

# Candidate Quality in European Parliament Elections

SARA BINZER HOBOLT  
University of Oxford  
Department of Politics and International relations  
[sara.hobolt@politics.ox.ac.uk](mailto:sara.hobolt@politics.ox.ac.uk)

BJORN HOYLAND  
University of Oslo  
Department of Political Science  
[bjorn.hoyland@stv.uio.no](mailto:bjorn.hoyland@stv.uio.no)

*Draft paper.*  
*Please do not cite without permission from the authors.*  
*Comments very welcome.*

Paper presented at the European Union Studies Association (EUSA) Tenth Biennial  
International Conference, Montreal, Canada \* May 17-May 19, 2007

## Abstract\*

European Parliament (EP) elections are characterized by low turnout and defection from governing parties to smaller parties. The most common explanation for this is that European elections are ‘second order national elections’, which voters use to either punish the government or simply abstain. However, so far the literature has not considered whether the *quality* of the candidates in EP elections is a contributing factor to these patterns of voting. In this paper, we examine whether low levels of turnout and defection from governing parties are influenced by the quality of candidates elected to the EP. We use a unique dataset on the background of each of the Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) from 1979 to 2006 to examine the determinants cross-national and cross-party variation in candidate experience and prominence, as well as the effect on turnout and electoral fortunes of parties. Finally, we examine whether the quality of candidates provides a good indicator of their activities in the Parliament. We find systematic differences in candidate quality across the member states. Higher candidate quality increases turnout and contributes to the electoral success of parties in EP elections. The drawback seems to be that the qualities that make candidates stand out in EP election campaigns make for inactive committee members.

**Key words:** European Parliament, MEP, elections, candidate quality, selection, second-order, turnout.

---

\* We are very grateful to Michael Marsh and Simon Hix for sharing their data on electoral success of parties in EP and national elections with us (see Hix and Marsh 2007).

## Introduction

- *A good candidate can win it, no matter how bad the conditions.*

(Jacobson and Kernell 1983:99)

Despite the increasing powers of the European Parliament (EP), turnout has been on the decline since the first direct election in 1979. Moreover, voters tend to 'punish' governing parties and vote for smaller rather than larger parties in European Parliament elections. Most scholars in the field rely on the 'second order national election theory' to explain these patterns of voting. This posits that European elections are mid-term contests, which allow voters to express their dissatisfaction with governing parties and vote more sincerely than in 'first-order' national elections (see Reif and Schmitt 1980; Marsh 1998; van der Eijk and Franklin 1996; Carrubba and Timpono 2005; van der Brug and van der Eijk 2007; Hix and Marsh 2007). Yet, a potentially crucial factor, which has received little attention in the study of European Parliament elections, is the *quality of candidates* who are elected to EP. This lack of attention is surprising given the extensive literature on candidate quality US elections which demonstrates the importance of candidate quality to the competitiveness of elections and electoral outcomes (see e.g. Jacobson and Kernell 1983; Lublin 1994; Carson et al. 2001).

This paper examines the causes and consequences of campaign quality in EP elections. In line with previous US studies, we operationalise candidate quality in terms of the political experience and profile of each candidate. Our focus is fourfold. First, which parties put high-quality candidates forward in EP elections? Second, does candidate quality influence turnout? Third, what is the electoral effect of nominating high quality candidates? Fourth, and finally, how does the selection of quality candidates influence the level of involvement in the legislative processes in the EU?

In line with the formal literature on elections as sanctioning and selection devices, we expect that voters will use EP elections not only to sanction national governments, but also to select quality candidates (see Fearon 1999). We thus expect that parties will nominate politically experienced candidates to achieve electoral

success and be especially likely to do so in candidate-centered electoral systems where the electoral pay-offs are likely to be higher. Given that the European Union arena in general and the EP in particular have traditionally been regarded as 'second-order' to national politics, the nomination of high-profile candidates in EP elections is both a very costly signal for parties (resources are removed from the national arena) and a very prominent signal to send to voters (voters are likely to take notice). We therefore expect that quality candidates will mobilize voters and lead to electoral gains for parties. We are less certain, however, that candidate quality serves as a guarantee of legislative activity in the EP parliament. Conversely, we expect that high-profile candidates are less likely to participate in the day-to-day committee work of the Parliament.

To test these hypotheses statistically, we compiled a unique dataset on the quality and activity levels of all elected MEPs in the period 1979-2006. Our findings suggest that candidate quality is indeed an important variable in determining electoral outcomes, but that quality does not guarantee higher levels of involvement in the EP legislative process.

### **Existing literature on European Parliament elections**

One of the key empirical findings in the EP election literature is that parties holding national office tend to do poorly in EP elections. Another is that turnout is considerably lower than in national legislative elections. The most common explanation of these phenomena is the 'second-order national election' thesis. At the heart of Reif and Schmitt's (1980) theory of second-order national elections is the proposition that they are of lesser importance than first-order elections for national office (see also Reif 1984; van der Eijk and Franklin 1996; Marsh 1998). Given the lower importance of EP elections, parties devote fewer resources to these campaigns and there are generally lower incentives for people to vote and engage with the issues at stake. This second-order nature of EP elections has consequences for several aspects of voting behavior. First, levels of turnout tend to be lower than in national elections. Secondly, citizens are

more likely to vote sincerely than strategically, and this in turn will tend to favor smaller parties. Finally, EP elections allow voters to express their dissatisfaction with governing parties. According to the theory, the extent to which governments are punished in EP elections depends on when the EP election is held in the national electoral cycle. This has roots in theories of mid-term elections in the US, where the president's party tends to enjoy a comparative disadvantage (Campbell 1960). This can either reflect a natural 'cycle of popularity' for governing parties, which declines mid-term (Reif 1984; Marsh 1998), or a negative retrospective judgment of economic performance (Tuftte 1975; Fiorina 1981; Kousser 2004).

There is a great deal of evidence showing that governing parties tend to do worse in EP elections relative to their performance in the national general election and that this defection is greatest around mid-term elections (Reif 1984; van der Eijk et al. 1996; Marsh 1998; Kousser 2004; Ferrara and Weishaupt 2004; Hix and Marsh 2007). Recent studies have suggested that the high levels of abstention and defection may also be due to Euro-skepticism, that is, dissatisfaction with governing parties over their position on European integration (Ferrara and Weishaupt 2004; Hobolt, Spoon and Tilley 2006; Marsh 2007). These studies show that defection from governing parties in EP elections is not only due to an evaluation of parties on the basis of domestic politics, but is also driven by concerns specific to the European dimension. In a systematic comparison of the 'Europe matters' and the 'second-order' and theses, Hix and Marsh (2007) employ aggregate-level data from the past six European elections to analyze whether voter desertion of governing parties is punishment over domestic matters or protest over Europe. They find some electoral gains for anti-EU parties and parties that emphasize the European issue. But in support of the second-order approach, they demonstrate that large parties tend to lose votes in EP elections regardless of their left-right placement or their European position.

