

# **Euroscepticism, Policy Alienation and Abstention in the 2014 EP Elections**

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## ***Abstract***

How do the positions of voters on European integration and EU policy alienation relate to electoral participation? We build on the recent literature on participation in elections in general and in the European level in particular and argue that positive positions on further steps in European integration boost the chances that a citizen participates in the European parliamentary elections. In addition, by building on a simple spatial model we argue that the European policy offers parties make before the election have an impact on participation in the election to the European Parliament: the more alienated a citizen is from the European policy positions parties offer, the more likely she abstains from going to the polls. Our analysis, which is based on the 2014 European Election Studies dataset, provides evidence for our argument, even after controlling for a battery of ‘standard’ factors that explain political participation.

Key words: Political participation, non-voting, European Parliament elections, policy alienation, attitudes towards European integration

## 1 Introduction

Despite the high salience of European issues in the last years and the increased importance of the European Parliament (EP) in selecting the President of the European Commission, the average turnout in the 2014 EP elections has declined once again. Since electoral participation is often seen as manifestation of citizen support for a political system, this decline seems worrisome for the EU's democratic legitimacy, even if we consider European elections as 'second order elections' (Reif and Schmitt 1980; Schmitt and Thomassen 1999; Schmitt 2010; Hix and Hoyland 2013). To an even greater extent, the increase in vote shares of Eurosceptic and anti-EU parties across Europe appears to be a further destabilizing factor for the future of European integration. Up to this day, scholars are arguing about whether EU citizens actually have Europe on their mind when casting their vote or whether they consider EP elections as a mere means to penalize their national government's performance (e.g. Reif and Schmitt 1980, Flickinger and Studlar 2007, Hix and Marsh 2007, Franklin and Hobolt 2011, Corbett 2014). The same question certainly arises regarding citizens who abstain from voting at all: Are non-voters in European elections motivated by European factors in their abstention behavior?

In this paper, we ask whether the decision to vote in EP elections is affected by the individual's attitude towards European integration and by the EU policy distance between the positions of citizens and political parties competing for votes. We argue that the chances of non-voting increase with the level of individual Euroscepticism, which seems plausible from a rational choice perspective: Abstaining from the right to vote is an appropriate electoral option for Eurosceptic citizens if they seek to undermine the system's political legitimacy. Moreover, we hypothesize – on the basis of a simple spatial model – that the European policy offers of political parties have an impact on participation in the election for the European Parliament: the more distant or 'alienated' a citizen is from the EU policy positions that parties offer, the more likely she abstains from going to the polls.

Our analysis, which is based on the Voter Study of the 2014 European Election Studies (EES), provides evidence for our arguments, even after controlling for a battery of 'standard' factors that commonly explain political participation. The empirical results suggest that the 2014 EP

elections have had – at least to a certain extent – a truly ‘European’ character in the sense that voters have made their electoral participation dependent on their position towards European integration. In conclusion, active non-participation in European elections can be considered as a manifestation of opposition towards further European integration and alienation from the European policy offer of political parties.

To derive these findings, we present a brief review of the literature on the determinants of electoral participation, particularly focused on European elections, in the next section. Section three presents our theoretical arguments, from which we derive our hypotheses. Before presenting the results of the analysis in section five, chapter four provides an overview on the dataset we use, presents the characteristics of our dependent and independent variables and introduces the statistical methods we apply to derive our findings. The concluding section summarizes the findings, discusses open questions and presents ideas for further research on the determinants of participation in election on the supra-national, national and sub-national level.

## **2 Literature review**

There is a huge amount of literature that provides answers on what actually affects turnout in general and in European Parliament elections in particular. Consequently, the theoretical and empirical literature has identified a multitude of explanatory factors. On the individual level, the most prominent explanations focus on socio-demographic characteristics (*resource model*) and socio-psychological dispositions (*psychological model*, see Blais 2006 for an overview). Moreover, voter turnout is shaped by mobilizing factors like election campaigns (*mobilization model*) and the political-institutional context (*institutional model*) that citizens live in (Caprara et al. 2012, Smets and Van Ham 2013). Among the most important variables from the macro level that help to explain turnout are characteristics of the electoral system, such as compulsory voting or proportional representation, and the outcome of the election itself, e.g. the degree of (expected) electoral closeness (Blais 2006, Geys 2006).

