

Stimulus, response and turnout variations at a European Parliament election

by

Mark Franklin
(European University Institute, Florence)

and

Bernhard Wessels
(WZB – Berlin)

Paper prepared for presentation at the annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association,
Chicago Illinois, April 2010

Stimulus, response and turnout variations at a European Parliament election *

ABSTRACT

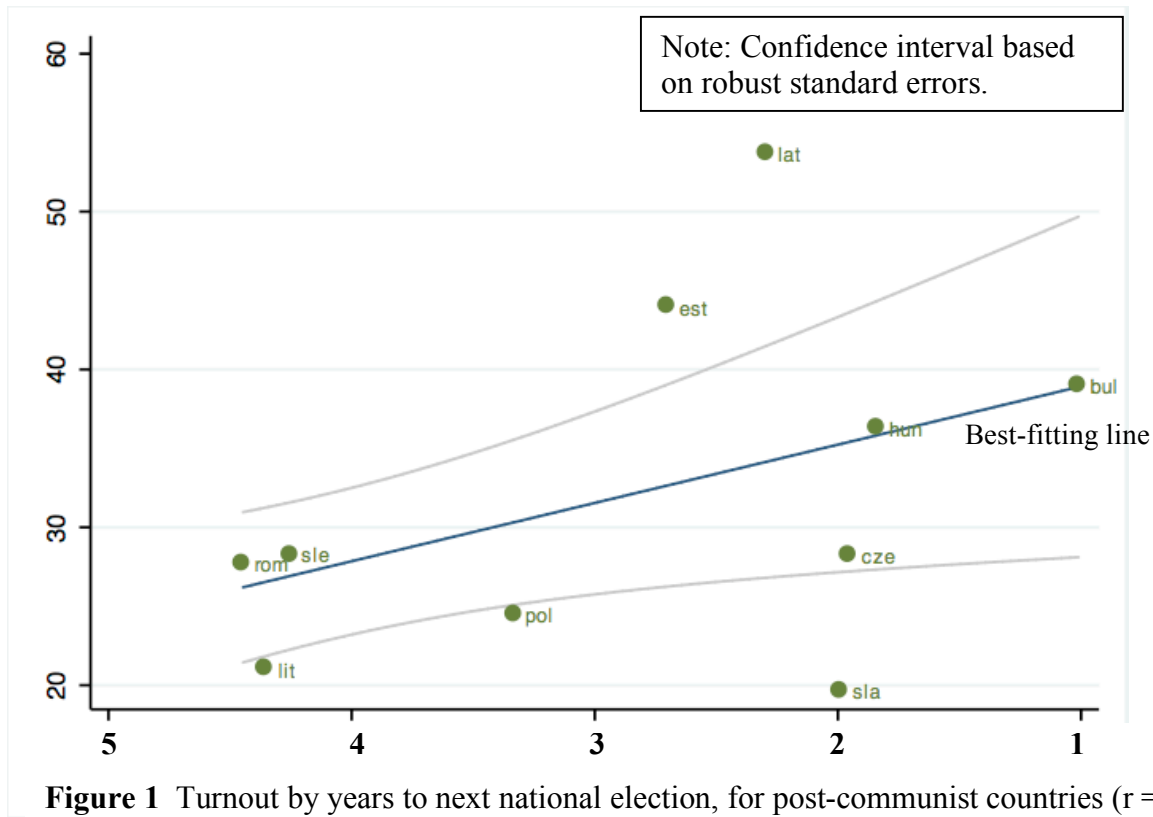
Elections to the European Parliament (EP) have virtually no salience in their own right. These are elections at which no executive is elected, no government is at stake and, while the composition of the European Parliament undoubtedly matters for the governance of the European Union, parties do not campaign at EP elections by putting forward differing platforms of promises regarding what the parliament would do if their party were to “win”. What salience these elections acquire comes from their use as “barometers” signalling what would happen if the election were a national election at which real government power was at stake; and their importance in this regard varies with the timing of the European Parliament election in the national electoral cycles of member states. EP elections occurring closely before national elections have considerable value as barometers, while EP elections occurring in the aftermath of national elections have no such value because the national election outcome is already known. So the importance of the election varies in a predictable fashion from one country to another, providing a quasi-experimental setting in which to study how voters react to differences in their own motivations and the mobilizing activities of political parties. Using insights gained from this study we are able to explicate variations in turnout between EU member countries, and in particular the very low turnout seen in post-communist EU member states.

*Thanks to Till Weber and Sara Hobolt for helpful comments.

Why is turnout at European Parliament (EP) elections so much lower in the post-communist countries of Central and South-Central Europe than in the countries of Western Europe that are also members of the European Union? This question could be reformulated the other way around: why is turnout so much higher in countries of Western Europe? Indeed, why would anyone vote in an election with no discernable purpose? EP elections are elections at which no executive is elected, no government is at stake and, while the composition of the European Parliament undoubtedly matters for the governance of the European Union (EU), parties do not campaign at EP elections by putting forward differing platforms of promises regarding what the parliament would do if their party group received more votes (van der Eijk and Franklin 1996). Perhaps voters in post-communist countries are more clear-eyed when it comes to these elections – recognizing them for the irrelevancies that they largely are. But then we would have to enquire why some post-communist countries see higher turnout at these elections than others and, indeed, why turnout has varied so markedly in the same countries over the two sets of EP elections at which their citizens have been eligible to vote.

In their marked variations in turnout from one country and one EP election to the next, post-communist countries prove no different from the countries of Western Europe. Indeed, it is by now well-understood that turnout at EP elections varies across countries and over time for three primary reasons (Reif and Schmitt 1980; van der Eijk and Franklin 1996; Franklin 2002, 2005; Wessels and Franklin 2009). In some countries voting is compulsory, and in these countries turnout at EP elections stays close to the levels seen at national elections and shows little variation between one EP election and the next. Importantly, none of the post-communist countries are compulsory voting countries, giving rise to an obvious reason for lower turnout there. Some elections are “founding elections” – the first EP elections ever held in each country have generally seen higher turnout than subsequent EP elections in the same country (even though this does not seem to have applied to post-communist countries, the founding elections may yet prove to have been different there). Finally, turnout at EP elections differs from country to country as a reflection of the length of time that has passed since the most recent national election – or perhaps the length of time still to elapse until the next national election. This final regularity does appear to apply just as much to post-communist as to other members of the European Union. Figure 1 shows turnout in the EP elections of 2009 for former communist member countries. While there are two clear outliers (Latvia and Slovakia), the pattern of rising turnout with reductions of anticipated time to the next national

election is clear (and, even with only ten cases, significant at the 10% level).¹



Explaining the outliers, and indeed explaining the very basis of the observed variations in turnout with time to the next national election, requires us to address the individual-level basis for the observed regularities, something that has never been done systematically. The explanation generally given is a very general one – that at European Parliament elections, as at other “second order” national elections, “less is at stake” (Reif and Schmitt 1980; Reif 1985). This would certainly explain lower turnout, but not the specific pattern of turnout falling off a cliff in elections held soon after a national election and then slowly recovering as time to the next national election decreases – a second puzzle that this paper addresses.