These studies thus provide a compelling explanation for patterns of voting behavior in EP elections. However, none of the existing literature has examined the effect of the quality of candidates on electoral behavior in EP elections. A few studies have examined the characteristics and career paths of MEPs. Scarrow (1997) explores how a seat in the EP fits into a domestic political career path. She finds considerable

cross-national variation in the background of MEPs, but concludes that the EP is increasingly attracting ‘careerist’ candidates who view the Parliament as their principal political arena. Norris and Franklin (1997) also examine the background of MEPs. They find that the EP is very social unrepresentative and that the chances of gaining a winnable seat in EP election is more strongly related to supply-side factors, such as gender, incumbency status and motivation, than demand side factors, such as gatekeeper demands. These studies give us an important insight into the composition of the European Parliament, but do not explicitly address the question of how MEP experiences affect electoral outcomes or legislative activities.

This is surprising since there is a vast literature which highlights the impact of candidate quality on both turnout and electoral prospects in US elections (see, for example Jacobson and Kernell 1983; Krasno 1994; Lublin 1994; Carson et al. 2001; Stone et al. 2004). The implicit assumption of the second order approach seems to be that the quality of candidates is generally fairly low, since parties are unlikely to nominate politically experienced and high-profile candidates to a second-order arena. Yet, anecdotal evidence suggests that the quality of candidates is far from negligible. For example, when the Danish Social Democrats (in opposition at the time) nominated the former Danish Prime Minister, Poul Nyrup Rasmussen to lead their EP party list in 2004, the party’s share of the vote increased by 19 percentage points compared with the previous EP election – an electoral gain which was widely attributed to the “Nyrup effect”; that is, the quality of this single candidate. In the next section, we outline the theoretical reasons for why and how variation in candidate quality may affect electoral outcomes and legislative performance, and we also present a number of testable hypotheses.

### **Candidate quality and electoral consequences**

According to the formal literature on elections, there are two principal mechanisms by which elections may bring about democracy, or rule according to the people: *sanctioning* and *selection* (Banks and Sundaram 1993; Ferejohn 1993; Fearon 1999). In the

classic tradition of democratic theory, which understands elections as mechanisms of political accountability, elections are inherently a *sanctioning* device in which voters reward or punish incumbents on the basis of past performance and thereby induce elected officials to be responsive to public preferences (see Key 1966; Fiorina 1981; Manin 1997; Powell 2000). Alternatively, voters may use elections not as sanctioning devices, but as opportunities to choose a “high quality” political representative, that is one with personal characteristics such as integrity, shared preferences, experience and skill (Fearon 1999; Besley 2005). In the formal literature on electoral control, the distinction is implied in the discussion of moral hazard (sanctioning) versus adverse selection (selection) (see Ferejohn 1993; Fearon 1999).

The second-order national election literature implicitly adopts a sanctioning approach to European Parliament elections. EP elections are seen as midterm contests on the performance of the national government (Hix and Marsh 2007). Hence, voters use these elections to sanction national governments. There are several reasons why it is reasonable to argue that voters sanction the performance of national governments rather than their European representatives in EP elections. First, since EP elections do not translate into the formation of a government at the European level, voters cannot use these elections to punish or reward the European executive institutions; the Commission and the Council (see Føllesdal and Hix 2006). Second, voters receive minimal information about the European Parliament through the media and other information channels and it is thus close to impossible for citizens to monitor and evaluate the performance of individual MEPs and thereby make informed judgments about whether to reelect on this basis. In comparison, information about national incumbents is far more accessible to most voters. Hence, in line with the second-order theory, we would expect that EP elections involve the sanctioning of national rather than European politicians. However, this does not exclude the possibility that voters also use the EP elections as a selection tool.

Given voters’ limited ability to hold MEPs to account in EP elections, they might use these elections, at least partially, as an opportunity to select quality candidates. As Fearon (1999) has noted, ‘voters think about elections much more as opportunities to try to select good types than as sanctions to deter shirking by future

incumbents'. It could even be argued that given the agency problems that voters face in EP elections with limited information about MEP activities they might be more susceptible to elect candidates on the basis of their quality, rather than to judge them on the basis of past performance. As Besley argues, politician quality is a valence issue, 'every citizen wants more of it regardless of the policy choices being implemented' (Besley 2005: 47-8). There is an extensive empirical literature on US elections, which supports the notion that the quality of candidates affect voter considerations. The key findings in the literature on US legislative elections is that the strategic decision to stand as a challenger in an electoral contest is influenced by the quality of the incumbent (high quality incumbents will deter challengers from running) and that voters respond positively to the quality of both the incumbent and the challenger (high quality candidates have more electoral success [see Jacobson and Kernell 1983; Lublin 1994; Carson et al. 2001; Stone et al. 2004; Stone et al 2006]).

Most of the US literature on candidate quality has focused on prior office-holding experience. As Jacobson and Kernell argue: 'the base of office itself is an important resource. Intuitively, we assume that people who previously managed to get elected to public office at least once should be more effective campaigners than those who have not' (1983:30). Some scholars use a simple dummy variable which contrasts candidates with and without prior experience in public office (Jacobson and Kernell 1983; Lublin 1994), while other scholars have refined this measure by calibrating the status of the previous offices held (see Krasno and Green 1988). Other studies have taken an even broader approach to candidate quality, which encompasses both strategic resources (ability to mount a successful campaign) and personal resources (skills, characteristics and qualities) (see Stone et al. 2004; Stone et al. 2006). As we describe in our Data and Variables section below, this paper adopts the former approach to candidate quality and focuses primarily on office-holding experience calibrated by the status of the office, and we also include other high-profile positions in our measure.

But how important is the 'selection mechanism' in EP elections? One factor which determines whether the voters choose candidates on the basis of quality is the extent to which there is sufficient variation in the quality of candidates. If all



candidates are of similarly low quality, the selection mechanism would not work. Voters would not be able to choose the “good representative” and would opt for the sanctioning of national incumbents instead. The received wisdom surrounding the quality of candidates in EP elections is that they are either young and inexperienced or old and about to retire, and hence their ‘quality’ is low. However, an increasing proportion of MEPs choose Brussels as their main career whilst others shift between prominent national positions and representation in the European Parliament (Scarrow 1997).