Notwithstanding their character as second-order national elections which citizens perceive to be less important than first-order national elections (Reif and Schmitt 1980), individual turnout in European Parliament (EP) elections is strongly determined by the same variables as in national elections. Participation in elections to the EP is, however, additionally affected by factors directly related to the supra-national – that is, European – level, especially by attitudes and perceptions related to the EU itself (Blondel et al. 1998, Franklin 2001, Mattila 2003). In a recent study, Clark (2014) concludes, for example, that low interest in EU affairs and perceptions of the EP as weak or unresponsive prompt individuals to abstain from EP elections. Several empirical analyses find evidence that support for the European Union is positively connected to participation in European elections (Flickinger and Studlar 2007, Stockemer 2012). Even though there are also studies that somewhat refute the relationship between support for the EU and turnout in EP elections (Schmitt and van der Eijk 2007), most of the empirical literature suggests that the original second-order national elections hypothesis needs some updating. Europe and EU-related topics seem to matter in European elections since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, not only regarding the question whether to vote or not, but also who to vote for (see Hobolt et al. 2008, De Vries et al. 2011, Hix and Marsh 2011, Van Spanje and De Vreese 2011, Hobolt and Spoon 2012).

Yet, there is little consensus about the question how exactly citizens' European orientations actually influence their decision whether or not to participate in European elections. In particular, two gaps in the literature can be detected: First, even the rather successful empirical studies, such as the ones by Flickinger and Studlar (2007) or Stockemer (2012), lack theoretical clarity and specification regarding the causal links between support for European integration and turnout. Second, we have found – by the best of our knowledge – no analysis that deals with the question whether voters are mobilized or demobilized by the degree to which they see themselves represented by political parties on the most relevant policy issues in European Parliament elections. In the following section, we aim at filling these gaps by clarifying how attitudes towards European integration and programmatic distance to political parties can influence the individual probability of voting in European elections.

### 3 Theory and hypotheses

We draw on the literature on political participation and electoral behavior to derive our expectations on the chances that individuals did not participate in the 2014 election of the European Parliament (Blais 2006). When modeling the choice of an individual citizen to take part in a (parliamentary) election, we can base our reasoning on the general literature on political participation, whereas the classical literature has framed participation as a collective action problem. A common point of departure for that literature is the calculus of voting originally formulated by Downs (1957). Following Riker and Ordeshook's (1968) decision-theoretic framework, the calculus can be written as such (Bäck et al. 2011):

$$U = P \times B - C \quad [1]$$

where  $U$  is the utility of voting,  $B$  the benefit derived from the success of the preferred candidate or party,  $P$  the probability that the vote cast will decide the outcome of the election, and  $C$  the costs of taking part in the election. A citizen will thus choose to vote when the benefits of voting exceed the costs, that is, when  $P \times B > C$ . The calculus of voting has on several occasions been generalized to other forms of collective action, such as group membership (Moe 1980), rebellions (Muller and Opp 1986), party activity (Whiteley 1995), parliamentary speech-making (Bäck and Debus 2016) or simply 'political participation' in general (Nagel 1987; Bäck et al. 2011). In general terms,  $B$  is the benefit derived from a successful act of participation (e.g., a change in the partisan composition of the parliament and/or government, which implies changes in government policy),  $P$  is the probability that the contribution of a single individual would decide the outcome, and  $C$  is the cost incurred by that contribution.

The so called 'calculus of participation' faces the problem as described by Olson's (1965) original account: for most political activities, the likelihood that the contribution of any single individual will decide whether collective action will be successful is extremely small, and since most outcomes of collective action are public goods, and action always involves some cost, rational citizens have little reason to participate, but rather to act as free riders. However, many

individuals still become active. This is the paradox of voting or the paradox of participation more generally (see also Bäck et al. 2011).

A number of efforts have been made to solve that paradox. The empirical literature has for the most part focused on two basic types of potential solutions. The first is an extension of Olson's (1965) 'solution', that is, specifying the private payoffs or selective incentives that accrue to the participants only and which therefore may help individuals to overcome the cost of participation even if the collective incentives are insufficient. The second involves specifying a model where the combined  $P \times B$ -term, called collective incentives, might yield a nonzero expected utility of participation (Bäck et al. 2011). Here, the literature has focused on the fact that some individuals have a higher level of efficacy, or a belief or sense that they are able to influence political outcomes.

