Electoral behaviour in European Parliament elections

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EuroPCom 2018, How opinions become a vote
STUDYING EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS
RESEARCH & EUROBAROMETER DATA

- 40 years of academic research on European Parliament elections
- Eurobarometer (EB): an invaluable source of cross-national, cross-temporal data
  - EP EB provides high quality representative post-electoral surveys
    - Collaboration in EP 2014 with an additional “European Election Studies” module
    - Allows researchers to study the determinants of public opinion and electoral behaviour
WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

- European Parliament elections are ‘second order national elections’
  - Low salience and low turnout
  - Vote choices based on domestic concerns rather than European politics
  - Defection from governing parties

- But things are changing
  - Attitudes towards Europe have become more salient to vote choices
Turnout in EP and national elections
WHO SHOWS UP? WHO STAYS AT HOME?

- Turnout higher among older citizens, better-educated citizens, partisans
  - Similar to national elections
  - But EP election mainly mobilize “habitual voters”

- Euroscepticism/ EU support is not a stable predictor of turnout

- A great deal of national variation
  - Electoral cycle and compulsory voting effects
  - Also some campaign effects e.g. more exposure to Spitzenkandidaten had a small positive effect
WHAT MOTIVATES VOTERS?

EU Politicisation

Motivations
- Sincere
- Protest

Domestic or EU

Arena

Behaviours
- Partisan
- Switcher
- Abstainer
WHAT MOTIVATES VOTERS?

- Policy motivations
  - Left-right ideology/partisanship
  - EU attitudes

  Voters are generally more Eurosceptic than governments, so Eurosceptic parties benefit in EP elections

- Protest voting
  - Punishing the government for poor performance
  - Voting against “The Establishment” (including the EU) in low-salience elections

  Opposition parties generally perform better in EP elections, especially those on the fringes
NATIONAL CONTEXT

- EP campaigns are fought nationally – and this shapes vote choices
  - How politicized is the EU nationally?
  - How popular is the government?
  - Are populist Eurosceptic parties the main opposition to the government?

- Feedback loop: EP elections ➔ national politics
  - Voting patterns in EP elections spill over to national elections, and increase the national vote shares of smaller, more Eurosceptic parties
WHO ARE THE WINNERS AND LOSERS?

Source: Hix and Hoyland 2018
**Will 2019 be Different?**

- European Parliament more powerful/ EU more salient to voters

- Yet, challenges remain
  - Declining turnout
  - Greater EU politicization often benefit Eurosceptic parties
  - Spitzenkandidaten:
    - Limited awareness among voters
    - Low clarity of responsibility / lack of a European “government”
    - Lack of genuine primaries to select candidates/generate interest
  - Engagement of national parties/ media outlets is crucial
  - Competition reflecting real choices on issues people care about
For more academic research on European Parliament elections see:

http://europeanelectionstudies.net/

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Thank you for your attention!