Hence, the first question to examine is when and why do parties nominate high quality candidates to the European Parliament? The nomination of politically experienced and high-profile candidates in second-order EP elections is potentially very costly for national parties, as quality candidates may be useful in the national political arena. The availability of high quality candidates may thus be a limiting factor (Besley 2005). Parties in government may have a smaller pool of high quality candidates to choose from than other parties. We therefore expect that parties in opposition are more likely to send high quality candidates than parties in national government. This leads to our first hypothesis.

H1: Parties in national opposition have a higher quality of MEPs than parties in government.

The decision to put forward high or low quality candidates is of course not only a question of availability of quality candidates. The effect of the decision on the electoral outcome is likely to guide the decision. We also thus expect parties to be more likely to nominate high quality candidates in electoral systems where it is expected to give the highest electoral pay-off. In candidate centered electoral systems, such as Single Transferable Vote and Open List PR, where the voters are more likely to pay attention to and vote on the basis of candidate quality, we would expect higher quality candidates:

H2: Countries with candidate centered electoral systems have a higher quality of MEPs than countries without.

As discussed above, empirical research on US elections has shown that high quality candidates attract more voters. We would expect a similar effect in EP elections. Well-known candidates are more likely to receive media attention than less well-known candidates. This is particularly important in the generally lackluster EP election campaigns. Media attention may of course be a mixed blessing. While it is more likely that supporters will be aware of the candidate's quality and turn out to vote, it may also serve to mobilize the supporters of the other parties. This may particularly be the case if well-known but unpopular candidates are put forward. In general, we expect that since high quality candidates attract more attention from the media, campaigns with higher quality candidates will mobilize more voters:

H3: High quality MEP candidates will have a positive effect on turnout in EP elections, all other things being equal.

By nominating a high-profile candidate, parties also send a costly signal to voters. We know from the literature that voters rely on cues and shortcuts when making decisions in elections. According to the signaling literature one important persuasive cue is 'observable costly effort' (see Lupia and McCubbins 1998), and arguably nominating high-profile candidates to the EP represents such effort on the part of parties. Hence, theories of signaling and theories of selection mechanisms would both lead us to expect that candidate quality results in positive electoral feedback for parties.

H4: High quality candidates will have a positive effect on the vote share of parties in European Parliament elections, all other things being equal.

Our final question concerns whether the quality of candidates - that is their profile and experience - is a good indicator of their performance in the EP once they have been elected? In other words, does quality provide a credible cue to voters about the amount

of effort that a candidate will put into his or her role as an MEP? The focus of activity in the European Parliament is different from national European parliaments. There is no government whose mandate is drawn from the European Parliament. The EP's role in the appointment and censuring the European Commission does not fully compare. MEPs are not normally public figures. The EP is not a grand debating chamber. Instead, MEPs spend their time in committees bargaining over detailed legislation. The importance of the committee system is well-known. Rapporteurships, the responsibility of an individual member to draw up the position of the committee, are important, both for individual MEPs and their party. Hence, parties that care about policy should send candidates that are capable and willing to act as rapporteurs. The important skills in this job are the ability to form coalitions and be capable of bargaining with other committee members, the EP plenary and the other EU institutions. This type of people may be different from the type of people that are capable of capturing the public's imagination in the public debate. Also, many well-known politicians go to the European Parliament as the last stage in their career. These candidates may have high public visibility, but they may be less focused on contribution in committees. This leads us to our final hypothesis:

H5: High quality candidates are less active in committee work than lesser known MEPs.

To sum up, we expect that candidate quality affects both turnout and the electoral fortunes of parties, but that 'star quality' has a negative impact on the activity levels of the individual MEP in the Parliament.

### **Data and variables**

To test the hypotheses outlined above, we have collected data on the quality and activity levels of successful candidates in all 6 EP elections. As described above, quality has been operationalized as previous political experience. However, rather than using

of simple dummy variable of previous position in office, we have created an additive scale of various aspect of previous experience, calibrated by the level of the position. The highest post in the index is president or prime minister in the country (with a multiplicative weight of 5), the second highest positions are previous ministerial posts, party leadership and other high profile positions (e.g. Mayor of Paris or famous author), all weighted by 3. Finally, members of national parliaments are also given a (double) score. In addition to these position variables, we also include a single score, which captures MEPs who enter the EP in their prime political age between 35 and 55. Candidates who enter later are likely to use it as a retirement home, whereas MEPs under 35 have little experience. These data on political experience were obtained by systematically coding the biographies of all MEPs included in the *Times Guide to the European Parliament* as well as EP and party websites and other party documents. As shown in table 1A in the appendix, this quality index of individual MEPs ranges from 0 to 34 with a mean of 2.14 and a standard deviation of 2.60. Candidate quality has a highly skewed distribution with many zeros, given the high number of candidates with little or no political experience.

It is important to point out that we were unable to collect information everyone who stood as a candidate in the European Parliament, and hence our dataset only consists of those people who were actually elected. Not only has it not been feasible to obtain accurate list of every single party candidate since 1979, but even if this would have been possible, we would have struggled to find the necessary biographical information on the thousands of unsuccessful candidates. This exclusion potentially has consequences for our analysis of the effect of candidate quality on electoral outcomes, since we do not have a measure of the quality of the unsuccessful candidates. However, this problem is partly alleviated by the fact that parties tend to rank order party lists according to the prestige of candidates. Hence, high quality candidates are likely to be listed as one of the top candidates and are consequently unlikely to be among the unsuccessful candidates. To ensure that our results are robust, we test the effect of candidate quality on electoral outcomes in two ways. First, we test the effect of the average quality of all party candidates on overall electoral gains or losses for that party. This could be argued to provide a conservative test of the

effect of candidate quality. Since most parties only have few, if any, prestigious (or quality) candidates, and tend to place these near the top of their lists, those parties that are very successful EP elections are forced to include more 'inexperienced' candidates due to their electoral fortune and we would consequently expect that the 'average' quality of their candidates would go down. In other words, because of the short supply of quality candidates, an increase in the number of MEPs would also lead to the selection of more novices. Second, we examine the effect of the "maximum quality" of a party's candidate on electoral outcomes. This allows us to test the proposition that a party will benefit from the candidacy of a single very high-profile candidate (such as a former prime minister), rather than simply relying on the average quality across all party candidates.