In this paper we will develop a theory explaining the individual-level behavior that underlies the aggregate regularity illustrated above (and even most of the deviations from this regularity represented by the already-mentioned outliers). We start from the question “why would anyone vote in an election with no discernable purpose?” and derive a set of propositions that are then tested

¹ Time to the next national election is obviously unknown in most EU member countries at the time of writing, and has been estimated on the basis of the latest time at which national elections could be held in each country, many of which permit early dissolutions which might occur in practice.

with data from the 2009 European Parliament election study. We will see that there are in fact not just one but several regularities having to do with the national electoral cycles in which EP elections are embedded, and that these regularities not only explain differences in turnout levels among post-communist countries in which EP elections fall early or late (along with the same differences in more established democracies) but also the very distinction between post-communist and other democracies, accounting for the lower turnout seen in new democracies at these elections.

Why vote at an election with no purpose?

In the existing turnout literature three very clear findings are repeated over and over again. Some people vote because this is what they always do – they are *habituated* (Schmitt and Mannheimer 1991, Plutzer 2002, Franklin 2004); others vote because they care which party wins the election and believe that their votes (along with those of like-minded people) can secure the desired outcome – they are *motivated* (Verba Schlozman and Brady 1995; Franklin 1996; Franklin 2004); yet others vote because they are persuaded to do so by parties, candidates, friends, or television pundits and editorial writers – they are *mobilized* (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Verba Schlozman and Brady 1995; Franklin 2004). A number of additional variables having to do with personal characteristics such as education and social embeddedness appear to be critical in determining whether young voters ever do acquire the habit of voting or whether, rather, they acquire a habit of non-voting (Plutzer 2002). Such personal characteristics probably serve to distinguish people likely to have acquired the habit of voting from other individuals, which would explain why they play a role in conventional turnout models such as that put forward by Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995). These regularities have been theorized and confirmed in the context of national elections, and the relative importance of each influence may well be different in European Parliament elections, but there is no reason to suppose that the categories of influence will themselves be different.²

Changes in stimulus and changes in response

What of the effects to be expected from the position in the electoral cycle at which EP elections fall? As already mentioned, such effects have never been theorized explicitly at the individual level,

² During the period when the characteristics that will be displayed by mature adults are being formed, young adults prove more responsive to variables affecting the maturation process and to differences in electoral context than older adults do (Plutzer 2002; Franklin 2004). However, to avoid additional complexities in an already complex research design, in this study we ignore differences in behavior of young voters as a separate group.

and certainly not in terms of the categories of influence distinguished above. Still, it is not hard to do so. Because European Parliament elections occur on a fixed five-year cycle, but national elections in the member countries do not, an election to the European Parliament can occur at different points in the national election cycle of EU member countries. If we consider these points in time to be laid out relative to a common starting point – the previous national election – so that what differs between an EP election in one country and ostensibly the same election in a different country is the length of time elapsed since the previous national election, then we expect two different kinds of changes to occur in the circumstances that surround these different elections.

The first way in which the character of EP elections can be expected to differ according to location in the electoral cycle is by providing voters with a different *stimulus*: an EP election that occurs shortly after a national election may have a different objective character than an EP election that occurs shortly before a national election, and both of these could be objectively different from an EP election that occurs near the middle of the electoral cycle.

The second way in which EP elections can be expected to differ, depending on location in the national electoral cycle, is in terms of the *response* that voters have to these stimuli. Even the same stimulus can elicit a different response in different circumstances, and we expect such differences to occur over the course of national electoral cycles.

Differences in stimulus correspond in practice to differences in the levels of independent variables, which can take on different values, higher or lower, at different points in the cycle. Differences in response correspond to differences in the effect coefficients that might be estimated in a regression analysis – coefficients that tell us to what extent individuals react to the stimuli with which they are presented. Of course, neither of these things should vary for compulsory voting countries.

The most important way in which the stimulus provided by an election to the European Parliament can be expected to differ when the election occurs at different points in the national electoral cycle is in terms of the efforts made by parties and candidates to *mobilize* their supporters. Elections are expensive to fight, and elections with no discernable purpose will not be viewed by rational party leaders as deserving the expenditure of scarce funds. So mobilizing efforts will be less, as mentioned ubiquitously by observers (Blumler and Fox 1980, Marsh and Franklin 1996, Banducci et al. 2005, De Vreese et al. 2006). Yet the extent to which mobilizing efforts will be less can be expected to differ over the course of the cycle. As suggested in *Choosing Europe?* (van der Eijk and Franklin 1996), EP elections acquire a secondary importance as barometers or “markers” of what

might have happened had the election been a national Parliamentary election, and the value of the election as a marker varies with position in the cycle. An EP election held soon after a national election has no value as a marker, since a better marker can be found in the outcome of the national election just past. On the other hand, mobilization at the start of the cycle may also be cheaper for parties to undertake if they still have an organization in the field placed there for national elections recently past, and other assets (such as television advertisements) that can be re-used with relatively little expense. But with the passage of time such assets will become less useful and mobilization should decline. Then, as the next national election approaches so the EP election becomes an increasingly valuable marker. Political commentators and political parties themselves should start to view the outcome increasingly as a “dry run” for the national election to come, so that parties can be expected to make greater efforts to mobilize their supporters, not wanting to give the impression of electoral weakness so soon before an important national contest and wanting to take advantage of the opportunity to remind supporters of the importance of voting (there may also be the same type of ‘spillover’ seen at the start of the electoral cycle if EP mobilization can ‘piggy-back’ on mobilization intended for the coming national election). The expected pattern of change in mobilization over the course of the election cycle (for all but compulsory voting countries) is shown by U-shaped line in the first pane of Figure 2. In practice, the drop-off in mobilizing activities might be rather sharper than shown, however, in line with the conjecture that rational parties will see no point in engaging in mobilizing activities at an EP election immediately following a national election – a conjecture that provides the customary explanation for the especially low turnout seen at EP elec-

