

**‘Surge and decline’ in European
parliament elections: A new challenge
for a classic theory of electoral change**

**Michael Marsh
Trinity College Dublin**

mmarsh@tcd.ie

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Introduction

Theories of electoral behaviour are typically elaborated to explain features of particular political systems. Most theorists are from the US, and have the US in mind when developing their ideas. Those outside the US may develop theories to explain features of their own political context. This can lead to different theories being employed in different places to explain phenomena that may appear, at least on the face of it, to be much the same. A central concern of political science in this field should be to establish the importance of political context on the applicability of such theories. Hence it is useful to compare such sets of such theories where they exist, identifying similarities and differences and evaluating the contributions each makes to understanding the phenomena in question. This paper sets out to make such a comparison, focussing on theories advanced to explain similar forms of change across different types of elections. Two bodies of theory have been advanced to explain the 'midterm' weakness of US presidential parties. These are known as 'surge and decline' and 'referendum' theory, and each has two or more versions. Another body of theory, that of 'second-order elections' has been developed to explain the changes that occur between national general elections and others. Both contexts share some common features, notably a fall in turnout from one election to the other [presidential to midterm/national to sub-national] and a loss of support suffered by incumbent executives/governments which the several theories seek to explain. A central assertion of each theoretical approach is that the results are interpretable only through an understanding of something external to the 'second' election, whether it be a US midterm or a European local or European Parliament election.

This paper reviews these bodies of theory and tests predictions from them using aggregate data on European parliament elections and survey data from the most recent European Election Study, carried out after the 1999 elections. The theories will first be reviewed here. Special attention is given to four things. First, what is the aggregate level behaviour each theory seeks to explain. Second, what is the source of the explanation. Thirdly, what is the mechanism of decision-making at the level of the individual that provides the expected change. And fourth, what refinements have been added to the theory since it was originally formulated. Having done that we can then move on to consider the manner in which these theories can be applied to the particular case of European Parliament elections.

Three bodies of theory

The original theory of Surge and Decline was presented by Angus Campbell in a paper published by *Public Opinion Quarterly* in 1960 and reprinted in *Elections and the Political Order* in 1966 – the version which is usually referenced. We will call this Campbell_1. The theory seeks to explain differences between US midterm and preceding presidential elections, which almost invariably show a decline in support for the president's party. The congressional vote at midterm for the president's party tends to be lower than that for the president's party, and for the president himself, in the preceding election. The explanation for this is that presidential elections provide a context in which people are more likely to depart from their 'normal' pattern of political behaviour. This is because they are (relatively, in the US context) high stimulus elections. The higher stimulus of a presidential election promotes two types of change. First, it draws those to the polls who do not usually vote, those Campbell calls 'peripheral' voters. Lacking a strong party attachment, these are likely to be swayed disproportionately by the circumstances of the moment to vote for the winning party. At the next midterm election, these voters stay at home, thus adversely affecting the president's party. The high stimulus also means that regular, or 'core' voters are more likely to be swayed by the advantage circumstances give to the winning party to depart from their normal partisan behaviour, only to return to their habitual behaviour in the lower-stimulus midterm. Again, this is to the disadvantage of the president's party. Presidential elections are thus a departure from an equilibrium that is restored at the subsequent congressional election.

Campbell_1 is very much a theory of its time in several ways: its emphasis on long-term stability, its location of the sources of change amongst the less interested voters, and its determinism. It depends firmly on the concept of psychological attachments to parties that was characteristic of the Michigan studies of the time, and ties in to concepts like the 'normal vote' developed by other members of the school.

After reviewing the individual level evidence and arguing that it does not support classic surge and decline theory, James Campbell (1993) provides a revised version of surge and decline in which the mechanism of a higher/lower stimulus remains much the same but the impact of that on different types of voters changes. We will call this Campbell_2. On the basis that the individual level evidence does not support the differential turnout of independent voters in the two types of election, James Campbell argues instead that the difference in the result is caused by the return to the mid term electorate of partisans of the losing party in the previous election ('disadvantaged partisans') who were cross-pressured by short-term forces and abstained, and the switching back of

weaker partisans who shifted support to the same cross pressures. In his revised version of Surge and Decline theory it is strong partisans who move from abstention to voting, and weak partisans and independents who switch. The key additional concept used in the revised model is that of cross-pressure. Strong partisans may find themselves cross-pressured in a presidential year, wanting to vote for their normal party but preferring the candidate of the opposition. They resolve the conflict by abstaining. Weaker partisans have no problem with the cross-pressures and simply switch parties.

Referendum theory

Referendum theories also seeks to explain why the party of the president does poorly in midterm elections. In sharp contrast to surge and decline, which finds the roots of inter-election decline in the upsurge at the previous election, referendum theories locate it in the recent record of the administration. However, as in surge and decline theory, the roots remain external to the election itself, since they are located in the record of the administration rather than of Congress. Midterm elections are essentially a referendum on the government's performance, in which voters express their approval or disapproval through voting for or against those representing the president's party. This view is expressed most clearly by Tufte (1975) and we will refer to his theory as Tufte_1. Tufte rejects surge and decline theory (Campbell_1) which sees midterm elections as non-events, and argues the mechanism of change lies in the decision by at least some midterm voters to reward or punish the party of the president. The election provides an occasion at which voters can signal their dissatisfaction.

Tufte cites two separate measures of performance: the public's general satisfaction with the president's performance and the trends in economic indicators. His analysis uses these to predict the magnitude of swings against the incumbent party, and he shows these can predicted with a high degree of accuracy. There is nothing in the theory of a referendum itself to explain why swings are almost always adverse, but Tufte suggests that this stems from two further trends. The first is that presidential popularity tends to decline through a term of office; the second is that the performance of the economy tends to be better at the time of presidential elections. Of course, to the extent that neither is the case, the president's party should not suffer midterm.

There are several variations on midterm referendum theory.¹ Each of these seeks to explain the same thing: the loss of votes by the in-party. Moreover, each explanation is rooted in presidential rather than congressional policy outcomes. However, each treats policy outcomes in a different way.

