

The role of partisanship in governing turnout at EP elections

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ABSTRACT

Many years ago, Schmitt and Mannheimer (1991) observed that those who voted at EP elections were habitual voters – voters who would vote at any election. Recent research suggests that the motivations concerned amount primarily to partisan loyalty. In this paper I consider to what extent this insight provides a basis for explaining the especially low turnout that we find at EP elections among young voters and in post-communist countries. Young voters have not yet had the opportunity to develop strong ties to parties and post-communist countries are countries where partisanship is particularly lacking simply because unstable party systems and high rates of individual-level turnover in party support have left these countries with exceedingly low levels of partisanship. One might say that in new democracies all voters are new voters, making the especially low turnout in post-communist EU member states explicable on the same grounds as the especially low turnout among young voters at EP elections. The paper employs data from 2014 European Parliament election study to explore this topic.

The question why turnout is so low at elections for the European Parliament no longer presents a puzzle to political scientists, even if commentators and politicians continue to express surprise. What is still a puzzle within the political science discipline is why turnout at EP elections is so particularly low in the EU member countries of East Central Europe that were, until 1989, ruled by communist parties. These countries joined the European Union in 2004 and voted in the European Parliament (EP) elections of that year. In this paper I link that puzzle with another puzzle, less frequently noted, as to why young and especially first time voters also turn out at particularly low rates in these elections (Franklin 2014). I argue that the particularly low turnout seen among young and among post-communist voters are due to the same phenomena: (1) a lack of partisan attachments as exacerbated by (2) another little-noted feature of EP elections, the fact that they themselves serve as catalysts for non-voting (Franklin and Hobolt 2011).

A longstanding idea in election studies, apparently originating with Butler and Stokes (1979) is that people who vote repeatedly for the same party become “immunized” against changing their party allegiance. In recent years this notion has once again become topical with the idea of “habitual voting” both in terms of turnout (Plutzer 2002; Gerber Green and Shachar 2003) and in terms of party choice (Dinas 2014). What these and other authors have shown is that the act of voting is itself habit-forming (Cutts Fieldhouse and John 2009; Denny and Doyle 2009; Aldrich 2011; Dinas 2012). The more one votes, the more one is likely to continue doing so, meaning that the correlates of EP voting noted by Schmitt and Mannheim (1991) can be seen as preconditions for the acquisition of a habit of voting, as already established by Plutzer (2002). Whether one can have a habit of voting for no particular party is not clear. Most likely the habit

of casting a vote implies the habit of voting for a party, although (to the best of my knowledge) this has not previously been established.

The idea that habitual voters are likely to cast a ballot in an election of any type provides a plausible answer to the question why anyone would vote at an election to the European Parliament (cf. Franklin 2014) and, at the same time, why some certain groups of voters will be particularly unlikely to do so. Young voters (unless brought up in particularly politicized surroundings) have not had time to acquire the sort of habit that would take them to the polls even at an election with no obvious purpose. The same argument might also be used about citizens in post-communist countries, which can perhaps be viewed as countries in which all voters are new. Perhaps more to the point, in these countries citizens have found themselves faced with a kaleidoscope of changing parties that have made it difficult for these citizens to acquire the habit of voting for any of them. So young voters and voters in post-communist countries perhaps share the same fundamental characteristic that makes them unlikely to vote at an election that itself provides little in the way of motivation.

This approach, viewing European Parliament elections as having little appeal in their own right, seems to accord with experience. At the time of European Parliament elections voters are not presented with statements (even statements lacking clarity, as is often the case in national elections) regarding what the different parties stand for or the consequences in policy terms that would flow from increased support for one party or another. In the words of Reif and Schmitt (1980), at such elections "less is at stake". Indeed one could go further and say that, in the eyes of voters, at such elections nothing is at stake. Of course scholars and policy-makers know well that EP elections serve the vital function of populating the European Parliament with representatives who have important contributions to make to the governance of Europe, but this role of

EP elections is not apparent to voters. For most voters, these are elections without purpose.¹ And at elections without purpose what it takes to make people vote is the habit of doing so.

In this paper I will not specifically seek to discover to what extent a lack of habitual voting fills the gap between turnout at EP elections and turnout at national elections but will rather focus on the particularly low turnout among certain groups and countries. To the best of my knowledge this is the first paper to turn our newfound understanding of the role of habitual voting on its head and used it to explain why certain groups are particularly unlikely to vote at an election that provides little in the way of additional motivations to supplement habitual ones.

Unfortunately identifying the role of habitual voting in EP elections is not easy. This is because in Europe we have no good indicator of the extent of habitual voting other than the extent of voting itself. So we risk circularity when we address this question. Moreover, even the act of voting is hard to establish with certainty, since the tally of votes reported in sample surveys always exceed the tally of votes actually cast. This is often taken to be because people misreport their voting behavior, but it could also be because sample surveys fail to interview many of those who fail to vote. There is also the operational question of whether to ask people if they will vote in a forthcoming national election or whether to ask them if they did vote in a previous national election. The latter question excludes people who were too young to vote in that election while the former question raises the issue of whether people will optimistically report an intention to vote even if, when the time comes, they would in practice fail to abide by

¹ When people were asked why they failed to vote at the EP elections of 1994, 30% on average across the then EU member countries said it was because they lacked information about the EU and/or the European Parliament elections. A further 30% said it was because they had no interest in politics generally or in these elections specifically (Blondel, Sinnott and Svensson 1998). But it is hard to discover from survey research why interest in EP elections is so lacking. It is only by contrasting these elections with elections in which everyone votes that it is possible to establish that what makes the difference is whether elections provide voters with an opportunity to change the course of public policy in ways that are meaningful to them (Franklin 2004).

that intention.

