

Selection in European Parliament Elections

SARA B. HOBOLT AND BJØRN HØYLAND*

Abstract

Elections are inherently about selecting good candidates for public office and sanctioning incumbents for past performance. Yet, in the low salience context of ‘second-order elections’ to the European Parliament, empirical evidence suggests that voters sanction first-order national incumbents. However, no previous study has examined whether voters also use these elections to select good candidates. Drawing on a unique data set on the political experience of party representatives in 85 national elections to the European Parliament, we evaluate to what extent voters prefer candidates with more political experience. The results show that selection considerations do matter. Parties that have experienced top candidates are rewarded by voters. The effect of promoting politically experienced candidates is greatest when European elections are held in the middle of the national electoral cycle.

Electoral politics can be understood as a principal-agent relationship. Voters (the principal) select a politician (the agent) to enact policies on their behalf. If the electorate is not pleased with the enacted policies, the politician is not re-elected for a new term. But this understanding of electoral politics rests on the assumption that voters have sufficient information about

*Hobolt: Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Oxford. Høyland: CICERO, Center for International Climate and Environmental Research - Oslo and Centre for the Study of Civil War (CSWS), Peace Research Institute, Oslo (PRIO). The authors would like to thank Simon Hix, Simon Hug, Oddbjørn Knutsen, Michael Marsh, James Tilley, Hugh Ward, Albert Weale and Alan Wiseman as well as the anonymous reviewers for useful comments. An earlier version of the paper was presented at the Midwest Political Science Association Meeting in 2007, the biannual meeting of the European Union Studies Association in 2007, the annual meeting of the Norwegian Political Science Association, as well as conferences at the University of Oslo, the Free University of Brussels and the London School of Economics. We are also grateful to Simon Hix and Michael Marsh for providing us access to their data on European Parliament Elections.

the politician's actions to effectively perform the sanctioning task, and that the politician, in turn, responds to such electoral incentives. If information about the performance of politicians is limited, then improving the quality of representation and government requires instead the selection of politicians on the basis of experience and competence.¹ This view considers elections as mechanisms for selecting suitable candidates for office. Voters may rely on cues about the competence of the representative, such as past political experience, in order to distinguish between 'good' and 'bad' candidates for office.² Yet, such selection considerations are often overlooked in the study of second-order elections.

In this article, we argue that political selection matters in so-called second-order national elections, such as European Parliament (EP) and local elections. From the US electoral politics literature we know that the political experience of candidates has significant electoral consequences in elections to Congress.³ But we have a limited understanding of whether this phenomenon also occurs in less candidate-centred contexts. This paper thus contributes to the largely US-focused literature by investigating the electoral effects of political experience in the party-centred context of European Parliament elections. It also enhances our understanding of electoral behaviour in EP elections.

The European Parliament is the only directly-elected institution in the

1. Timothy Besley, "Political Selection," *Journal of Economic Perspectives in Politics* 19, no. 3 (2005): 43–60.

2. Gerald H. Kramer, "Short-Term Fluctuations in U.S. Voting Behavior, 1896 - 1964," *American Political Science Review* 65, no. 1 (1971): 131–143; James D. Fearon, "Electoral Accountability and Control of Politicians: Selecting Good Types versus Sanctioning Poor Performance," in *Democracy, Accountability, and Representation*, ed. Adam Przeworski, Susan C. Stokes, and Bernard Manin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 55–97; Raymond M Duch and Randolph Stevenson, *The Economic Vote. How Political And Economic Institutions Condition Election Results* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

3. e.g. Gary C. Jacobson and Samuel Kernell, *Strategy and Choice in Congressional Elections* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983); Peverill Squire, "Candidates, Money, and Voters. Assessing the State of Congressional Election Research," *Politics Research Quarterly* 48, no. 4 (1995): 891–917; Jamie Carson et al., "The Impact of National Tides and District-Level Effects on Electoral Outcomes: The U.S. Congressional Elections of 1962 – 63," *American Journal of Political Science* 45, no. 4 (2001): 887–898.

European Union (EU). Nevertheless, the electoral contests are widely regarded as second-order national elections, where campaigns are fought on national rather than European issues and voters have little or no knowledge of the policy-making in the Parliament.⁴ Given the lack of information about past performance, these elections provide an apposite case for examining the degree to which political experience matters to voters. We ask the question: *To what extent do politically experienced politicians increase the vote share of parties in EP elections?* More specifically, we examine whether parties with a very experienced candidate on their list, such as a former government minister, attract more voters. To answer this question, we draw on a rich and original data set covering 85 national elections to the European Parliament between 1979 and 2004. Using multilevel modelling, we demonstrate that parties with a very politically experienced politician at the helm of their campaign gain more votes. Our findings also reveal that voters are more likely to base their vote on candidate quality during the mid-term of the general election cycle.

This paper proceeds as follows. First, it discusses the notion of elections as instruments for political selection of 'good' candidates and relates it to the extensive US literature on electoral effects of candidate quality. Second, we introduce the reader to the extant literature on European Parliament elections before presenting our argument of why selection mechanisms should matter in these elections. In the subsequent section, we present the data and the statistical approach. Thereafter, we present the empirical results. The final section concludes.

4. Karlheinz Reif and Hermann Schmitt, "Nine Second-Order National Elections - A Conceptual Framework for the Analysis of European Election Results," *European Journal of Political Research* 8 (1980): 3-44; Cees van der Eijk and Mark Franklin, *Choosing Europe? The European Electorate and National Politics in the Face of the Union* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996); Michael Marsh, "Testing the Second-Order Election Model after Four European Elections," *British Journal of Political Science* 28 (1998): 591-607; Simon Hix and Michael Marsh, "Punishment or Protest? Understanding European Parliament Elections," *The Journal of Politics* 69, no. 2 (2007): 495-510; Wouter van der Brug and Cees van der Eijk, *European Elections and Domestic Politics: Lessons from the Past and Scenarios for the Future* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).

Selection and candidate quality

There are two principal mechanisms by which elections may bring about democracy, or rule according to the people: sanctioning and selection.⁵ In the classic tradition of democratic theory, which understands elections as mechanisms of political accountability, elections are inherently a sanctioning device in which voters reward or punish incumbents on the basis of past performance and thereby induce elected officials to be responsive to public preferences.⁶ Alternatively, voters may see elections not as sanctioning devices, but as opportunities to choose a good political representative, i.e. one with personal characteristics such as integrity, shared preferences, experience and skills.⁷ Whereas the sanctioning model is seen as retrospective in nature, the selection or competency model is future-oriented. Yet, both approaches rely on some knowledge about past behaviour of candidates or parties. Mansbridge⁸ refers to the selection type of representation as 'gyroscopic', where voters 'select the representative based on predictions of the representative's future behaviour derived from past behaviour and other cues', rather than the traditional 'promissory' type of representation, which follows the principal-agent format. In the formal literature on electoral control, the distinction is implied in the discussion of moral hazard (sanctioning) versus adverse selection

5. Jeffrey Banks and Rangarajan K. Sundaram, "Adverse Selection and Moral Hazard in a Repeated Elections Model," in *Political Economy: Institutions, Competition, and Representation*, ed. W. A. Barnett, Melvin J. Hinich, and Norman Schofield (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

6. V. O. Key, *The Responsible Electorate* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966); Morris P. Fiorina, *Retrospective Voting in American National Elections* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981); Bernard Manin, *The principles of representative government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); G. Bingham Powell, *Elections as Instruments of Democracy: Majoritarian and Proportional Visions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

7. Besley, "Political Selection"; Fearon, "Electoral Accountability and Control of Politicians: Selecting Good Types versus Sanctioning Poor Performance"; Francisco Herreros, "Screening before Sanctioning: Elections and the Republican Tradition," *European Journal of Political Theory* 5 (2006): 415:435; Duch and Stevenson, *The Economic Vote. How Political And Economic Institutions Condition Election Results*.

8. Jane Mansbridge, "Rethinking Representation," *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 4 (2003): 521.

(selection).⁹ To distinguish 'good types' from 'bad types' voters can make use of a variety of signals. 'Good types' are those politicians who share voters' interests, have moral integrity and are competent.¹⁰ Yet, moral integrity and competence are notoriously difficult for voters to observe directly, and the theoretical literature tends to be vague about the specific characteristics that signal the quality of a candidate. As we will discuss further below, one of the most compelling and frequently cited signals of competency is the prior experience of potential agents. As Shepsle and Bonchek¹¹ put it, 'before-the-fact protection relies upon the assumption that an agent's reputation is a valuable asset which he or she does not want to depreciate'. Political experience can thus act as an informative cue about the quality and competence of the candidate.¹²

The literature on electoral democracy has been dominated by a paradigm in which candidates (or parties) are successful mainly because they get policies or policy positions right, and not because of their personal characteristics or other competency signals. Most prominently, the literature on economic voting has modelled vote choices using this sanctioning approach: voters punish incumbents at the polls when past performance is substandard and reward them when the economy is doing well.¹³ It is the concern with reelection that motivates incumbents to avoid shirking their responsibility.¹⁴

Yet, the electoral mechanisms of sanctioning and selection can comple-

9. John Ferejohn, "The spatial model and elections," in *Information, participation and choice. An economic theory of democracy in perspective*, ed. B Grofman (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1993).

