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Europeans at the polls – What voter motivations tell us about EP accountability

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1. Introduction

Second-order election theory (SOE) implies some serious challenges to the legitimacy of the European Parliament (EP). If, for example, voters make their decision based on national concerns, it is doubtful whether reasonable accountability links can be established between the EP and the electorate. Also, if the mandates voters intend to give by voting lie outside the powers of the EP, it is hard to see how Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) are supposed to meet these expectations and how they are supposed to be held responsible for their achievements or failures.

In our view, the assessment of accountability links requires a nuanced understanding of individual voter motivation. It is crucial to understand why voters come to the polls in the first place and which level of politics they mean to address with their vote. Yet, to this point arguments about voter motivation are often deduced from theory or derived from aggregate results rather than from careful inductive investigation. Moreover, those studies dedicated to individual level factors yield contradictory results, with some claiming second-order effects to be dominant and others pointing to novel forms of politicization of the integration process. We are thus still left to wonder whether voters use EP elections to voice preferences that could meaningfully guide the EU policy-making process, or whether they vote on largely national issues the EP has no competence over.Based on these considerations we formulate the following research question: *Which implications does individual level voter motivation have for the accountability of the EP*?

This paper uses semi-structured qualitative interviews in three comparable cities in Poland, Germany and France to provide an in-depth study of individual level voter motivation in the 2019 European elections. We propose a typology of voter motivation ordered along two dimensions: On the one hand the level of governance (European, national or non-defined) and on the other hand the meaning attached to the vote, ranging from symbolic acclamation to concrete policy goals. We argue that the six resulting ideal-types of voters have largely diverging implications for accountability, with only one type posing a specific problem for EP elections and the EP's legitimacy. Although our sample is not representative enough to make inferences to the entire electorate, we believe that our results show that EP elections are much less "second order" than is often believed. For example, as the ideal type of the *EU issue voter* suggests, citizens do not only perceive the EU as a policy issue in terms of the desired degree of integration, but also as a separate level of governance to be addressed with specific policy concerns.

In the following part, we will discuss the necessary criteria for the assessment of accountability in European elections. We argue that a particular focus on voter perspectives is necessary to apply these criteria. Justification for our choice of method is given in the third part. The fourth part presents our voter typology and discusses their implication for EP accountability. In the fifth section, we offer some potential explanations for why problematic types of voter motivation appear more frequently in some contexts, particularly focussing on the role of politicization across countries and age groups.

2. Voter motivations as the central issue in the accountability argument

The most prominent strategy to assess the extent to which elections bestow democratic legitimacy on the European Parliament is based on a concept of accountability. In a democracy, voters should hold their representatives accountable, either retrospectively (by evaluating past performance) or prospectively (by choosing the most promising programme). The key idea is that citizens express an expectation when voting and that this expectation can guide the policy-making process. If expectations are not met, citizens have the opportunity to vote for other representatives at the next election who might then do a better job.

This conception of accountability has proven a very useful tool to address normative concerns in Second Order elections theory. It has been applied to local (e.g. Marien et al. 2015) as well as European elections (Hix & Hageman 2007; Thomassen& Schmitt 1997). For concrete criteria, we stick to the interpretation of Marsh and Norris (1997):

- Cohesive and unified parties within the European parliament need to offer alternative policy programmes on the major issues facing Europe;
- The electorate needs to choose parties based on retrospective evaluations of their performance and prospective evaluations of their programmes;
- The outcome of parliamentary elections should thereby link voters' preferences with the policy making process within the European Parliament.

In our view, the most decisive criterion is the second. As for parties, it can hardly be denied that at each European election there is a sufficient amount of parties competing and that these parties have different positions on EU policy issues. Criticism targeting a lack of alternatives in EP elections rather refers to citizens' lack of awareness of these alternatives. The focus lies on the visibility, rather than the absence of alternatives. It has, for example, been argued that in the absence of a clear government-opposition structure "any moderate change in the location of the median member of the European Parliament is unlikely to significantly alter the direction of the EU policy agenda" (Hix & Hageman, 2007, 40). Having the Commission elected by the parliament, then, would introduce a need to form coalitions which just might make these minor alternations significant (Follesdahl & Hix, 2006; Tsakatika, 2007). Yet, this argument merely states that a stricter delineation of party alternatives makes it easier for citizens to identify these options, rather than denying their existence as such. As much as parties might be to blame for the lack of visibility of their position (because they invest too little in the campaign or because they deliberately choose to prioritize national topics), it would be difficult to argue that the EU-wide party spectrum does not offer voters a minimal amount of choice. An ideal voter going through all the manifestos and voting records will eventually find a party reasonably close to her position.

