

SOUTH EUROPEAN SOCIETY AND POLITICS SERIES

# The 2014 European Parliament Elections in Southern Europe

*Still second-order or critical contests?*

Edited by  
Hermann Schmitt and Eftichia Teperoglou



# The 2014 European Parliament Elections in Southern Europe

Southern Europe has been the EU region most exposed to the Eurozone sovereign debt crisis with consequences for national party systems and political stability. The 2014 European Parliament elections took place at a crucial time for Europe and Southern European societies more generally. This book analyses the Euroelections in Southern Europe, asking whether these followed the usual pattern of low-stimulus contests or whether the crisis context raised the bar. Country chapters on Italy, Greece, Spain, Portugal, Cyprus and Malta investigate the background of the elections, the electoral campaign and the rise of Euroscepticism. The linkage between governments' economic performance, the Europhile or Eurosceptic stances of political parties, and their electoral performance are at the core of the analysis in each chapter. The findings reveal that the political and electoral consequences of the economic crisis have not fundamentally challenged the second-order character of the 2014 European Parliament elections in Southern Europe. However, electoral behaviour exhibits some indications of a more critical contest in which the EU divide becomes more significant and polarising in determining voting choices. This book was previously published as a special issue of *South European Society and Politics*.

**Hermann Schmitt** is Professor of Political Science at the Universities of Manchester (UK) and Mannheim (Germany). He has been involved in the series of European Election Studies from the very beginning in 1979 ([www.europeanelectionstudies.net](http://www.europeanelectionstudies.net)). He is also a co-director of the British Election Study 2015 and has contributed, in various roles, to additional comparative studies like the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES), the Comparative Candidate Survey (CCS) and the True European Voter (TEV). His main research interest is in comparative political behaviour, the multi-level nature of political representation and electoral democracy in the EU, and European integration more broadly conceived. He has published widely on all of these topics.

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André Freire and José Santana-Pereira

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# The 2014 European Parliament Elections in Southern Europe: Second-Order or Critical Elections?

Hermann Schmitt and Eftichia Teperoglou

*The article provides a comparative analysis of the 2014 European Parliament elections across the six countries of Southern Europe by gauging the performance of the second-order election model. Both the aggregate hypotheses of this model and evidence of micro-level foundations are analysed. The findings reveal that the political and electoral consequences of the economic crisis have not drastically challenged the second-order character of these elections in Southern Europe. However, electoral behaviour also exhibits some indications of a more critical contest.*

Since 1979 when the first European Parliament (EP) elections were held, national politics have dominated the campaigns and election results. In most member states of the European Communities, which later became the European Union (EU), European issues have been relatively unimportant or insignificant. Consequently, these elections have been described as ‘second-order’ national contests (Reif & Schmitt 1980). However, what was at stake at the European level during in the earlier years of the EP is certainly not the same as what is at stake 35 years later in the enlarged 28-member EU.

Over the past few years, the process of European integration is said to have entered its ‘post-functionalist’ phase (Hooghe & Marks 2009; Taggart & Szczesniak 2004). Political conflicts increasingly cross national boundaries within the ‘higher level’ of the multi-level system of European governance (Hooghe & Marks 2009). Nevertheless, many studies prior to the 2009 EP elections have almost invariably concluded that voting decisions in these elections have been based on national politics (see Hix & Marsh 2007, 2011; Schmitt 2005, 2009; Van der Eijk & Franklin 1996) and that the parties have failed to campaign on EU issues (see Reif 1985; Weber 2007).



## THE 2014 EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS IN SOUTHERN EUROPE

The elections of 22–25 May 2014 may have represented a new direction in this respect. This is due to two features, both of which had the potential to alter the second-order character of the contest and modify the configuration of electoral competition at the European level. The first factor is related to the financial and economic crisis that has affected Europe (and its southern periphery in particular) and the important role the EU has played in the regulation of this crisis. Suddenly, as a result of these EU policies, European governance became a polarising issue in some electoral arenas. A central question is whether in these elections EU politics (that is, a political dimension ranging from outright opposition to full support of integration) shaped political contestation within and among at least some of the member states (Bakker, Jolly & Polk 2012; Gabel & Hix 2002; Hix, Noury & Roland 2006; Hix 1999; McElroy & Benoit 2007). The second factor refers to the EU decision-making process, and in particular the efforts towards strengthening the role of the EP.