Negative voting: Kernell (1977) asserts a 'negativity' hypothesis. Like Tufte, Kernell sees the midterm election as strongly influenced by perceptions of the president's record but he offers a more fundamental account of why this is bad news for the president's party. According to Kernell, judgements on presidential performance are always biased in a negative direction because – as a social-psychological rule - negative impressions are always more salient than positive ones (see also Lau 1985). Moreover, voters are more likely to act on negative impressions. Hence, there will be more people dissatisfied with the president than there were two years ago, dissatisfied voters will also be more likely to turn out than satisfied ones, and, having turned out, will be more likely to vote against the president's party.²

Balance: This perhaps is linked more tenuously to referendum theory since the mechanism provoking the anti-administration swing is not a function of what the administration has, or has not done but what it might do. The argument goes that some voters actually prefer a situation where the control over the presidency and over congress is divided between the parties, with no one party controlling both institutions. Because of this, some voters will tend to vote against the president's party so as to balance things up. The suggestion is made by Erikson (1988), citing a similar interpretation of provincial elections in Canadian politics and Fiorina's argument that divided government stems from voters' direct preferences (Fiorina 1988; see also Fiorina 1992). This idea

¹ There are others which, because they are more specific to US circumstances, I have ignored here. These include Jacobson and Kernell's (1981)'strategic politician' hypothesis and Waterman's (1986)'exposure' hypothesis. An additional theory relates to party competence. This is a minor amendment. Rather than challenge referendum theory, Cover (1986a, 1986b) and Abramson et al (1986) argue that Tufte simply ignores an important intervening variable in the relationship between government performance and electoral support: competence. Actual government performance impacts on the perception of the government's capacity to deal with key problems and it is this that is vital for support. In the event that governments did not lose votes despite some adverse economic circumstances, it might be shown that the electorate did not conclude the government was incompetent, and thus did not signal discontent in the ballot box. What is interesting about this suggestion is that it links to the concept of 'blame' that has featured in accounts of economic voting in parliamentary democracies. Under what conditions do voters blame the government, and in the case of a coalition government which party do they blame when things go wrong? However, what this calls for is a theory of blame, and Abramson et al do not offer any such theory.

² Cover 1986a makes the point that even if cues are mixed, the dissatisfactions will outweigh the satisfactions.

has been developed further by Alesina and Rosenthal (1997) (see also Scheve and Tomz, 1999) who argue that the midterm swing is produced by those who want divided government but do not know how to effect it at the previous presidential election due to uncertainty about the outcome. When the situation becomes clear, they vote to promote balance by voting against the president's party. The degree of change in their model is a function of the uncertainty two years earlier, and hence the degree of 'surprise' at the outcome. The source of change should be so-called 'moderate' voters, those whose policy preferences lie between those of the two parties.

Second-order theories

The idea of second order national elections has its roots in observations of electoral patterns in US midterm elections, as well as German regional elections but it was proposed primarily as an account of the first direct European Parliament election by Reif and Schmitt in 1980 (see also Reif 1984, 1985, 1997). These elections are held in each country of the European Union simultaneously. However, unlike national parliamentary elections in the EU countries (and other parliamentary democracies) the EU parliament does not elect a government. Parliament simply acts as one site of decision making and influence along with a Commission appointed by the respective national governments and the Council of Ministers, which comprises members of national EU governments themselves. And of the three, the parliament has been seen as the weakest.

Reif and Schmitt start by pointing out that elections differ in terms of how important people think they are. Just as Angus Campbell assumes that presidential elections will normally be accorded greater importance than midterm elections, so Reif and Schmitt assume national general elections will be considered more important than European Parliament elections (or sub-national elections).³ Rather than distinguish elections as such they refer to different arenas of politics, with elections to bodies in the most important arena of primary importance and elections in other arenas of lesser consequence. Given that national politics remains pre-eminent, general elections in parliamentary democracies are therefore first-order elections. All others are second-order. Voters can be expected to behave differently in the two types of elections because of their differential importance. For a start, they will be less likely to vote in second-order elections, because they, and the parties, know that such elections are less important. When they do turn out voters will be more mindful of the political situation in the first-order arena than that of the second-order arena. First-order issues, for instance, will dominate

³ Of course, if some other hierarchy was recognised this would not alter the theory itself, only the predictions that would be made on foot of it.

second-order ones. In particular, voters may take the opportunity to signal their dissatisfaction with government policy, despite the fact that the second-order election has no direct implications for government composition. Additionally, in making their choice voters will be more inclined to follow their 'heart' in second-order elections, whose relative un-importance means there are no consequences for the voter. This explains why their behaviour may differ from that in first-order elections, in which voters follow their 'head'.

Again, the theory reflects its time and place. Reif and Schmitt did not go far to develop a theory of the voter, though some points are implicit in what they say. Essentially, at the core of second-order theory is a much more strategic voter than the one at the heart of theory. And implied in this notion is one of a voter who has a preference structure across two or more parties, rather than a somewhat dichotomous preference between one and the others.

This strategic aspect has been further developed by a team of people studying European Parliament elections (van der Eijk and Franklin *et al.* 1996). Reif and Schmitt suggested that governments would perform particularly poorly when second-order elections occurred at midterm. The rationale for this essentially follows Tufte. It is a normal nadir of government popularity, brought about by a combination of political business cycles, and the inevitability of unrealised expectations.[Reif cites Miller and Mackie 1972 and Goodhart and Bhansali 1971 and Tufte 1975]. However, this is disputed by Oppenhuis et al(1996) who reject the inevitability of such popularity cycles and instead focus on the importance of the election as a signalling device. This also a function of the time since the last general election, and the time expected until the next one. When a second-order election follows close on, or is simultaneous with, a general election it passes almost unnoticed. Hence turnout will be particularly low. Those who do vote will please themselves, voting with the 'heart'. However, when a second-order election takes place on the eve of a general election, its importance as a sign of what will happen at that general election is considerable. In such circumstances turnout will be higher (relative to other second order elections) and voters are more likely to signal their discontent with a party or government, typically by casting a protest vote for a new or extreme party: voting with the 'boot' (Oppenhuis et al 1996). The 'referendum' element of second-order elections is thus contextually located, not by levels of government dissatisfaction or economic trends but by the timing of the second-order election in the first-order election cycle. Of course voters still need a reason to voice dissatisfaction, and the explanation for the degree of it would not differ from the accounts offered by referendum theorists.