10. Fearon, "Electoral Accountability and Control of Politicians: Selecting Good Types versus Sanctioning Poor Performance."

11. Kenneth A. Shepsle and Mark S. Bonchek, *Analyzing Politics: Rationality, Behavior and Institutions* (London: W.W. Norton / Co., 1997), 361.

12. Squire, "Candidates, Money, and Voters. Assessing the State of Congressional Election Research."

13. An exception to this is Duch and Stevenson, *The Economic Vote. How Political And Economic Institutions Condition Election Results*, this cross-national study of economic voting presents a selection rather than a sanctioning model to explain the economic vote.

14. Key, *The Responsible Electorate*; Fiorina, *Retrospective Voting in American National Elections*; John Ferejohn, "Incumbent Performance and Electoral Control," *Public Choice* 50 (1986): 5-25; Michael Lewis-Beck, *Economics and Elections: The Major Western Democracies* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988).

ment each other: voters may punish and reward incumbents for their performance in office and at the same time evaluate the experience and competence of candidates when casting their vote. Recent work has emphasised the importance of politicians' characteristics in explaining political behaviour. Formal models in the political economy literature, such as the citizen-candidate approach, have been used to study selection on valence characteristics of politicians, such as competence and honesty, as well as what determines the supply of 'good' and 'bad' politicians.¹⁵ Besley and Coate¹⁶ have argued that selection mechanisms should be given more attention in the literature on electoral behaviour, emphasising that 'personal qualities of politicians such as honesty, integrity and competence are potentially important, especially in environments where politicians face limited formal sanctions'. European Parliament elections clearly represent such an environment, since there is no 'incumbent' and formal sanctions are thus limited. Consequently, we may expect that selection mechanisms play an important role in these second-order elections. However, it still raises the questions of how voters identify the 'quality' of candidates and what impact it has on their vote choices.

In the empirical literature on electoral behaviour, political selection has featured most prominently in studies on 'incumbent advantage' in US elections. In these studies, which seek to explain why incumbents in House, Senate and Gubernatorial races win so often, it has been shown that the 'quality' of the incumbent as well as the challenger has a strong effect on the re-election chances of the incumbent. The key findings in this literature are two-fold. Firstly, the strategic decision to stand as a challenger in an electoral contest is influenced by the quality of the incumbent: high quality incumbents will deter challengers from running. Secondly, voters respond positively to the quality of both the incumbent and the challenger: high

15. Timothy Besley and Stephen Coate, "An Economic Model of Representative Democracybro," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 112, no. 1 (1997): 85–114; Besley, "Political Selection"; Francesco Caselli and Massimo Morelli, "Bad politicians," *Journal of Public Economics* 88, no. 3 (2004): 759–782.

16. Timothy Besley, Rohini Pande, and Vijayendra Rao, "Selection and the Quality of Government: Evidence from South India" (Yale University, Economic Growth Center Discussion Paper 21, 2005), 2.

quality candidates have more electoral success.¹⁷ In these studies, 'candidate quality' is understood as prior office-holding experience. Clearly political experience is only an imperfect measure of 'candidate quality', understood as the competence and moral integrity of the individual. It is not implausible that certain politicians have been elected to office for reasons that have very little to do with competence and integrity, such as wealth or charisma. Nevertheless, there are good reasons why prior political experience is generally regarded as useful signal concerning the quality of the politician. First, by selecting a politician with experience voters are taking cues from other voters who have favoured the candidate in the past. Second, if a politician has already been in the public eye for some time, any lapses in terms of honesty and integrity are more likely to have been discovered than if he is a novice. Third, a seasoned politician will bring more experience and knowledge to the office, and is therefore likely to be more competent in the role. In other words, if politicians have delivered in the past, they should be able to deliver in the future. As Squire¹⁸ notes, 'while there is no consensus on the specific personal characteristics associated with better challengers, there is a strong agreement that whatever those qualities are they are measured in substantial part by the candidate's previous political experience'.

Some scholars use a simple dummy variable which contrasts candidates with and without prior experience in public office,¹⁹ while other scholars have refined this measure by calibrating the status of the previous offices held.²⁰

17. see Jacobson and Kernell, *Strategy and Choice in Congressional Elections*; David Ian Lublin, "Quality, Not Quantity: Strategic Politicians in U.S. Senate Elections, 1952-1990," *The Journal of Politics* 56, no. 1 (1994): 228-241; Squire, "Candidates, Money, and Voters. Assessing the State of Congressional Election Research"; Carson et al., "The Impact of National Tides and District-Level Effects on Electoral Outcomes: The U.S. Congressional Elections of 1962 - 63"; Walter Stone, Sandy Mausel, and Cherie D. Maestas, "Counts: Extending the Strategic Politician Model of Incumbent Deterrence," *American Journal of Political Science* 48, no. 3 (2004): 478-95; Adam M. Brown, "Strategic Politicians in Gubernatorial Elections" (PhD diss., University of California, San Diego, 2008).

18. Squire, "Candidates, Money, and Voters. Assessing the State of Congressional Election Research," 893.

19. e.g. Jacobson and Kernell, *Strategy and Choice in Congressional Elections*; Lublin, "Quality, Not Quantity: Strategic Politicians in U.S. Senate Elections, 1952-1990."

20. e.g. Jonathan S. Krasno and Donald P. Green, "Preempting Quality Challengers in House Elections," *The Journal of Politics* 50, no. 4 (1988): 920-36; Brown, "Strategic

Other studies have taken an even broader approach to candidate quality, which encompasses both strategic resources, (ability to mount a successful campaign) and personal resources (skills, characteristics and qualities).²¹ But regardless of the exact operationalization, these studies all show that political experience has a significant impact on electoral success.²² As we describe in our Data and Measurement section below, this paper adopts the former approach to candidate quality and focuses on office-holding experience calibrated by the status of the office. Given the low salience of European Parliament elections, we are interested in examining the electoral effects of putting forward a candidate with a prominent national profile of experience and competence, such as a former minister and prime minister. To distinguish between the effect of political experience (which can be argued to signal quality) and the mere effect of name recognition, we also compare the effect of experienced MEPs with the effect of candidates with a high profile public persona but without political experience (e.g. television personalities).

While office-holding experience has proven important in the context of US elections, relatively little work has been done on the effect of candidate quality outside the US setting. We thus have a limited understanding of whether political selection plays a role in other political contexts. Yet, it is reasonable to expect political experience to matter in elections to second-order legislatures where the assumption that the electorate is sufficiently informed to perform the sanctioning task is problematic. This argument is further elaborated in the next section, where we discuss the role of political selection in the context of elections to the European Parliament.

Selection in European Parliament elections

Despite the fact that the European Parliament has gained increasing legislative powers in the European Union over the past decades, elections of

Politicians in Gubernational Elections.”

21. e.g. Stone, Mausel, and Maestas, “Counts: Extending the Strategic Politician Model of Incumbent Deterrence.”

22. Squire, “Candidates, Money, and Voters. Assessing the State of Congressional Election Research.”

its members remain low-key affairs. Campaigns leading up to EP elections focus more on national than on European policy issues, turnout is low and parties that are in national government tend to perform worse.²³ The most common explanation of these phenomena is the 'second-order national election' thesis. At the heart of the theory of second-order national elections is the proposition that EP elections, like local and regional elections, are of lesser importance than first-order elections for national office.²⁴ Given the lower importance of EP elections, parties devote fewer resources to these campaigns and there are generally lower incentives for people to vote and engage with the issues at stake. Hence, citizens are more likely to vote sincerely rather than strategically, and this in turn will tend to favour smaller parties. EP elections also allow voters to express their dissatisfaction with governing parties. The extent to which governments are punished in EP elections depends on at what point in the national electoral cycle the EP election is held. This argument has roots in theories of mid-term elections in the US, where the president's party tends to enjoy a comparative disadvantage.²⁵ Mid-term losses can either reflect a natural 'cycle of popularity' for governing parties, which declines mid-term,²⁶ or a negative retrospective judgement of economic performance.²⁷ Fundamentally, this view of EP elec-

23. van der Eijk and Franklin, *Choosing Europe? The European Electorate and National Politics in the Face of the Union*; Claes H de Vreese, Susan Banducci, and Holli A. Semetko, "The News Coverage of the 2004 European Parliamentary Election Campaign in 25 Countries," *European Union Politics* 7, no. 4 (2006): 477–504.

