Titel:

Can the European Parliament satisfy the people? Voter mandates and accountability links in the European elections 2019

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Kurzzusammenfassung

Following second-order election (SOE) theory, European elections entail accountability problems if voter mandates address national rather than European concerns. To investigate this issue, we conducted 107 semi-structured interviews with voters on Election Day in France, Germany and Poland and develop a typology of voter mandates. We argue that the quality of accountability links between electorate and EP varies with mandate types. While some mandates reflect the concerns of SOE theory expects, most establish meaningful accountability links, with many testifying to novel forms of EU politicization.

Schlagworte

Voter types, accountability, second-order election, democratic deficit, politicization

1. Introduction

The nature of European elections is commonly regarded as an element of the EU's democratic deficit. According to second-order election (SOE) theory, European elections are dominated by national concerns and thus cannot establish meaningful accountability links between the European Parliament and its electorate. Voters might give mandates aiming at national politics which the European Parliament (EP) is incapable to fulfil. The EP would therefore be incapable to satisfy the people.

Despite the prominence of this argument, empirical evidence supporting it remains thin in one important regard: We know little about voters' perspectives in European elections, i.e. which mandates citizens actually intend to give with their vote. Existing theories addressing this issue provide contradictory explanations. Whereas classical SOE explanations argue that there is less strategic voting in European elections, recent studies have identified politicization of the EU (polity politicization) as an important factor. In light of this debate, this paper asks two research questions, one empirical and one normative:

RQ1. Which kinds of mandates do voters express in European elections?

RQ2. Which kinds of accountability links do these mandates establish?

To explore these questions, we chose an inductive and qualitative approach. We conducted 107 semi-structured interviews in France, Germany and Poland on Election Day 2019. We develop a typology of voter mandates and show that different types of mandates establish accountability links of very different quality. Although our sample is not representative, we took measures to ensure the observation of a diverse and arguably complete range of voter mandates.

Although we find evidence of classical second-order behaviour, our study challenges the second-order paradigm in two ways. First, we discover new forms of politicization with voters addressing the EU as a site of action best suited to realize specific policy goals (policy politicization). Second, we argue that even without a European perspective, some types of mandates generate meaningful accountability links. In light of these findings, the EP's legitimacy problem might be less pronounced than suggested by SOE theory. We hope that these conclusions will help to guide more nuanced research on voting behaviour in European elections in the future.

In the following section, we will spell out our theoretical approach and the existing theories of voter behaviour in greater detail. The third section explains how we build our typology of voter mandates and contemplates on some patterns. Section four then discusses the accountability implications of each type of mandate before we reach a brief conclusion.

2. Theoretical Background

Accountability has proven a useful concept to explore legitimacy problems which might arise in European elections. Put briefly, an accountability approach implies that in elections voters express a preference on competing policy alternatives. These preferences can be understood as an "instruction by voters to politicians", a *voter mandate* (Mulgan 2000). Mandates establish *accountability links* as representatives can be held accountable for how well they implemented the instructions given by citizens (Marsh & Norris 1997; Thomassen & Schmitt 1997).

It has often been argued that European elections do not generate meaningful accountability links because they are second-order elections (e.g. Hix & Hagemann 2007). A central tenet of SOE theory holds that European elections are dominated by national concerns. As a consequence, citizens might cast votes based on their assessment of the national political situation while remaining ignorant about the policy alternatives for the European level that are actually at stake. Their mandates then could not meaningfully guide the policy-making process

in the European Parliament. An assessment of accountability links, therefore, requires a very nuanced understanding of the meaning voters attach to their vote.

Despite the prominence of the accountability argument, its empirical basis is thin in exactly this regard: We know little about the mandates attached to the votes in European elections. The reason for this is, first, that many studies deduce explanations of individual behaviour from aggregate voting patterns. The relative lack of inductive and of qualitative approaches in this domain is the first gap we identify in the literature.

Second, the existing theories of voting behaviour in European elections generate conflicting hypotheses concerning the quality of mandates. On the one hand, in classical SOE theory the central assumption is that European elections are less important than national elections. Voters thus behave less strategically and use European elections to either express protest or to vote more sincerely (e.g. Hix & Marsh 2011; van der Brug et al. 2016). On the other hand, recent theories of EU politicization postulate that the integration process has become a political issue in itself within the national arena (Clark & Rohrschneider 2009; Hobolt & Spoon 2012). In this view, citizens might use European elections to express their attitude towards the EU as such (polity politicization).