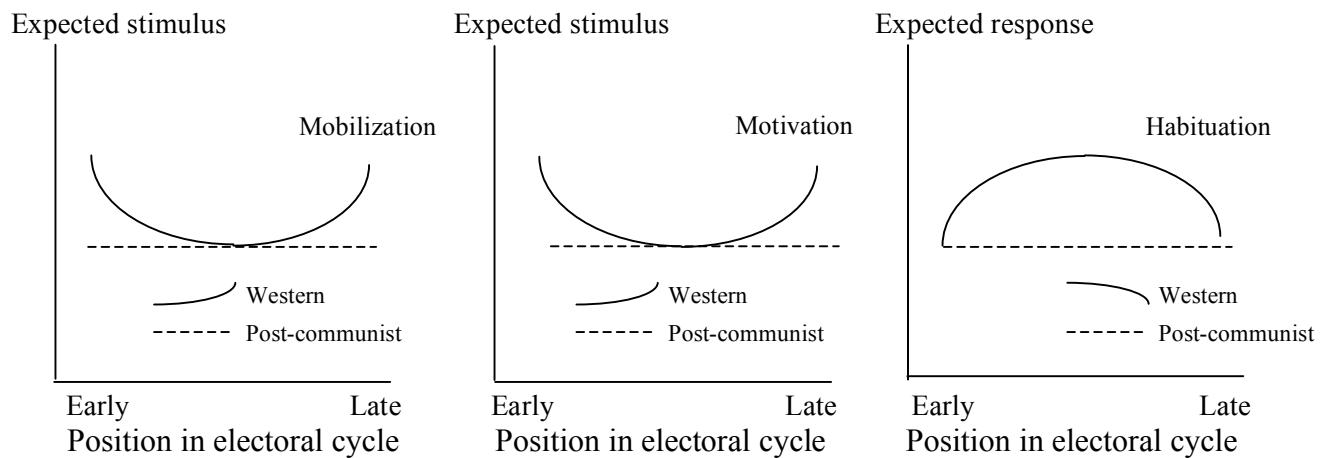


Figure 2 The expected influence on turnout at EP elections of three influences falling at different times in the period between national elections (not compulsory voting countries)

tions that occur right at the start of the national election cycle (van der Eijk and Franklin 1996, Franklin 2002) – though this conjecture has never before been tested using individual-level data.

Importantly, there is no reason to suppose that the same progression across the electoral cycle will be found in post-communist countries (dashed lines in Figure 2). In these countries the attachments between voters and political parties that would make it feasible for parties to cheaply mobilize their followers are largely absent (Schmitt 2005, van der Brug et al. 2008, Marsh 2009). Greater mobilizing costs bring less likelihood of mobilizing attempts at any point in the cycle.

Not only should parties and candidates see EP elections differently that occur at different points in the electoral cycle, we can also expect such differences to be apparent to voters. This gives rise to a second way that the stimulus EP elections provide can differ over time, in terms of the *motivations* that voters have to go out and vote. In principle, for West European countries, we should expect the same pattern as with regard to mobilization, with EP elections providing no intrinsic motivation except to the extent that they gain a surrogate importance as markers for what would happen in a forthcoming national election – although, as with mobilization, we would expect spill-over from recent national elections to have left voters still attentive, quite well informed, and with low costs of voting, yielding the same U-shaped progression as for mobilization and illustrated in the central pane of Figure 2. Just as for mobilization, we expect no such progression in post-communist countries, since if parties do not treat EP elections as markers there is no reason why voters should (though we are less confident of this expectation since spill-over might occur for these voters too).

We also expect differences in regard to habitual behavior (right-hand pane of Figure 2) but here our expectations relate not to stimuli (which should not change over the course of the electoral cycle) but to the responses of voters to those stimuli. Habit should play least role in the immediate aftermath of a national election and during the run-up to the next national election, when other reasons for voting are apparent. By contrast, habit should play the largest role at the midpoint of the electoral cycle, when there is little other reason to vote. But again we expect no such progression in post-communist countries for the same reasons as stand in the way of mobilizing efforts by political parties. Habits of voting involve loyalties to parties that apparently have not yet had time to develop in post-communist countries. Note that only the right-hand pane of Figure 2 relates to responses, which are expected to be constant across the electoral cycle except in regard to habit.

Our expectations as these relate to West European citizens for both the level of these influences

and their effects are summarized in Table 1, which has rows for each type of influence and columns for the level of stimulus and strength of response to be expected for that type of influence at

Table 1 Expected levels of stimulus and strengths of response regarding different influences on turnout in EP elections among West European publics (not compulsory voting countries)

	<u>Level of stimulus</u>		<u>Strength of response</u>	
	Start or end of cycle	Middle of cycle	Start or end of cycle	Middle of cycle
Habituation	Medium	Medium	Low	High
Motivation	Medium	Low	Medium	Medium
Mobilization	High	Low	High	High

different points in the national electoral cycle. Most of the entries in the table follow from the reasoning outlined above. However, we expect higher responsiveness to mobilizing activities than to motivational differences, based on findings of past research (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993, Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1996).

But the expectations summarized in Table 1 should not apply in post-communist countries, as already explained. Because of this, we expect the differences summarized in Table 1 to account for differences between post-communist and other members of the European Union when it comes to turnout at EP elections. We believe that voters in post-communist countries are not different from voters elsewhere (cf. van der Brug et al. 2007) and that if they behave differently this is because of differences in electoral context. If we find that the electoral cycle indeed fails to play the same role in post-communist countries as elsewhere then these differences in the circumstances of European Parliament elections should be sufficient to account for differences in turnout between the different categories of country.

These expectations will be subjected to thorough tests, establishing whether the expected changes occur as well as whether they are linear or quadratic (as suggested by the curved lines in Figure 2). Conducting these tests requires an elaborate research design, to which we now turn.