In figure 1, we present both mean and maximum candidate quality by country in each of the six European Parliaments. Country-level descriptive statistics can be seen in table 3A. The figure includes two indicators of quality. The right-hand dot indicates the *mean quality* of candidates in a particular country and parliament. The mean quality of candidates at the country level ranges from 0.82 to 8. The left-hand point indicates the *maximum candidate quality* in a country in a particular year. Here we can see that quality varies much more. On average the highest quality candidate scores 10, with a standard deviation of 5.5, but this ranges from 2 to 34. France and Italy stand out, as these are the countries where most former presidents and prime ministers have been elected to the European Parliament, including Jacques Chirac, Edgar Faure, Valéry Giscard D'Estaing, Bettino Craxi and Silvio Berlusconi.

[Figure 1 about here]

Whereas maximum candidate quality may vary from one election to another, cross-national differences in mean candidate quality are quite stable over time. For example, Luxembourg has very high quality candidates across most elections, and Belgian, Danish and Irish parties also provide on average high quality candidates. In contrast, the UK, the Netherlands and Germany tend to provide candidates of a lower quality. Ireland is the country where the between party differences is the largest, as measured

by the size of the standard deviation. The variation between the Greek parties is also quite large. The variation between parties seems to be smallest in Belgium and Italy.

In this paper we seek to explain not only why candidate quality differs across parties and countries, but more importantly, how this affects election outcomes and legislative activities. In section below we describe the other variables in our models.

#### *Variables in models*

We analyze four models in this paper. The first model examines the determinants of candidate quality. Candidate quality at the party level is thus the dependent variable. In the remaining models, candidate quality is an independent variable. In the second model, we examine the effect of MEP quality on country-level turnout and in the third model, we analyze the impact of quality on electoral gains and losses of parties. Finally, the fourth model seeks to explain individual legislative activity by individual MEPs. Tables 1A to 3A in the appendix present the descriptive statistics for individual, party and country-level data.

Our first model seeks to explain why some parties have higher quality MEPs compared with others. To test our first hypothesis, we include a dummy variable for *Government Party* that captures the effect of whether a party is in government or opposition, and hence takes the value 1 if a party was in government at the time of the European election, and 0 if the party was in opposition. We also include a dummy variable for *candidate centered electoral systems* to test our second hypothesis. Two countries have candidate centered electoral systems, Ireland and Finland. We expect that the candidates that emerge in these systems differ from those of other electoral systems. The effect of electoral system is interesting in itself as it is up to each member state to decide on the details of the electoral system for the EP elections. It is also important to control for this effect in order to ensure that the other results are not artifacts of this difference in the electoral system. In addition to these key independent variables, we also control for the size of the party<sup>2</sup>, since large parties may be able to nominate higher quality candidates than smaller parties. We also include separate

---

<sup>2</sup> Party size is measured in terms of the vote-share a party received in the national election immediately prior to the European election.

dummy variables for Green and Euro-skeptic parties, since we expect their candidates to have less previous political experience. If parties are fighting their very first EP election, they might be keener to send high quality candidates, so we include an indicator for first EP election. Finally, we include a measure of electoral volatility in the country, since electoral volatility may affect the type of candidates that run for EP elections.

In our second model the dependent variable is turnout. It is measured as the difference between in turnout between the EP election and the previous general election in each country. Our key independent variable is candidate quality, measured as both mean quality (model 1) and maximum candidate quality (model 2) in each country. We also include additional controls. Previous research has shown that the norm of alternating in the government influence turnout. We control for government alternation. Control variables are also included for various aspects of the electoral system that may influence turnout: candidate centered systems, electoral threshold and compulsory voting. In countries where people are very skeptical about the EU, they may be less likely to turn out in EP elections, so we include a control for public support for the EU.<sup>3</sup> Again, we also control for electoral volatility and first EP elections.

In our third model, electoral gain is our dependent variable. This variable is measured as the change in the vote-share of a political party between the previous general election and the subsequent European Parliament election. Again, our key independent variables are mean and maximum candidate quality at the party level. To control for second-order effects, we include a government dummy variable.<sup>4</sup> As described above, one of the most solid findings in the literature is that governing parties tend to do less well in EP elections than in the previous elections that won them the office. This is widely interpreted as evidence of a second-order national contest effect. One should however be aware of the regression to the mean effect which might operate here. If we assume that there are both structural and stochastic elements that determine vote choice and that those parties that win the right to form a government

---

<sup>3</sup> Following Hix and Marsh (2007), we use public opinion data from the Eurobarometer surveys.

<sup>4</sup> In previous estimations of this model we also include a time since last election variable. If there is such an affect as “office-tiredness” we would expect governing parties to do worse to longer they spend in office and opposition parties to do better. However, neither the direct effect, nor the interaction is statistically significant.

have done better in the elections than the parties that have not won this right. If this is purely due to a stochastic element, then these parties would on average do worse if a new election is held, even if the structural component of their electoral base is the same. Following the second-order national election theory, we also include dummies for Green parties, as they should do better if people vote sincerely, and the size of parties. We would expect large parties to experience greater electoral losses than small parties. If voters base their vote choices at least partly on European issues, we would also expect Euro-skeptic parties to gain votes in EP elections.

In our final model on legislative activities, we use individual level data to investigate the effect of candidate quality on the amount of committee work individual MEPs take on. We collected information on all committee reports since 1979. The information for the 1979-1999 periods was obtained from EP officials.<sup>5</sup> The post-1999 period was taken directly from the EP webpage. Our key independent variable is the quality of the individual EMO. We also include dummy variables for each of the party families, since we may expect some party families to be more active than others. Moreover, we include variable on EU position, since we would expect that MEPs belonging to more EU-positive parties may be more involved in the legislative activities.<sup>6</sup> We also need to control for the position of individual MEPs on EP committees, since chairmanships of committees are likely to induce MEPs to write more report. Finally, we also control for first elections and electoral system.

In the next section, we discuss the results when we estimate these models.

## Results

The first step in the analysis of candidate quality is to establish whether there are any systematic differences in the type of candidates the parties put forward. We investigate variables associated with both parties and the political system. As discussed in the

---

<sup>5</sup> We thank Simon Hix for helping us obtaining this data.

<sup>6</sup> The data on EU position are taken from two party expert surveys by Gary Marks and Marco Steenbergen (1999) and Kenneth Benoit and Michael Laver (2006). These have been rescaled so they range from 0 to 20.



previous section, we use both the mean quality of the successful candidate and the maximum quality of any individual candidate within each party at each European Parliament election. The dependent variable is truncated at zero. It is possible that the uncorrelated residual assumption is violated. We hence estimate tobit regression model with robust standard errors to account for these two violations of the standard OLS assumptions.