24. Marsh, "Testing the Second-Order Election Model after Four European Elections"; Karlheinz Reif, "National Election Cycles and European Elections, 1979 and 1984," *Electoral Studies* 3, no. 3 (1984): 244–255; Reif and Schmitt, "Nine Second-Order National Elections - A Conceptual Framework for the Analysis of European Election Results"; van der Eijk and Franklin, *Choosing Europe? The European Electorate and National Politics in the Face of the Union*; Cliff Carrubba and Richard J. Timpono, "Explaining Vote Switching Across First- and Second-Order Elections: Evidence From Europe," *Comparative Political Studies* 38, no. 3 (2005): 260–281; van der Brug and van der Eijk, *European Elections and Domestic Politics: Lessons from the Past and Scenarios for the Future*; Hix and Marsh, "Punishment or Protest? Understanding European Parliament Elections."

25. Angus Campbell, "Surge and Decline: A Study of Electoral Change," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 24 (1960): 397–418.

26. Marsh, "Testing the Second-Order Election Model after Four European Elections"; Reif, "National Election Cycles and European Elections, 1979 and 1984."

27. Fiorina, *Retrospective Voting in American National Elections*; Thaddeus Kousser, "Retrospective Voting and Strategic Behaviour in European Parliament Elections," *Electoral*

tions rests on a 'sanctioning' view elections. It acknowledges that voters are unlikely to sanction representatives on the basis of their performance in the EP and argues that voters instead use these second-order elections to punish national governments for their performance in the domestic arena.

There are several reasons why it is plausible that voters sanction the performance of national governments rather than their European representatives in EP elections. First, since EP elections do not translate into the formation of a government at the European level, voters cannot use these elections to punish or reward the European executive institutions; the Commission and the Council.²⁸ Second, voters receive minimal information about the European Parliament through the media and other information channels and it is thus close to impossible for citizens to monitor and evaluate the performance of individual Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) and thereby make informed judgements about whether to reelect on this basis.²⁹ In comparison, information about national incumbents is far more accessible to most voters. Hence, in line with the second-order theory, we would expect that EP elections involve the sanctioning of national rather than European politicians. There is a great deal of evidence showing that governing parties tend to do worse in EP elections relative to their performance in the national general election and that this defection is greatest in mid-term elections.³⁰ These studies provide a compelling explanation for patterns of voting behaviour in EP elections. However, this does not exclude the possibility that

Studies 23, no. 1 (2004): 1–21; Edward Tufte, "Determinants of the Outcomes of Midterm Congressional Elections," *American Political Science Review* 69, no. 3 (1975): 812–26.

28. Andreas Føllesdal and Simon Hix, "Why There is a Democratic Deficit in the EU: A Response to Majone and Moravcsik," *Journal of Common Market Studies* 44, no. 3 (2006).

29. de Vreese, Banducci, and Semetko, "The News Coverage of the 2004 European Parliamentary Election Campaign in 25 Countries"; van der Brug and van der Eijk, *European Elections and Domestic Politics: Lessons from the Past and Scenarios for the Future*.

30. Reif, "National Election Cycles and European Elections, 1979 and 1984"; van der Eijk and Franklin, *Choosing Europe? The European Electorate and National Politics in the Face of the Union*; Hix and Marsh, "Punishment or Protest? Understanding European Parliament Elections"; Federico Ferrara and J. Timo Weishaupt, "Get Your Act Together: Party Performance in European Parliament Elections," *European Union Politics* 5, no. 3 (2004): 283–306; Marsh, "Testing the Second-Order Election Model after Four European Elections"; Kousser, "Retrospective Voting and Strategic Behaviour in European Parliament Elections."

voters also use EP elections as a selection tool.

None of the existing literature on electoral outcomes in EP elections has examined the role of selection effects. We therefore do not know whether political experience matters to voters in EP elections. Only a few studies have examined the characteristics and career paths of MEPs. Scarrow³¹ explores how a seat in the EP fits into a domestic political career path. She finds considerable cross-national variation in the background of MEPs, but concludes that the EP is increasingly attracting 'careerist' candidates who view that Parliament as their principal political arena. Norris and Franklin³² also examine the background of MEPs. They find that the EP is very socially unrepresentative and that the chances of gaining a winnable seat in EP election is more strongly related to supply-side factors, such as gender, incumbency status and motivation, than demand-side factors, such as gatekeeper demands. These studies give us an important insight into the composition of the European Parliament, but do not explicitly address the question of how MEP background affects electoral outcomes.

The implicit assumption of the second-order approach is that the quality of candidates is generally fairly low, since parties are unlikely to nominate politically experienced and high-profile candidates to a second-order arena. Of course, if all candidates are of similarly low quality, the selection mechanism would not work. Voters would not be able to choose the 'good representative' and might opt for the sanctioning of national incumbents instead. The first question we must address is therefore to what extent the 'quality', or level of political experience, varies across parties and countries. The received wisdom is that MEPs are either young and inexperienced or very old and about to retire.³³ However, an increasing proportion of MEPs choose Brussels as their main career whilst others shift between prominent national positions and representation in the European Parliament. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the political experience of many MEPs is far from negligible, and that

31. Susan E. Scarrow, "Political Career Paths and the European Parliament," *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 22, no. 2 (1997): 253–263.

32. Pippa Norris and Mark Franklin, "Social Representation," *European Journal of Political Research* 32 (1997): 153–164.

33. Scarrow, "Political Career Paths and the European Parliament."

this makes a difference in elections. For example, when the Danish Social Democrats (in opposition at the time) nominated the former Danish Prime Minister Poul Nyrup Rasmussen to lead their EP party list in 2004, the party's share of the vote increased by 16 percentage points compared with the previous EP election - an electoral gain which was widely attributed to the 'Nyrup effect'; that is, the 'quality' of this single candidate.

The second question is therefore whether variation in the political experience has an effect on the electoral fortunes of parties. As discussed above, we use the political experience of candidates as a proxy of 'candidate quality', as is the norm in the extant literature on candidate quality. Given the limited knowledge that voters have about the second-order arena, i.e. the European Parliament, we focus exclusively on the political experience of the candidates in the first-order arena, i.e. national politics. Moreover, we are primarily interested in the effect that experience of the 'top candidate' of each party has on that party's electoral success, rather than candidate-specific effects. Whereas existing empirical studies on political selection have focused on *candidate* quality, this paper examines the political experience represented in *parties*. In the context of EP elections, it makes more sense to focus on the success of parties rather than individual candidates. First, vote choices in European elections are generally modelled in terms of parties rather than individual candidates.³⁴ Second, by focusing on the party level we can more easily compare across countries with different ballot structures.³⁵ Third, by measuring the experience of a party's top candidate, we limit the selection

34. Reif and Schmitt, "Nine Second-Order National Elections - A Conceptual Framework for the Analysis of European Election Results"; van der Eijk and Franklin, *Choosing Europe? The European Electorate and National Politics in the Face of the Union*; Marsh, "Testing the Second-Order Election Model after Four European Elections"; Hix and Marsh, "Punishment or Protest? Understanding European Parliament Elections"; van der Brug and van der Eijk, *European Elections and Domestic Politics: Lessons from the Past and Scenarios for the Future*; Sara B Hobolt, Jae-Jae Spoon, and James Tilley, "A Vote Against Europe? Explaining defection at the 1999 and 2004 European Elections," *British Journal of Political Science* 39, no. 1 (2009): 93–115.

35. David M Farrell and Roger M. Scully, *Representing Europe's Citizens? Electoral Institutions and the Failure of Parliamentary Representation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

bias issue associated with the lack of data on unsuccessful candidates.³⁶ Finally, a high-profile candidate, such as a former prime minister, is likely to secure votes for the party as a whole and not just to secure his own seat in Parliament. We are thus interested in examining whether the political experience of parties' top candidates - that is the candidate with the most national political experience - makes voters more likely to reward them in elections.

There are sound theoretical reasons to expect that selection plays a role in EP elections. Taking into consideration voters' limited ability to hold MEPs to account in EP elections, they might use these elections, at least partially, as an opportunity to select good representatives. Given the agency problems that voters face in EP elections with limited information about the activities of their MEPs they might be more susceptible to elect candidates on the basis of their perceived quality, rather than to sanction them on the basis of past performance. We know from the literature that voters rely on cues and shortcuts when making decisions in elections. According to the signalling literature, one important persuasive cue is 'observable costly effort',³⁷ and arguably nominating high-profile candidates to the EP represents costly effort. If a party nominates a high-profile (former) minister as a candidate to the EP, he or she will no longer be able to play an active role in national politics, and this signals that the party regards this European chamber as one of high priority. As discussed above, political experience and reputation also provides information to voters that the candidate is a 'good type', and this information can be used in the screening process by voters as an *ex ante* control mechanism. Fearon,³⁸ for example, has shown formally that when

36. There may still be a bias in our analyses due to the fact that we only have data on successful candidates. The magnitude of this bias is, however, unlikely to be very large when using this operationalisation of experience, since the most experienced candidate of a party will almost always be among the successful candidates. Moreover, as a robustness check, Model 3 of the Appendix shows a re-estimation of our main results with mean rather than maximum level of experience as the key explanatory variable.