In 2014, for the first time in the history of EP elections, an explicit attempt was made to base the appointment of the president of the European Commission on the EU-wide results of the election. The Lisbon Treaty states that the president of the European Commission is to be elected by the EP, based on a proposal by the European Council that takes the results of the EP elections into account (Article 17[7] TEU). The campaign motto of the EP for these elections – ‘This time is different’ – was meant to capture this change. The nomination of leading candidates or *Spitzenkandidaten* (the German term that has often been used) for the post by the major European political groups was meant to strengthen the connection between voter preferences expressed in EP elections and the selection of the head of the EU executive,<sup>1</sup> as well as to mobilise citizens’ interest and participation in these elections. Moreover, it was hoped that the nomination of lead candidates would strengthen the political role of both European political parties as well as the candidates competing in these elections. The question to be addressed here is whether these two features have actually changed the character of the campaign towards a ‘genuine European contest’ or whether the dominant role of the domestic political arena has been reaffirmed.

Initial empirical evidence on the electoral effects of this institutional and procedural innovation is not too impressive. It seems the campaign of the *Spitzenkandidaten* has had a limited mobilising effect (those who recognised them were found to be somewhat likelier to turn out; Schmitt, Hobolt & Popa 2015), while citizen awareness of them did not improve their evaluation of the performance of EU democracy, but rather polarised these evaluations among segments of society that were positive and critical towards the EU (Rohrschneider, Schmitt & Popa 2015). We are thus already sceptical about whether these new elements in the electoral process have indeed challenged the second-order nature of this ‘less important election’ (Marsh & Mikhaylov 2010).

Another aspect of the 2014 EP elections is that they represent a crucial test of EU electoral democracy during a time of unprecedented attacks on EU institutions – in terms of their intensity – for their lack of accountability and popular input as well as

their policy directions, which appear to be dictated exclusively by elite concerns. This is particularly relevant for Southern European EU member states. These countries – Italy, Greece, Spain, Portugal and Cyprus (but not Malta) – have been hard hit by the economic crisis, and their governments have been forced by Eurozone authorities to implement harsh austerity policies.<sup>2</sup> These policies have to varying degrees damaged the credibility of and support for governing parties across the region. They have simultaneously uncovered the increasing lack of manoeuvring room for national governments within the Eurozone, which has become an increasingly important dimension of EU politics. The result has been a surge of Euroscepticism in the countries of the southern periphery (and far beyond; see Treib 2014), countries that were hitherto some of the EU's most Europhile members (Andreadis et al. 2014; Clements, Nanou & Verney 2014; Freire, Teperoglou & Moury 2014; Verney 2011).

The sovereign debt crisis and its consequences for Southern European electoral politics, and the ensuing debate about Europe, highlight the importance and complexities of the 2014 EP elections in these countries. This special issue is a result of a joint effort to provide an in-depth analysis of voting behaviour in these elections across the six countries by gauging the performance of the second-order election (SOE) model (Reif & Schmitt 1980). We also pay attention to the specific background of the electoral contests and electoral campaigns, as well as to the trends in political attitudes leading up to the EP election.

### **The Context of the 2014 EP Elections in Southern Europe**

The 2014 EP elections in Southern Europe have received attention in the media, but much less in scholarly publications. This special issue is the first major collaborative effort to analyse these elections in Southern Europe. Their particular background was largely framed by the sovereign debt crisis and the economic recession. The starting points of the crisis were different in each country, as were their trajectories during the past few years. Three countries (Greece, Portugal and Cyprus) had signed bailout agreements – the so-called Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) – with the Troika, made up of the European Central Bank (ECB), the European Commission (EC) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).<sup>3</sup> Spain and Italy did not have to go through formal bailouts, but they also experienced serious economic problems. Malta was not hit by the crisis. And while it is beyond the scope of this article to present a detailed account of the economic downturn in each country, some selected economic indicators are emblematic of the exceptional circumstances under which the EP election took place.<sup>4</sup> According to 2013 Eurostat figures the unemployment rate reached 27.5 per cent in Greece, 26.1 per cent in Spain, 16.4 per cent in Portugal, 15.9 per cent in Cyprus, 12.2 per cent in Italy and 6.4 per cent in Malta (the 28-member-state EU average was 10.8 per cent).<sup>5</sup> Real gross domestic product (GDP) growth (percentage of GDP) is another indicator of the harsh economic realities in the region: in 2013 all economies – except that of Malta – shrank: by – 5.4 for Cyprus, – 3.9 for Greece, – 1.9 for Italy, – 1.4 for Portugal and – 1.2 for Spain. The economic crisis that