In what follows I will first expand on the points made above regarding the importance of habitual voting for turnout in EP elections and then describe the design of the study with which I evaluate the role of habitual voting (or its lack) in accounting for low turnout in the two groups of voters on which I focus.

Why vote?

One strand in the turnout literature asserts (more often just implies) that turnout levels reflect social-structural factors, with older better-educated and wealthier individuals being more likely to vote. These regularities exist, but they are not causal factors in the determination of turnout levels. We know this because in countries where virtually everyone votes there are no such social differences (this is a logical requirement – if everyone is voting there cannot be differences between groups). Moreover, countries with more educated, richer and older populations do not see higher turnout. Indeed, at the country level, increasingly educated and wealthy populations correlate negatively with turnout (the negative correlation with education is stronger than -0.9 in Switzerland, firmly negating the expected link between education and turnout – see Franklin 2004). Social differences emerge only as turnout falls, with the youngest, poorest and least educated (often these are the same individuals) dropping out first as turnout declines. Social differences thus reflect rather than cause turnout decline. But if social differences do not account for turnout differences, what does? Much recent research suggests that the answer lies in features of the elections themselves – features that make it compelling for people to vote. In particular, people will vote in an election that is close-fought and whose outcome promises to have meaningful effects on the lives of individuals. This requires people to have an awareness of how different election outcomes could give rise to differences in resulting government policies, and to

sense that the outcome could depend on the votes of “people like them”. Identification with a group that stands to gain or lose will give purpose to the voting act and bring most affected voters to the polls (Franklin 2014).

Evidently none of these requirements are met by a European Parliament election. It is hard to see how such an election could be described as close fought and, more importantly, virtually impossible for voters to discern how the outcome could have policy implications relevant to them. These are quintessentially “elections without purpose”.

Why vote at an election with no evident purpose? Three things bring people to the polls at these elections. First, some people are obliged to go out and vote because of a legal requirement to do so (compulsory voting), which exists in four countries that are members of the EU, though it only appears to be enforced in two of them. Second, some people feel sufficient loyalty to a political party that they will support that party at any opportunity, or at least they will respond to the appeals of a party leader to help him demonstrate the strength of the party and its viability in forthcoming national elections. Individuals mobilized in this way are generally referred to as “party loyalists” – probably largely the same individuals that exhibit a habit of voting and raising the point that even those with a habit of voting may still need to be mobilized. Appeals to party loyalists will be more successful as a European Parliament election is held in closer proximity to an upcoming national election, reason why turnout at EP elections tends to be greater at EP elections held only a short time before a national election. In contrast, EP elections held at a greater temporal distance from the next national election see lower turnout (Franklin and Hobolt 2014). Finally some will turn out in order to punish their party or the government by voting for a candidate or party that their usual party (or the government) will hate to see receive support – such voters are motivated to demonstrate their support for a policy that the party they normally

support does not propose, in hopes that their party will get the message and take that policy on board. Members of this last group are generally referred to as "protest voters".

Though there is much talk of protest voting at EP elections, the proportion of those switching parties at European Parliament elections is small – about a quarter of those voting at EP elections, so about an eighth of all voters, with a very slight increase in numbers over time (Franklin and Hobolt 2014). Most protest voters have to be included in this group and, given the motivations mentioned above, most of those who turn out to vote at EP elections must be party loyalists. So the prevalence of protest voting does not alter my assessment that the turnout level at EP elections depends largely on the proportion of party loyalist in each electorate. More loyalists means higher turnout, other things being equal.

However, loyalists are created by the experience of voting. The more often someone votes for a party at national elections the more likely they are to continue voting for that party. This idea has been asserted at least since Butler and Stokes (1975) first pointed out the empirical regularity involved, but it has only recently been confirmed by experimental evidence (Cutts Fieldhouse and John 2009; Denny and Doyle 2009; Aldrich 2011; Dinas 2012; Dinas 2014). Figure 1 shows increasing turnout at EP elections with increasing age, consistent with this expectation. It also shows a big difference between anticipated future vote and actual recalled past vote, with anticipated future national election turnout hardly varying by age but actual past national turnout varying even more than does reported EP election turnout.

What we gather from these contrasting curves is that people are generally optimistic about their likely future voting behavior but that in practice most voters do not live up to their own expectations, presumably either because of unanticipated difficulties or because the election proves less compelling than expected. For some, however (evidently mainly those of middle

age), the election apparently proves more compelling than anticipated, yielding higher turnout. It is this reported behavior that displays the familiar curve that characterizes the “start-up” and “slow-down” (Verba and Nie 1972) phases in the turnout life-cycle. The appendix shows that these contrasts are very consistent across EP election years – 2014 is not remotely exceptional.