37. see Arthur Lupia and Mathew D. McCubbins, *The Democratic Dilemma. Can Citizens learn what they need to know?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

38. Fearon, "Electoral Accountability and Control of Politicians: Selecting Good Types versus Sanctioning Poor Performance."

voters perceive any differences in quality between candidates in an election it is rational for them to vote on that basis of those differences rather than to try to use their vote to sanction incumbents. Such a 'selection' rationale should be even more pertinent in second-order elections where voters have very little information about the past performance of the representatives, and their only sanctioning tool is to punish the government at the national level. Hence, theories of signalling and selection mechanisms would lead us to expect that politically experienced candidates bring about positive electoral feedback for parties. On the basis of this, we can formulate our first hypothesis:

H1: The more politically experienced a party's top candidate, the larger the increase in the party's vote share in European Parliament elections, all other things being equal.

The relative degree to which voters focus on domestic vis-à-vis European issues will depend on the timing of the EP election. European Parliament elections are not synchronised with national general elections, except in Luxembourg, and often take place during the mid-term of the general election cycle. We know from the literature that governing parties tend to do worse during the mid-term period, reflecting the 'cost of ruling' and the normal cycle of popularity for incumbents. In contrast, elections to the European Parliament that are held concurrently with the national election will be entirely overshadowed by domestic politics, and voters are unlikely to receive much information about the candidates competing in the European Parliament race. We can thus formulate our second hypothesis:

H2: The effect of political experience on change in parties' vote share in EP elections is greatest when they are held in the middle of the national electoral cycle.

To test these two hypotheses, we have built a unique data set on the political experience of successful party candidates in EP elections. This data

set, and our empirical model, is described in further detail below.

Data and Measurement

To create a measure of 'quality', we collected data on the political experience of successful candidates in all six EP elections between 1979 and 2004 (a total of 85 national elections and over 3000 successful candidates). As mentioned above, candidate quality is often operationalized in terms of whether or not the candidate has any past political experience. In this study, rather than using of simple dummy variable of previous position in office, we have created an additive scale of various aspects of previous experience in the national arena, weighted by the level of the position.

The index is calculated as follows. If an MEP has been an MP, he is given a score of 1, if not, the score is 0. We then add 2 to this score if the MEP has been a minister and 3 to the score if the MEP has been a party leader. Finally, we add 4 to the score if the MEP has been the prime minister or the president. The score ranges from 0 to 10. A party scores 10 if at least one of the elected MEPs had held all of the above mentioned positions, 0 if none of the elected MEPs had held any of these positions. The data on political experience were obtained by systematically coding the biographies of all MEPs, included in the *Times Guide to the European Parliament* as well as EP and party websites and other party documents.³⁹

As discussed above, we would not expect voters to have detailed knowledge of the background of the less experienced candidates in these low salience elections, and it thus makes theoretically most sense to focus on the political experience of each party's top candidate. For the purpose of our investigation, we define the candidate with the highest score on the index, as the party's *top candidate* in that election. In the previous example of the Danish 2004 EP election, the top candidate for the Social Democrats was Poul Nyrup

39. R Morgan, *Times Guide to the European Parliament 1994* (London: Times Books, 1994); A Wood, *Times Guide to the European Parliament 1979* (London: Times Books, 1979); A Wood, *Times Guide to the European Parliament 1984* (London: Times Books, 1984); A Wood, *Times Guide to the European Parliament 1989* (London: Times Books, 1989).

Rasmussen, and the Danish Social Democrats are thus given a score of 10 in 2004, since Rasmussen has held posts as national MP, minister, party leader and prime minister.

By focusing on the experience of the top candidate we also address the skewness in the distribution of experience of MEPs. Although most elected MEPs have little or no experience from national politics, most parties have at least one MEP with some experience from national politics. The mean national experience of the *top candidate* is 2.12.

As this index focuses on previous political experience, not the unobservable virtues highlighted in some of the theoretical contributions reviewed above,⁴⁰ it is not a direct measurement of 'quality' in any normative sense. However as discussed above, past political experience and important offices provide a visible cue to voters of competence of party representatives. As Squire⁴¹ points out, 'in essence, previous political experience is a surrogate for the positive personal characteristics associated with higher quality challengers because we take it to be a concrete manifestation of them. People who have held elective office - what we typically mean by political experience - have, under most circumstances, already exhibited personal appeal and campaign skills by virtue of their election to that office'. Hence, for both substantive and methodological reasons, the models shown in this paper focus exclusively on the experience of the 'top candidate' (most experienced) of each party in an election.

Before turning to the distribution of this variable, we must first address two potential concerns about this measure of candidate 'quality'. The first concern is that our experience variable is merely capturing the effect of simple name recognition, or 'celebrity status', rather than any signal of competence. In other words, since EP elections are low salience contexts voters may choose famous candidates, regardless of whether their 'fame' is due to experience from national politics or something else. To be able to distinguish between the effect of political experience and the effect of sheer name

40. e.g. Mansbridge, "Rethinking Representation."

41. Squire, "Candidates, Money, and Voters. Assessing the State of Congressional Election Research," 893-894.

recognition, we created a dummy variable that takes the value 1 if at least one of the elected candidates from the party is a well-known national figure, e.g. TV presenter, singer, author, sports star, etc. This variable is labelled *Prestige*. If our argument about quality holds, the effect of *Experience* should be stronger than the effect of *Prestige* and the effect of experience should not disappear when *Prestige* is controlled for. Second, it may be argued that many experienced candidates either hold dual mandates (i.e. are members of both national and European parliaments, as it was allowed until 2004) or have no intention of serving a full term in the European Parliament, even though they appear on the ballot. In both cases, political experience can be argued to be a poor signal of contribution that these experienced MEPs will make to the European Parliament. In order to ensure that our results are not driven by these less committed MEPs, we excluded all MEPs with dual mandates and those who did not serve a significant part of their term in the EP from the calculation of the experience score.

We can now turn to the distribution of political experience among national parties represented in the European Parliament. Looking at Figure 1, there is clearly some between-country variance in MEP experience. 9 of the 25 countries have at least one MEP obtaining the highest score on our index. French and Italian parties have sent several former presidents and prime ministers to the EP, for example Jacques Chirac, Edgar Faure, Valéry Giscard D'Estaing and Bettino Craxi. We can also see that several of the former communist countries that joined the EU in 2004 put forward high-profile candidates in their first national elections to the European Parliament. Slovenia, Estonia, Latvia and Poland all had former prime ministers standing as their top candidates on a party list, as well as several other candidates with high national profiles. For countries that have participated in several European Parliament elections since 1979,⁴² cross-national differences in candidate quality are quite stable. For example, parties in Luxembourg have very high quality top candidates across most elections, and Belgian and Portuguese parties also provide on high quality candidates. In contrast, par-

42. Due to the continuing expansion of the EU, 9 countries participated in the 1979 EP elections, 10 in 1984, 12 in 1989 and 1994; 15 in 1999 and 25 in 2004.

ties in the UK, the Netherlands and Germany tend to nominate MEPs with less experience. Recently, the Finnish party system has also produced many high quality candidates. However, our goal is not simply to demonstrate that candidate quality differs across parties and countries. Instead, we want to investigate how this affects election outcomes.⁴³

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Following the standard approach in the literature,⁴⁴ our dependent variable is the percentage change in vote share of each party in EP elections as compared to the results obtained in the previous national elections. This makes our results easily comparable with the existing literature. Furthermore, using difference in vote share from previous election takes care of party-specific omitted variables.⁴⁵

We control for the vote share in the most recent national election with the variable *Party size*.⁴⁶

Our key independent variable is the political experience of the top candidate measured at the party level in each election. As discussed above, there are both substantive and methodological advantages to limiting the focus to the candidate with the highest level of political experience within each party.

To examine second-order election effects, we include a *Government* dummy variable, which takes the value 1 if the party belongs to the national government at the time of the EP elections and 0 if not. This operationalisation is in line with previous studies of EP elections, and thus allows us examine the robustness of previous findings in addition to investigating the effect of political experience by including an interaction between *Government* and

43. The curious reader might like to know that there is no significant relationship between the difference in the turnout in national and EP elections and the experience of the top candidates.

44. e.g. Hix and Marsh, "Punishment or Protest? Understanding European Parliament Elections."

45. We thank one of the reviewers for pointing this out.

46. We do not estimate the squared and cubed effects of *Party size* as initial investigations showed effects of an implausible magnitude under this specification. The substantive results of the key variables of interest for our investigation remained the same.