Data and method

The data for this study come from the European Parliament Elections Study 2009 (EES 2009, van Egmond et al. 2010). This study, funded by the EU's DG Research under their FP7 Programme and by the British ESRC and the German DFG, actually consists of five separate studies – of candidates,

party manifestos, media and contextual data, along with the voters' study which supplies the data for the present paper. The voters' study was fielded in all member countries of the EU during the four weeks immediately following the EP elections of June 2009, with independently-drawn samples of approximately 1,000 respondents in each of the EU's 27 member countries. The resulting data considerably over-reports the official turnout in the EP elections – more so in countries with lower turnout – which presents an analysis problem since either non-voters are under-represented in the sample or non-voters have tended to mis-report their voting behavior when questioned. Either way we have too few self-reported non-voters and too many self-reported voters in the data. We deal with this problem by weighting the data to the reported turnout figures and repeating the same analyses on both weighted and unweighted data. The findings were effectively identical using both datasets, so in what follows we report the findings for weighted data, where turnout differences match those officially reported (see Appendix for the analysis with unweighted data).

The questionnaire for the EES 2009 contains a variety of items specifically designed to measure the concepts described above and to unravel the puzzles with which this paper is concerned. It includes questions thought to indicate habitual voting (whether respondents felt close to any party and whether they had voted at the previous national election), questions tapping the motivation to vote (whether the respondent trusted the institutions of the European Union and cared which party or candidate won), a battery of questions regarding mobilization (including seeing anything about the election in the media, being contacted by a party or candidate, or attending a political meeting), along with personal characteristics found in past research to be influential in determining whether people vote or not. These variables were submitted to a confirmatory factor analysis that sought to verify the separate identity of the three concepts (habitual, motivational and mobilizing) summarized earlier. In practice, five factors had to be extracted and subjected to varimax rotation in order to isolate the specific concepts of interest, with two of the resulting factors representing separate sets of personal characteristics (which we had no theoretical reason to suppose would go together). These five factors between them account for 47 percent of the common variance. On the basis of that analysis (not shown) the variables not loading on the three factors of interest were removed from consideration and the remaining variables submitted to a second analysis in which just three factors were requested. The results are shown in Table 2.

As can be seen, the three expected factors show up clearly – habituation as factor 3, motivation as factor 2, and mobilization as factor 1 – though factor 3 surprisingly includes an additional

characteristic that we had expected would fall within the personal domain – union membership. However, with the benefit of hindsight it might be thought reasonable to find this institutional affiliations loading on a factor theorized to be concerned mainly with strength of party affiliation. Importantly, previous voting record loads highest on this factor.

Table 2 Factor loadings, Eigenvalues and variance explained for effects on EP election turnout (N = 22,555)

Variable	Factor1	Factor2	Factor3
Trusts EU institutions	^a	0.781	
Cared which candidate won		0.852	
Cared which party won		0.752	
Saw EP election coverage on TV	0.674		
Read news story on EP election	0.632		
Talked to others about EP election	0.666		
Went to meeting about EP election	0.556		
Was contacted by party/candidate	0.469		
Was interested in the campaign	0.625		
Voted in previous national election			0.780
Feels close to a political party			0.728
Member of a trade union			0.449
Eigenvalues	2.463	2.362	2.133
Cumulative variance explained	0.277	0.397	0.493

a. Coefficients under 0.4 suppressed for clarity.

The scales underlying factors 1, 2 and 3 were confirmed by Mokken scale analysis, which established that all three factors would constitute dominance scales so long as union membership was removed from Factor 3. In practice we left it in place, loading on the habitual voting factor (though removing it from this factor and including it with other control variables makes no difference to our findings).

A considerable problem arises from trying to operationalize location in the national election cycle. This location could be seen as time since the previous national election, time to the next national election, or as distance from the midpoint of the national electoral cycle of each country. And, if seen in the latter fashion, distance from the midpoint could be measured in years or as distance from the center of a cycle standardized across countries to take account of the different lengths of this cycle in different countries – as long as seven years in Malta and as short as three years in Denmark. Given these large differences between countries, if standard cycle units were employed the unit as applied to Malta would be more than twice as long as the unit as applied to

Denmark. It seems likely that actual temporal distances in months or years would be more relevant to the sorts of influences that interest us, ruling out standard units in our analyses.

It might be thought that the best way to overcome this problem would be to include two measures and interactions with both of them: time since the previous national election and time until the next national election, measured years and parts of years. Such measures work well, except that colinearity between the two measures yields some implausible effects. Importantly, however, effects of all substantive variables in such an analysis, when interacted with time from the previous election, have the same signs and general magnitudes as effects of the same variables when interacted in the same analysis with time to the next national election (see Appendix). Summing the two effects thus produces a maximum (or minimum) at or near the mid-point of the electoral cycle, suggesting that a more parsimonious model can employ time from the midpoint of the cycle as its measure of temporal location. Such a variable was tried in both standardized and unstandardized form, and (while yielding substantively similar findings) produced a higher pseudo R^2 and more highly significant effects when not standardized, confirming the intuition expressed at the end of the previous paragraph (the analysis using the standardized cycle measure is given in the Appendix).

Findings

The first questions to be answered with our constructed measures of habituation, motivation and mobilization is how their levels differ as between post-communist and other EU member countries, how these levels change over the course of the electoral cycle, and whether these changes in level coincide with differences in the stimulus provided by EP elections that we expect on the basis of the theorizing summarized earlier. Figure 3 shows the difference between post-communist and other

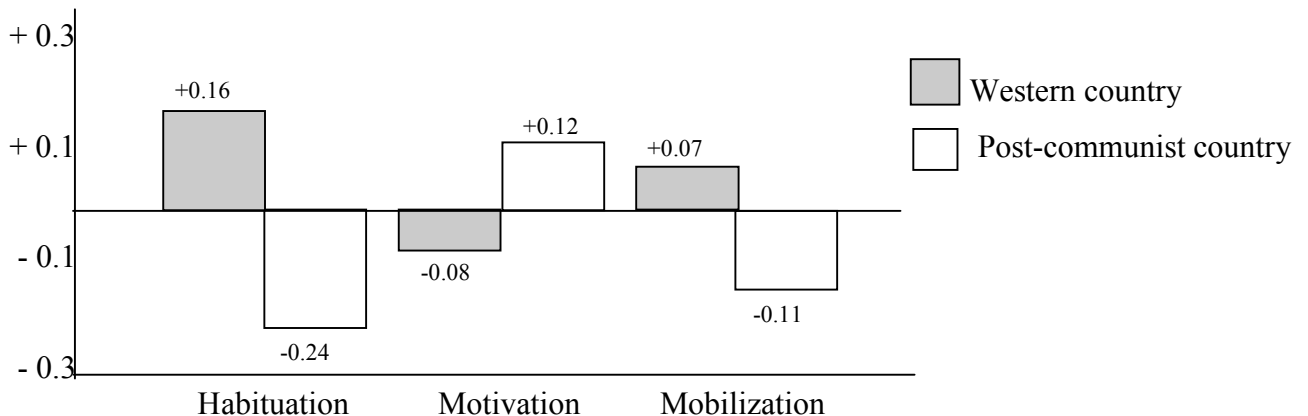


Figure 3 Stimuli to vote by post-communist versus W. European country (non-compulsory voting)