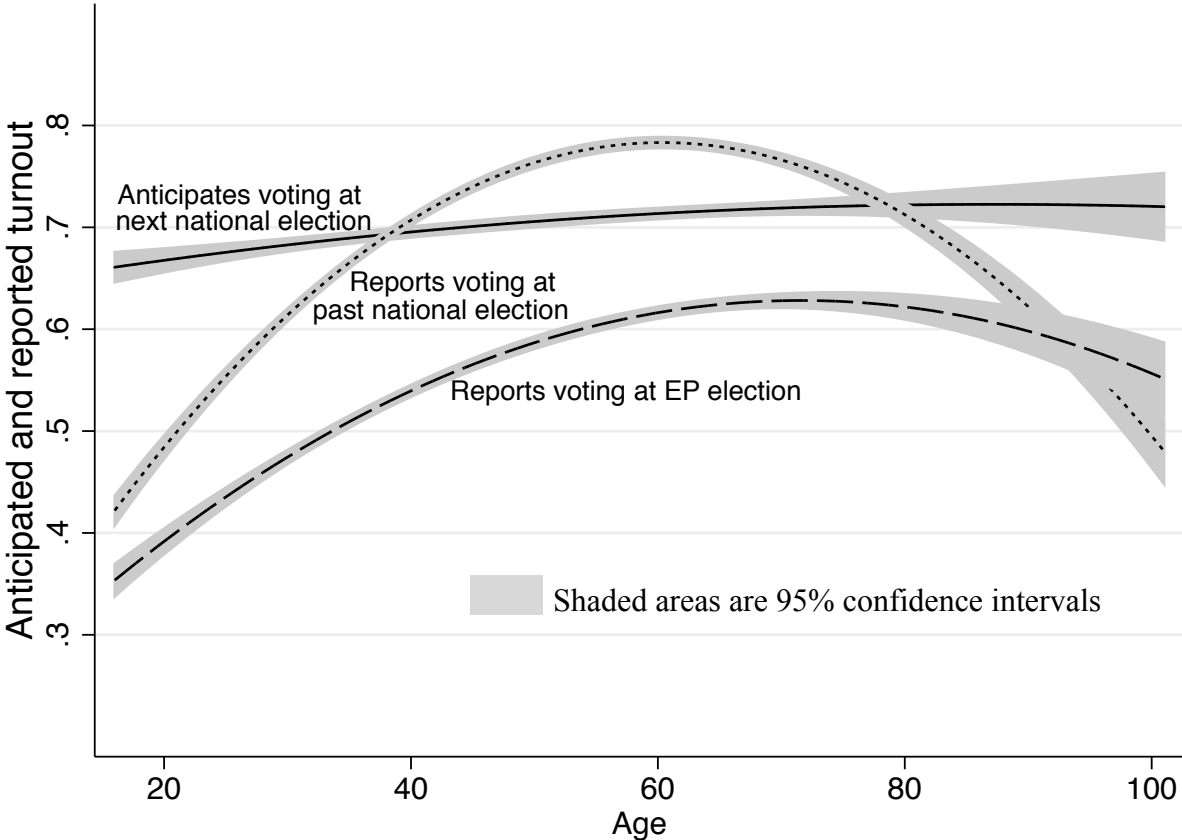


Figure 1 Reported and anticipated turnout at European Parliament and previous national elections (omitting compulsory voting and post-communist EU member states)
 Source: EES 2014

Figure 2 shows only reported turnout at EP elections, differentiating between EU member countries that are established democracies and post-communist EU member countries. The upper curve is the same one as already shown in Figure 1, indicating turnout evolution through the age-cycle for those living in established democracies, though somewhat exaggerated because the Y-axis has a lower maximum in Figure 2. The lower curve shows the same evolution for those living in post-communist countries. It appears as though the evolution of

turnout in these countries is simply displaced down and to the right, never reaching the inflection point with increasing age that is seen in established democracies.