Experience. As described above, one of the most solid findings in the literature is that governing parties tend to do less well in EP elections than in the previous elections that won them the office. It has also been shown that governments are punished most severely by voters when EP elections are held in the middle of the national electoral cycle, i.e. in mid-term elections.⁴⁷ Hix and Marsh⁴⁸ capture this effect by multiplying the government dummy with another dummy variable which takes the value 1 if the EP elections were held in the first fifth of a national electoral cycle. While this specification captures the 'mid-term' effect, it is a slightly crude measure of the effect of the national electoral cycle. Hence, we opt for interacting the government variable with a continuous variable which is 0 at the mid-term between the previous and the next national elections and 1 if the EP and general elections are held in the same month. We calculate this variable by taking the absolute difference between months since last elections and months to next elections. The difference is divided by the maximum value of either of the two variables. *Election proximity* hence captures the effect of the timing of elections for opposition parties while the interaction effect captures the difference between the effect of timing for opposition parties and governing parties. If opposition parties benefit and governing parties suffer from a 'mid-term' effect, *Government* should be negative and *Election proximity*Government* positive. We also test whether the effect of political experience varies over the course of the electoral cycle by including an interaction term between *Election proximity* and *Experience*. According to our second hypothesis the coefficient for this interaction should be negative, since the selection mechanism is expected to be more prevalent in the mid-term period.

We include dummies for party family, using the social democratic party family as the reference group. We do this to control for party family specific effects. For example, previous studies have shown that Green parties and Eurosceptic parties do better in EP elections.⁴⁹ If people vote sincerely rather

47. Marsh, "Testing the Second-Order Election Model after Four European Elections"; Reif, "National Election Cycles and European Elections, 1979 and 1984."

48. Hix and Marsh, "Punishment or Protest? Understanding European Parliament Elections."

49. van der Eijk and Franklin, *Choosing Europe? The European Electorate and National*

than strategically in EP elections, we may expect Green parties to perform better. Equally, if voters base their vote choices at least partly on European issues, we would expect Eurosceptic parties to gain votes in EP elections.⁵⁰ Our classification of party groups is identical to Hix and Marsh.⁵¹

Finally, we also need to control for the effect of the electoral system. Although legislation on uniformity of electoral procedures in EP elections was enacted in 2003 (according to which all national elections to the EP shall be held under a proportional representation electoral system), there has been, and continues to be, considerable variation in the ballot structure and district magnitude across countries.⁵² When it comes to examining the impact of candidate quality on the electoral success of parties, the most important aspect of the electoral system is the degree to which the ballot structure allows voters to determine the fate of individual candidates, that is how 'candidate-centred' it is.⁵³ Farrell and Scully⁵⁴ distinguish between open (candidate-centred) systems - in which the candidates' electoral fates are affected by their personal vote-chasing activities (e.g. STV in Ireland and Malta and Open list in Finland) - and closed (party-based) systems - in which candidates' electoral fates are determined by their party list placement (e.g. Closed lists in France and Germany). Since candidate-centred systems give voters greater freedom to choose the candidate of their choice, we would expect that such systems would encourage higher quality candidates to stand. Moreover, such systems may also enhance the effect of expe-

Politics in the Face of the Union; Carrubba and Timpone, "Explaining Vote Switching Across First- and Second-Order Elections: Evidence From Europe"; Hix and Marsh, "Punishment or Protest? Understanding European Parliament Elections."

50. Hobolt, Spoon, and Tilley, "A Vote Against Europe? Explaining defection at the 1999 and 2004 European Elections."

51. Hix and Marsh, "Punishment or Protest? Understanding European Parliament Elections."

52. Farrell and Scully, *Representing Europe's Citizens? Electoral Institutions and the Failure of Parliamentary Representation*.

53. David Farrell et al., "EPRG 2000 and 2006 MEP Surveys Dataset" (2006); Farrell and Scully, *Representing Europe's Citizens? Electoral Institutions and the Failure of Parliamentary Representation*.

54. Farrell and Scully, *Representing Europe's Citizens? Electoral Institutions and the Failure of Parliamentary Representation*.

rience on vote share. As Farrell and Scully⁵⁵ note 'electoral systems that are characterised by candidate-orientation tend to produce greater attention to personal vote chasing by politicians and the maintenance of close links with their electorates'. To test whether this affects the impact of experience on party vote share and change in vote share, we include an interaction between candidate-centred *Electoral system* and *Experience* in our model. Following Farrell,⁵⁶ the electoral system has been operationalised as an index ranging from 0 to 10, where 10 indicates the highest degree of openness.⁵⁷ As previous studies⁵⁸ have demonstrated that the effective threshold may matter, the variable *Threshold* estimates how much of the difference in the vote share from the previous national election is due to electoral system effect related to the effective threshold. The interaction between *Threshold* and *Experience* captures whether the effective threshold conditions the effect of candidate experience on party vote share.

The descriptive statistics of the variables in our models are summarised in table 1.

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

We use a cross-level hierarchical linear model to estimate the effect of political experience on electoral outcome as our dependent variable is change in party vote share in the EP election compared to previous national election, and the vote share in the EP election. Variation in the change in the vote share of parties may be due to factors related to the party (e.g. governing or opposition party, position on salient issues) and factors related to the election itself (e.g. when it occurs in the electoral cycle). It thus makes theoretical

55. Farrell and Scully, *Representing Europe's Citizens? Electoral Institutions and the Failure of Parliamentary Representation*, 77.

56. Ibid.

57. The coding is as follows: Austria 2.9, Belgium 2.9, Cyprus 2.9, Czech Republic 2.9, Denmark 7.1, Estonia 7.1, Finland 7.1, France 1.4, Germany 1.4, Greece, 1.4, Hungary 1.4, Ireland 10, Italy 7.1, Latvia 2.9, Lithuania 7.1, Luxembourg 7.1, Malta 10, the Netherlands 2.9, Poland 1.4, Portugal 1.4, Slovenia 2.9, Slovakia 2.9, Spain 1.4, Sweden 2.9 and United Kingdom 1.4 (1979 - 1994 = 4.3).

58. e.g. Hix and Marsh, "Punishment or Protest? Understanding European Parliament Elections."

sense to consider countries and elections as two different nesting groups, both within which party election results are nested, rather than seeing them nested within each other. The systematic element of model then takes the following form:

$$Y_{ijt} \sim \mathbf{Z}\gamma_j + \delta_t + \mathbf{X}_i\beta.$$

We use γ_j to model the country correlation and δ_t to model the time-period correlation. $\mathbf{X}_i\beta$ indicates a matrix of explanatory variables and their coefficients. The effect of most of the coefficients are fixed across both time and countries. The exceptions are the effect of political experience and governing party status. These coefficients are free to vary across countries, but not over time. The stochastic element of the model is $y_i \sim N(\mu + \gamma_{j[i]} + \delta_{t[i]}, \sigma_y^2)$ for $i=1, \dots, n$, $\gamma_j \sim N(0, \sigma_\gamma^2)$ for $j=1, \dots, J$ and $\delta_t \sim N(0, \sigma_\delta^2)$ for $t=1, \dots, T$. We estimate a cross-level model rather than a three-level hierarchical model as we expect the effect of time to be common across countries. This is because the European Parliament has substantively increased its power within the European Union, thereby making it more important for policy-seeking political parties to be represented in the institution.⁵⁹ Furthermore, changes in the level of electoral volatility and electoral cost of being in government are common across most member states.⁶⁰ However, there are several country-specific features that do not vary across time, like electoral laws (in most countries) and party systems. We also estimate a linear regression model with fixed year and country effects and panel corrected standard errors. This model is included to guard against our results being driven by omitted variable bias. The results are discussed in the next section.

59. Simon Hix, Abdul Noury, and Gerard Roland, *Democracy in the European Parliament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

60. van der Eijk and Franklin, *Choosing Europe? The European Electorate and National Politics in the Face of the Union*.

Results

We estimate five alternative models. The first four models are hierarchical models while the fifth is a fixed effects version of the fourth model.⁶¹ The results are reported in table 2. The different model specifications give similar substantive results. The reported results are maximum likelihood estimates.

[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Model 1 is the base model. It estimates the unconditional effect of experience as well as how the effect of experience varies over the national electoral cycle. It also investigates to what extent the effect of experience differs between governing and opposition parties and the difference in the effect of the national electoral cycle for governing and opposition parties. Finally, it controls for vote share in the previous national election, governing status and party group affiliation. The coefficients for experience, governing party status and electoral cycle are allowed to vary across countries. For simplicity, and because the residual variation across time is small, none of the coefficients are allowed to vary across time. The residual variance is more than halved compared to the empty model. For all the models where *Experience* is included, the variances of the country specific intercept and the country specific slopes of *Government* and *Proximity* are large. The variances in the country specific slopes of *Experience* and *Prestige* are negligible. This implies that the experience of candidates matters to parties' electoral success in all countries in our study.