countries in terms of the levels of these stimuli of interest. As can be seen, post-communist countries see lower levels of habituation and mobilization, but (curiously) higher levels of motivation. The balance, however, is markedly negative because of the large difference in habituation.

What of differences in stimuli over the course of the electoral cycle? These were expected to show different patterns according to stimulus, with mobilization and motivation showing U-shaped curves over the course of the cycle while the stimulus of habituation was not expected to vary. In practice, while habit showed the expected constant level of stimulus, so did motivation (except for a marked non-significant curve in the *wrong* direction for post-communist countries). Even more unexpectedly, mobilization for Western member states showed a highly significant linear trend in the reverse direction from what might have been expected of such a trend, with mobilization being strong in the aftermath of a national election and weak in the approach to a national election, as shown in Figure 4 (for post-communist states the line is essentially flat, as shown).

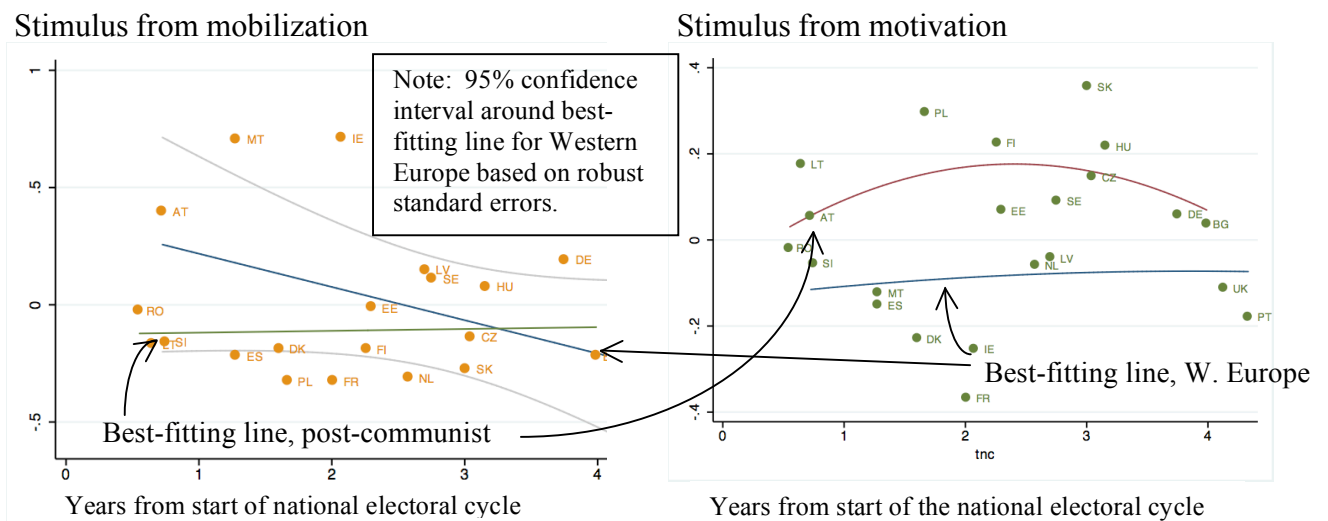


Figure 4 Mobilization and habituation by time from previous national election (non-compulsory voting)

Though our expectations regarding stimuli were not fulfilled by the data, our expectation regarding responses were born out. Table 3 shows in four models how differences between post-communist and Western countries can be explicated by introducing the variables whose effects we have theorized. The top-most independent variable in the table is the dummy variable indicating whether the country of the respondent is a post-communist country. When it is the only independent variable, in Model A, it picks up the entire average disparity between turnout in post-communist countries and elsewhere. The bottom row of the table converts this logistic effect into a first

difference, the effect of a unit change from Western to post-communist on turnout when all other variables are held at their mean values, 0.177 for Model A, or nearly 18 percent. (King, et al. 2000; Tomz, et al. King 2001). This is the average difference between turnout in post-communist and other countries that we seek to account for.

Model B introduces a dummy variable indicating whether the respondent resides in a country with compulsory voting. As can be seen this accounts for nearly half the difference between Western and post-communist countries, in none of which is voting compulsory, leaving a 10.3 percent differ-

Table 3 Effects of various stimuli on turnout, hierarchical analysis with logit link (standard errors from HLM in parentheses; control variables not shown) ^a

	Model A		Model B		Model C		Model D	
	b	s.e.	b	s.e.	b	s.e.	b	s.e.
Constant	0.171 (0.215)		-0.214 (0.212)		-4.247 (0.230)***		-4.383 (0.377)***	
Post-communist country	-0.867 (0.354)*		-0.482 (0.316)		-0.147 (0.316)		-0.137 (0.310)	
Compulsory voting country ^b			1.458 (0.425)***		1.620 (0.425)***		1.881 (0.502)***	
Habituation factor					0.350 (0.018)***		0.449 (0.033)***	
Motivation factor					0.723 (0.019)***		0.687 (0.033)***	
Mobilization factor					0.836 (0.020)***		0.871 (0.035)***	
Time in years from start or end of electoral cycle ^c							-0.097 (0.286)	
Cycle * habit ^c							0.107 (0.029)***	
Cycle * motivated ^c							-0.039 (0.023)	
Cycle * mobilized ^c							0.038 (0.032)	
Country-level variance	0.782 (0.215)		0.543 (0.150)		0.542 (0.150)		0.523 (0.145)	
Number of observations	22555		22555		22555		22555	
Number of countries	27		27		27		27	
Marginal effect of post-communist country	-0.177		-0.103		-0.026		-0.021	

a. Additional control variables are age, age squared, time in community, never married, church attendance (per week), education (years completed), family income (relative), worker, unemployed.

b. With correction for Italy, counted as 50% of a compulsory voting country in 2009.³

c. Compulsory voting countries coded 0 for point in the electoral cycle.