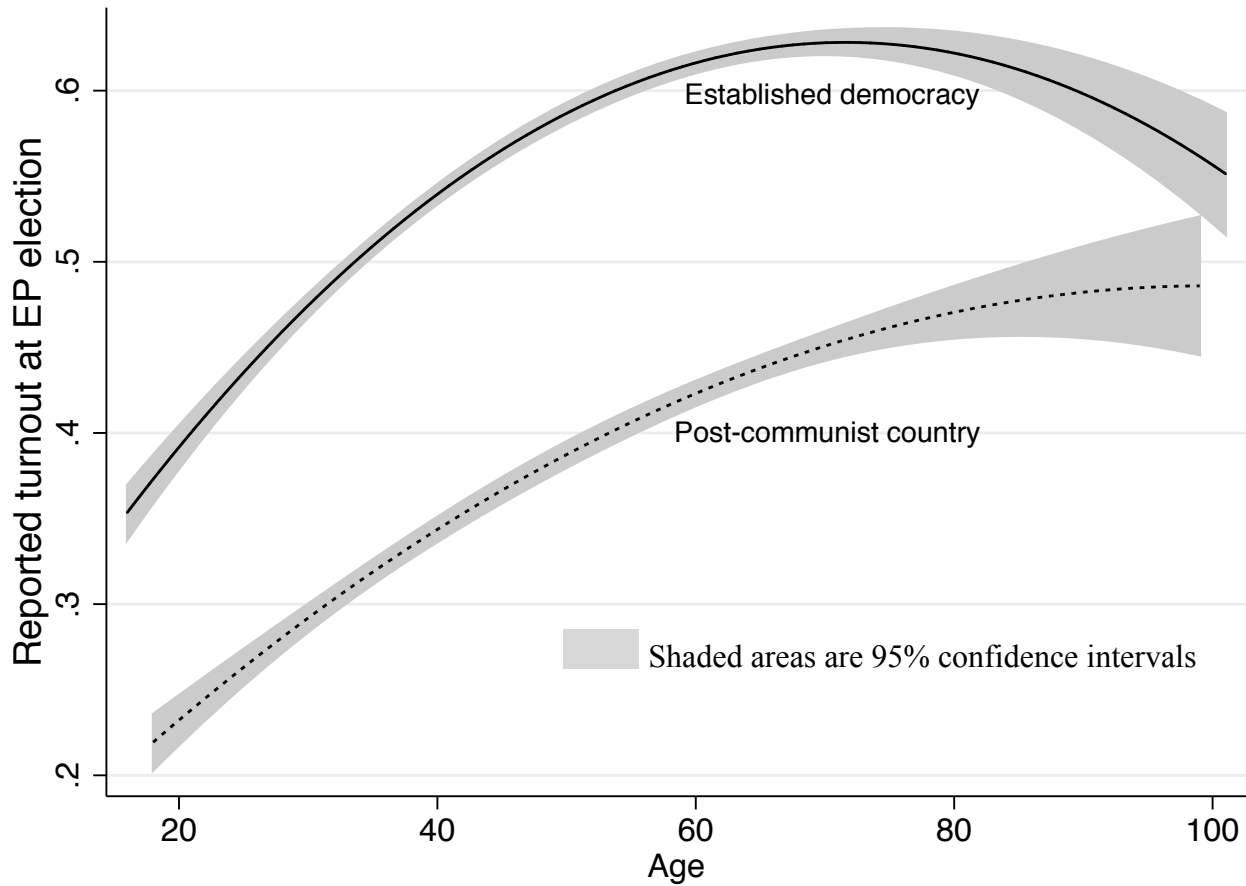


Figure 2 Reported voting at EP elections, contrasting respondents in established democracies with those in post-communist EU member countries (omitting compulsory voting countries).
Source: EES 2014

The story we seem to see in these pictures is complicated by the fact that experience of facing an EP election can itself have an effect on turnout. Indeed, it appears that not only does turnout at EP elections depend on habits created at the national level but also, ironically, that EP elections themselves get in the way of the acquisition of such habits. For citizens who have not yet acquired the habit of voting, the experience of *not* voting at an EP election apparently is itself habit-forming, promoting the acquisition of a “habit of non-voting” (Plutzer 2002). Or

perhaps this experience simply makes more difficult the acquisition of the habit of voting. At all events, those who experience a European Parliament election before they have had the chance to experience a national election are disadvantaged when it comes to later turnout (Franklin and Hobolt 2011).²

