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A new normal? The EP elections 2024 amidst old and new challenges. Special issue introduction

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Abstract. The special issue addresses whether recent electoral dynamics characterised by high levels of disengagement, a more polarized conflict, and the establishment of challenger parties as (potentially) governing parties, should be no longer seen as exceptional in themselves, but rather as symptomatic of a political competition that is in fact representing a 'new normal'. It focuses on the European Parliament elections 2024. These elections have provided us with an important opportunity to assess whether these dynamics will structure electoral competition also in the European arena as should be the case according to the second order model which predicts that EU elections are seen as less important than national elections by voters, parties and the media; and that the EU electoral arena is influenced by national party competition (Reif and Schmitt 1980). Or, contrary to the second order model, whether European elections will be played on a different playground compared to national elections. To this end, the special issue presents comparative contributions (but also case studies of particular relevance) capable of clarifying how the competition between parties is structured and which factors have influenced voters' choices at the ballot box.

Keywords: 2024 EP elections, EU party competition, EU voting determinants.

In 2019, the European Parliament elections took place amidst a turbulent political landscape. Just a few years prior, the United Kingdom had exited the European Union. In addition to this, the migration crisis, and the lingering effects of the Eurozone crisis, had propelled the rise of challenger parties, particularly right-wing populist parties, in several countries. However, the anticipated surge of challengers was rather modest in the end. While the European People's Party and Social Democrats lost their majority in the European Parliament for the first time since 1979, it was the Greens and Liberals who achieved the best results.

Fast forward five years. Just months away from the 2024 European Parliament election date, the stage once again seemed favourable for challenger parties. The aggression of a sovereign state (Ukraine) by Russia, the resurgence of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with renewed fears of terrorist attacks in Europe, have effectively plunged the continent into a state of crisis, with the EU often uncertain or powerless in the face of these exter-

nal threats. At the same time, internal political dynamics within individual member States had shown a steady electoral strengthening of radical right-wing parties. In Italy, for example, Brothers of Italy (FdI), led by Giorgia Meloni and heir to the neo-fascist Italian Social Movement (MSI), had won the 2022 elections, leading to the formation of a centre-right government together with another right-wing populist party (League) and a centre-right party (Go Italy). More recently, in Portugal, the populist party Chega significantly increased its parliamentary representation after the March 2024 elections, asserting itself as a central player in the country's political landscape. In France, political competition seems by now articulated prevalently along the conflict between Macron and the radical-right Rassemblement National, which remains extremely competitive electorally. Furthermore, political conflict is becoming increasingly polarized almost everywhere in Europe, not only ideologically but also affectively, a clue that (despite the increasing levels of alienation from politics of large sectors of the society, as shown by the increasing levels of abstentionism across the Western world) political conflict is becoming more intense.

From a certain perspective, these dynamics could be seen as a continuation of what was already happening in 2019. The 2024 scenario could in some ways be the continuation of a process of consolidation of challenger political parties that could once again aspire to play a central role in the future of the member states and the European Union (especially in a turbulent international context, as described earlier). A consolidation that both the external environment and internal dynamics are contributing to accelerate. Against this backdrop, this special issue asks if these electoral dynamics characterised by high levels of disengagement, a more polarized conflict, and the establishment of challenger parties as (potentially) governing parties, should be no longer seen as exceptional in themselves, but rather as symptomatic of a political competition that is in fact representing a 'new normal'. By 'new normal' we refer here to a context of political competition in which previously exceptional dynamics – such as the structural presence of challenger parties, heightened polarization coupled with political disengagement, the extreme politicization of crises – have become routinized features of the electoral landscape. The term therefore captures the idea that these phenomena are no longer temporary deviations from a presumed stable order, but rather constitute the baseline conditions under which voters and parties now operate.

The special issue addresses this question by focusing on the European Parliament elections 2024. These

elections have provided us with an important opportunity to assess whether these dynamics are structuring electoral competition also in the European arena as should be the case according to the second order model which predicts that EU elections are seen as less important than national elections by voters, parties and the media; and that the EU electoral arena is influenced by national party competition (Reif and Schmitt 1980). Or, contrary to the second order model, whether European elections are played on a different playground compared to national elections. To this end, the special issue presents comparative contributions (but also case studies of particular relevance) capable of clarifying how the competition between parties is structured and which factors have influenced voters' choices at the ballot box.