³ In 1994 Italy abolished compulsory voting. This reform appears to have had immediate effect on voters who had entered the electorate at the previous two national elections as well as those who entered in 1994 and later, but little or no effect on older citizens whose habits of voting and non-voting were already set (Franklin 2004). So the full effect of the reform will not be felt until all those who were already established voters in 1994 have left the electorate. Indeed, Italy serves as a test case confirming the generational basis of turnout change (Franklin, Lyons and Marsh 2004).

ence between post-communist and other countries still to be accounted for, as indicated in the bottom cell of Model B.

Model C introduces the variables hypothesized to account for this remaining difference: measures of habituation, motivation, and mobilization derived from the factor analysis reported earlier, together with various control variables (not shown). As can be seen, these variables virtually eliminate the difference between post-communist and other countries, leaving only 2.6 percent to be accounted for. Interactions with position in the electoral cycle that are introduced in Model D (position is measured in terms of years from the nearest national election at the start or end of the cycle, since other measures of temporal location yielded no significant effects) prove able reduce the disparity between post-communist and other countries by a further half of one percent.⁴

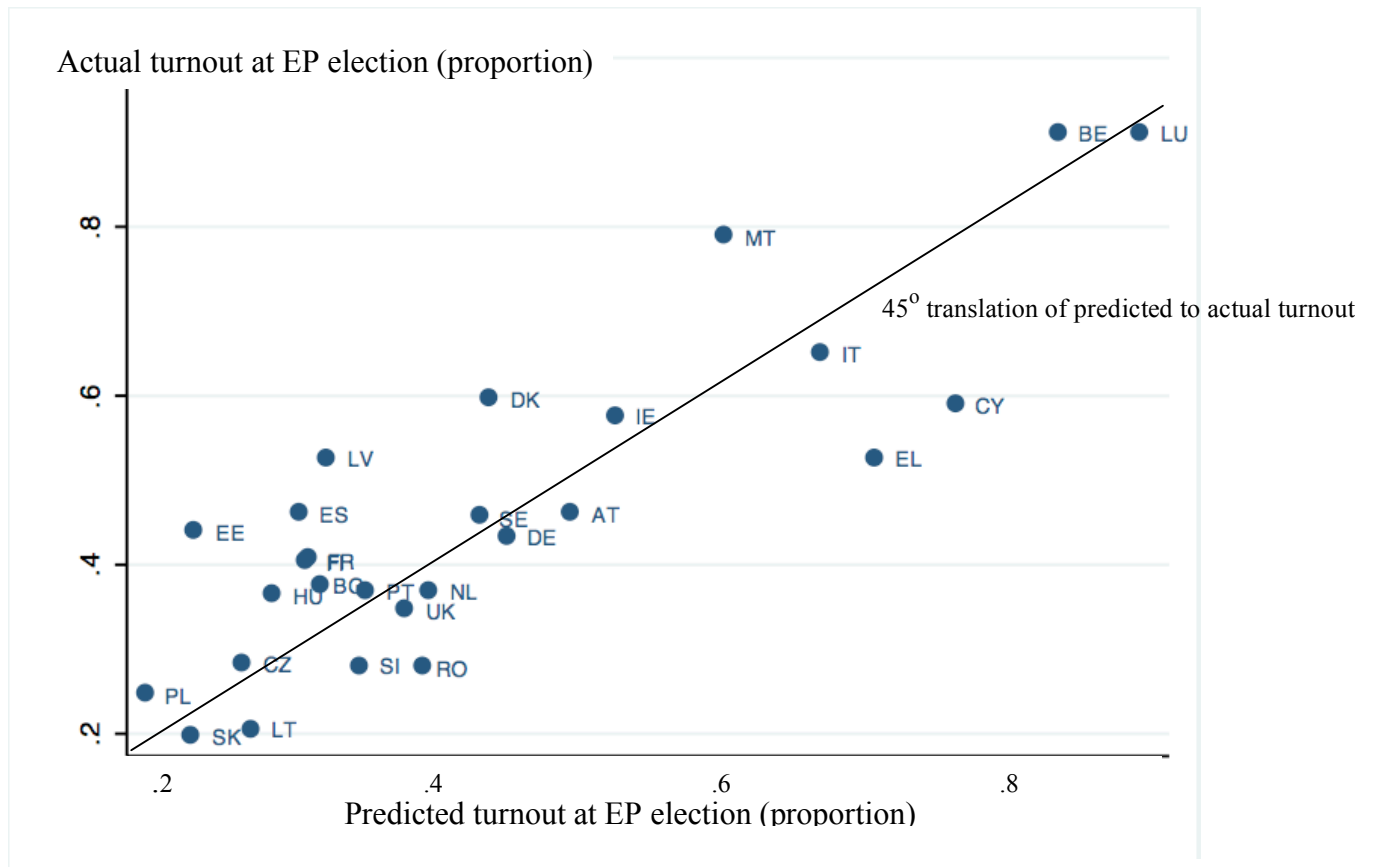


Figure 4 Turnout at the EP election and turnout predicted from Table 3, Model D (includes compulsory voting countries also included in Table 3)

⁴ If interactions between cycle and post-communist are added to Model D, it is seen that in post-communist countries the increased effect of habit at the center of the cycle is virtually absent, as expected, but we do not show this model because it predicts a positive effect on turnout of being post-communist, which appears counter-intuitive and suggests multicollinearity between interactions.

Once differences in stimulus are taken into account in this way, predicted turnout comes very close to matching actual turnout in all countries, as shown in Figure 4 (the prediction is from the fixed portion of Model D, whose b coefficients were shown in Table 3). Note that while the model does not perfectly predict the official turnout level in each country, yet the tracking of country differences is excellent and leaves no obvious outliers, post-communist or other.