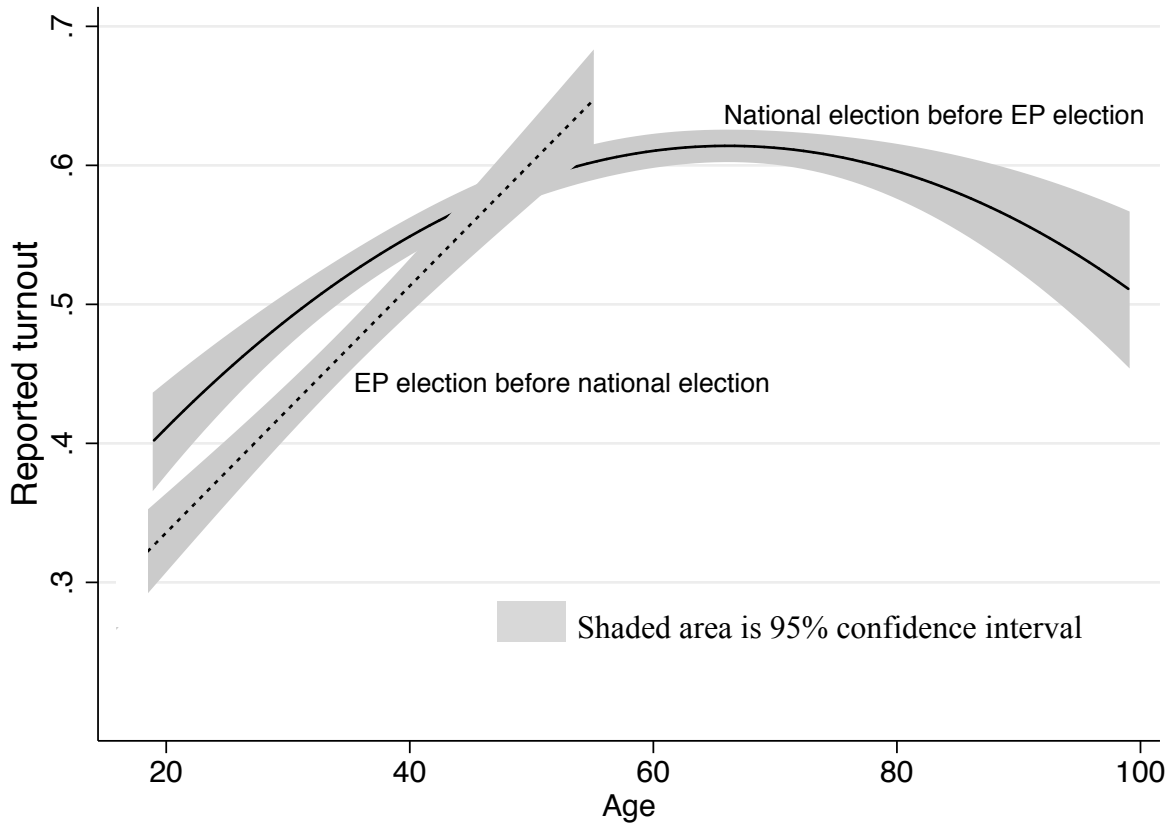


Figure 3 Turnout over the age cycle in the 2014 EP elections, by formative electoral experience (omitting compulsory voting and post-communist EU member states)
Source: European Parliament Election Study 2014.

Figure 3 focuses only on EP voting and distinguishes between those respondents to the 2014 election study who experienced a national election before their first opportunity to vote in an EP election (solid line) from those (broken line) who were unlucky enough to experience an EP

² Note that I have no measure of whether our respondents actually voted in an EP election that was their first election. I use their dates of birth to instrument this measure by assuming that all such voters fail to vote at the EP election in question. This is a conservative assumption since, to the extent that these individuals did actually vote, this will reduce the extent of the negative effect I measure.

election as their first experience of a nationwide parliamentary contest. No-one over the age of 57 in 2014 had been provided with the opportunity to have voted in an EP election before being faced with their first national election,³ but for countries that were members of the EU at the time of the first EP elections in 1979, all of their citizens too young to have voted at the previous national election will have experienced at that EP election their first nation-wide parliamentary election contest, with the same being true for about half the voters who came of voting age after that and each successive EP election. We see in the figure (as is documented extensively in Franklin and Hobolt 2011) that these individuals vote at a lower rate and, even if their turnout rate as they age does converge with the turnout rates of those who experienced a national election before their first EP election,⁴ it is clear that the act of not voting at the first election for which they were eligible had a negative effect on their ensuing turnout at several successive EP elections. The difference in turnout at national elections for those whose first voting experience was at an EP election is twice as great (a 30 percent gap, as will eventually be shown in an updated appendix).⁵

These findings serve to indirectly support the idea that the act of voting builds a habit of voting by establishing with what is effectively a regression discontinuity design the corollary proposition that the act of not voting interferes with the acquisition of a habit of voting. Moreover the finding suggests a role for EP elections in reinforcing the lack of habitual motivations for voting, not just at EP elections but at all elections. I will name this effect the

³ To have experienced an EP election as their first election they would have had to be not more than 22 years old in 1979. Thirty-five years later they could be no more than 57 years of age.

⁴ The apparently higher turnout of those over 50 years of age who experienced an EP election before a national election is based on a quite small N and is not statistically distinguishable from the turnout of those with the contrary experience.

⁵ The greater impact on national election voting of the negative experience of failing to vote at one's first election is presumably due to the higher turnout at such elections. Turnout among the youngest agegroups is already so low at EP elections that the negative effect can logically have much less impact because of a floor effect (turnout cannot be less than zero).

“EP lethargy” effect, after the title of my article with Sara Hobolt that documented it.

What remains to be seen is whether these patterns can actually be attributed to habitual attachment and the EP lethargy effect. Does the difference we see between voters of different ages correspond to the extent of their growing attachment to parties over time (as modified by the EP lethargy effect)? And does the difference we see between voters in established democracies and post communist countries equally arise from differences in habitual attachment (as modified in the same way)?

Operational hypotheses

The picture painted in the above text and graphs suggests that European Parliament elections see lower turnout because they do not provide an incentive to vote for those who have not acquired a habit of voting. To test this idea I need some measure of the habit of voting: some equivalent in the European context to the US measure of partisanship. Unfortunately that measure does not travel well outside the United States (Thomassen 1976; Budge Crewe and Farlie 2010) and in particular fails, for some 40 percent of respondents, to elicit information regarding which party they feel close to, putting into question whatever indication they might provide for how close they feel to that party. In this paper I supplement that measure with a measure of “propensity to vote” (PTV) constructed from responses to the question “In [country] various parties would like to get your vote. Thinking of each of these parties, how likely is it that you would ever vote for that party? How about [name of party]? What are the chances on a scale of 0-10 that you would ever vote for it?” Clearly the question was never intended to get respondents to think specifically about any habitual attachment they might have for the different parties but, if habitual attachments make people more likely to vote for some specific party, then this question will

capture those attachments. In this paper I have coded the maximum value given to any party by each respondent as a measure of party attachment for that respondent, as a robustness check on the more theoretically satisfactory PTV measure. Though PTVs are normally coded on a 0 to 10 scale, for this paper I have divided the measure by 11 in order to make it range from 0 to 1. Similarly I divided age by 82 to give it the same range.