The unconditional effect of experience is positive and significant. One unit increase on our index, increases the vote share by 1 percentage points, with the 95 % confidence interval ranging from 0.48 to 1.53. The model predicts that the difference between nominating a former minister with experience from the national parliament and running without anybody with experience

61. The Bonferroni outlier test revealed four outliers in the fixed effects model. We removed these observations and re-ran the analysis. We also re-ran model 4 and 5 with party mean level of political expertise. The substantive results still hold. See table 3 in appendix.

from national politics is on average 3 percentage points. This is in line with hypothesis one.

We can also see that the effect of national political experience decreases if the EP elections are held close to the national elections. If the elections occur simultaneously, the effect of experience disappears. This makes sense, since voters are more likely to vote in accordance with their national vote choice in EP elections when the two elections occur at the same time. This is in line with hypothesis two.

The model also shows that the governing parties lose on average 3.4 percentage points compared to the previous elections, if the EP elections occur in the middle of the national electoral cycle. However, as the national elections draw closer, this effects disappears, as the coefficient of the interaction term *Government * Election proximity* cancel each other out.

Also in line with existing research, we see that larger parties lose in EP elections. On average, the vote share is reduced by 0.2 percentage points per percentage point of the vote share the party received in the previous national election. The 95% uncertainty ranges from -0.24 to -0.15. A large party that received 20 per cent of the vote share in the previous national election is thus expected to receive only 16 per cent of the vote share in the EP elections. We also find that the Greens, Eurosceptic and Christian Democratic parties do better, whereas Social Democrats perform worse in EP elections, controlling for other variables. It should also be noted that the effects of governing party status and timing of the electoral cycle vary considerable across countries while there is less country-level variation in the effect of experience.

Model 2 adds two electoral system variables and the interaction with experience. *Electoral system* measures the openness of the electoral system and *Threshold* measures the effective electoral threshold. While there is no effect of the electoral system variable, we see that experience has a smaller effect the higher the electoral threshold. There is hence more to gain by nominating experienced politicians the lower the effective electoral threshold. It should however be noted that this effect is only significant at the 10 per cent level. We should hence refrain from reading too much into it. The coefficients

for the main variables do not change substantively by the inclusion of these system level variables. Both the magnitude and the precision of the estimates remain similar. Indeed, it is not clear whether the inclusion of these system level variables are warranted. The Akaike Information criteria favours model 2 over model 1, (model 1, AIC = 2749 vs model 2, AIC = 2747) while the Bayesian information criteria, which punishes complexity more heavily, favours model 1 over model 2 (model 1, BIC = 2866 vs model 2, BIC = 2880).

Model 3 is a test of the extent to which our results are simply due to name recognition rather than national political experience. The main effect of experience and its interaction terms are substituted for the *Prestige* variable, which takes the value of 1 for parties with one or more MEPs who are famous for reasons other than national political experience. All other variables are identical to model 2. The results strongly suggest that we can dismiss the hypothesis that the effect is due to name recognition rather than experience. Under this specification, only the interaction term between *Prestige* and *Threshold* stays significant. However, the direction of this interaction term is positive, the opposite of the interaction between *Experience* and *Threshold*. This suggests that name recognition has the largest effect in system with a high electoral threshold.

In model 4, we include both *Experience* and *Prestige* in the same specification. We have removed the *Electoral system* variable, as it does not seem to have any effect. This specification tests whether the effect of *Experience* still holds even after controlling for *Prestige*. The test is affirmative. *Experience* remains positive and significant. One should nevertheless note that *Prestige* has a positive effect on the vote share in countries with sufficiently high effective electoral threshold. The conditional effect of effective threshold hence works in opposite directions for *Prestige* and *Experience*. The effect of experience is smaller in countries with high effective electoral threshold. The effect of *Experience* is strongest during mid-term. Holding all other variables constant, there is no significant difference in the effect of *Experience* for governing and opposition parties. The other coefficients remain similar in effect. Again the AIC and BIC differ with regards to which model is best. AIC favours model 4 over model 1 and 2, whereas BIC favours the parsimonious

model 1 (AIC: model 1 = 2749, model 2 = 2747, model 4 = 2744. BIC: model 1 = 2866, model 2 = 2880, model 4 = 2906). Both AIC and BIC favour model 4 over model 3 (AIC: model 3 = 2836, BIC: model 3 = 2970).

As we want to reduce the risk that our results suffer from omitted variable bias, model 5 is a fixed effect specifications of model 4, but without the system-specific effects as these cancel out under the fixed effects specification. We include fixed effects for both country and year, and heteroskedastic-corrected robust standard errors. The results from this model is broadly consistent with the results reported in models 1 to 4, both in terms of magnitude of the coefficients and level of significance. We can hence be confident in the results obtained from the hierarchical models.

To illustrate the impact of experience on party success, Figure 2 plots the estimated effect of experience for governing and opposition parties of average size in the middle of the electoral term.⁶² The left side of the figure shows the estimated effect of experience in the scenario for opposition parties. The right side of the figure shows the scenario for governing parties. The uncertainty interval around the estimates is created by drawing 10,000 samples from the multivariate normal distribution with the parameter estimates from model 4. We then plugged in the values for an average sized opposition (left) and government (right) social democratic party in the middle of the electoral cycle.

[FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]

We see that the effect of experience is stronger for opposition than for governing parties. For example while average sized opposition parties can expect to improve their vote share compared to the previous national elections when nominating somebody scoring at least 3 on our experience index, governing parties need to nominate somebody scoring at least 3 simply not to lose any votes. As the uncertainty of the effect of experience grows somewhat for values beyond 5, we should have more faith in the effect of increasing the

62. To simplify matters, we calculated the effect for social democratic parties, the reference category. Year and country effects are ignored.

experience at lower values. Beyond a certain level, marginal differences in experience may not matter that much.⁶³

Figure 3 shows how the effect of experience is conditional on when the EP election occurs in the national electoral cycle. In accordance with hypothesis 2, the figure demonstrates the predicted effect of experience for a hypothetical opposition party where the most experienced candidate scores 4 on our index, i.e. a former MP and party leader. The -1 and 1 endpoints on the x-axis indicate the occurrence of a national election, while the 0 point indicates the middle of the electoral cycle.

[FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE]

We see that the effect of running with an experienced candidate has a significant positive effect for most of the electoral cycle. The effect is only indistinguishable from zero in the first and last fifth of the electoral cycle. In the middle of the cycle, running with an former MP and national party leader improves the received vote share with an average of 5 percentage points, with the 95 % uncertainty interval covering the 2.5 to 7.5 percentage points region. This shows that, conditional on when in the national electoral cycle the EP election occurs, running with an experienced politician can make a substantive difference to the electoral fortune of a party in the EP elections.

Overall, we find support for our hypotheses. First, parties do better as the national political experience of their top candidate increases. Second, the effect of political experience is strongest in the middle of the national electoral cycle. Overall, the findings extend and complement the standard second-order election understanding of EP elections.

Conclusion

Elections perform two main functions: they allow voters to select suitable representatives and to hold the government to account. Yet, since effective

63. We also investigated whether the difference in turnout from previous national election mattered for the effect of experience. It did not. The correlation between difference in turnout and experience is weak.

sanctioning requires that the electorate is able to monitor the actions of the incumbent, this may not be a viable option in second-order elections. Rather than sanctioning representatives for past performance, voters may instead attempt to select competent representatives. One clear signal of competence is previous political experience. In this paper, we have investigated to what extent voters in European Parliament elections reward parties with politically experienced candidates. Drawing on an original dataset of all elected MEPs in 85 national contests, across 6 election cycles, we show that parties with a 'high quality' representative are indeed rewarded by voters. This effect is strongest in the middle of the national electoral cycle. Our findings add new insights into the dynamics of European Parliament elections. Whereas the existing literature on EP elections has focused on how voters sanction incumbent parties, our results suggest that the selection mechanism also matters in second-order elections. These results modify one of the main findings in the extant literature: the degree to which governing parties are punished depends not only on the electoral cycle, but also on the experience of their EP candidates. In other words, governing parties could avoid some the electoral losses in EP elections if they were to send more prominent representatives to the European Parliament.

These findings thus have implications for our understanding of second-order elections more generally, since they suggest that the selection model, combined with the traditional sanctioning model, is a promising theoretical approach for understanding variation in parties' electoral fortunes. When voters operate in a information-sparse environment, they seem to rely on a mix of retrospective cues about the first-order arena and signals about the competence of EP representatives, depending on which informational shortcuts are most readily available at the time. This paper has focused on one proxy for 'candidate quality', namely political experience. We have also distinguished between political experience of candidates and their 'celebrity status' (Prestige), and we found that the latter has no significant effect on party vote share. But further research should seek to parse out these selection and sanctioning mechanisms further. Moreover, this paper raises the broader question of whether this selection approach is effective in achieving

its democratic ends. In other words, do politically experienced representatives in the European Parliament do a better job at serving the interests of European citizens? The European Union is said to have a democratic deficit. This is at least partly because the sanctioning mechanism is unlikely to motivate EP representatives to avoid shirking their responsibility, since voters are not punishing (or rewarding) them for their performance in the EP, but rather that of their colleagues in the national capitals. However, we do not know whether the selection mechanism fares any better.