Seddone et al. (2025) examine citizens' engagement within the digital arena of the 2024 European Parliament election campaign in Italy, offering strong evidence in support of the second-order framework. The study explores how the online visibility and contentious framing of EU actors and issues influenced users' interactions on social media by analysing the Facebook communication strategies of Italian party leaders. EU-related content is operationalized along three dimensions – Domestication, Vertical Europeanization, and Horizontal Europeanization – to assess their respective effects on engagement, measured through likes, comments, and shares. The results point to the centrality of Domestication in fostering engagement: posts that intertwined national and European elements consistently attracted higher levels of interaction, suggesting that citizens engage more readily with EU content when it is framed through a domestic lens. Conversely, posts focusing exclusively on Vertical Europeanization – that is, on EU institutions – were associated with lower engagement across all metrics. This pattern aligns with the second-order election theory (Reif and Schmitt 1980), which holds that European issues tend to be perceived as secondary unless domestically contextualized. The limited impact of Horizontal Europeanization further underscores the persistence of nationally anchored perspectives in online political discourse.

Turning to party competition, Carteny et al. (2025) study the effects of the polycrisis on differences in party competition between the 2019 and 2024 EP elections. Specifically, they ask if the salience and importance of key European issues increased in the 2024 EP elections compared to 2019. Have the positions of the political parties, in particular between Eurosceptic and mainstream parties, become more polarised? To address these questions, their special issue contribution examines whether and how Eurosceptic and mainstream par-

ties have emphasised different types of European issues during the 2024 EP elections compared to 2019, as well as their positioning towards these issues. Carteny et al. draw on 71 manifestos from nine European countries (Austria, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Italy and Spain), to study issue emphasis as well as the positions parties have taken on key European issues: polity, migration and environment. They find that the salience of the three key European issues has increased across the board. In addition, the positions of political parties on key issues show diverse trajectories. In the 2024 European Parliament election, far-right Eurosceptic parties have adopted less critical stances towards the EU polity and migration compared to 2019, probably to increase their chances of governing. In contrast, mainstream and far-left parties have tended to adopt more critical positions, especially on migration. The findings offer a more nuanced perspective on the phenomenon of polarisation. While there has been a decline in the polarisation of views on the EU polity issue, with mainstream and Eurosceptic parties becoming less ideologically distant from one another, the environmental issue has demonstrated a slight increase in polarisation due to varying degrees of negativity.

Notwithstanding this, the EU still played a significant role in shaping voters' party preferences in 2024. Focusing on the Italian case and drawing on original survey data combined with expert evaluations of party positions from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey, Carrieri et al. (2025) examine the positional distance between voters and parties on the EU and its impact on vote choice. The 2024 European Parliament elections in Italy provide a compelling case for reassessing the relevance of EU issue voting in a country long marked by fluctuating Euroscepticism both among voters and parties. While second-order election theory traditionally suggests that European contests are dominated by domestic concerns, the mounting politicization of the EU – intensified by successive crises – has opened new avenues for issue-based voting. Italy, once firmly pro-European, has become a critical testing ground given rising anti-EU sentiment, the success of radical right actors, and the unprecedented presence of a government dominated by Eurosceptic forces (FdI and the League) during the 2024 elections. Results from the analyses show that EU issue voting significantly influenced electoral choices: citizens were more likely to support parties whose EU positions were closely aligned with their own. Importantly, this effect was not limited to Eurosceptic forces but extended across the entire political spectrum, benefiting both Europhile parties (PD, AVS, FI) and Eurosceptic ones (League, M5S, FdI). EU issue voting thus emerged as a

cross-cutting determinant of electoral outcomes, challenging the notion that it primarily advantages anti-EU actors. Moreover, and alternatively to the second-order model, these findings confirm that Europe mattered (once again), echoing evidence from other national contexts as well (Braun 2021; Carrieri et al. 2024).

That the economy matters for voting is a fairly uncontested matter. However, most studies on economic voting focus on the national level. Okolikj and Lewis-Beck (2025), in their special issue contribution ask what happens when the election operates on the supranational level, as is the case in European Parliament elections. Specifically, does the economic voter in a member state assigns the EU significant responsibility for national economic conditions in European Parliamentary contexts? The authors build on existing research by arguing that the strength of the economic vote is stable over time and space. Focussing specifically on the European Parliament elections of 2024, Okolikj and Lewis-Beck propose that the EU economic voting pattern will show no breaks from external shocks, such as the Great Recession or Brexit. Based on European Election Surveys from 2004 to 2024, and focussing on the six founding members (Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, The Netherlands), the authors show that (positive) economic perceptions are a robust predictor of the incumbency vote also across European elections. This effect is stable across time and space. In fact, Okolikj and Lewis-Beck find that economic perceptions are the strongest predictor of the incumbency vote. Events such as the Eurozone crisis, Brexit, Covid, and the election of Donald Trump appear not to have influenced the economic vote. Hence, from an economic perspective, there is little evidence of a 'new normal': the strength and stability of economic voting remain remarkably robust, even in 2024.