We expect that electoral volatility of the political system will increase the quality of the candidate parties put forward as more is at risk. The type of electoral system is also likely to influence the choice of candidates. The candidate centered electoral systems used Ireland and Finland are likely to run higher quality candidates than other countries (hypothesis 2). Anti-EU parties, and to a lesser extent Green parties, are not as integrated in the party system as other parties. This limits their ability to produce the type of candidates that scores high on our index. It is hence necessary to control for these parties. Similarly, larger parties should have a larger pool of quality candidates and hence score higher on our index on average. We also expect that governing parties follow a different strategy from opposition parties as more of their pool of candidates will be occupied with holding office at the national arena (hypothesis 1). Finally, it is likely that the first election to the European Parliament attracts higher quality candidates than subsequent elections.

We estimate two models. They are identical expect that model 2 use the highest recorded quality amongst the successful candidates from a party as the dependent variable while model 1 use the mean quality. The results are presented in table 1.

[Table 1 about here]

The results show that the quality of the candidates that run for EP office is on average higher in candidate centered electoral systems compared to party centered systems. Green parties have lower candidate quality than other parties. These two effect hold across both specifications. Party size increases the maximum candidate quality, but not the mean quality. There is no difference in candidate quality between governing and opposition parties.

Electoral volatility increases the mean level of candidate quality, but does not significantly influence the maximum quality. A similar pattern holds for the effect of first time elections. The explanation is that both electoral volatility and first time elections increases the interest of the parties to supply many good candidates. The latter do to the opening of a new set of political offices available. The former is due to the fact that electoral volatility increases the available pool of politicians that have had the possibility of holding the types of posts included in the index. Rapid changes in the political fortune increase both the probability that more active politicians have experience from national office, and the probability that there are a larger pool of “failed” party leaders being shipped off to Brussels. If the latter is the main effect we would not expect that candidate quality increases electoral success. Instead, we would expect it to be associated with electoral failure. This would mean that our index would not be a good indicator of quality. We address this in the two next sub-sections. Next we turn to the effect of candidate quality on turnout.

#### *Candidate quality and turnout*

As we have demonstrated that there are significant differences between parties in the quality of their successful candidates, we move on to investigate the effect of candidate quality on turnout in EP elections. Low, and falling turnout is a source of concern amongst observers of EP elections. One of the justifications for the European Parliament is democratic legitimacy. Some authors argue that strengthening the powers of the European Parliament will help to reduce the democratic deficit. However, as the powers of the EP have increased, the tendency of falling turnout has not stopped. It is problematic for the EP to claim it represents the views of all European citizens, if most citizens do not take part in the elections. It is the role of the elites to provide meaningful alternatives for the people to choose between in elections (Schumpeter 1942). The electorate will be capable of making more meaningful choices if it is easy to distinguish between the competing elites. The previous record for other public offices may provide information that enables the electorate to see the choice between the competing elites as meaningful and hence turn out to vote.

We present an evaluation of the extent to which candidate quality affects turnout in table 2. As before, we use two different indicators for candidate quality, the mean candidate quality in the country in a particular election and the maximum candidate quality in a particular election. The first specification implies that turnout is affected by the average quality of the candidates, while the latter implies that it is affected by the profile of the candidate with the highest quality only. The latter case means that one high quality candidate suffice to influence turnout.

The dependent variable is difference between turnout in the previous general elections and subsequent European Parliament elections. As described above, we control for several variables. Compulsory voting is expected to have a positive effect on turnout. The norm of government alternation is also expected to have a positive effect. Effective threshold should have a negative effect on turnout as it reduces the electoral chances for smaller protest parties, and hence make it less meaningful for dissatisfied voters to use the EP elections to protest against the government and the other major parties. Falling turnout has by some observers been seen as a sign that the EP lacks support amongst the public. We would thus expect turnout to be lower in countries it the public is hostile to the integration project. We expect the second order effect to be lower (turnout to be higher) during the first EP election in a country. The reported results are OLS regression with robust standard errors.

[Table 2 about here]

Table 2 shows that the electoral quality of the candidates increases turnout in EP elections. The mean quality has a bigger effect than the maximum quality. But both are significant. For example, one standard deviation increase in the mean candidate quality (1.359) is associated with an increase in turnout by almost 3 percent. One standard deviation in the maximum quality (5.55) is associated with an increase in turnout of about 2 percent. Unsurprisingly, turnout is substantively lower in countries with compulsory voting. It is also higher in those countries that have a norm of alternating governments. Candidate centered electoral system have higher turnout than other countries. The effect is not as strong when the mean measure of candidate

quality, rather than the maximum level is used. This is however not surprising given that countries with candidate centered electoral systems also have parties that produce higher quality candidates (see above). It does not look like it is the fact that it is the first EP election that explain turnout. Instead, it seems like there are more high quality candidates in the first elections. It is hence the quality of the candidates, not the fact that it is the first EP elections that explain high turnout. Hence, parties could reduce the trend of falling turnout by ensuring that the quality of the candidates running for EP elections do not deteriorate. It is also clear that more pro-EU publics turn out in greater numbers for the EP elections than Euro-skeptic publics. The effect of one standard deviation (12.75) change in attitudes towards the EU changes turnout by more than 2.5 percent. So, candidate quality increases turnout. There are two possible explanations for this. It may be the case that it increases turnout because voters turn out because they want to vote against well-known national figures, not because they support them.

#### *Electoral gains and losses*

Having considered the consequences of candidate quality on turnout, we now turn to the electoral consequences of the type of candidates that are selected. The dependent variable is the change in the vote share of a political party between the previous general election and the subsequent European Parliament election. Again, we estimate 2 alternative models. The first model measure candidate quality at the party mean. The second measures the maximum quality of any of the successful candidates within a party. The reported results are OLS regression with robust standard errors. The results are presented in table 3.

[Table 3 about here]

The results show that candidate quality matters for the outcome of the elections. Parties with high quality candidates do better than low quality candidates. Moreover, we see that the effect of one standard deviation (2.09) change in the quality of the mean successful candidate is about half a percent change in the vote-share. One standard deviation (4.23) change in the quality of the “best” candidate results in a change of

about 1 percent of the vote-share. We are able to reproduce the “protest vote” effect reported in previous studies (see Hix and Marsh 2007). Parties represented in the government lose on average over 1.7 percent of their vote-share from the previous national elections. It is clear that parties with a clear European “cause” like the Euro-skeptics and the Greens do better at EP elections than national elections. Finally, size matters. Big parties do worse than smaller parties in the EP elections. The effect of one standard deviation (13.10) change in the party size amounts to 2.3 percent change in the vote-share in the EP election.