It is on citizens' perspectives, then, that the main focus of analysis must be placed. Second-order election theory proposes a model of voter motivation based on aggregate election results. European elections have been repeatedly shown to produce gains for small parties, losses for government parties and a higher rate of abstentions (e.g. Hix & Marsh 2011; van der Brug et al. 2016). The central factor in explaining these results on an individual level is the lack of importance attributed to the elections. The more there is at stake, the more voters are inclined to vote strategically. In national elections, voters might vote "with their heads", implying that they choose large parties that have higher chances of ending up in government over small parties that might be closer to their actual preferences. In European elections, on the contrary, citizens need not be concerned with government formation and more frequently "vote with their hearts", choosing smaller parties that reflect their interests more closely. In addition, citizens can "vote with their boots", using EP

elections to send a signal of protest to their national government. On a large scale, these individual considerations would cause the observed aggregate effects, with government parties losing and small opposition parties gaining votes.

The aggregate patterns found in European elections might, however, be explained by different models. Studies of vote switching in local elections, for example, show that some groups of voters have clear conceptions of the different competences of the various levels of government and adopt their vote choice accordingly (Marien et al. 2015). In the European context, voters might for example switch to Green parties (often small opposition parties) because they see climate policy as an issue of particular importance at the European level. Not lack of importance, but a precise understanding of the importance of EU elections would then be the decisive factor (Clark & Rohrschneider 2009). A similar argument has been made with regard to the politicization of the EU itself (Hobolt & Spoon 2012). Vote-switching might be explained by specific attitudes regarding the future of the integration process.

We are then left with a situation in which, first, the reconstruction of citizens' motivations to vote plays a crucial rule in assessing accountability in EU elections. Second, as voting behaviour in EP elections seems to be "over-determined" (i.e. there is a variety of plausible, but conflicting explanations), what we set out to do is an in-depth study of individual level voter motivation in the 2019 European elections.

3. Research Design and Method: A qualitative exploration of the Weimar Triangle

To study voters' perceptions at this stage of EP election research, a qualitative approach seems to be most adequate. First, because we understand our research as an exploratory study that can open more clearly delineated paths for quantitative application in the future. With theories of individual behaviour in EP elections being contradictory, a qualitative approach allows us to pursue an inductive strategy and thus make contributions to theory building that would be much more difficult to acquire with the quantitative data currently at hand.

Second, a qualitative design arguably allows us to get the least biased insight into citizens' preference orderings and level references. We conducted semi-structured interviews with very open questions, thus avoiding triggering any specific level reference (e.g. European, national or local). Moreover, as our prompts are open 'why' questions (e.g. Why was it important for you to vote today? Why did you vote for the party you voted for?), we are confident that citizens' answers reflect the importance they assign to various aspects of their voting decision. Respondents were able to choose themselves how many motivations to mention and how long to elaborate on them. We admit that our interviewing strategy might cause other biases (e.g. self-selection of participants, interviewees saying what is socially acceptable rather than what they really think) but we believe that the benefits clearly outweigh the risks.

The three countries chosen for this study are Poland, Germany and France, the so-called "Weimar Triangle", each the most populous country in one of the EU's three socio-political blocs of eastern, northern, and southern European countries.

In each of the three countries we chose a medium-sized city (70.000-200.000 inhabitants) in which to conduct the interviews in order to balance the rural-urban divide. Colmar in France, Brandenburg an der Havel in Germany and Radom in Poland were selected particularly because the previous election result had been relatively close to the respective country's average results. This made it

more likely that we could collect a relatively complete range of views and motivations. In each city, we conducted interviews on Election Day in front of two different polling booths, one in a more affluent and one in a less affluent part of the city. We conducted 107 interviews in total that we subsequently transcribed and translated into English.

In our analysis of the interviews we focused on two specific aspects that are crucial to the assessment of accountability links: (1) The motivations given for voting (what do voters want to achieve with their vote?), and (2) the level references – EU, national, or others – made during the interview (which level do voters address?). These aspects guided our coding and sorting processes. We carried out multiple rounds of examining and ordering the material in order to obtain a good overview, refine categories and item allocations, as well as counter-check against individual biases.