A second development of second-order theory is the suggestion that the differential importance of elections is better represented by a continuum than by a categorisation (van der Eijk et al 1997). Not all second-order elections are equally unimportant (see also Reif 1984) but not all first-order elections are equally important either. In fact, where general elections have few implications for the choice of government, because a system of consociational democracy operates for instance, then they may differ little from second-order elections in the same system. Perhaps only in countries where general elections are expected to bring about some alternation of government control does it make sense to see local or European parliament elections as second-order (Marsh 1998).

Similarities and differences

There are obvious similarities across the several approaches, as Figure 1, which summarises our review, demonstrates. In particular, second-order election theory combines aspects of surge and decline and referendum theory, a consolidation that Tufte (1975; see also Campbell 1993) argues is necessary for any complete explanation of US midterm elections.

However, differences in the context in which each is typically applied makes a proper comparison difficult. For a clearer appraisal we must seek to apply each to the same situation. It is useful to take European Parliament elections as a site for doing this.⁴ This might be seen as biasing any conclusions towards the benefits of second-order theory. However, such a perception would be inappropriate since what is sought here is a contrast across different contexts and European Parliament elections provide a wider variety of context within a specific framework than would any other set of elections.

There are several aggregate features of European Parliament elections which require explanation. In comparison with the preceding general election these are:

- the loss of support by government parties
- the switch in support from larger to smaller parties
- the decline in turnout

Government losses: these could be explained by all three sets of theories, but each would make different predictions as to the scale of the losses, and what sort of voters would bring the changes about.

Surge and decline theory would link losses to the surge in support at the preceding general election. The greater the vote difference from a 'normal' one at the preceding general election, the greater the swing back in the European Parliament election. This is a simple matter in the US's stable,

⁴ For an application of second-order theory to US midterm elections see Franklin and Evans (In Press).

two-party system but in multi-party parliamentary systems it is possible that the government actually enjoys less than 'normal' support already. In that case the expectation should be that support would not decline. The very concept of a 'normal' election might also be problematic in some countries where the party system is far less stable than it is in the US. Surge and decline theories would locate the government's losses in different behaviour by partisans and non-partisans although Campbell_1 and Campbell_2 make different predictions here. Campbell_1 suggests government supporters (from the previous election) will be less likely to vote in the European Parliament election, and non-partisan government supporters should be particularly prone to abstain. There will also be some swing away from the government amongst its own partisans. Campbell_2 locates the losses in abstention by government partisans and a return to the electorate by opposition partisans who abstained last time. Of course it may be that government parties did not win a greater than normal vote. If we simply argue that voting behaviour will return to normal in a second order election then governments may not lose at all. Instead, losses will be sustained by the parties who performed relatively well in the general election, and gains made by parties who under-performed. The mechanisms bringing about such changes will again be differential behaviour by different groups of partisans and non-partisans.

Referendum theory of the sort outlined by Tufte has already been employed to explain government losses in non-general elections in parliamentary systems (eg Mughan 1986; Norris 1995; Anderson 1996). Tufte's theory would predict that the scale of government losses to be dependent on the approval rating and economic record of the incumbent government. Losses would be caused by erstwhile supporters who now disapproved, or saw no economic benefits accruing, changing their vote, or abstaining. The *negativity* hypothesis would also predict losses but would locate changes of vote more directly amongst the discontented, with satisfied voters more likely to abstain. The *balance* hypothesis was advanced in the context of a single political system and as such is a little more difficult to apply to a European Parliament election. Arguably, voters might seek to balance the government (and European Council) by the European Parliament. If so, it should be those voters whose views on Europe are between government and opposition views who switch votes from government to opposition. In contrast to the other theories, this implies that people's views on Europe are relevant to their voting behaviour! However it could be argued that as more decisions on all matters are made in Europe, then the balance could be sought on more conventional left-right issues. Hence, voters who are ideologically placed between government and opposition parties will shift from government to opposition support.

Second-order theory incorporates the predictions of referendum theory with the proviso that the timing of the election is important. Oppenhuis et al's (1996) reformulation retains the stress on timing, but for different theoretical reasons. Second order theory provides an additional reason and mechanism for government losses. This is the absence in the European Parliament election of the tactical considerations that may have influenced voting in the general election. Voters can now be directed by their heart rather than their head. In part this means voting for parties is less dependent on a party's size, and potential importance to coalition formation. The idea of a 'wasted vote' makes less sense in an election whose direct consequences are obscure, and there is no government to be elected. This can be expected to benefit smaller parties, and also perhaps those outside the normal set of 'coalitionables'. Governments might thus be expected to suffer more when composed of larger parties, or one large party than when they comprise several smaller ones. As far as expectations about individuals are concerned, second-order theory would lead one to look for government losses in the defections by voters whose sympathies are close to smaller and in some ways more extreme rivals of the larger, more centrist parties they voted for in the preceding general election.

Larger party losses: neither surge and decline, nor referendum theories have any explanation for the losses which are peculiar to larger parties, although surge and decline theory can offer predictions and explanations as to the likely beneficiaries of government losses. Surge and decline theory would predict, as stated above, a return to 'normal' that might, or might not, favour larger parties. Referendum theory also offers nothing to explain the direction of aggregate vote shifts beyond a pattern of government losses. Voters vote 'no' to the government, but unless they abstain they must vote 'yes' to something else. What determines who gets the 'yes'? Only second-order theory provides an explanation that deals with the pattern of vote exchanges between smaller and larger parties, one which was developed above in the context of government losses. However, explanations might be developed along the lines specific to each of the other theories. In the case of surge and decline, the patterns of change should be explicable in terms of the conditions of the preceding general election. To the extent that those conditions generally favour larger parties, then the European Parliament elections should adversely affect those same parties. Surge and decline theory sees 'surges' as stemming from the advantages accruing to particular parties at particular times. Campbell's reference to advantageous circumstances encompasses things like issues and candidate factors. Arguably, these can also operate in a low salience election, but their effects would necessarily be weaker. Furthermore, in surge and decline theory these effects are inferred from the swings at previous elections, and so give no guidance as to what might be expected at a future election. Other

reasons why the conditions might favour larger parties are given in second-order theory – as explained above. However, these reasons are essentially strategic, relating to the institutional incentives provided by a particular election, and we would need to stretch surge and decline theory somewhat to incorporate them. All surge and decline theory can do is suggest a return to ‘normal’. In general, those parties who lost most at the previous election should gain most at the European Parliament election.