To sum up the effect of candidate quality on electoral performance. First, there are substantive differences in the quality of the candidates. Some of this difference can be attributed to the electoral system. Candidate centered electoral systems produce better candidates. Second, quality candidates increase turnout in EP elections. Third, parties that put forward high quality candidates improves their electoral results vis-à-vis other parties in similar situations.

#### *Candidate activities*

The final part of the analysis focuses on the effect of candidate quality on subsequent work in the European Parliament. We are in particular interested in finding out whether high quality candidates behave differently in the committee work in the EP than other candidates. As candidate centered electoral systems produced higher quality candidates, we would like to see if MEPs from these systems take on more committee work. As it is well known that committee work is fairly proportionally distributed amongst party groups according to number of MEPs (Mamadouth and Raunio 2003), we include dummy-variables for party group. The largest group, the EPP is the reference category. The effect of the different party groups is hence the difference from MEPs in the EPP. We expect MEPs from the smaller party groups to write the fewest reports. We do not expect the difference between the EPP and the PES to be very large. It cannot be expected that Euro-skeptic MEPs will write very many reports as they will find fewer issues where the majority of the EP can unite behind a position they can feel comfortable with, we should expect MEPs from such parties to write fewer reports. The flip-side of this argument is that MEPs from pro-integrationist

parties will write more reports (Benedetto 2005). We also know that committee chairs and vice-chair write more reports than other MEPs (Kreppel 2002). We may also expect that party leaders take on less committee works as it is considered the job of the backbenchers of the party. Hence, we also control for party-groups presidents and vice-presidents. The unit of analysis is the individual MEP in one parliamentary term. The dependent variable is number of report. We estimate a negative binomial model with robust standard errors. The results are reported in Table 4.

[Table 4 about here]

The results indicate that quality candidates are less active in committee work than those of lesser public visibility. The results are consistent across both models. While this may not surprising, it highlights the fact that national party leaderships face hard tradeoffs in this situation. They can either improve their electoral chances by relying on well known candidates, or be active in the EP committee system, but risking paying an electoral cost. However, candidate centered electoral systems produce MEPs that write more reports, controlling for candidate quality. MEPs from new member states write fewer reports than more established members. MEPs from pro-integrationist parties write more reports than other MEPs. Committee chairs and vice chair also write more. There is no significant difference between party leaders and other members. However, a substantive proportion of the difference is between party groups. MEPs from the EPP and the PES write more reports than MEPs from the smaller parties.

## **Conclusion**

Research on EP elections has focused on the second order election effects. Government parties tend to get punished. Voters and parties use the elections as a publicly funded opinion pool. We do not dispute that this is a key feature of EP elections. However, the decision to treat the elections as such is ultimately influenced by the supply of candidates that parties put on offer. Research on electoral politics in the US has

emphasized the importance of candidate quality. The focus has been on reelection prospects and challenger deterrence. High quality candidates face fewer quality challengers and have higher reelection prospects.

In this paper, we investigate the effect of candidate quality on EP elections. It is well known that many high profile national politicians have gone to the EP towards the end of their career. What effect nominating well-known politicians as candidates in EP elections has on turnout, electoral fate and subsequent legislative effort in the EP has until now not received scholarly attention. This paper is a first attempt at investigating these effects. On the basis of data on all successful candidates to the EP in the first 6 direct elections (1979-2004) we are able to offer the following findings.

First, well known candidates increase turnout in elections. National parties can hence reduce the perceived lack of popular democratic legitimacy of the European Parliament by nominating better known candidates. Second, parties that put forward quality candidates do better in EP elections. Third, there is a cost in terms of legislative effort from nominating well known candidates. They are less involved in the committee work than their less-known party colleagues. These findings highlight a potential dilemma. On the one hand, high-profile candidates raise the awareness of the European Parliament and mobilize voters. This is a very welcome effect, given the low levels of turnout and general lack of interest in the European Parliament. On the other hand, our findings suggest that it is the lesser-known 'careerist' MEPs who see the EP as their primary political arena who do the bulk of the work in the European Parliament, whereas the high-profile MEPs are more likely to shirk their responsibilities. Voters have little or no information about the performance of their MEP, and are therefore unlikely to punish an MEP for poor performance. This implies that while more prominent MEPs would raise the profile of EP elections, this may also be to the detriment of the quality of legislative output in the Parliament.