Starting with an open coding round and following up with integrating and specifying codes collectively, we disassembled each interview into multiple statements concerning voter motivations (both for voting in general and for voting a specific party/list), cleavage perceptions and information sources. We added level references (local, national, European, not affiliated) to these different code types. This first series of disassembling gave us a good understanding of the different types of motivations and level orientations and allowed us to build more generalised groups. As a second step, we proceeded to categorize interviews as a whole, translating the above-mentioned aspects of level references and voter motivations into two dimensions: (1) Level orientation, separating interviews 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 motivation, separating those who ascribe a more symbolic value to voting from those who pursue relatively concrete policy goals. The latter see voting as a means to an end, while the former understand it as an end in itself.

4. Conceptual analysis: Six voter types and their consequences for EP-accountability

These two dimensions allowed us to distinguish six ideal types of voters that we will describe in more detail, before we can then contemplate on the normative implications of these voter types.

Table 1: Voter types based on voting motivation and level orientation

		Primary voting motivation	
		Symbolic (value is bestowed on the act of voting / the choice; voting is an end in itself)	**Policy-oriented** (value is bestowed on what the vote can achieve; voting as a means to an end)
Primary level orientation	**under-defined**	Basic signalling voter	Party voter
	National	Mid-term voter	National issue voter
	European	EU referendum voter	EU issue voter

1.   *The basic signalling voter*: The basic signalling voter does not have a clearly defined level orientation and appears more concerned with the symbolical aspect of voting. When asked about his motivation for voting, he focuses on general and vague declarations alluding to democratic principles or individual discontent. This voter puts no emphasis on his particular electoral choice and certainly does not feel the need to give justifications for it. The basic signalling voter seems somewhat disconnected from the decision at hand, be it for lack of interest or lack of knowledge, but puts value on participating itself. A typical example of this type of voting comes from a French home carer we interviewed. When asked what influenced her voting decision, she answered: "So I admit I absolutely did not listen to anything. I did not watch anything, I did not listen. Because, frankly, it takes my head. [...]. I went today because I did my homework".

2.   *The party voter*: This voter, like the basic signalling voter, does not show a clear level orientation, but is more policy-oriented in her electoral choice. Upon being asked why she voted, she emphasises the alignment of her political preferences with those of the chosen party. Some of these voters have been loyal to a particular party for a long time, based on a fit of principles; others have used various information sources to find the perfect match. As a Polish teacher put it: "some of my inner beliefs are reflected in the party I voted for. [...]. I trust the party I vote for most. So I think that, in general, their views correspond to mine."

3.   *The mid-term voter*: This voter justifies his electoral choice with reference to the national government's performance, either because he likes or because he dislikes its record. The mid-term voter is thus firmly oriented towards national politics and puts value on the signal associated with his vote, either supporting or denouncing the national executive. "So things stay like they were the past years with PiS", said a trash truck driver in Radom/Poland, "So I hope it will be the same".

4.   *The national issue voter*: The national issue voter gives specific reasons why she voted (and who she voted for) by pointing to issues important to her. Although she is oriented towards the national, not the EU level, some of her concerns are issues of a transnational dimension and touch on EU competences. An issue that is frequently mentioned is the national pension scheme, as exemplified by a German cashier who was asked what motivated her vote in particular:"Pension. [...]. Because I am heading towards retirement. Two more years and I will be retired. And the maternity year is not paid, only half a year is paid, counts towards the pension. And that has to be changed. You are retired and get a measly pension and have worked all your life. And that does not work. You have to survive somehow."

5.   *The EU referendum voter*: The EU referendum voter understands his vote as a statement on the project of European integration, as if it were an EU treaty referendum. While acknowledging the European dimension of the EP elections, the juxtaposition of pro-European versus anti-European positions gives his electoral choice a symbolical character. A German social worker's answer to our questions illustrates this voting type: „Because I have the feeling that in Europe we are at a crossroads and that it is particularly important right now to show colours." That is why she voted for those who "stand for continuing with Europe".

6.   *The EU issue voter*: This voter primarily addresses the European level and talks about the issues important to her. When asked about her voting motivations, she describes a relatively specific idea of what kind of political goals she wants to see pursued at EU level. One example comes from a French-Moroccan retiree we interviewed in Colmar: "the problem of Europeans today, they must change their policy, the way... Normally, we must have a minimum wage for all Europeans. The same salary. Portugal has 400, Bulgaria 260. That's not right."