In the case of referendum theories there are various possibilities for an explanation, none of them particularly convincing. The *negative voting* hypothesis offers nothing at all, since it explains only the tendencies of erstwhile partisans to abstain. The *balance* hypothesis offers a little more. If defections are based on the desire for a policy emphasis that lies between those of two reasonably favoured parties, shifts should take place towards an ideologically proximate party that is not in government. It is not clear that those would necessarily advantage smaller parties but it could be so. With respect to Tufte's referendum theory, if people are primarily expressing dissatisfaction with the government, we would expect voters to shift to the parties who best express whatever is at the roots of dissatisfaction with the government. No particular pattern might be expected on a regular basis here, since discontent will not necessarily be uniform in its origins but again it is possible that this will favour some smaller parties.

The decline in turnout: This is certainly expected by *surge and decline theory*. The decline is explicable as being the inevitable consequence of the European Parliament election being less salient. At individual level, ‘peripheral voters’, those who vote irregularly, will be less likely to vote. This is little more than tautology. In practice, the theory suggests there will be voters who vote at all elections and those who vote only at general elections, and the latter will be less interested in politics in general and will believe European Parliament elections do not matter much. Hence the ‘interest’ in and ‘salience’ of elections should predict both aggregate levels of turnout and patterns of individual participation in those elections.

Tufte's *referendum theory* offers little explanation of variations in turnout between general and other elections. Neither is the *balance* hypothesis a promising source of explanation for turnout decline. However, the *negative voting* hypothesis might lead us to expect some decline and to pinpoint its location. Satisfied voters, in particular satisfied government supporters, do not vote. The more there are of them the greater the rate

of abstention.⁵

Second-order theory essentially follows surge and decline theory in locating abstention in indifference and lack of interest without implying a rigid distinction between regular voters and those who only vote in general elections.

Having dealt with the explanations given by the various theories for features of European Parliament elections, we can now turn to examine the evidence that might or might not support them. The following analysis deals largely with the central point at issue between the competing theories, the explanation of government losses. It deals only indirectly with turnout, in as much as differential turnout is essential to such explanations. This paper does not deal with the shift in votes from large to small parties since, with the possible exception of the *balance* none of the US theories address the problem of change between parties independently of change between government and opposition – for obvious reasons.

European Parliament elections

We can start with the aggregate data on government performance in European Parliament elections. What we want to know is how well the different theories can account for the pattern of government losses in European Parliament elections. A number of concepts used require definition:

Government loss: the difference between the percentage vote in the European election and the last national election. Alternatives are possible. We could also use the previous European election, or take a hypothetical election at the same time as the European election (as in Oppenhuis et al 1996) as a baseline. We have chosen the last national election as it ties in more closely to the US midterm parallel.

Normal vote: the percentage vote at the national election before last. This allows us to see whether the government's vote rose or fell at the last national election, identifying the extent of a surge. As stated above, the concept of a normal vote is more problematic in countries where parties are less stable than in the US. We have taken this measure as a simple if crude solution.

Election cycle: the timing of the European election within the term defined by the two adjoining national elections. Where the date of a

⁵ This may seem a little perverse. We can hardly imagine a government spokesman claiming that an overwhelming defeat in a by-election, or European election testified to a very high level of satisfaction amongst its supports and certainly not imagine any interviewing letting the spokesman away with the claim.

succeeding national election is not known it has been estimated according to the normal pattern of a country.

Economic record: the change in GDP, unemployment and inflation in the calendar year prior to that in which the European Parliament election takes place (which is always in June).

Alternation: the existence of a norm that elections may bring about substantial change in the partisan control of the government. We judge here that this exists in all EU countries other than Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Italy (prior to the system upheaval of the early 1990s).

Specific expectations, derived from the discussion above, are as follows:

Surge and decline: Campbell_1 and Campbell_2:

AE1.1 Government losses will be a function of the surge at the previous general election, that is the difference between that election and the preceding national election.

Referendum: Tufte and Negativity

AE 3.1 Government losses will be a function of the economic performance in the previous year.

Second order

AE4.1 Timing of election within the national cycle is important for defection rates

AE4.2 Government losses will be a function of the economic performance in the previous year. see AE3.1)

We have estimated a model including cycle and cycle squared, allowing for a greater loss around midterm, as well as surge and economic record. We have done so for all countries, excluding only those with concurrent national and European Parliament elections, and for only those who normally experience a pattern of governmental alternation on the basis that it is perhaps only in such countries that the idea of a second-order election damaging governments makes sense. This analysis essentially replicates and extends that in Marsh 1998, which covered only those European Parliament elections between 1979 and 1994. This analysis includes all European Parliament elections to date. We also included dummies for the five directly elected European Parliaments to date to control for time differences.⁶

⁶ In a previous paper (Marsh 1998) the EP variable was included in the regression analysis. This reflected the tendency of anti-government swings to increase since 1979. 1999 proved an exception to this trend, necessitating the use of dummies here instead.

The results confirm those of Marsh 1998 in demonstrating the importance of the timing of the election, and supporting the quadratic function of the timing of the degree of government losses. Estimates in the reduced-form model for countries with governmental alternation are very similar to those for the 1994-99 period: -47 as against -51 and 41 as against 39. Similarly, for all countries estimates are -33 as against -31 and 29 as against 22. This means that after a quarter of the cycle governments could be expected to lose 2.0 percent of their national election support, 6.6 percent at midterm and 5.2 percent at the three quarter mark.⁷ Neither cycle term was significant when the analysis was limited to the countries without alternation (not shown). Additionally, the variables designed to examine surge and decline and referendum theories proved not significant in any specification. Surge has no effect, nor does GDP, nor the alternative economic indicators (not shown).

Table 1.

	European Parliament elections in countries with governmental alternation				All non-concurrent European Parliament elections			
	b	se	b	se	b	se	b	se
Cycle	-39.6	16.4*	-47.4	15.3**	-27.3	13.9	-33.2	13.3*
Cycle Squared	35.8	15.8*	41.0	14.6**	25.3	13.4	29.4	12.8*
Surge	0.02	0.2			-0.1	0.1		
Record(GDP)	-0.20	0.6			-0.5	0.5		
Constant	1.2	4.0	7.3	3.4	0.4	3.5	0.6	
R ²	.23		.23		.22		.21	
F	2.36*		3.36**		2.71*		3.27**	
	(8,29)		(6,34)		(8,40)		(6,45)	
N	38		41		49		52	
Root MSE	5.93		6.04		5.85		5.07	

Notes: * sig at .05 ** sig at .01

Dummies included for the European parliament (1-5) included with the 1979-84 as the reference category but results not shown.