Despite the fact that Model D contributes little to the explication of differences between post-communist and other countries, it still confirms the expectations theorized at the start of this paper and summarized in the final two columns of Table 1. Effects of the cycle*habit interaction are strongly positive, as hypothesized, indicating that habit plays its greatest role when EP elections fall in the center of the national electoral cycle (as far as possible from a national election). Still, even if it is satisfying that responses to stimuli evolve over the electoral cycle very much as theorized, nevertheless it is differences between levels of stimulus in post-communist and other countries that are primarily responsible for the differences in turnout between the two groups of countries, not differences in strengths of response. In particular, the very strong main effect of mobilization in Table 3, together with the very different levels of mobilization seen in Figure 3 between post-communist and other countries, appear to completely account for the disparity in turnout between the two groups. Differences in habituation and motivation are seen in Figure 3 to largely cancel out, and in any case have no significant effects except for the small positive effect of habit towards the center of the election cycle.

Where the electoral cycle plays its most relevant role is in determining the temporal location at which these disparities are most evident, closely following national elections. At the center of the cycle there is in fact no significant difference in perceived mobilization efforts between the two groups of countries, as shown in the left-hand pane of Figure 4. It is the lack of spill-over from national to closely following EP elections in post-communist countries – spill-over that is evident in other EU countries – that appears to be largely responsible for the disparity in turnout between the two groups of countries.

Discussion

Is the outcome of our investigations just to swap one black box for two others? Post-communist countries were thought to be inexplicably low turnout countries. Now it appears that they are low mobilization countries afflicted by poorly developed habits of voting. But the difference in

explanations consists not so much in a swapping of black boxes as in the unpacking of one black box to find two others inside. Moreover, the black boxes of low mobilization and lack of habitual voting may be easier to explain than was the black box of low turnout. We theorized a close connection between the two, with low mobilization in post-communist countries being due to a lack of habitual party attachments there. This idea is lent support by the lower level of habit shown in Figure 3 to be a feature of post-communist countries. If the low levels of habit are due to these countries' status as relatively new democracies, as seems plausible (cf. Tavits 2008), this disparity should disappear with the passage of time.

Our success in explaining differences in turnout between post-communist and West European participants in a European Parliament election stands in contrast to our lack of success in explaining the customary evolution of turnout at EP elections that was illustrated in Figure 1, starting very low in the immediate aftermath of a national election and increasing as the next national election approaches. Rather our findings would be consistent with declining turnout over the course of the national electoral cycle in West European countries, quite contrary to established findings.

Figure 6 shows that this unexpected relationship is indeed found for non-communist countries at

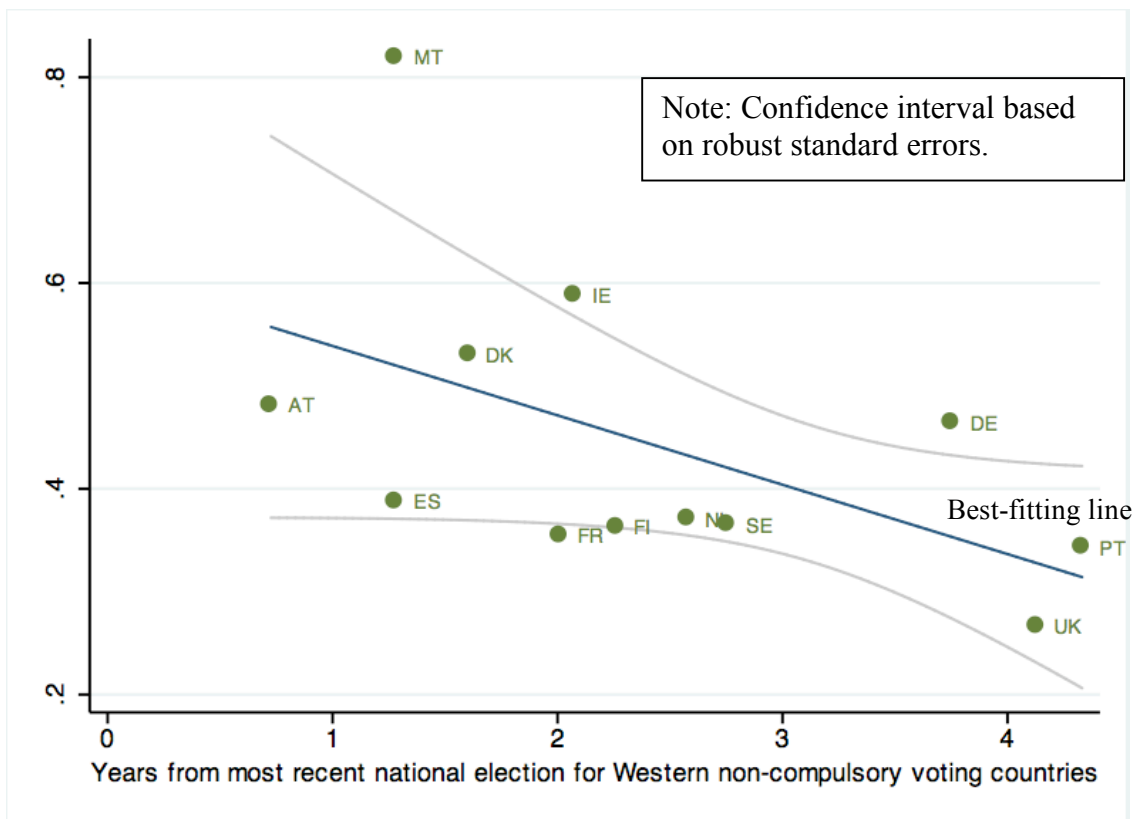


Figure 6 Turnout by years to next national election, for post-communist countries ($r = -0.529$)

the European Parliament elections of 2009. This finding raises questions as to the suitability of the 2009 EP elections for studying the phenomena of interest.⁵ Before we can proceed further we need to discover how a well-established relationship, found at all previous EP elections, could go into reverse at this one. This will require analyses employing pooled data from multiple EP election studies, something that must be placed high on the agenda for future research. It also may require the passage of time, which will enable us to replace our measure of years from the previous election, used in Figure 6, with years to the next election as these dates become known. It is noteworthy that the relationship has always been more reliable when calculated in terms of years until the next election, in contrast the measure employed in Figure 6.