	Mean	Min	Max	SD	Description
Change in vote share	0.25	-31.7	29.8	5.99	Change in vote share from national election
Experience	2.12	0	10	2.27	Max level of political experience
Prestige	0.381	0	1		Famous national figure
Government	0.334	0	1		Party in government at EP elections
Vote share	14.468	0	51.8	13.118	Vote share in previous national elections
Election proximity	0.377	0	1	0.252	Proximity of EP to general elections
Electoral system	3.74	1.40	10	2.607	Index of candidate focus in the electoral system
Threshold	5.97	0.852	37.5	6.233	Effective electoral threshold

Table 1: Descriptive statistics

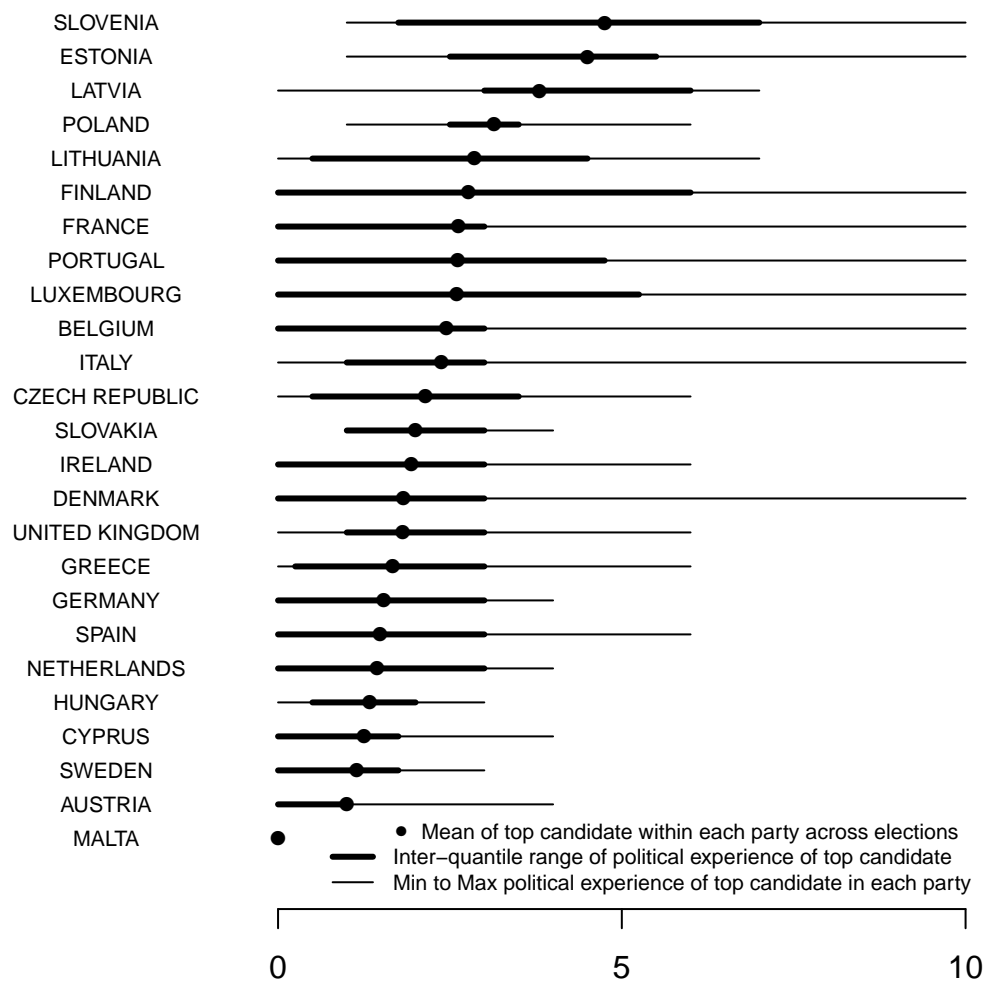


Figure 1: Experience of the top candidate

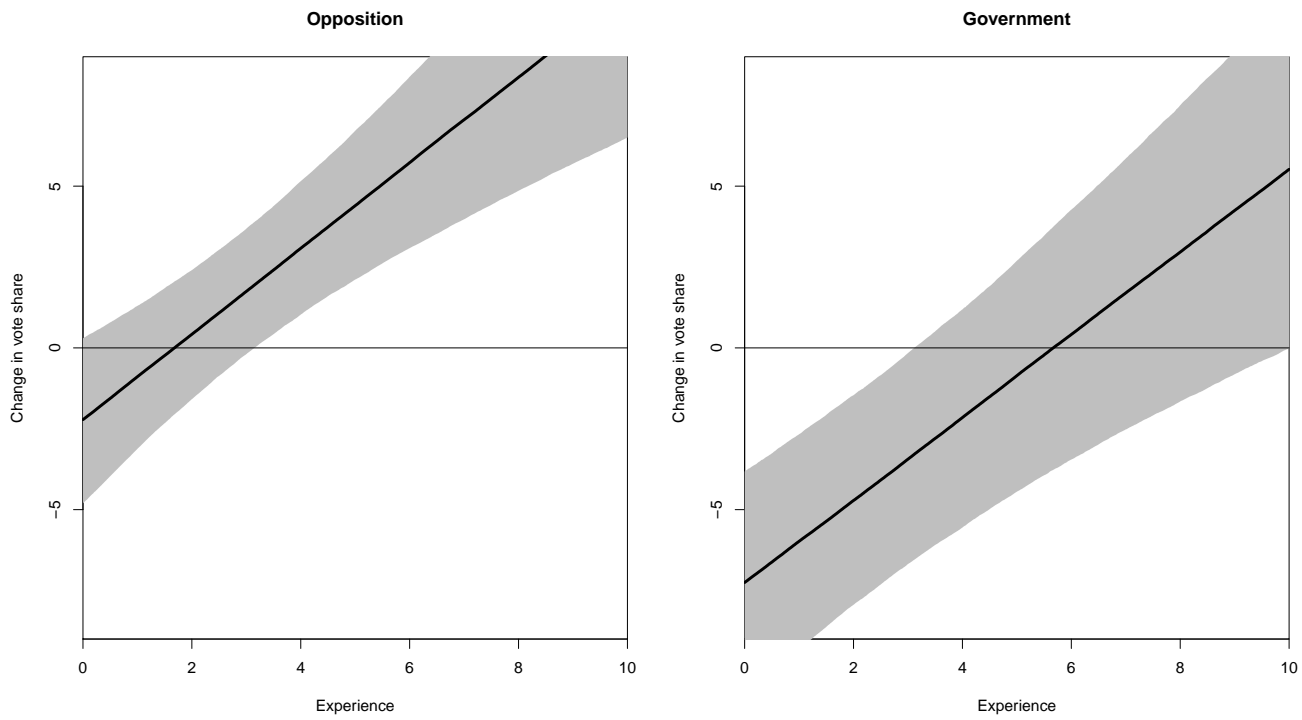


Figure 2: Effect of political experience on change in party vote share for governing and opposition parties of average size.