At least at the aggregate level these results demonstrate the strength of the second-order theory in predicting government vote loss moderately well, and performing much better in those countries where it would be expected to be more appropriate, *ie* those with a norm of alternation. They also indicate a weakness, in the European context, of the Tufte referendum and of surge and decline theories. Admittedly, the referendum test is a very crude one that could easily be bettered, but it closely parallels Tufte's original analysis. Information on government popularity might be more appropriate, but that is not available for all

⁷ Oppenhuis et al's signalling theory does provide some alternative, and offers some ideas on what sort of defection might take place. Alternative specifications of the models in Table 1, using time since the last election, or time until the next proved insignificant. If both terms are entered results are better than those for cycle, suggesting a roughly similar set of predictions but in a much less elegant fashion.

elections. The surge indicator is also crude. Another operationalisation, averaging across three general elections with the previous general election as the mid-point of the three was also tried. This allows for some trend in parties' support over time. However, it this also failed to produce significant estimates.

These 'success' of second-order theory in this context is unsurprising, and in line with previous work at this level. Moving to the individual level is more challenging as it brings into to question not so much what is happening but who makes it happen. In particular we want to observe the pattern of voter mobility across the two elections (general to EP) and see how well it matches the expectations of the various theories already discussed.

Specific expectations, again derived from the discussion above, are as follows:

Surge and decline: Campbell_1

IE1.1 That most of the change is away from the government.

IE1.2 That government will lose more votes to non-voting than opposition parties, and many more voters will switch parties away from them than towards them.

IE1.3 Independent voters are less likely to turn out at European elections than general elections, relative to partisans.

IE1.4 There should be a higher defection of partisans at general elections than European elections

IE1.5 Voters is more likely to vote for their 'normal' party at a European election than at a general election.

Surge and decline: Campbell_2

IE2.1 Opposition partisans who abstained last time will rejoin the opposition side

IE2.2 Weak opposition partisans who voted for the government last time will return to the opposition.

Referendum: Tufte

IE3.1 Shift away from the government by voters dissatisfied with its record

Referendum: negative voting

IE3.2 Satisfied government supporters stay home (abstain) more then dissatisfied ones who are more likely to switch.

Referendum:Balance

IE3.3 Centrist voters are more likely to switch.

Second order

IE4.1 Shift away from the government by voters dissatisfied with its record (see E3.1).

IE4.2 Shift away from government greater when there is another favoured party

IE4.3 Second-order concerns not relevant: ie European attitudes do not affect the pattern

Data for this section is from the most recent European Election Study, of the 1999 elections.⁸ Between 500 and 3000 voters were interviewed by telephone immediately after the 1999 elections. (300 were interviewed in Luxembourg but this country has been excluded from what follows as the two elections occurred simultaneously.) Country samples have been weighted so that each sums to 500.

Operationalisations are as follows:

Vote change: differences between recalled vote at the last national election and reported EP vote.

Partisanship: Feeling of being close to a party, measured on a 4 point scale: not close, sympathiser, quite close, very close. This is coded from -3(very close to opposition party to +3(very close to government party) with not close as zero.

Government popularity: approval or disapproval of the government's record to date, running from -1(disapproval) through zero(DK) to +1 (approval).

Multiple party preferences: these are measured by the 'probability to vote for' questions (PTVs) standard in European Election studies as well as several national election studies. Respondents are asked for each party how likely is it that they would ever vote for this party, with responses on a 10 point scale from 1-10. Three measures are calculated from this. The first is a measure of support for a/the government party and is the highest ptv for a government party. The second is an equivalent measure of support for an opposition party. The third is simply the difference between the two, scaled from -9(PTV=10 for an opposition party, no more than 1 for any government party) to +9 (PTV=10 for a government party, no more than 1 for any opposition party).

Views on Europe: item on attitude to Unification which uses a 1-10 point scale to indicate whether integration has gone too far or should be pushed further. This is recoded here as a 10 point scale from -4.5 (too far) to +4.5(further). Respondents were also asked to place each party on this scale and we have used the same technique as explained with respect to differences in party preferences to measure the perceived difference between government and opposition on Europe.

⁸ These study were designed and organized by Wouter van der Brug (Amsterdam), Pilar del Castillo (Madrid), Cees van der Eijk (Amsterdam), Mark Franklin (Trinity College, Hartford CT), Renato Mannheimer (Genova), Michael Marsh (Dublin), Hermann Schmitt (Mannheim) who co-ordinated the efforts of the group, and Colette Ysmal(Paris). It was funded largely by the Dutch NWO, the Spanish National Science Foundation, the Universities of Mannheim and Amsterdam, and Trinity College, Hartford.

Left-right: respondents were asked to locate themselves and each party on a standard 1-10 left-right scale. We also calculated a party differential on this dimension.

Political interest: Four point scale self-assessed interest in politics from none (0), a little, somewhat to very(4).Missing values were coded 0.

Table 2a Voter transition matrix: last national election to European parliament election

Last GE vote	EP vote			
	Opp	None	Gov	Total
Opp	1690	678	111	2479
None	114	604	62	780
Govt	329	947	1182	2458
Total	2133	2229	1354	5717

Note: Weighted to equalise country size

Table 2a contains the evidence of voters' movement between the two elections, general (GE) and European (EP), showing in each case whether they voted for a government party, and opposition party or did not vote. In the countries covered here the actual average loss by governments was 6.5% from their previous general election vote. Here it is 11%. This may reflect sampling error but almost certainly also arises from systematic inequalities in people's recall which are now well know. In particular, they tend to forget votes for now unpopular parties or governments. In as much as our findings will be distorted because of this systemic error the problem is a serious one. However, we will ignore it for now and return to it in the discussion.