Still, the major purpose of this paper has been accomplished. European Parliament elections have relatively little salience in their own right, but they apparently acquire some salience, at least for certain countries, in the vicinity of national elections (though we find evidence in this paper only of salience in the aftermath of national elections). Of course, this fact is itself a very sad one, since one would like EP elections to be important on their own account. But they are not, for reasons long ago set out in van der Eijk and Franklin's *Choosing Europe?* (1996). Three elections later, nothing much has changed. Despite endless hand-wringing over the state of democracy in Europe, Europe's leaders have repeatedly proved unwilling to bite the bullet that would give real political power to the EU's political institutions and thus real stakes to European Parliament elections. They are unwilling, of course, because the power they would give to Europe is power they would take from themselves. Treaties and constitutions supposedly designed at least in part to address the problem of the democratic deficit in reality appear to have done nothing of the kind. At least in regard to turnout at European Parliament elections, these reforms have just been palliatives – tokens that politicians can point to when asked what they are doing about the problem.

Turnout at the European Parliament elections of 2009 was no different from turnout in 2004, 1999 or even 1994 or 1989 for countries that were members of the EU over the entire period (Franklin 2005) making it clear that EU citizens (whose behavior was, after all, the cause of all that concern) are no more willing to vote in EP elections following the many institutional reforms of

⁵ Contributing factors in this unexpected relationship might be the unprecedented coincidence of two outlying countries (Britain which has always had exceptionally low turnout at EP elections, and Malta which has always had exceptionally high turnout) being placed at the extreme ends of their national electoral cycles. However, additional factors would also have to be playing a role.

recent years than they were before those reforms were enacted. European Parliament elections remain in reality no more consequential than they ever were, and Europe's party leaders remain quite well-aware of that fundamental fact.

Europe's voters may or may not be consciously aware of this fact (the changes in motivation over time that would have provided evidence of conscious awareness are lacking in our findings), but the evolution in effects of habitual behavior over the electoral cycle strongly suggests the lack of structure at mid-term EP elections that would be injected by a "real" electoral contest at which executive power was at stake. Confirmation of this conjecture must wait on future research employing these data pooled with data from past European Parliament election studies.

References

- Banducci, Susan A. and Semetko, Holli. 2003. Media and Mobilization in the 1999 European Parliamentary Election. In: Bond, Martyn (Ed.). *Europe, Parliament and the Media*. London: Federal Trust: 189-204.
- Blumler, Jay and Anthony Fox. 1982. *The European Voter: Popular Responses to the First Community Election*. London: Policy Studies Institute.
- Brug, Wouter van der, Mark N. Franklin and Gabor Toka. 2008. "One Electorate or many? Differences in party preference formation between new and established European democracies" *Electoral Studies* (27) 589-600.
- van Egmond, Marcel, Wouter van der Brug, Mark Franklin and Sara Hobolt. 2010. *European Elections Study 2009: Voter Study Questionnaire*. Florence: European University Institute PIREDEU online publication (www.piredeu.eu).
- EES. 2009. *European Elections Study 2009*. Florence: European University Institute PIREDEU online publication (www.piredeu.eu).
- van der Eijk, Cees and Franklin, Mark N. (Eds.). 1996. *Choosing Europe? The European Electorate and National Politics in the Face of Union*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Franklin, Mark N. 2004. *Voter Turnout and the Dynamics of Electoral Competition in Established Democracies Since 1945*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Franklin, Mark N. 1996. Electoral Participation. In: Leduc, Laurence; Niemi, Richard; Norris, Pippa (Eds). *Elections and Voting in Global Perspective*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage: ??-??.
- Franklin, Mark N.. 2002. "How Structural Factors cause Turnout Variations at European Parliament Elections," *European Union Politics* (2:3) 309-328.
- Franklin, Mark N., Marsh, Michael and Lyons, Patrick. 2004. The Generational Basis of Turnout Decline in Established Democracies. *Acta Politica* 39:115-151.
- Karp, Jeffrey, Susan Banducci and Shaun Bowler. 2008. "Getting out the Vote: Party Mobilization in Comparative Perspective" *British Journal of Political Science* 38(1) 91-112.
- King, Gary Michael Tomz, and Jason Wittenberg (2000). "Making the Most of Statistical Analyses: Improving Interpretation and Presentation." *American Journal of Political Science* 44, no. 2 (April 2000): 347-61.
- Marsh, Michael. 2009. "Vote Switching in European Parliament Elections: Evidence from June

- 2004." *Journal of European Integration* 31(5): 627-644.
- Marsh, Michael and Franklin, Mark N. 1996. The Foundations: Unanswered Questions from the Study of European Elections, 1979-1994. In: van der Eijk, Cees, Franklin, Mark N. et al. *Choosing Europe? The European Electorate and National Politics in the Face of Union*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press: 11-32.
- Plutzer, Eric. 2002. Becoming a Habitual Voter: Inertia, Resources, and Growth in Young Adulthood. *American Political Science Review* 96:41-56.
- Reif, Karlheinz (Ed.) 1985. *Ten European Elections: Campaigns and Results of the 1979/81 First Direct Elections to the European Parliament*. Aldershot: Gower.
- Reif, Karlheinz and Schmitt, Hermann. 1980. Nine Second-Order National Elections. A Conceptual Framework for the Analysis of European Election Results. *European Journal of Political Research* 8:3-44.
- Rosenstone, Steven J. and Hansen, John Mark. 1993. *Mobilization, Participation, and Democracy in America*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company.
- Schmitt, Hermann. 2005. "The European Parliament Elections of June 2004: Still Second-Order?" *West European Politics* 28(3):650-679.
- Schmitt, Hermann and Mannheimer, Renato. 1991. About Voting and Non-Voting in the European Elections of June 1989. *European Journal of Political Research* 19 (1):31-54.
- Tavits, Margit. 2008. "On the Linkage between Electoral Volatility and Party System Instability in Central and Eastern Europe." *European Journal of Political Research* 47(5):537-555.
- Tomz, Michael, Jason Wittenberg, and Gary King (2001). CLARIFY: Software for Interpreting and Presenting Statistical Results. Version 2.0 Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, June 1. (<http://gking.harvard.edu>).
- de Vreese, Claes. H.; Banducci, Susan; Semetko, Holly A.; et al. 2006. The news coverage of the 2004 European Parliamentary election campaign in 25 countries. *European Union Politics* 7 (4):477-504.
- Wessels, Bernhard and Mark N. Franklin. 2009. "Turning out or Turning Off: Do Mobilization and Attitudes Account for Turnout Differences between New and Established Member States at the 2004 EP Elections?" *Journal of European Integration* 31:5, 609-626.