Using these measures we can frame two hypotheses, one having to do with young adults and the other one having to do with citizens of post-communist countries, as follows:

H1: Turnout distinctions based on age will be attenuated (perhaps eliminated) when habitual attachment and EP lethargy are included as control variables and in interaction with each other.

H2: Turnout distinctions between established democracies and post-communist EU member countries will be attenuated (perhaps eliminated) when habitual attachment and EP lethargy are included as control variables and in interaction with each other.

For ready interpretation of coefficients I employ hierarchical linear probability models. Equivalent logistic regression models are shown in the appendix.

Findings

The findings are presented in Tables 1 and 2. Table 1 addresses the young voter question and shows that effects of age are attenuated when controls are introduced for EP lethargy and habitual voting attachment (whether measured by maximum propensity to vote in Model B or by closeness to party in Model C), as expected. Indeed the main effect of age itself is so attenuated as to statistical significance in both Models B and C. The effects of age and attachment are readily interpreted. Habitual attachment increases the likelihood of voting, especially when

interacted with age. So both measures of attachment have greater effect with increasing age, as expected. Effects of EP lethargy are less intuitive to interpret since the interaction appears to have the wrong sign. But we saw in Figure 3 that lethargy has less of a negative effect on turnout as age increases – what the interaction with lethargy indicates.⁶

Table 1 Effects of habitual attachment and EP lethargy in accounting for age differences in EP turnout

Inputs	Outcomes: Voted in EP election (Model A)		Voted in EP election (Model B)		Voted in EP election (Model C)	
	Coef	(s.e)	Coef	(s.e)	Coef	(s.e)
Age (0=17 to 1=100)	0.29	(0.02)***	0.03	(0.05)	0.01	(0.04)
Maximum PTV (0-1)			0.55	(0.03)***		
EP lethargy (0,1)			-0.11	(0.02)***	-0.10	(0.01)***
Age * Maximum PTV			0.18	(0.06)**		
Age * lethargy			0.37	(0.06)***	0.33	(0.06)***
Feels close to party (0,1)					0.21	(0.02)***
Age * close to party					0.27	(0.04)***
Constant	0.46	(0.03)***	0.08	(0.03)*	0.20	(0.03)***
R-squared	0.02		0.15		0.08	
N of level 2 units	15		15		15	
Observations	14,845		14,845		14,845	

Note: Significant at * 0.05, ** 0.01, *** 0.001, two-tailed. Excludes compulsory voting and post-communist EU member states.

In general terms the story is much the same for the difference between post communist countries and established democracies, as shown in Table 2. There the main effect of the variable of interest (post-communist in that table) is again attenuated when interactions are introduced, even if not so definitively as were the effects of age in Table 1. Though the post-communist indicator is attenuated to the extent of statistical insignificance in both Models B and C, in model

⁶ The positive coefficients for age*lethargy are implausibly large, however, suggesting specification error perhaps due to the truncated nature of a variable that is not measured for respondents over 57 years old (see above). The loss of statistical significance for age does not require a multi-level model. A simple linear probability model at the individual-level shows the same loss of significance even when based on the full 26,437 cases.

C the lack of significance is mainly due to the small N at the country level.⁷ Main effects of habitual attachment and lethargy are of the same general magnitude as in Table 1. Interactions are more straightforward than in Table 1, however, being always negative – increasing the negative effects of lethargy and reducing the positive effects of habitual attachment for post-communist electorates. What this means is that turnout in post-communist societies is so low both because the experience of EP elections is particularly negative in those countries and also because party attachments have less effect there.⁸

Table 2 Effects of habitual attachment and EP lethargy in accounting for post-communist distinctiveness in turnout

Inputs	Outcome: Voted in EP election (Model A)		Voted in EP election (Model B)		Voted in EP election (Model C)	
	Coef	(s.e)	Coef	(s.e)	Coef	(s.e)
Post-communist (0,1)	-0.18	(0.05)***	-0.07	(0.04)	-0.09	(0.05)
Maximum PTV (0-1)			0.63	(0.01)***		
EP lethargy (0,1)			-0.08	(0.01)***	-0.10	(0.01)***
Postcom * Maximum PTV			-0.11	(0.02)***		
Age * lethargy			-0.05	(0.02)**	-0.04	(0.02)*
Feels close to party (0-1)					0.37	(0.01)***
Postcom * close to party					-0.11	(0.02)***
Constant	0.58	(0.03)***	0.10	(0.03)***	0.25	(0.03)***
R-squared	0.03		0.16		0.08	
Number of level 2 units	26		26		26	
Observations	26,432		26,432		26,432	

Note: Significant at * 0.05, ** 0.01, *** 0.001, two-tailed. Excludes compulsory voting EU member states.

Discussion

⁷ The insignificance of the remaining effect of the post-communist indicator in Model B does not depend on the reduced N at Level 2 for the multi-level model. A linear probability model at the individual level (not shown) evinces a smaller remaining effect of post-communist (0.04) that fails to attain significance at the 0.01 level – a generous threshold for a model with such a large N.

⁸ These two propositions are likely connected by the fact that when habitual attachments to parties are lacking there is less to counteract the negative effect of failing to vote.