We can see from the marginals in Table 2a that the government parties lost many more votes than did the opposition - retaining only 1182/2458 = 48% of their votes as opposed to the opposition's 1690/2479=68%. From the cells we can also see that erstwhile government supporters are also more likely to abstain than they are to defect (65:35). Amongst clear non-habitual voters (the 2229 in the second column) the government did better last time than the opposition, 947 to 678. All this is accordance with the Campbell_1 (IE1.1, IE1.2). There is relatively little evidence of significant shifts from abstention to voting, although, as might be expected from Campbell_2 (IE2.1), this did benefit the opposition (by 114 votes to 62) although obviously not to any great extent.

Surge and decline theories also direct attention to the party attachments of voters, arguing that tendencies to stay, abstain or switch vary across different categories. We thus need to know something of the character of

the voters in the different cells. Table 2b makes this clearer, showing the Table 2b Voter transition matrix: last national election to European parliament election, by party attachment

Last GE vote	pty attach	EP vote			Total
		Oppo	None	Govt	
Oppo					
	Opp	1005	241	25	1271
	Ind	661	414	68	1144
	Gov	24	23	18	65
	Total	1690	678	111	2479
None					
	Opp	44	55	2	100
	Ind	69	490	38	597
	Gov	2	59	22	82
	Total	114	604	62	780
Govt					
	Opp	64	56	16	136
	Ind	205	477	370	1052
	Gov	60	413	796	1270
	Total	329	947	1182	2458

Note: Weighted to equalise country size

transition matrix by party attachment, coded here as simple -1 (opposition, 0 (none) and +1 (government). Campbell_1 would lead us to expect independents who voted for the government last time to abstain this time, whereas partisans who crossed over should return. This is what we find. Of 1052 independents who voted for the government last time, 45 per cent abstained in the European election and more stayed with the government (35 per cent) then switched (19 per cent). Partisan defection was rare in the general election but of the 136 'disadvantaged' partisans who defected to the government last time, 47 per cent returned, compared to only 11 per cent who stayed and 41 per cent who abstained. Campbell_2 predicts partisans of the non-government party should move from abstention back to their party. However, there are only 100 of them and, while 44 per cent returned, 55 per cent continued to abstain. Campbell_2 also predicts that independents should switch back from the government, but as we have seen this was less common than abstention.

A further expectation from Campbell_1 (IE 1.4) is that there should be more defections - that is, those identifying with one party but voting for

another - in general elections than in European ones. The numbers are very small here. Only 201 partisans defected in the national election and 84 in the European election, giving 7 per cent defections (as a percentage of partisans voting) and 4 per cent in the European election.

On the whole these results suggests the original theory, Campbell_1 is more useful here than the revised one, Campbell_2.

While this detailed analysis is necessary to test some ideas of surge and decline theory, and to give some idea of the numbers involved, a more general and multivariate analysis is preferable to consider the other expectations. Such an analysis also allows us to control for the country factor in our data set. We are particularly interested in those voters in the first and third rows, those who voted for or against the government last time, and in how their behaviour in this 1999 election is related to characteristics like partisanship, satisfaction, and their views on Europe.

Taking each row in turn we could simply regress the pattern of 1999 behaviour of our characteristics, controlling for country, using standard OLS regression. Apart from concerns about the distribution of the dependent variables, a central problem would be that we would need to assume that the characteristics that lead to abstention were also those that lead to switching parties. This may be the case, but the assumption seems unwise to make at this point, especially since in many of the expectation above abstainers and switchers are expected to behave differently. For that reason we have chosen to use multinomial logit which allows a categorical variable to be regressed on a number of independent variables.

The table contains two sets of odds ratios. The first set, on the left-hand side of the table, indicate the odds first of shifting and second, of abstaining, rather than staying with the government party (this is the reference option). So a shift of one point in government approval (eg from 0 to 1) lowers the odds of an erstwhile government supporter shifting to the opposition to 0.89:1. A shift from -1 to +1, the maximum, would drop it to 0.78:1 and as the standard error indicates, this is not quite enough to be significant (p actually equals .16). On the right hand side of the table, the odds ratios apply to the likelihood of switching, or abstaining relative to staying with the opposition. The odds ratios of 1.60:1 and 1.31: 1 indicates a one unit shift in approval makes someone 60 per cent more likely to switch to the government and more than 30 per cent more likely to abstain, having voted for the opposition last time.

Table 3 Characteristics of vote switchers

Variables	Voted Government Last General Election				Voted Opposition Last General Election			
	EE opposition		EE non voter		EE government		EE non voter	
	Odds ratios	SE	Odds ratios	SE	Odds ratios	SE	Odds ratios	SE
Approval of government	0.89	0.08	0.89	0.06	1.60	0.12***	1.31	0.09***
Attitude to Europe	0.88	0.03***	0.93	0.02***	1.03	0.03	0.96	0.02
Party differential on Europe	1.02	0.04	1.01	0.02	1.03	0.03	1.05	0.03
Partisan attachment to govt party	0.62	0.04***	0.84	0.03***	3.45	0.23***	2.64	0.17***
PTV_maxG	0.96	0.05	0.91	0.03***				
PTV_maxO					1.09	0.05*	0.95	0.04
PTV_maxDif	0.74	0.03***	0.93	0.02***	1.50	0.05***	1.27	0.03***
Interest in politics	0.99	0.10	0.70	0.04***	1.13	0.10	0.66	0.06***
Non Centrist	1.34	0.21	0.93	0.11	0.91	0.12	0.77	0.10*
Pseudo R ²			0.24				0.46	
N			2696				4572	

Note: Thirteen country dummies also included but coefficients not shown.

We can use this data to consider the evidence in relation to our expectations outlined earlier, starting again with surge and decline theory. Partisanship is linked to abstention/defection patterns. As partisanship inclines towards the government it seems to have more impact on defection (0.60) than abstention(0.81): ie it makes defection less likely. We can also explore this with the PTV question of government parties, PTV-maxG in the table. Interestingly, the PTV for a government party has no impact on defection, but lower PTVs do make abstention more likely. This would seem to be in accord expectations that suggested weak government partisans were more likely to shift. ⁹ Expectation IE1.5 on the normal vote will be discussed later as this requires a slightly different analysis.

⁹ The means of the different groups reinforce this point. Loyal government supporters average 1.5 on the party attachment scale. Abstainers have weaker attachment, averaging 0.92. Switchers, however, average 0.05. These results are closer to the Campbell_1 than Campbell_2.