## References

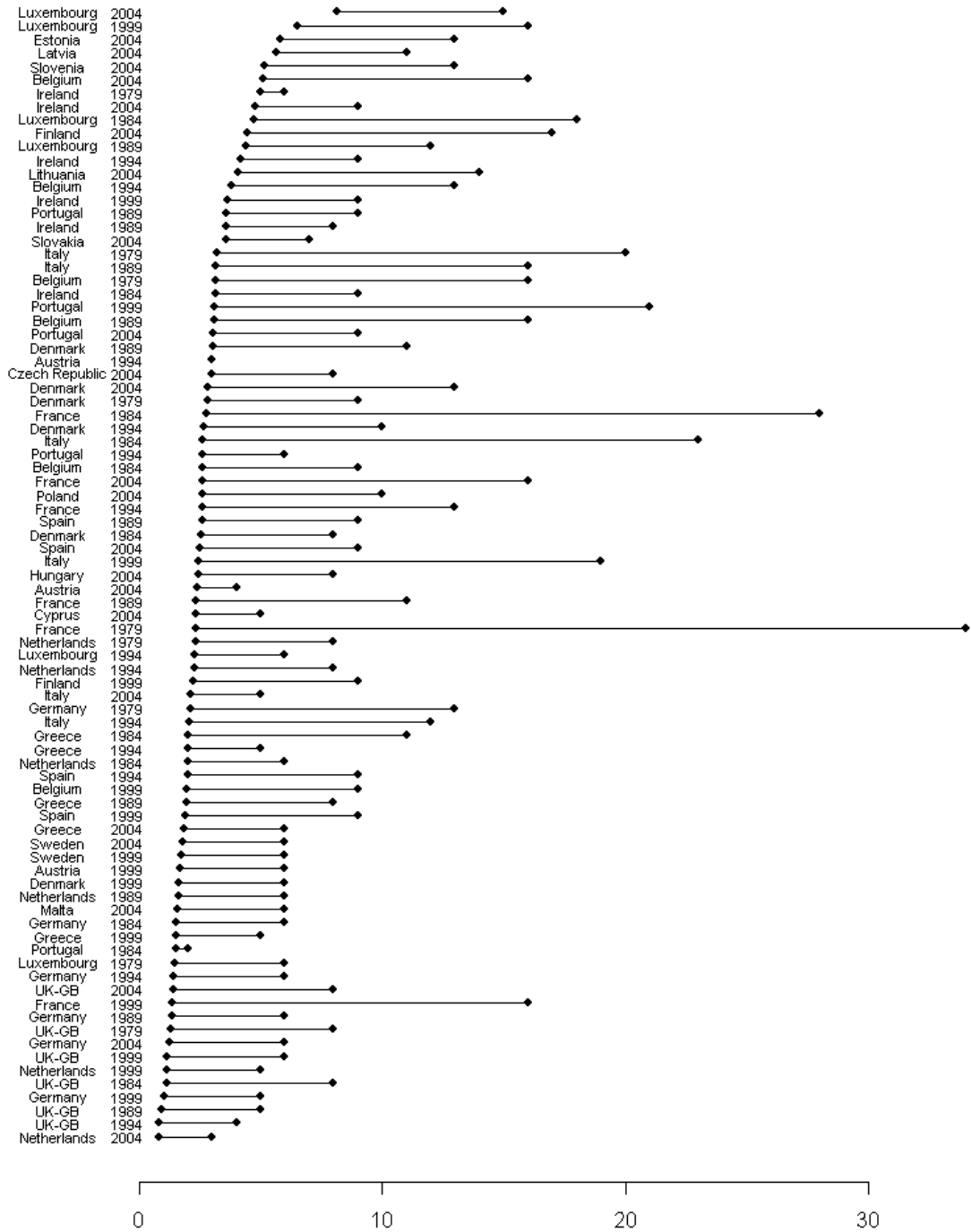
- Banks, Jeffrey S. and Rangarajan K. Sundaram 1993. 'Adverse Selection and Moral Hazard in a Repeated Elections Model.' In William A Barnett, Melvin J. Hinich, and Norman J. Schofield, eds., *Political Economy: Institutions, Competition, and Representation*, pp. 295–311. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press.
- Benedetto, Giacomo (2005) 'Rapporteurs as Legislative Entrepreneurs: The Dynamics of the Codecision Procedure in the European Parliament', *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol. 12, No. 1.
- Benoit, Kenneth and Michael Laver (2006). *Party Policy in Modern Democracies*. London: Routledge.
- Besley, Timothy (2005) 'Political Selection'. *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 19(3):43-60.
- van der Brug, Wouter and Cees van der Eijk (2007). *European Elections and Domestic Politics: Lessons from the Past and Scenarios for the Future*. University of Notre Dame Press. In press.
- Campbell, Angus (1960). 'Surge and Decline: A Study of Electoral Change', *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 24: 397-418.
- Carrubba, Clifford J. and Richard J. Timpone (2005). 'Explaining Vote Switching Across First and Second Order Elections: Evidence from Europe', *Comparative Political Studies* 38(3): 260-281.
- Carson, Jamie, Jeffery A. Jenkins, David W. Rohde, and Mark A. Souva (2001). 'The Impact of National Tides and District-Level Effects on Electoral Outcomes: The U.S. Congressional Elections of 1862-63.' *American Journal of Political Science* 45(4): 887-898.
- van der Eijk, Cees and Mark Franklin (1996). *Choosing Europe? The European Electorate and National Politics in the Face of Union*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.
- Fearon, James D. (1999). 'Electoral Accountability and the Control of Politicians: Selecting Good Types versus Sanctioning Poor Performance' in Adam Przeworski, Susan C. Stokes and Bernard Manin (Eds.), *Democracy, Accountability, and Representation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ferejohn, John. (1993). 'The spatial model and elections'. In Bernard Grofman, ed., *Information, participation and choice. An economic theory of democracy in perspective*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, pp. 107-124
- Ferrara, Federico and J. Timo Weishaupt (2004). 'Get Your Act Together: Party Performance in European Parliament Election', *European Union Politics* 5(3): 283-306.
- Fiorina, Morris P. (1981). *Retrospective Voting in American National Elections*. New Haven: Yale U. Press.



- Follesdal, Andreas and Simon Hix (2006). 'Why There is a Democratic Deficit in the EU: A Response to Majone and Moravcsik', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 44(3) 533-562.
- Hix, Simon and Michael Marsh (2007). 'Punishment or Protest? Understanding European Parliament Elections', *The Journal of Politics* 69(2), forthcoming.
- Hobolt, Sara B., Jae-Jae Spoon, and James Tilley (2006). 'A Vote Against Europe? Explaining Defection in the 1999 and 2004 European Parliament Elections'. Paper presented at the APSA meeting 2006.
- Jacobson, Gary C. and Samuel Kernell (1983). *Strategy and Choice in Congressional Elections*. New Press.
- Key, V.O. (1966). *The responsible electorate. Rationality in presidential voting, 1936-1960*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press
- Kousser, Thaddeus (2004). 'Retrospective Voting and Strategic Behaviour in European Parliament Elections', *Electoral Studies*, 23(1): 1-21.
- Krasno, Jonathan S. (1994). *Challengers, Competition and Reelection: Comparing Senate and House Elections*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Krasno, Jonathan S. and Donald P. Green (1988). 'Preempting Quality Challengers in House Elections', *The Journal of Politics*, 50: 920-36.
- Kreppel, A. (2002), *The European Parliament and supranational party system*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Lublin, David Ian (1994), 'Quality, Not Quantity: Strategic Politicians in U.S. Senate Elections, 1952-1990', *The Journal of Politics*, 56(1): 228-241.
- Mamadouth, V. and Raunio, T. (2003) The committee system: powers, appointments and report allocation, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 41(2), pp. 333–351.
- Manin, Bernard. (1997). *The principles of representative government*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Marks, Gary and Marco Steenbergen (1999). *1999 Expert Survey on National Parties on National Parties and the European Union*, Center for European Studies, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.
- Marsh, Michael (1998) 'Testing the Second-Order Election Model After Four European Elections', *British Journal of Political Science*, 28(4): 591-607.
- Marsh, Michael (2007). 'European Parliament Elections and Loss of Governing Parties' in van der Brug and van der Eijk (eds.) *European Elections and Domestic Politics*. Notre Dame Press.
- Morgan, R. (ed) (1994) *Times Guide to the European Parliament 1994*. London Times Books.
- Norris, Pippa and Mark Franklin (1997). 'Social Representation'. *European Journal of Political Research* 32: 185-210.
- Powell, G. Bingham, Jr. (2000) *Elections as Instruments of Democracy: Majoritarian and Proportional Visions*. Yale University Press: New Haven.