Low turnout at EP elections appears to be due to a combination of low motivations to vote (for most people the only motivation appears to be habitual party attachment) and negative effects of the elections themselves – negative effects that act directly to reduce the level of habitual attachment for those who encounter an EP election before experiencing a national election. The negative effect of experiencing an EP election appears especially strong for young voters, further reducing the turnout of a group that already exhibits low turnout because these are voters who have, by and large, not yet developed party attachments. In post-communist societies the same effects appear to be in evidence, with immature party systems failing to generate the party attachments we see in established democracies and this shortfall in mobilizing motivations being further exacerbated by EP lethargy effects that are even stronger than in those EU member countries that are established democracies. However, the attenuation of the post-communist differential in turnout is not as complete as was the attenuation of the age differential.

My findings must be seen as tentative due the fact that EU elections have been conducted for only 35 years, about half the time the average adult remains a member of their electorate. The truncated structure of electoral experiences that results from this limitation appears to have caused a specification error in Table 1 (see footnote 7) and may be masking other deficiencies that will only become apparent as the length of time over which we have relevant data increases.

Still, these tentative findings are theoretically satisfying. With a parsimonious set of just two explanatory variables (the same two in each case, though buttressed by alternative specifications of the party attachment measure) I am able to largely explain away both the particularly low turnout among young voters in EP elections and the particularly low turnout in post-communist countries. These explanations are derived from general propositions about why people vote established with the benefit of experimental evidence in very different venues than those at issue

in this paper, leaving no need for special-purpose theories relating to a decline in dutiful behavior by today's young voters or the nature of post-communist culture.

The extent to which I have explained the actual extent of lower turnout at EP elections than in national elections is not readily discovered from my models. However, the general picture is readily derived from Figure 1. There we see EP turnout rising among middle-aged citizens to within ten percent of the general level of turnout to which those citizens aspire at national elections. Turnout that is less than this, mainly among younger citizens, is explained by our theorizing. The still higher turnout reported at actual national elections by middle-aged voters must be due to features of those elections that EP elections by their very nature cannot share – features having to do with particularly compelling choices and/or uncertainties. The same difference between national and EP elections that we see in Table 1 for established democracies is also evident for post-communist countries (as will be shown in a later version of the appendix), and the same general implications flow from my findings. The bulk of the difference between post-communist and established democracies appears to be explained by my theorizing. What is left has to do with features of national elections that at some times and for some people make them even more compelling than are the general run of national elections. On average this will yield higher turnout at national elections even leaving aside the fact that these elections have less need of habitual attachments to bring people to the polls.