This categorisation has implications for the value of accountability that we deem crucial for the EP's democratic legitimacy. It is particularly illuminating to consider whether the voting types for European elections differ in terms of accountability to national elections. If the electorate ought to

choose parties based on evaluations of their performance and the political plans for the coming legislative term, it would seem that symbolic voting is more problematic than policy-oriented voting. Where voting is seen as an end in itself, a party's actual performance will likely be of lesser importance for the electoral choice. Considering also that parties contest over EP seats, EU level oriented voting seems better suited for holding parties accountable than voting oriented towards the national level. If national frames and concerns dominate in voter evaluations, they might miss the mark on the issues that are actually in the EP's competence. What does this mean for our voter types?

We argue that the EU issue voter is the voter type that can best bestow legitimacy on the European Parliament. She is likely to evaluate a party's policy ideas for the European level, judge it against her issue hierarchy, and thus be able to hold EP deputies accountable. Similarly, by using party positions as a heuristic, the party voter is also able to hold politicians accountable based on principles or policies, though it is less clear to what degree she takes their European record into account.

The national issue voter and the EU referendum voter are more difficult to assess. The EU referendum voter realises that European elections differ from national elections and therefore employs a specific heuristic to judge parties and candidates. Mainly distinguishing pro- and anti-European positions does allow for some accountability, but is arguably of limited use for evaluating the manifold approaches to European integration. The national issue voter has the opposite problem: Evaluating EP elections like she would national elections, she might lack the means to appreciate the specificities of EU politics and EP competences. Grounding the EP election vote, for instance, on a party's health system plan results in accountability deficits. However, a lot of policy areas know shared competences between the EU and member states; therefore, many national issue voters are right to expect that their concerns will be taken up by MEPs, at least to a certain degree.

Most problematic from the accountability perspective are the two remaining voter categories: The basic signalling voter and the mid-term voter. The basic signalling voter arguably lacks the instruments to competently evaluate parties' performances and policy plans, and thus cannot put much weight behind his electoral choice. The mid-term voter uses a heuristic to judge parties, but it has little to do with a party's past or future policy initiatives in the EP. When the electoral choice is based on the national government's record, MEPs' decisions are not properly tied to the electorate. It is therefore doubtful that these voters can bestow much legitimacy on the European Parliament.

We have seen that some voting motivations are better suited to establish an accountability link between the European electorate and the European Parliament than others. It should be noted, however, that only some of these are peculiar to EP elections. The basic signalling voter, problematic as he is, is not an exclusively European phenomenon, but rather commonplace in democratic practice. In our following discussion on empirical findings, we will therefore focus on those voter types that are specific to European polls: The mid-term voter, the EU-referendum voter and the more issue-oriented voter types.

5. What causes problematic voter orientations in EP elections?

There are some interesting patterns emerging from the distribution of voter types across specific groups of respondents. Admittedly, our sample is not representative and thus our data should not be used to speculate about the relative distribution of voter types in the population. Our results on basic voter motivation, however, do not seem to be too far from those of comparable quantitative

studies (e.g. Eurobarometer 2019). Moreover, we do believe that certain causal tendencies can be observed, in particular where numerical evidence is backed up by recurring discursive patterns. We think that our results can be explained by different kinds of politicisation of the EU – a factor that intersects with national political context and age. This explanation confirms some assumptions of pre-existing theories of voting behaviour, but also adds a novel hypothesis.

Table 2: Voter type distribution across France, Germany and Poland

	France	Germany	Poland	Total
Basic signaling voter	9	3	3	15
Party voter	6	8	6	20
Mid-term voter	0	4	12	16
National issue voter	3	5	3	11
EU-referendum Voter	6	11	6	23
EU issue voter	11	6	5	22
Total	35	37	35	107

To begin with, the distribution of mid-term voters seems to confirm a central tenant of the SOE theory: The impact of the national electoral cycle. In our study, we found no voter of this type in France, four in Germany and a solid twelve in Poland. In Poland, the heavy polarisation of national politics dominates the European dimension of the election. For most interviewees, the government's controversial social policy (500+) as well as recent Church scandals were dominant topics. The Polish opposition used the elections as a test-run for a potential alliance in the upcoming national elections in October 2019 and in our interviews, we find clear evidence of people voting strategically to show their support for either side of the national arena. Multiple voters (mostly of the *European coalition*) used the exact same words to justify their choice, claiming they had voted for "the lesser evil".For us, this is an indicator of voting with the head, rather than with the heart. We take this as evidence supporting the SOE theory in its assumption that proximity to national elections increases the chances of EP elections being dominated by national concerns.