- Reif, Karlheinz (1984) 'National Election Cycles and European Elections, 1979 and 1984', *Electoral Studies* 3(3):244-255.
- Reif, Karlheinz and Hermann Schmitt (1980). 'Nine Second-Order National Elections. A Conceptual Framework for the Analysis of European Election Results', *European Journal for Political Research* 8: 3-44.
- Scarrow, Susan E. (1997) 'Political career paths and the European Parliament'. *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 22(2): 253-263.
- Schumpeter, Joseph A. (1942). *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*. New York: Harper and Brothers
- Stone, Walter, L. Sandy Mausel, Cherie D. Maestas (2004). 'Quality Counts: Extending the Strategic Politician Model of Incumbent Deterrence'. *American Journal of Political Science* 48(3): 478-95.
- Tillman, Erik R. (2004) 'The European Union at the Ballot Box. European Integration and Voting Behaviour in the New Member States', *Comparative Political Studies*, 27(5):590-610.
- Wood, D. and A. Wood (eds) (1979) *Times Guide to the European Parliament 1979*. London Times Book
- Wood, A (ed) (1984) *Times Guide to the European Parliament 1984*. London Times Book
- Wood, A. (ed) (1989) *Times Guide to the European Parliament 1989*. London Times Book
- Tufte, Edward (1975). 'Determinants of the Outcomes of Midterm Congressional Elections', *American Political Science Review* 69(3): 812-826.

**Figure 1**  
Candidate quality in parties by country and year (mean and max)



**Table 1**  
Candidate Quality in the European Parliament

	Model 1		Model 1	
	<i>Coeff.</i>	<i>Robust SE</i>	<i>Coeff.</i>	<i>Robust SE</i>
Candidate Centered Elections	1.22***	0.18	0.75***	0.23
Electoral Volatility	0.03***	0.01	0.04	0.03
Government Party	0.25	0.19	0.58	0.58
Party Size	0.008	0.01	0.12***	0.03
Euro Skeptic Party	-0.82**	0.36	-0.50	0.60
Green Party	-0.55***	0.12	-1.06**	0.37
First EP elections	0.59*	0.27	1.21	0.69
Intercept	1.47**	0.63	1.97	1.40
Log	0.76***	0.09	1.40***	0.08
Scale	2.13		4.06	
N	471		471	

The dependent variable is mean candidate quality by party (model 1) and max candidate quality by party (model 2). The coefficients are from a tobit model with Huber White robust standard errors clustered by country.

**Table 2**  
Turnout in European Parliament Elections

	Model 1		Model 2	
	<i>Coeff.</i>	<i>Robust SE</i>	<i>Coeff.</i>	<i>Robust SE</i>
Quality (mean)	2.16*	0.84	-	-
Quality (max)	-	-	0.37*	0.18
Government alternation	12.26***	2.63	10.66***	2.69
Candidate Centered Elections	6.20	3.69	9.72*	3.89
Electoral Threshold	-0.22*	0.09	-0.22*	0.10
Public Support for the EU	0.30**	0.09	0.29**	0.09
Compulsory Voting	28.37***	2.91	28.20***	2.97
First EP Elections	1.66	2.51	2.31	2.66
Intercept	-63.50***	8.03	-60.09***	7.57
N	85		85	
Adjusted R squared	.65		.64	

The dependent variable is turnout in EP elections. The estimates are from a linear model with robust standard errors.

**Table 3**  
Electoral Success of Parties in European Parliament elections

	Model 1		Model 2	
	<i>Coeff.</i>	<i>Robust SE</i>	<i>Coeff.</i>	<i>Robust SE</i>
Quality (mean)	0.23*	0.12	-	-
Quality (max)	-	-	0.24***	0.07
Government Party	-1.66**	0.54	-1.72**	0.54
Party Size	-0.17***	0.02	-0.19***	0.03
Euro-skeptic Party	7.11***	1.29	7.03***	1.24
Green Party	1.27*	0.50	1.43**	0.49
Intercept	2.18***	0.38	1.92***	0.34
N	471		471	
Adjusted R squared	0.34		0.36	

The dependent variable is electoral success. The model is a linear model with Huber White robust standard errors.

**Table 4**  
Committee Reports by MEPs

	<i>Negative binomial coeff.</i>	<i>Robust SE</i>
Quality	-0.07***	0.01
First Elections	-0.28***	0.08
EU position	0.04***	0.01
Candidate Centered Elections	0.53***	0.15
Committee Chair	1.19***	0.13
Committee Vice-chair	0.45***	0.07
Party president	-0.14	0.20
Party Vice president	0.09	0.07
Green Party	-0.33**	0.12
Left	-0.33***	0.18
Liberals	-0.21	0.11
Non-attached	-1.16***	0.23
Right	-0.92***	0.22
Socialists	-0.17*	0.07
Euro-skeptics	-1.41***	0.37
Intercept	0.27*	0.13
N	3284	
AIC	11671	

Dependent variable is number of reports. The estimates are coefficients from a negative binomial regression model with Huber White robust standard errors.

## Appendix: Descriptive statistics

**Table 1A** Individual level descriptive statistics

Individual level	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Frequency
Reports	2.10	3.80	0	47	
Quality	2.14	2.60	0	34	
EU Position	14.09	5.00	0.81	20	
First EP Elections	0.19		0	1	
Candidate Centered Elections	0.03		0	1	
Committee Chair	0.05		0	1	
Committee Vice Chair	0.12		0	1	
Party Group President	0.04		0	1	
Party Group Vice President	0.03		0	1	
EPP					1356
Green					174
Left					159
Liberals					254
Non-attached					145
Right					82
Social Democrats					1058
Euro-skeptics					56



**Table 2A** Party level descriptive statistics

Party	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Electoral fate	0.30	5.70	-31.7	24
Candidate Quality (mean)	2.52	2.10	0	34
Candidate Quality (max)	5.11	4.20	0	34
Governing Party	0.33		0	1
Candidate Centered Elections	0.06		0	1
Electoral Volatility	22.10	7.3	0.5	51
First EP elections	0.19		0	1
Green Party	0.09		0	1
Euro-skeptics	0.05		0	1

**Table 3A** Country level descriptive statistics

Country	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Turnout	-22.60	15.00	-53	1
Candidate Quality (mean)	2.46	1.40	0.82	8
Candidate Quality (max)	10.00	5.50	2	34
Alternating Government	0.63		0	1
Candidate Centered Elections	0.09		0	1
Electoral Threshold	7.15	7.80	0.85	38
Support for the EU	73.30	13	50	96
Electoral Volatility	21.30	8	0.5	51
Compulsory Voting	0.22		0	1
First EP elections	0.22		0	1