peace, security, solidarity, human rights, state of law and democracy. Rather, they are increasingly contested in a way that challenges the foundations of a liberal democratic Europe. Such value conflicts became salient in debates about migration and the relocation of refugees, Europe's place in the world and its relationships to Russia or the US, but also in internal clashes within the EU between representatives of a liberal and social Europe against the new illiberal, authoritarian and socially conservative Europe. For example, Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orban rallied during the election campaign against 'liberal European empire-building and a Europe of immigrants'[6]. Such anti-EU discourse is however met with a pro-European mobilisation around liberal values as part of - as Guy Verhofstadt put it - a 'battle for Europe's soul'. Part of the pro- and anti-EU cleavage is therefore not just about the EU per se, but about the EU as a symbol of a particular set of progressive values.

While this values conflict is most commonly discussed in relation to migration and multiculturalism, in 2019 it was also gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights that became subject to contestation. The EU has long advocated gender equality; the principle of equal pay written into the Treaties of Rome and equality between men and women was officially designated a fundamental value of the EU in the Lisbon Treaty and written into the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. While this commitment to gender equality does not necessarily translate into practical reality, the EU has prioritized gender mainstreaming as an approach which demands that gender equality is considered within all areas of EU policy-making. This approach recognises the pervasiveness of gender inequalities across all issue areas and introduces a fundamentally new approach to tackling them[7]. This ~~centering~~centring of gender equality as a fundamental value of the EU has therefore brought gender to the heart of the EU polity and, in doing so, opened up an area of EU contestation in which the EU comes to be seen as a symbol of those liberal values by both supporters and opponents.

This conflict became clear in the 2019 EP election where gender is centred in a struggle over the meaning of Europe. For example, Matteo Salvini was photographed after the results came through kissing a crucifix and declaring that it is time to "save Europe" and "its Judeo-Christian roots"[8]. Such language calls not just for the exclusion of Islam from the idea of Europe but also for a return to conservative 'European' Christian family values. Earlier this year Salvini and other Lega members spoke at a 'World Congress of Families' event that opposes abortion, LGBTQ rights and so-called 'gender ideology'. Germany's AfD also mobilises against what it refers to as "gender madness" and in their 2019 manifesto calls for the abolition of 'gender mainstreaming' that has been written into the EU treaties. The campaign in Poland was fought in large part over the place of LGBT rights in Polish and European society, described as 'completely alien to European civilisation'[9]. In the UK, the pro-/anti-EU debate also reveals a similar values divide: voting leave in the EU referendum

was found to be associated with the belief that feminism is a force for ill and opposition to LGBT rights[10] ~~while members of the Conservative Party's hardline European Research Group (ERG) are also MPs who have consistently voted against marriage equality and women's reproductive rights.~~. The pro- and anti-EU cleavage therefore also overlaps with attitudes along the social liberal – traditional-authoritarian spectrum.

Such examples demonstrate the way in which gender and other social liberal values are transformed into an EU polity issue that are subject to contestation during EP elections. The 2019 EP elections were therefore not just a fight over more Europe or less, but over what kind of Europe it should be. These are also not one-dimensional debates about the choice of either more or less integration, but a multi-dimensional debate in which the choice for or against Europe is fundamentally linked to the expression of values and preferences about democracy. It is therefore not simply the high salience of the pro-anti-European cleavage, but rather the polarisation over 'European' values that distinguish the new first order character of the EP elections. This also implies that the dynamics of contestation are no longer nationally confined. The EU is contested as a symbol or vehicle of such progressive liberal values, led by populist parties or the national governments of Poland, Hungary or Italy in a way that has European-wide repercussions. Yet, it is not just political parties that successfully transform EP elections into first-order polity elections. We also observe how both traditional news media and new digital and social media increasingly play a role in promoting European polity elections.