	model 1	model 2	model 3	model 4	model 5
	β (se)	β (se)	β (se)	β (se)	β (robust se)
Experience	1.007 (0.267)***	1.219 (0.361)***		1.327 (0.293)***	1.052 (0.259)***
Experience * Proximity	-1.089 (0.378)***	-0.951 (0.391)**		-1.163 (0.397)***	-0.994 (0.385)***
Experience * Threshold		-0.042 (0.023)†		-0.05 (0.023)*	
Experience * Government	-0.098 (0.191)	-0.106 (0.19)		-0.059 (0.194)	-0.107 (0.236)
Experience * Candidate centered		0.002 (0.063)			
Prestige					
Prestige * Proximity			0.633 (1.048)	-0.82 (0.907)	0.856 (0.952)
Prestige * Threshold			0.948 (1.701)	1.696 (1.606)	2.054 (1.73)
Prestige * Government			0.158 (0.068)*	0.142 (0.067)*	
Prestige * System			-1.307 (0.885)	-0.919 (0.839)	-2.005 (1.114)†
Vote share (national elections)			-0.013 (0.178)		
Proximity	-0.196 (0.023)***	-0.204 (0.023)***	-0.207 (0.024)***	-0.212 (0.023)***	-0.282 (0.035)***
Threshold	1.998 (1.509)	1.672 (1.538)	-1.192 (1.171)	1.252 (1.448)	-0.637 (1.321)
Government	-3.402 (1.509)*	-3.259 (1.533)*	-3.321 (1.775)†	-2.697 (1.539)†	-2.124 (1.195)†
Government * Proximity	4.083 (1.936)*	3.429 (1.934)†	1.925 (2.152)	2.625 (1.939)	5.029 (2.009)**
Candidate centered		-0.123 (0.179)	-0.025 (0.116)		
Regionalists	-0.845 (0.951)	-1.132 (0.942)	-2.075 (0.987)*	-0.597 (0.938)	-1.926 (1.134)†
Far Right	0.662 (1.009)	0.517 (0.999)	0.132 (1.092)	0.807 (0.984)	0.792 (1.412)
Euroceptic	7.253 (1.101)***	7.159 (1.088)***	6.077 (1.137)***	7.334 (1.066)***	6.077 (1.601)***
Christian democrats	2.099 (0.719)***	2.085 (0.715)***	1.954 (0.743)***	2.159 (0.702)***	1.658 (0.831)*
Conservatives	1.049 (0.719)	0.865 (0.714)	0.901 (0.76)	1.195 (0.707)†	0.79 (1.151)
Greens	2.32 (0.905)**	2.2 (0.897)**	1.173 (0.954)	2.528 (0.881)***	1.747 (1.009)†
Far Left	0.327 (0.869)	0.238 (0.856)	-0.698 (0.894)	0.639 (0.848)	-0.242 (0.934)
Liberals	-0.233 (0.734)	-0.338 (0.73)	-1.204 (0.779)	-0.389 (0.721)	-0.935 (0.877)
Intercept	0.815 (1.337)	0.373 (1.459)	3.446 (1.038)***	0.059 (1.35)	
Random effects	variance (st.d)				
Country intercept (null = 0.865 (0.93))	18.947 (4.353)***	20.065 (4.479)***	1.915 (1.382)	18.404 (4.290)***	Fixed effects
Country Experience	0.810 (0.900)	0.831 (0.911)		0.745 (0.863)	
Country Prestige			0.677 (0.823)	0.178 (0.422)	
Country Government	31.245 (5.590)***	33.134 (5.590)***	50.278 (7.091)***	32.935 (5.739)***	
Country Proximity	18.639 (4.317)***	21.670 (4.655)***	1.761 (1.327)	14.139 (3.760)***	
Year intercept (null = 0.00 (0.00))	0.406 (0.638)	0.372 (0.610)	0.086 (0.293)	0.413 (0.643)	Fixed effects
Residual (null = 34.842 (5.90)***)	13.479 (3.671)***	13.136 (3.624)***	16.132 (4.016)***	12.577 (3.46)***	
AIC (empty model = 3083)	2749	2747	2836	2744	
BIC (empty model = 3100)	2866	2880	2970	2906	
N	473	473	473	473	473
Countries	25	25	25	25	25
Electons	6	6	6	6	6

† p < .1, * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

Table 2: Modelling the effect of political experience on vote share

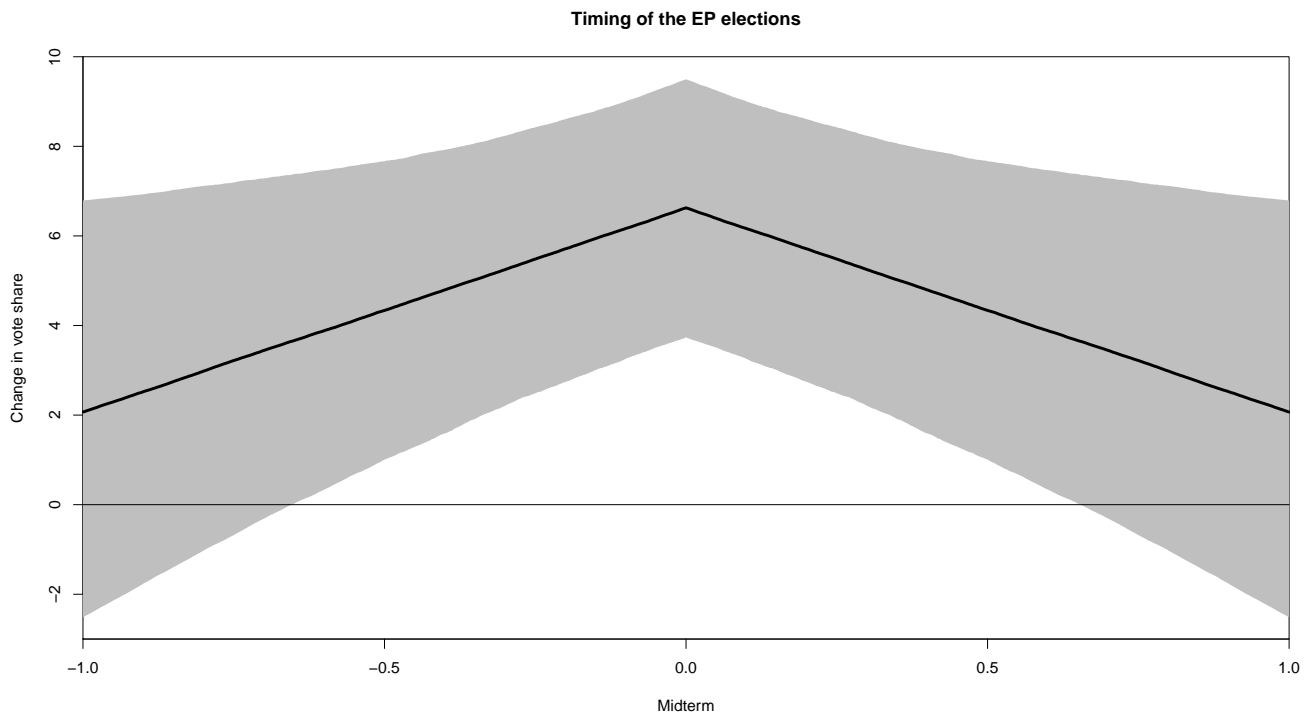


Figure 3: Effect of experience over the electoral cycle

Appendix

Model 1 in table 3 is a re-estimation of model 4 in table 2, using the mean level of national political experience amongst elected MEPs rather than the maximum level. Model 2 is a re-estimation of model 4 in table 2 where the 4 outliers are taken out. Model 3 is a re-estimation of model 5 in table 2, without the outliers and with the mean, rather than the maximum, level of experience.

	model 1	model 2	model 3
	β (se)	β (se)	β (robust se)
Experience		1.017 (0.19)***	
Experience * Proximity		-0.708 (0.317)*	
Experience * Threshold		-0.043 (0.016)***	
Experience * Government		-0.169 (0.169)	
Experience (mean)	1.2 (0.444)***		0.72 (0.392)†
Experience (mean) * Proximity	-1.273 (0.701)†		-1.343 (0.674)*
Experience (mean) * Threshold	-0.053 (0.033)		
Experience (mean) * Government	-0.123 (0.402)		0.359 (0.597)
Prestige	0.642 (0.931)	-0.783 (0.851)	1.695 (0.949)†
Prestige * Proximity	0.921 (1.672)	1.535 (1.534)	1.425 (1.676)
Prestige * Threshold	0.142 (0.067)*	0.211 (0.06)***	
Prestige * Government	-1.129 (0.868)	-1.055 (0.798)	-2.06 (1.091)†
Vote share (national elections)	-0.224 (0.024)***	-0.217 (0.021)***	-0.261 (0.035)***
Proximity	-0.049 (1.173)	-0.144 (1.149)	-1.47 (1.29)
Threshold	0.102 (0.05)*	0.124 (0.05)**	
Government	-2.978 (1.725)†	-1.761 (1.076)	-2.9 (1.163)**
Government * Proximity	2.174 (2.083)	2.677 (1.741)	4.9 (2.214)*
Eurosceptic	5.866 (1.124)***	7.05 (1.014)***	5.762 (1.745)***
Christian democrats	2.059 (0.748)***	2.157 (0.673)***	1.836 (0.875)*
Conservatives	0.528 (0.758)	1.375 (0.672)*	0.339 (1.3)
Greens	1.181 (0.942)	2.323 (0.848)***	0.995 (1.13)
Far Left	-0.454 (0.888)	0.473 (0.8)	-1.155 (1.07)
Liberals	-1.124 (0.774)	-0.405 (0.686)	-1.343 (0.998)
Regionalists	-1.843 (0.964)†	-0.881 (0.878)	-2.639 (1.203)*
Far Right	0.277 (1.075)	0.211 (0.962)	0.666 (1.515)
Intercept	2.385 (0.989)**	1.289 (0.985)	
Random effects	variance (st.d)		
Country Intercept	0.7087 (0.842)	2.389 (1.546)	
Country Experience (mean)	0.162 (0.403)	0.012 (0.109)	
Country Prestige	0.323 (0.568)	0.107 (0.326)	
Country Government	43.881 (6.624)***	7.581 (2.753)***	
Country Election proximity	0.656 (0.810)	3.464 (1.861)†	
Year Intercept	0.054 (0.231)	0.426 (0.653)	
Residual	15.241 (3.905)	12.258 (3.501)***	
N	473	469	469
Countries	25	25	
Years	6	6	

† p < .1, * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

Table 3: Alternative model specification