Expectations IE3.1 and IE3.2 from referendum theories offer two different possibilities: that defection or abstention from the government is a function of approval (Tufte), and that abstention is not but that defection is (negative voting). Results are inconclusive but if anything they point to the particular weakness of negative voting theory. There is the expected tendency for voters to leave the government when they are dissatisfied but as we have already illustrated above this is hardly very strong. There is no sign at all of negative voting, which would require a link between disapproval and switching but not between disapproval and abstention. Respective odds ratios of 0.89 and 0.89 are identical when the negative voting hypothesis would require them to be very different. However, approval does help governments as is clear from the right hand side of the table. Former opposition voters satisfied with the government are much more likely to leave – either to abstain or shift, as government approval rises.

There is also little support for the balance hypothesis, IE3.3, which required centrist voters to be more inclined to shift from the government. This would have required a significant negative odds ratio (the variable is coded 1 for centrist, 1 for no centrist) in column 1, but the direction is neither as expected and not significant.

Second order theory now rests on the assumption that voters have preferences across a number of parties and that different elections provide different contexts in which they select from their set. The PTV_diff variable uses this insight, measuring the differential utility of voting for different parties, in this case government or opposition. A low value for this variable indicates a low government-opposition differential, a high value indicates that one is preferred to the other by a big margin. We would expect – E4.3- that those who shift will have a lower party differential. This is the case. An increase of only 1 point in the differential (running from -9-+9) reduces the chances of defecting from the government side by almost 50 percent. Similarly, on the opposition side, it increases the chance of moving from opposition to government by almost 50 per cent. The differential has a much weaker impact on abstention, where a 1 point change alters the odds by about 25 percent. Arguably, abstention is the option of people who have no other party to vote for.¹⁰

¹⁰ If we look at the means for each of the different groups who voted for the government last time, the party differential for those who stayed with the government is 3.5, for those who abstained is 2.2 and for those who switched is -0.8. The equivalent figures for those who voted opposition last time show a similar pattern: stayers -3.87, abstainers -3.05 and switchers -0.14.

Perhaps the most striking result of all, however, is that with respect to European attitudes. Expectation E4.4 is certainly not confirmed in this data which show negative attitudes to Europe driving voters to switch or abstain having voted for the government last time. A 1 point decline on the European attitude scale (which runs from -4.5 to +4.5) makes a voter 24 percent more likely to switch (0.88) or 14 percent more likely to abstain (0.93). Hence a voter strongly opposed to more integration would be almost 200% (9*24) more likely to change their vote than one who was strongly in favour and over 100 per cent, twice as likely, to abstain. Positive attitudes pull people away from the opposition too. As it happens Government parties were more supported at the last set of general elections than opposition parties by pro-Europe voters. The mean attitude to Europe on the scale used here was 0.39 to the opposition's 0.20. In the European Parliament elections the difference increased: 0.74 to 0.29 – half a point on the scale. Non voters too are much less pro European in European elections than in general elections, 0.08 as against 0.46.

What is problematic about this significant shift is that it is unrelated to the perceived party differential on Europe. We would have expected the shift to be more pronounced amongst those who see the opposition as closer to their own position on Europe than is any government party, yet this is not the case. The inclusion into the model of a variable indicating whether a respondent is closer to a government party than any opposition party proved insignificant.¹¹ It appears that voting against the government, or abstaining is often an anti-European act, which is carried out regardless of whether the government or opposition is closer to the voter on the issue!

Finally we should return to Campbell_1's IE1.5, the expectation that the European election would more closely resemble a 'normal' election than a general election. We have already seen that there are relatively fewer partisan defections in general elections. A related test is that vote choice –government or opposition- in a European election should be better predicted by party attachment than it is in a general election. This allows us to measure attachment both by the party attachment variable and the government-opposition PTV differential. Table 5 shows the result of three logit analyses, predicting government vote in (1) the European election, (2) the previous national election and (3) the next national election – the party respondents would vote for if there were a general election

¹¹ In case the party attachment and PTV items were acting as intervening variables in the relationship between proximity on Europe and defection these were dropped, but the proximity variable was still insignificant. Only by dropping all variables other than the European ones and country was a significant coefficient (p=.027) obtained for switching against the government but even this effect was quite small, at most increasing the chances of an switch by 40 percent.

tomorrow. The pseudo R^2 , and the strength of the respective coefficients indicate that we can indeed predict the choice at the European election better than we can the previous general election. However, best of all is the prediction choice at the next general election. This result is thus not clear cut. It is possible to discount the 'next' result as purely hypothetical, and suggest that people are simply responding on the basis of current attachments, lacking a clear context for an election which remains hypothetical. However, it is also possible to suggest the greater predictability of the European election is due to its being almost coterminous with the measurement, whereas the last national election could have taken place up to four years ago. Attachments and preferences have changed in the meantime. Hence we must conclude that while we could have rejected IE 1.5 on the basis of this test, we can hardly confirm it in the absence of panel data.

Table 5 Logit analysis of government/opposition vote in three election, showing odds ratios and robust standard errors.

	European Parliament Election	Last national election	Next national election
Party attachment	2.54 (0.11)	1.77 (0.04)	2.37 (0.08)
PTV differential	1.34 (0.02)	1.29 (0.01)	1.54 (0.02)
Pseudo R^2	0.51	0.39	0.61
% cases correctly classified	87.4	81.6	89.9

Note: country dummies included but not shown.

Discussion

In his original formulation of surge and decline theory Campbell suggested that although the theory was specifically intended to illuminate well-established patterns in US political behaviour it was likely that

‘...the basic concepts... - political stimulation, political interest, party identification, core voters and peripheral voters, and high- and low- stimulus elections - are equally applicable to an understanding of political behaviour in other democratic systems’ (Campbell 1966: 62).

This paper has sought to examine Campbell’s theory as well as its successors and developments and contrast them with the theory of second order national elections on the basis that all seek to explain the comparable patterns of regularity in different political systems. We

explained the differences between the several theories. These lie chiefly in different conceptions of what motivates the average voter, with later theories allowing for more strategic, 'rational' behaviour than the earlier ones, but they also lie in the behaviour that each was developed to explain. Surge and decline and referendum theories focus on behaviour in a two-party system with a separation of powers and an electorate which is easily categorised as identifying with one party or another. In parliamentary democracies none of these conditions applies. Two-party systems are rare, even if they are liberally defined; there is no separation of powers¹²; and party identification, as the concept is understood in the US, is much less easily separated from immediate voting intentions. Nonetheless, the assumption with which this paper began was that such theories are at least potentially applicable in the different circumstances. Indeed, as we have indicated, previous studies have used referendum theory in particular to explain patterns of electoral change in sub-national elections. Second-order election theory has grown out of this literature but offers explanations for matters outside the normal ambit of US focussed studies, such as the shift of votes from larger to smaller parties as well as adapting previous insights to understanding electoral change in sub- and supra- national elections.