Creating the European Media Arena – From Traditional News to Social Media

One important driving force for this new trend towards a first-order polity blame game are new media dynamics in communicating about Europe and engaging citizens in democratic

debate, contributing to the, albeit so far limited, creation of a European public sphere. This process does not necessarily transform into debates over European parties, leadership or policy proposals but facilitates the kind of EU polity contestation we describe here. There are often internal media logics at play: in our article on the media coverage of the 2014 EP elections, we argue that there is that result from a bias in the media towards focusing on the EU *polity* over issues of *politics* and *policy[11]*. It is easier to create news value with this kind of contestation – drama, conflict, and the risk of collapse of the European project. This polity bias often combines with the general media bias towards negativity and bad news to create negative stories about the EU that delegitimise its institutions. The polity bias also means that news disproportionately amplifies voices of Eurosceptics – for example, in coverage during the 2019 election warning of a Eurosceptic landslide or "populist surge" in the elections[12]. This amplification of nationalist voices takes place even in contexts such as Germany where there is a domestic media consensus in opposition to the AfD but where the combined negativity and polity biases creates drama about Euroscepticism in other EU member states. Yet, this polity bias can in some cases also be combined with a defence of the European project if news reports spark existential fears about the collapse of the EU – German newspapers, for example, debated whether the 2019 election would constitute a *'Schicksalswahl'*, an election determining Europe's fate[13] .

Traditional media also exacerbate the conflict over fundamental values such as gender equality. The public sphere has traditionally prioritised a masculine style of deliberation, with women generally relegated to the private sphere. In the 2014 EP elections, women were marginalised in debates about the EU, with women far less likely to write or be quoted in opinion-shaping news about the EU polity especially in the UK[14]. This matters for the descriptive and substantive representation of women in EU affairs, preventing, for example, any possible development of a European identity amongst women on the basis of a 'gender

equal polity'[15]. ~~It also matters for women's active citizenship in the EU – a study by Roberta Guerrina and colleagues found that in the run up to the referendum women were far less confident than men in their knowledge of the EU, were more uncertain how they would vote and were more likely to speak about the EU in the private rather than public sphere[16].~~ ~~. The lack of women's representation in EU debates may mean that rallying cries by Eurosceptics against 'gender ideology' go ignored or unchallenged in the European public sphere. In the 2019 election, we might expect that there were more female voices represented, with, for example, Theresa May as British Prime Minister, female leaders of the two mainstream parties in Germany in Andrea Nahles and Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer as party leaders, and with Margrethe Vestager tipped as a potential candidate for EU Commission President. However, the question becomes how women leaders are represented in mainstream and social media discourse. Women as leaders in European and international politics become easy targets of sexist and misogynistic reporting that focuses on their appearance or critiques their performances in way rarely targeted at men.~~

- However, the 2019 election also demonstrates the need to look at the growing role of social media in creating the conditions for first order 'polity' elections. Concern about the role of social media in elections has grown since <u>the last EP elections in</u> 2014, particularly in response to Brexit and the election of Donald Trump as US president in 2016. ~~In a recent article, we argue that online discussion forums turn into 'participatory populism' during EP elections in which not just the EU but also mainstream parties and actors are systematically delegitimised.~~ In recent years, scholars have observed how far-right and right-wing populist parties <u>and movements</u> use social media to spread disinformation, ~~and~~ delegitimise institutions and to network across borders. ~~The Leave campaigns during the UK referendum were found to be most active on Twitter and Germany's AfD is known to do most of its mobilisation online. More recently, t~~ <u>In</u> a study of 'junk news' shared on social media in the

run up to the 2019 EP election, t~~he~~ Oxford Internet Institute found that while 'junk news' ~~on Twitter during the 2019 election~~ was minimal on Twitter, it was shared fairly widely on Facebook, with a focus particularly on populist themes such as anti-immigration and Islamophobic ~~content~~sentiment[17]. Such social media mobilisation around the EU election also incorporates ~~highly~~ misogynistic content related to the European values divide we describe above. ~~and anti-LGBTQ campaigns~~. In the UK for example, the launch of UKIP's EU election campaign sparked controversy after the anti-feminist and anti-EU YouTuber 'Sargon of Akkad' was selected as a UKIP candidate and uploaded new YouTube videos building upon his previous comments about raping Labour MP Jess Phillips[18] ~~female MPs speaking out against Brexit have been subject to online death and rape threats to such an extent that they are forced to change the way in which they organise their public meetings and communication with constituents.~~

~~However, there is also a constructive role for social media.~~ Social media platforms were also used by progressive and pro-European actors in the 2019 elections to defend the EU or present new visions for Europe's future. ~~There have also been changes since the 2014 election to the way that social media platforms deal with far-right content. In Germany for example, online discussion forums on many online news platforms have been shut down because they served as a platform for xenophobic or racist discourse. While there is still a lot more they could be doing, Twitter and Facebook now publish the funding source of political ads. There are also many more fact-checking organisations working across Europe, some organised and funded by the European Parliament and others organised at the grassroots level, such as the #IAmHere movement formed of individuals fighting hate speech online. In the UK, Remainers have been highly mobilized on social media since the referendum, and through Facebook groups for the '48%' as well as local Remain voters have sparked offline groups to campaign for the UK to remain in the EU.~~ During the 2019 election in the UK,