In the light of the methodological gap and conflicting explanations in the literature, an in-depth study of voter mandates is warranted to gain a better understanding of accountability problems in European elections. The following section presents the research design we developed to address this issue.

3. Methodological approach

To go beyond existing theoretical presumptions, an inductive and qualitative approach is the most promising. We therefore decided to interview voters on Election Day and inquire their voting motivations and intentions with very open questions: *Why was it important for you to vote today?*; *Why did you vote for the party/list you voted for?; Was there anything in particular that influenced your decision?; What do you think, why did other people vote differently than you?*. Instead of choosing a corresponding item from a given list of reasons and issues, respondents were able to choose for themselves what kind of concerns they want to mention and how much they want to elaborate on them. This interviewing strategy allows a comparably unbiased insight into voting motivations and intentions, and thus into mandates.

We conducted our interviews in Brandenburg an der Havel (Germany), Colmar (France), and Radom (Poland) in the respective native languages. By including the largest countries from the

North, the South, and the East of the EU, we aspired to capture the regional and political diversity within the Union. The cities were chosen due to their medium size (70.000 to 210.000 inhabitants), balancing the rural-urban division, and because each city's previous election results had been relatively close to the national results. In each city, we conducted our interviews in front of two different polling booths, one in a more affluent and one in a less affluent part of the city. These measures were taken to collect a (fairly) complete range of views and motivations. Hence the goal was saturation, not representativity. In the end, we collected a total of 107 interviews that we subsequently transcribed and translated into English for our analysis.

3.1 RQ1: Typology of mandates in European elections

In order to map the mandates voters expressed with their ballot, we focused on two aspects in particular: (1) the level references – EU, national, or others – made during the interview (which level dominates in voters' political imagination?) and (2) the intentions and types of instructions voters expressed (what do voters seek to achieve with their vote?). Guided by these aspects, we carried out multiple rounds of examining and ordering the material to obtain a good overview, refine categories and item allocations, as well as counter-check against individual biases. After several rounds of disassembling interviews into single statements, we proceeded to categorize interviews as a whole, scoring interviews from mainly European (+2) in focus to predominantly national (-2), and from very issue-based (+2) to mainly symbolic (-2). In the coding process we realized, however, that there was an aspect missing on this second dimension: While we did encounter voters who were driven by specific issues and those who wanted to send a generalized message, we also met voters who were mainly moved by their support or opposition to specific political actors. We finally sorted voter types into a matrix along two dimension: (1) Level orientation, separating voters focused on national events, people, concerns, etc. from those focusing on European events, issues, etc. as well as from those with under-defined level orientations; (2) primary voting intention or type of instruction, distinguishing voting grounded in specific issues, addressee-oriented voting and voting as signalling.

Table 1: Matrix of voter types

	Voting intention / instruction		
	Issue-centred ("someone do *this*")	**Addressee-centred** ("*you* do something")	**voting as signal** ("someone do something")

Primary level orientation	**European**	Supranational issue voter	*(EU addressee voter)*	EU referendum voter
	National	National issue voter	midterm voter	*(national polity voter)*
	under-defined	Transnational issue voter	Party voter	Basic signal voter

Source: Own illustration

The combination of these two dimensions leaves us with nine potential voter types that we want to lay out in more detail:

- *Supranational issue voter:* In explaining her intentions, a voter of this type clearly refers to supranational, usually EU-wide, concerns. She is primarily guided by strong issue preferences (often environmental ones) that she wants to see picked up by political actors. We encountered this type of voting more frequently (a) among younger voters, and (b) among French voters, e.g. with reference to *une Europe sociale.*

- *National issue voter*: Like above, a voter of this type is driven by particular issues, but he remains in a national political imaginarium. An issue that was mentioned particularly often is the (national) pension scheme.

- *Transnational issue voter*: A voter of this type, while also moved by particular issues (oftentimes concerns about democracy), does not offer a clear level orientation. She might either speak of her issues in general terms or might explicitly state that these concerns are present in her as well as in other countries.

- *EU addressee vote*r: Unlike the above-mentioned types, this voter (as well as the following two) authorizes a particular actor to take political decisions, usually based on ideological proximity or personal trust. An EU addressee voter would mandate European political actors specifically, be it European parties, MEPs, Spitzenkandidaten, or the like. However, we did not meet a voter of this type in reality. This absence might be linked to the lack of a government-opposition structure in the EP which makes it more difficult to identify responsible actors on the European level (Follesdahl & Hix 2006).