A fifth paper by Castaldo et al. (2025) focuses on the issue of discontent and takes a deep dive into populism and affective polarisation, two of the most influential political phenomena of our time and key explanatory factors of today's politics and voting behaviour. Despite a vast political science literature on both populism and affective polarisation, the connections between these two concepts remain under-investigated. Both of them describe the conflict between ingroup ("us") and outgroup ("them") individuals. Nonetheless, although in the first case, the conflict pits the people against the elite, in the second case conflict occurs between party supporters and other parties (e.g., leaders, members). In their paper, Castaldo et al. ask a number of questions in relation to the rise of populists and affective sentiments. Specifically, they aim to uncover to what extent populism and affective polarisation affected voting behaviour in the

2024 European elections, and whether the two phenomena have a mutually reinforcing effect on voting. Focusing on the Italian context to shed light on the dynamics and effects that affective polarisation and support for populist parties produce on voting behaviour, they use new data from a dedicated survey conducted in Italy during the 2024 European elections. The findings show that that populism and affective polarisation have opposite effects on turnout. Affective polarisation increases the likelihood of voting, whereas at least certain forms of populism are negatively associated with turnout. This suggests that when individuals delegitimize the role of political representatives and perceive an unbridgeable divide between ordinary people and the elite, they are less likely to vote in elections. The authors observe a similar opposing relationship among the leading independent variables concerning voting preferences. Affective polarisation is significantly and positively associated with voting for parties that possess a strong identity and/or represent the more straightforward choice to prevent the victory of the “other” camp or out-group. Differently, anti-establishment populism is significantly related to voting for populist parties. A key contribution of the paper is in showing that although populism and affective polarisation may not be conflicting attitudes at the individual level, they do have opposing effects on voter turnout and vote choice.

Moving to voters on the left, Improta and Mannoni (2025) explore the motivations of voters who supported the Greens and Left Alliance (*Alleanza Verdi e Sinistra*, AVS) in the 2024 European Elections in Italy. Specifically, they investigate whether the rapid increase in popularity of AVS was primarily driven by ideological alignment, policy positions on salient issues, candidate appeal, leaders’ character, or other factors. Leveraging original online survey data ($n = 147$), combined with more detailed qualitative evidence obtained through interviews, Improta and Mannoni delve into the primary motivations for voting AVS. The quantitative analysis of survey data suggests that these motivations revolve around ideological alignment, particularly with environmentalism, social justice, and left-wing values. AVS is seen as the only genuine left-wing option by many, contrasting with other political options. The party’s coherence, radical stance, and trust in candidates further bolster its appeal. The analysis of the interviews confirmed the combination of ideological commitment and issue-based considerations. While respondents differed in the specific concerns they prioritized, their pathways to AVS show a high degree of internal consistency. AVS was rarely perceived as a first-choice party in absolute terms but rather as the only viable

option within the existing political landscape. A recurring theme across the interviews was the perception that AVS remained the only political force in Italy that still adhered to leftist principles without compromise. Although AVS remains a minor player in Italian politics, its performance in these elections suggests an opening for more radical left-wing positions within the Italian party system. Whether this momentum can be sustained in future national elections will depend on AVS’s ability to consolidate its support base and attract new voters, particularly those encouraged by its recent electoral gains.

Rather than pointing to a wholesale transformation of European electoral politics, the contributions to this special issue suggest a more nuanced picture in which continuity and change coexist. Challenger parties – particularly those on the radical right – are no longer episodic protest actors but have become central, credible contenders for government. In fact, party competition is evolving in nuanced ways: radical-right Eurosceptic parties have moderated their positions on EU polity and migration, arguably to appear as viable governing forces, while mainstream and far-left parties have in some cases become more critical. Polarization itself appears issue-specific, with conflict on environmental issues intensifying while ideological distance on EU polity has narrowed – even though the EU issue remained a key determinant of voting behaviour in the 2024 EP elections. At the same time, political competition is increasingly polarized along affective lines, producing deeper emotional divides between camps. Yet, this ‘new normal’ operates alongside enduring mechanisms of the ‘old normal’: while the EU issue has become increasingly relevant for voting behaviour, citizens continue to engage with it primarily when framed through a domestic lens. At the same time, economic voting remains robust and stable, confirming that the basic logics of democratic accountability continue to structure voter choice. This hybrid equilibrium is also reflected in voters’ strategic behaviour: as the Italian case of AVS illustrates, while new issues such as the environment have entered into voters’ considerations at the ballot box, some choose genuinely leftist parties not as their first preference but as the most effective counterweight to less-preferred alternatives – an instance of spatial competition dynamics well known since Downs (1957). What emerges, therefore, is not a rupture but a reconfigured competitive landscape where crisis politics and the consolidation of challenger parties have become routine features, interacting with stable behavioural patterns.

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