Remainers used social media to share views on tactical voting for pro-EU parties, to organise campaigning efforts and to share information. The so-called 'green wave' of the EP election was also driven by social media mobilisation. In Germany, the YouTuber Rezo sparked debate after posting a video calling for people not to vote for the Christian Democrats (CDU) in large part because of their inaction on climate change. The 16-year-old Swedish climate campaigner Greta Thunberg called for action on the climate emergency in the EP elections on her Instagram platform that has 2 million followers. Finally, social media is was also used to push back against anti-LGBTQ movements during the 2019 elections. For example, the highly charged debate over LGBT rights in Poland intensified in the final days of the election as a result of a YouTube documentary about the sexual abuse of children by Catholic priests, speaking to the role of the Church in shaping social values in Poland. The role of social media platforms in the 2019 election may go some way to explaining the mobilisation of younger people and the increase in turnout. In Germany, for example, younger voters were far more likely to have voted Green compared to their older counterparts. Social media platforms during the 2019 election were therefore an important arena for staging debates about the future of the EU and the nature of 'European values'.

Conclusion

Overall, it appears that the 2019 elections deviated from the patterns of second-order elections in important ways. Instead of substitute national campaigns in isolated national arenas, we observe highly Europeanised debates that were primarily about the EU 'polity' rather than EP party politics or its policy competences. General perceptions of 'crisis' in Europe had a decisive impact on the transnational dynamics of campaigning in the form of a European-wide blame game not just regarding who should be targeted as culprits for failures

in economic performance, migration or democracy, but also about who can provide sustainable solutions to crises that affect the whole of Europe. Campaigning also took place 'in the shadow of Brexit', which was debated widely across the European public sphere and sparked fears about an uncertain future of Europe and of democracy.

EP polity elections, especially when amplified through social media, ~~are~~ opened the arena for ~~also about fundamental value~~ transnational conflicts about fundamental values that were debated controversially with and across countries, between political parties along an emerging cosmopolitan-nationalist/communitarian cleavage and among a polarised European public ~~opinion.~~ While such value conflicts revolved around migration, multiculturalism and the place of Islam in Europe, these ~~are~~ also touched ~~also about~~ on the interpretation of the EU's fundamental values such as human rights, (gender)equality, free speech and the rule of law ~~also highly gendered Europeanised polity elections, in which women are not just marginalised but the principle of gender equality in the EU is highly contested~~. Such value ~~conflicts~~ clashes ~~also~~ align with the pro-and anti-European cleavage, with those highly critical of the EU also seeing it as a symbol of the social liberal values that they oppose and vice versa.

Finally, traditional and social media have played a key role in the trend towards what we describe as first-order polity elections in 2019, driving and facilitating the debates not just over EU legitimacy and national sovereignty but also over fundamental values and the kind of Europe voters want. The pro-EU/anti-EU conflict was~~is now~~ also fought through the media – both through traditional news and social media such as Facebook. This supported~~s~~ a trend towards coalition building and the formation of 'alternative leadership' in both the anti-European and pro-European camp, with public figures such as Salvini and Verhofstadt ~~making use of traditional and social media platforms~~gaining EU-wide media prominence while the official *Spitzenkandidaten* campaign was~~is~~ further undermined. The mediatisation

of the campaign further facilitate~~ds~~ mobilisation of voters through various forms of social media engagement in the discussion of EU polity issues. Nevertheless, while these election dynamics ~~are~~ initiated a development from the earlier model of 'second-order' elections, they ~~are~~ remained largely detached from the procedures of empowerment and control provided by EU democracy. ~~also not positive news for the goal of EU-level democracy because t~~This is ~~so, because the~~e EP ~~does~~ only has ~~only restricted~~limited ~~not have the~~ competences to ~~manage~~ deal with such fundamental constitutional questions. It represents the EU foundational values but has no leeway to initiate Treaty change. First-order polity contestation therefore largely sidesteps the ~~As a result, t~~he key function of EP elections, which remain bound to procedures of accountability ~~to~~ of EU-policy-making ~~hold MEPs and European party groupings to account for their political and policy decisions fa~~and not to changes of the constitutional game~~ils to fully materialise~~.

Notes

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