- *Midterm voter*: In contrast, we encountered quite a few midterm voters, particularly in Poland. A voter of this type sees the election as a chance to support or oppose the current national government, to give or withdraw a mandate to its leadership. The frequency of this voting type in Poland is likely linked to the looming national election later in the year.

- *Party voter*: The party voter supports a particular political party based on trust or proximity in the Downsian sense (Downs 1957). Some of these voters have always voted for that party, others have just recently decided to support it, e.g. after using a voting advice application.

- *EU referendum voter*: In contrast to all of these voter types, a number of interviewees appeared to use their vote to express their position on the general state of affairs. Hence, the EU referendum voter intends to show her overall opposition or (more often) support for the EU polity or further integration (polity politicization). Many of these often elderly voters link their explanation to the peace narrative of European integration, others to a previous EU treaty/accession referendum. This type of voters was notably frequent in Germany.

- *National polity voter*: Similar to this type, the national polity voter uses the election to show his support or opposition to the national polity. Perhaps unsurprisingly, we did not encounter such a voter type in reality. In contrast to the EU, the national polities are very rarely contested on such a fundamental level.

- *Basic signal voter*: This voter sees the election as an opportunity to signal support or opposition in very basic terms and without clear references to a specific level. Such a voter might put value on democracy and regard voting as a duty, or she might want to express general disaffection with the status quo. In either way, she does not express particular concerns or target particular political actors.

All in all, we discovered a huge range of intentions that voters disclosed as important for their electoral choice. Some of these are likely to be found in national elections as well (party voter, (trans-)national issue voter, basic signal voter, midterm voters), while others seem specific to European elections (supranational issue voter, EU referendum voter). As our sample is not representative, the data should not be extrapolated to the population at large. However, patterns of frequency might hint at national and age differences as important factors. We found that EU referendum voters were more common in Germany, while supranational issue voters were more frequent in France, perhaps indicating different dominant types of EU politicization (polity vs. policy) in these countries. Likewise, a slanted distribution is also visible across age groups with EU referendum voters typically to be found among older citizens and supranational issue voters more frequent among younger people. We can speculate that younger voters have grown up with the EU as an established polity and thus more often see it as a field of political contestation rather than an object of it. The prevalence of midterm voters in Poland, finally, indicates that in the public perception the European elections 2019 were closely tied to national power struggles.

Table 2: Voter types prevalence in different countries

	France	Germany	Poland	Totals
Basic signal voter	9	3	3	**15**
EU referendum voter	6	**11**	6	**23**
Midterm voter	0	4	**12**	**16**
Party voter	6	9	6	**21**
National Issue voter	1	2	1	**4**
Transnational Issue voter	1	2	2	**5**
Supranational issue voter	**12**	6	5	**23**
Totals	**35**	**37**	**35**	**107**

Source: Own illustration

Table 3: Voter type prevalence in different age groups

Age	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+	Total
[total number]	**[6]**	**[22]**	**[18]**	**[18]**	**[14]**	**[29]**	
EU referendum voter	0	2	3	3	6	9	**23**
Supranational issue voter	3	6	3	4	2	4	**22**

Source: Own illustration

3.2 RQ2: Assessing the accountability links established by different types of mandates

We use two criteria to evaluate the quality of accountability links established by different kinds of mandates. First, we assess what we call the *clarity of mandates*. The central question is whether the mandate actually contains a meaningful instruction, i.e. whether it could guide policy-making or the representatives' voting behaviour. This criterion mainly separates the different types of instructions (issue-centred, addressee-centred and vague). We argue that both issue- and addressee centred mandates contain a reasonably clear instruction, the former by voicing a preference on a specific issue that should be tackled by policy-makers and the latter by expressing trust for a political actor that is charged with implementing its programme. Vague mandates are problematic as they at best express diffuse support for or diffuse protest against an abstract condition and thus could be taken to justify almost any kind of policy action.