Nevertheless, we find more evidence indicating that that these elections were not second order contests in voters' minds. In over a third of all interviews (43 out of 107), references to European level considerations dominated (voter types *EU referendum* or *EU issue*). Particularly the EU referendum voter is easily explained by theories of voting behaviour that identify politicization of the EU itself as increasingly important factor in EU elections. Our findings support Clark and Rohrschneider's sui generis hypothesis (2009) or Hobolt & Spoons' claim that an EU integration dimension plays an important role in determining vote choice.

Much less has been written so far about the EU issue voter. In fact, it seems that the possibility of voters' actually making very informed and EU-specific choices has somehow fallen under the table in the dominant second-order election paradigm. Our data, however, points towards a more interesting explanation: the EU issue voter could be a rather novel phenomenon.

Table 3: Age distribution of the *EU-referendum voter* and the *EU issue voter*

Age [total number]	18-24 [6]	25-34 [22]	35-44 [18]	45-54 [18]	55-64 [14]	65+ [30]	Total
EU-referendum voter	0	2	3	3	6	9	**23**
EU issuevoter	3	6	3	4	2	4	**22**

First, we have reason to believe that age is a factor explaining the way citizens understand politicization of the EU. In older age groups, EU referendum voters are quite frequent which might be due to the fact that they are used to this kind of politicisation (note that almost all of these EU referendum voters are pro-EU-voters). Many of these respondents reproduce a historical narrative according to which the EU is the answer to Europe's war-torn past and its historical responsibility for peace. This collective memory of the EU's peace mission is captured in the code *EU: topic (peace)*. Yet, memories also come in in another interesting way – as memories of past referenda on the EU which mostly were phrased in terms of pro-or anti-EU (most dominantly, the referendum on Polish accession). Younger age groups are more frequently mobilized by specific topics that have a transnational dimension. Not surprisingly, climate change and environmental issues are a frontrunner on this dimension, but also internet regulation and somewhat surprisingly migration.

Table 4: Distribution of certain topics across age

Age [total number]	18-24 [6]	25-34 [22]	35-44 [18]	45-54 [18]	55-64[14]	65+ [30]	Total
Theme [indicative of EU referendum]							
EU: Topic (Peace)	0	1	2	4	2	6	15
Cleavage:Pro vs. Anti-European	0	2	1	5	10	0	18
Theme [indicative of EU issue]							
EU: Topic (Environment)	1	8	0	1	1	5	16
EU: Topic (Migration)	1	6	0	1	2	1	11
Cleavage: Environment	0	3	2	1	0	1	7

A second factor again is the national political context. EU issue voters are most frequent in France, a country with a traditionally strong EU integration polarisation. Yet arguably, since the 2017 election campaign, France has seen a more-issue based polarization of the EU, as Macron's campaign was based on an alternative vision of the EU ("une Europe qui protège"). Indeed, concerns of social justice on an EU level (e.g. "une Europe sociale") were almost exclusively broad up in France, some of them even using specific national vocabulary that would not translate to other national contexts (e.g. la concurrence déloyale"). This contrast sharply with the German campaign that was still largely fought on a pro- vs. anti-EU basis (although the dominance of EU referendum voters in Germany is likely connected to the high percentage of higher age groups in the sample).

6. Conclusion

In this paper, we investigated what kind of accountability links exist between voters and the European parliament. In order to do so, we conducted qualitative interviews in France, Germany and

Poland and used an inductive strategy to develop ideal types of voting behaviour. Some of the ideal types we found are congruent with the pre-existing theory of voter motivation, e.g. the mid-term voter with classical second-order models or the EU-referendum voter with literature on EU-politicisation. However, we also found other voter types that might open interesting paths for future analysis. In particular, we speculate that the EU-issue voter might be a consequence of different forms of politicisation which causes differences in issue salience across age groups and national political contexts.

For the legitimacy of the EP, the voter types have different implications. Whereas *EU issue voters* seem to give clear mandates to their representatives, other voter types are more problematic from an accountability perspective. *Party voters* and *EU referendum voters* use somewhat limited heuristics for European politics, but still allow for a reasonable accountability link. The same cannot be said of *basic signalling voters*, but their challenge is not specific to EP elections and hence should not be held against this institution's legitimacy in particular. *Mid-term voters* and some *national issue voters*, finally, voice preferences that MEPs cannot really enact– they are the truly problematic case in EP elections.

As our paper is of a qualitative and conceptual nature, we can say very little about the statistical distribution of these voter types in the entire population. Hence, the final question of how big the share of problematic voters (and hence how big the EP's accountability problem) iscannot be answered here. However, assuming that our sample is not fundamentally biased, it is indeed interesting to see that there were few of the famous *mid-term-voters*, but rathermany *Europeans* at the polls.

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