In assessing these various theories in terms of their contribution to understanding behaviour in European Parliament elections we have chosen to focus only on one type of electoral change: that between the national government and the national opposition. We have generally ignored the issue of turnout, and the much more complex question of change between parties. While this clearly limits the comparison between the theories it has the advantage of taking a pattern which is more directly analogous to US midterm election changes by imposing a two-group, if not two-party system on European elections. This is not to say that hypotheses could not be derived from the US theories to explain other patterns of inter-party change – and a few were suggested in the earlier discussion.

Conclusions

The expectations derived from surge and decline theory were only in part confirmed by the data. First of all, there is mixed evidence that government losses can be seen as a consequence of voters returning to 'normal' behaviour. Aggregate losses are not linked to the size of a surge at the previous election, and while we were not able to dismiss the expectation that European elections were more 'normal' than national election, we were not able to confirm it either. However, it seems that defections by partisans were more apparent in general election than

¹² Although of course in the context of a European Parliament election the difference is less important.

European elections, a finding which runs counter to some popular wisdom that European elections are contexts in which partisanship counts for little. We also see at individual level that independent voters are more likely than others to abstain at the lower stimulus election, and that partisanship is linked to shifts in and out of the voting public in some of the expected ways, although it is evident that 'peripheral' voters alone are not responsible for the losses suffered by governments. Of course these findings may be distorted by the fact that we have only recall evidence for the last national election, and must assume no change in partisanship or PTV differentials, perhaps a somewhat heroic assumption. Even so, the distortions in recall might be expected to strengthen links between partisanship and recalled choice rather than weaken them and the evidence here should certainly not be discounted on that point. In general the findings give more value to Campbell's original formulation than his namesake's revised version. While not every expectation is fulfilled, nor can all be dismissed.

Referendum theory and its developments generally performs less well. The aggregate data showed no sign that the economy mattered, and the individual level analysis revealed at best extremely weak results with respect to government popularity.¹³ We also found no evidence of negative voting, nor of an electorate seeking to provide 'balance', at least not in a left-right sense.

Evidence with respect to second-order theory confirmed previous analyses at aggregate level in testifying to the importance of timing for the extent of government losses. This result obtains even when the economic record is controlled for. These controls could certainly be specified in a more sophisticated way. However, if the result is accepted it raises the important question as to why voting with the heart rather than the head disadvantages the government. In our analysis this is probably a consequence of the fact that the opposition is more fragmented than the government. Vote switching is thus more likely to hurt the government than the opposition. This does not explain why the degree of loss follows the cyclical pattern.

The individual level findings provided further support for the idea that voters have a set of party preferences, rather than a single loyalty. Voters with another option were more likely to defect than abstain. However, the most striking finding relates to the significance of attitudes to Europe on defection and abstention. A central tenet of all the theories reviewed here is that midterm or second-order elections are not quite what they seem, and nowhere is this more evident than the conception of a European Parliament election as a second-order national election – an election

¹³ Mixed results have also been found in the US context (Niemi and Weisberg, 1993: 209)

about national concerns and not about Europe at all. The evidence here provides some qualification to that. Europe does seem to matter to some voters. What is a puzzle is the absence of evidence that defection is prompted by a perception that the 'other party' is closer to the voter on the European issue. Rather 'Europe' is tied up with the government, and disaffection with Europe means disaffection with the government. This is slightly different to a tendency observed in previous years of disaffection with the government manifesting itself in a vote against Europe (eg Franklin et al 1994; van der Eijk et al 1996). More research is needed to ensure this is a different pattern and not just a different result generated by a different methodology but if it is true it marks a departure from past behaviour.

While this result certainly offers food for thought about European elections, the main concern here has simply been to review theories of lower stimulus elections, to explore differences and similarities between them, and assess what each can tell us about one particular set of low stimulus elections. Most of them offers something of value, although some have a wider potential than others. Integrating them into a new super theory however would be problematic, in as much as each is driven by a different mechanism, and different interpretation of why people vote as they do.

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Appendix 1

Variables in Table 3

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Party attachment	-0.1480223	1.730737	-3	3
PTV_ government	6.018171	3.19272	1	10
PTV-opposition	6.850304	2.788583	1	10
PTV-difference	-0.8293694	4.723953	-9	9
Europe	0.4952068	2.600199	-4.5	4.5
Interest	1.403306	0.9056884	0	3
Govt approval	0.0365154	0.9993765	-1	1

Note: unweighted means and standard deviations.

	Origins	Seeks to account for:	Source:	Mechanism	Refinements
Surge and decline	US midterm reversals for president's party Campbell (1966)	Tendency of President's party to 'lose' midterm elections	The 'Surge' in the previous Presidential election	System returns to normal. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • lower turnout by President's supporters from previous election • shift by voters from President's party to 'normal' party vote 	J. Campbell (1993) argues lower t/o in previous election by non-Presidential partisans who now vote; shift in vote to opposition by less partisan voters
Referendum	US elections and government support Tufte (1975)	Tendency of government/executive to become unpopular	Levels of satisfaction with the government. Economic trends	Reward and punishment by voters. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • those dissatisfied with President's record change party. Those unhappy at economic trends change party away from President's party. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'negative voting': satisfied Pres supporters stay home • 'balance': centrist voters support the other side
Second-order	European Parliament elections Reif and Schmitt (1980)	Tendency of governments, and larger parties, to do badly in European Parliament elections	The incentive to vote tactically rather than expressively in more important elections	Expressive rather than instrumental voting, plus referendum effect <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • voters cast expressive rather than a tactical 'head' vote [weakening larger parties] • voters dissatisfied with government vote against it 	The opportunity to signal to the government given by a less important election <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • expressive vote more likely when SOE least important as signal: close to previous general election • protest vote more likely when SOE close to next general election

Figure 1. Three bodies of theory about less salient elections.