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Appendix

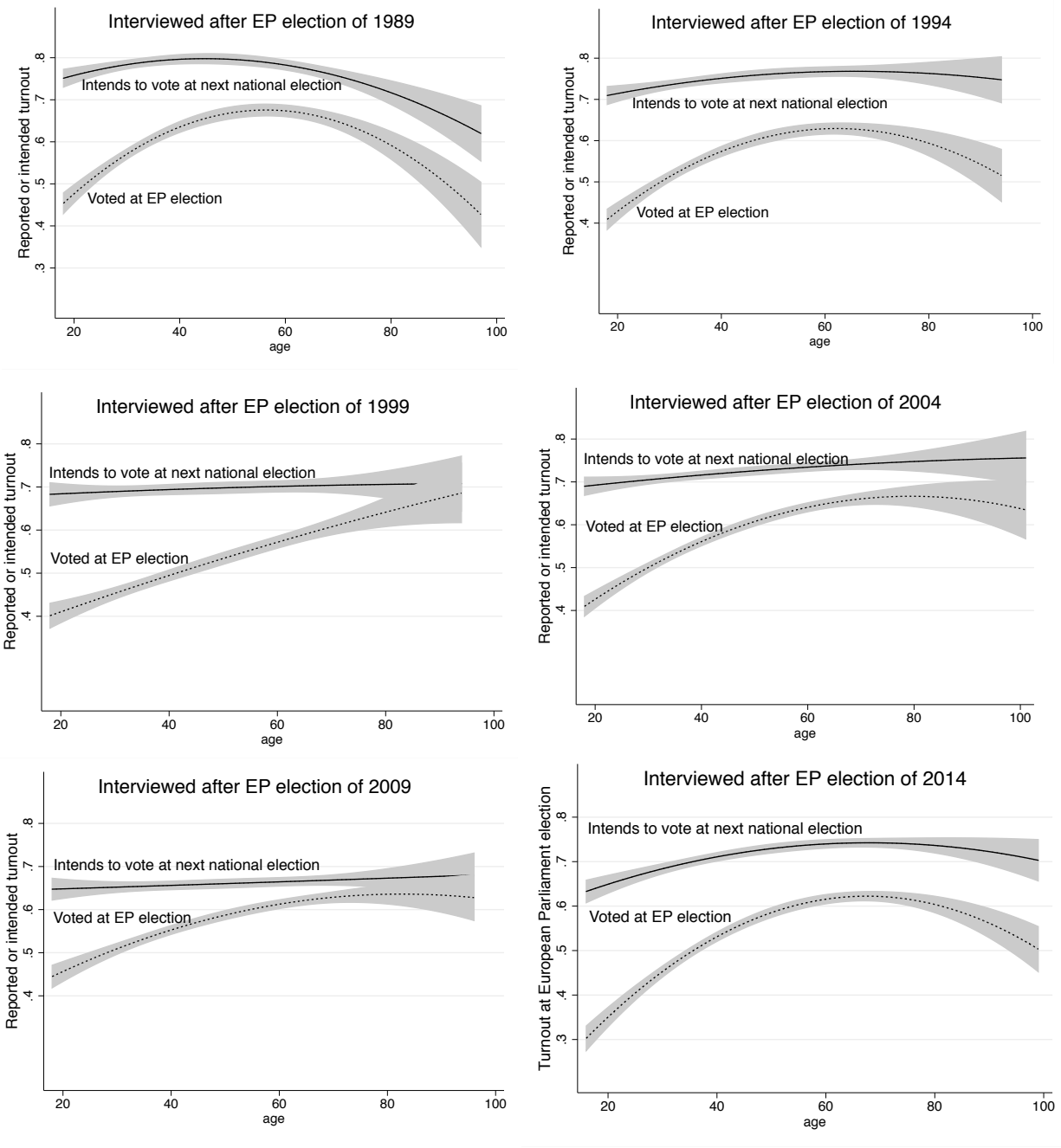


Figure A.1 Vote intention at next national election compared to voting in European Parliament election, 1989-2014

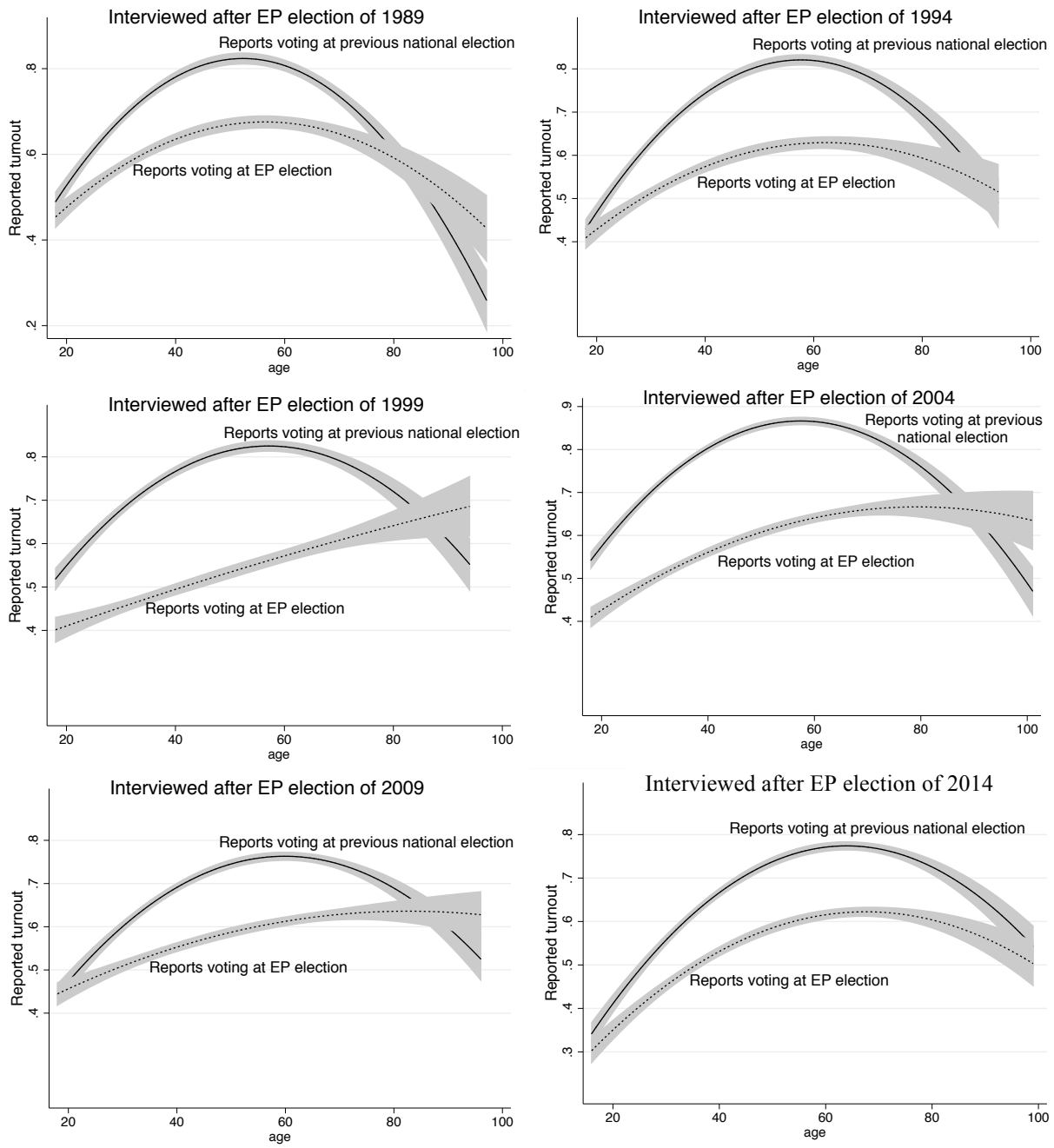


Figure A.2 Recall of vote at previous national election compared to voting in European Parliament election, 1989-2014