The most frequently cited of all attempts to solve the paradox, Riker and Ordeshook's (1968) 'D-term', exemplifies the first of the two suggested solutions. The authors argue that the calculus of voting as originally formulated is incomplete, due to the fact that it ignores the rewards of the act of voting that are independent of the outcome. They therefore rewrite the calculus as such (Bäck et al. 2011):

$$U = P \times B - C + D \quad [2]$$

where the new term introduced by Riker and Ordeshook (1968),  $D$ , denotes psychic gratifications, such as 'the satisfaction from compliance with the ethic of voting' and the 'satisfaction from affirming a partisan preference'. This added term, if interpreted as the reward that participants gain from the act of participation itself, easily generalizes to other modes of participation, and in general focuses on so called 'selective benefits' that participants derive regardless of whether they can change the outcome (Bäck et al. 2011).

### **3.1 Support for European integration**

Our first theoretical proposition is that the probability of individual participation in an election depends on the support for the political system and its central principles. The main reason for this hypothesis is that individuals who support a political system or its central policy propositions perceive a personal benefit from the continued existence of this system. Since it seems commonplace today that electoral participation is essential for a political system's persistence (Norris 1999: 257), it is reasonable to assume that voters perceive the turnout rate as a measure of the democratic legitimacy and stability of the system. Furthermore, it is also plausible that citizens are aware of the fact that large scale non-participation in elections due to popular discontent with the political system would eventually lead to the system's breakdown (Allenspach 2012: 55). Largely disenchanting and alienated citizens might therefore choose the "exit option" (Hirschmann 1970) of electoral non-participation in order to delegitimize the whole political system.

Even though the chances of actually ensuring the survival of a political system are close to zero, voters might still experience psychological benefits from expressing their support at the ballot boxes. This additional utility of contributing to the stability of the political system can thus be located into the D-term of the calculus of voting. In conclusion, we can therefore hypothesize that system-supporting citizens have a higher utility from the act of voting itself than system-opposing citizens, independently of the outcome of the election.

If we apply this reasoning to the political system of the EU, we would expect that citizens who support the European integration process, which is the main political principle of the EU, perceive greater benefits from voting in European Parliament elections than Eurosceptic citizens who oppose further integration. In this sense, pro-EU voters gain expressive benefits from casting their votes in European elections, whereas Eurosceptic citizens express their discontent by staying away from the ballot boxes. An auxiliary assumption for this argument might be that EU citizens are aware that the European Union today is, more than ever before, dependent on public support. The end of the "permissive consensus" (Lindberg and Scheingold 1970) and the "post-Maastricht blues" (Eichenberg and Dalton 2007) have triggered the public debate around

the EU's "democratic deficit" and its lacking input legitimacy. Since many citizens seem to be aware of a connection between political participation and democratic legitimacy, it can reasonably be assumed that they make their decision to vote dependent on their stance on European integration. In summary, we can therefore derive the expectation that citizens who support the European integration process have a higher chance to participate in European elections, whereas citizens with opposing, Eurosceptic views should have higher probability of non-voting.

**H1:** The more an individual supports (opposes) the European integration process, the higher is the probability that she has participated (abstained) in the 2014 European Parliament election.

### **3.2 General and EU-specific policy alienation**

We secondly argue that the B-term in equation [1] and [2] and, thus, the utility a citizen can expect from participating in an election, depends on what policies the parties competing for votes offer in the particular election campaign. If the distance between citizens and parties (and their candidates) on relevant policy dimensions increases, the degree of utility that a citizen can expect when, e.g., the party strength in parliament and/or the partisan composition of the government changes, decreases. If the latter is the case, then the P-term, i.e. the expected probability that the vote cast will decide the outcome of the election, which should be true for a complex election like the one for the European Parliament and the complex multi-level institutional surrounding in which the EP operates, has to be large so that participating in an election is more likely. In addition, the costs for going to the polls (i.e. the C-term) have to be low and the D-term (i.e. the psychic gratifications) has to be large so that the citizens expect a higher degree of utility for participating in an election.

