

# Do European elections enhance satisfaction with EU democracy?

*Elections carry the potential to increase citizens' satisfaction with democracy. As **Carolina Plescia, Jean-François Daoust and André Blais** explain, previous research has shown that this effect is apparent among those who take part in national elections, rather than abstain, and among voters who back 'winners' rather than 'losers'. Drawing on original panel data collected during the 2019 European Parliament elections in eight countries, they demonstrate that while electoral participation and backing a winning party do increase satisfaction with EU democracy, this effect does not materialise among citizens with an exclusive national identity.*

A key argument in favour of holding elections is that people will accept (and consent to) a political authority when they have been given the opportunity to choose who will govern them. In line with this argument, democratic theory expects elections to boost system support, commonly measured as satisfaction with democracy, among those who have participated in the election regardless of whether they have won or lost. The 'winner–loser gap' literature further tells us that those who supported a party now in government express even higher levels of satisfaction with democracy.

The existing literature on European Parliament (EP) elections largely expects the two linkages between (1) voting and satisfaction with democracy and (2) winning and satisfaction with democracy not to hold for EP elections. This is mainly due to the fact that, compared to first-order national elections, EP elections do not provide a direct relationship between the outcome of the election and the governing body and because these elections commonly fail to engage the public in a European-wide event.



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In a [recent study](#), we propose the first systematic test of whether or not holding EP elections fosters citizens' satisfaction with European Union democracy. Our hypotheses are that turnout and party performance did play a role in the EP 2019 elections due to the changing circumstances that characterised these elections. In particular, we contend that a series of changes — an emerging European party system, the greater importance of EU institutions for the policy-making process at the national level, and the *Spitzenkandidaten* process — have enhanced the relevance of the electoral process at the EU level to the extent that people should become more satisfied with the way democracy works at the EU level if they participate in EP election and their party performs well.

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To test our expectations, we make use of panel data in eight countries: Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Poland, and Spain. Since the same respondents were interviewed twice – just before and just after the election – we can study changes in satisfaction after the election (our dependent variable) for voters versus non-voters and winners versus losers of the election. In particular, to study the effect of ‘winning’ in the context of EP elections we take into account not only whether citizens voted for the largest party or not but also the performance of the voted party simultaneously at the national and the EU level.

The findings of our study show that citizens are slightly more satisfied when they participate in the election, when they win the election and when their party receives more votes – albeit the effects are rather small. Our results also help clarify the meaning of winning at the EU level. Our findings suggest that party performance at both the national and the European level matter. This is likely due to the fact that national parties often use EP election results as a barometer of their national-level strength. In this regard, EP elections provide the parties with the opportunity to proclaim themselves winners either if they won the European contest of the EP election or if they were the top performing party at the national level.

Second, our study shows that the extent to which election outcomes influence democratic satisfaction depends on individual-level exclusive national identity. For those who are more alienated from the EU, it does not matter whether their party performed well or poorly in the election; they remain highly critical. Given that turnout remains rather low at EP elections and those alienated with the EU are unlikely to tune in during the election, we conclude that in line with previous findings, the positive effect of EP elections is unlikely to be broadly felt by the population. In short, EU elections do contribute to slightly increasing the legitimacy of the EU among those who participate, but not among those who completely reject that legitimacy to start with. Mission not quite accomplished.

**For more information, see the authors’ accompanying paper at [European Union Politics](#)**

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