Second, we assess if the mandates' level orientations make sense in an election to the European Parliament by using a *national standard of comparison.* This criterion has proven useful for other legitimacy question concerning the European Union (e.g. Risse 2014; Koopmans 2014). The national standard of comparison can be assessed by examining whether a mandate would establish better accountability links in a national election compared to a European one. For issue-centred mandates this means that the issues raised need to fall at least partly within the competences of the EP. For addressee-centred mandates it means that the addressee needs to be an actor that is present in the EP or can be held accountable by the EP. For vague mandates we ask whether the voter might potentially give a more specific mandate in a national election. Unsurprisingly, a European level orientation generally establishes better accountability links than a national orientation. Somewhat more counter-intuitively, we argue that the absence of a specific level reference is un-problematic and usually allows for the establishment of good accountability links.

Taking both criteria together we find that two types of mandates are problematic, two are ambiguous and three generate good accountability links in European elections. The most problematic types are the national issue voter and the midterm voter. National issue voters demand solutions for issues the EP has very little influence over (e.g. pensions); their mandate cannot be fulfilled in reality. Midterm voters express support for or disapproval of the national government – an institution which is neither up for vote nor directly involved in the decisions made in the EP. Both types cannot generate a meaningful accountability link between the parliament and the people. They represent the legitimacy problem that SOE theory suggests.

The EU referendum voter and the basic signal voter are ambiguous cases. Considering the first criterion, both are problematic because their mandates are too vague to serve as an instruction for policy action. On the second criterion, matters get more complex. For basic signal voters there is little reason to believe that they would express clearer mandates in national elections – they do not seem to care much about the specificities of the election at hand. While problematic, this category of voters is not part of a specific EU democratic deficit. For the EU referendum voter two interpretations are possible. Understood as a position on more or less integration, his concern might arguably be better suited to a national election, since the states remain *masters of the treaties*. Understood as a comment on the status quo, his mandate could mean *carry on* for the grand coalition in the EP. In both cases, the EU referendum voter does not fit into the SOE version of the EP's accountability problem, as these voters have specific European heuristics for the European elections. The ambiguous category is only partly problematic.

Most mandates found in our sample generate good accountability links. Party voters and transnational issue voters have reasonably clear mandates and, despite a potentially national political imagination, give instructions that the EP could address. Parties become European actors as they enter transnational coalitions and in many policy domains competences are shared between the national and the European level. The absence of an explicitly European perspective thus does not forestall establishing accountability links. Supranational issue voters, finally, can be seen as the poster boys and girls of European elections: Their mandates are both clear and directly addressed to the European level. They seem to identify the EU as a specific level of government to be charged with policy issues that have a supranational dimension (policy politicization). Taken together, these types of mandates show that the EP has (very) good accountability links with at least some sections of the electorate.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, we argued that a precise understanding of voter mandates is needed to assess accountability links in European elections. Our results suggest that the dominant second-order paradigm catches some, but not all of the normative implications of voter behaviour. With the national issue and the midterm voter, two of the seven observed types of voter mandates lend support to the second-order thesis and its pessimistic conclusions for EP legitimacy. The high concentration of midterm voters in Poland indicates an electoral cycle effect and thus underlines the adequacy of SOE theory under certain conditions. In addition, the absence of an EU addressee voter seems to reflect the EP's visibility deficit resulting from the lack of a government-opposition structure.

Nevertheless, there is reason for more optimistic conclusions. To begin with, we find evidence of EU politicization. While the presence of the EU referendum voter shows that polity politicization guides voting behaviour, the supranational issue voter is indicative of a form of politicization that has received too little attention thus far (policy politicization). A non-negligible part of the electorate addresses the EU with specific policy issues suited to this level of governance. Furthermore, we argue that the absence of a European perspective does not imply an accountability deficit specific to the EU (basic signal voter) and in many cases actually allows for the establishment of good accountability links (transnational issue voter, party voter). Contrary to the predictions of SOE theory, then, the European Parliament is actually able to meet citizen demands and, at least in theory, satisfy the people.

As our sample is not representative, we have consciously avoided basing our arguments on the frequency of voter types. We do however believe that the patterns we found are not

meaningless, but see them as promising avenues for future research. First, the national and generational differences we found for some voter types could be starting points for research on the origins of polity and policy politicization. Second, while much of the literature still counts the nature of European elections as part of the EU's supposed democratic deficit, the large number of non-problematic voter types needs to be considered. This is particularly true of the supranational issue voter who despite her frequency in our sample is too rarely taken into account. We hope that our typology can guide future research based on more representative samples. Until then, we hold that claims about European elections as normatively problematic second-order contests should be advanced with greater nuance.

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