The B-term is thus an important aspect in the calculus of participation in an election and component of the ideological or policy-area specific congruence between citizens, parties and their candidates. Following the distance model proposed by Downs (1957), which is often used



to explain voting behavior in modern democracies in a comparative manner (e.g., Adams et al. 2005), we can model the utility of citizen  $i$  to participate in an election – because of an expected change in the policy position of the government that comes closer to the position of  $i$  – by calculating the Euclidean distances between the position of  $i$  on policy dimension  $j$  and the positions of the set of all parties or candidates  $K = \{k_1, k_2, \dots, k_n\}$  competing for votes in the particular election. While  $i$  should vote for that party  $k \in K$  which comes closest to her ideal point according to the distance model developed by Downs (1957), we argue that the smaller the distance between  $i$  and the competing parties within  $K$ , the higher should be the likelihood that  $i$  participates in the upcoming election. This is because in this particular constellation, the positions of at least one party within  $K$  comes close to  $i$ 's ideological or policy-area specific point of view about which policies should be implemented by the parliament and the government in the next legislative period. Therefore, the utility of  $i$  to go to the polls because of an expected policy output in favor of  $i$  decreases with an growing distance between  $i$  and  $k$  and can be calculated by

$$U_i(B) = -\sum_j a_j (x_{ij} - x_{kj})^2, \quad [3]$$

where  $x_{ij}$  is the position of citizen  $i$  on dimension  $j$  and  $x_{kj}$  the position of that party  $k$  among the set of all parties  $K$  which is located closest to  $i$  on dimension  $j$ . The term  $a_j$  is estimated from the data and provides information on the importance of dimension  $j$  for the chances that  $i$  participates in the election under study. The larger the distance between  $i$  and  $k$  (i.e. the party closest to  $i$  on dimension  $j$ ), the less likely citizen  $i$  should participate in the election. Consider for clarification Figure 1 below, which shows the position of parties A, B and C and of citizen  $i$  on a policy dimension differentiating between negative and positive positions on further steps on European integration. Citizen  $i$  favors a moderate European integration policy, while the three parties that compete for votes are either (more or less strongly) against further integration policies (parties A and B) or very much in favor of further steps in EU integration (party C). There is no party that comes close to  $i$ 's position, so that  $i$  would have to live with a future European integration policy not congruent with her own one regardless whether she participates in the election or not. If we further assume that  $i$ 's 'policy horizon', that is the set of policies she would only accept on that

particular dimension (see Warwick 2005, 2006), does not cover the positions of parties A, B or C, as it is the case in Figure 1, then no party covers her positions and she has no incentive to participate in the election because of the high degree of ‘programmatically alienation’ on the European integration policy dimension. On that basis, we hypothesize that the degree of ideological or policy-area specific alienation has an impact on the chances that a voter refrains from participating in an election:

**H2:** The smaller (greater) an individual’s programmatic alienation is, the higher the probability is that she has participated (abstained) in the 2014 European Parliament election.

\*\*\*Figure 1 about here\*\*\*

### **3.3 Other approaches to explain individual voter turnout**

We know from formula [2] that besides the B-term also the probability that the vote cast will decide the outcome of the election, the costs of taking part in the election and psychic gratifications like ‘the satisfaction from compliance with the ethic of voting’ or the ‘satisfaction from affirming a partisan preference’ should influence whether a citizen will participate in the upcoming election. These factors might compensate the utility loss resulting from a high degree of ‘programmatically alienation’. Such factors are very well covered in the literature on political participation in general and turnout in particular and include – from the ‘standard’ socio-economic perspective (Verba and Nie 1972) – variables like the income and the degree of education. The theoretical argument is that higher educated citizens and/or citizens with a higher income have more facilities to participate in general.

Besides these structural factors, Marsh and Kaase (1979, see also Verba et al. 1995) argued that socialization of citizens matter for their chances to get actively involved in the political process. Therefore, they included the age and gender of citizens as well as their general political interest, the existence of a close relationship – i.e. identification (see Campbell et al. 1960) – with a

political party into their model. The more interested and the closer a citizen is to a political party that competes for votes, the more likely the respective citizen should participate in the different stages of the political process. Finally and related to the term P-term in formulas [1] and [2], motivational factors like the perceived degree of political efficacy, i.e. whether citizens feel that their vote counts and that the body to be elected considers the citizens interests in the political process, should influence individual turnout. In the empirical analysis, we will incorporate measures that reflect the theoretical accounts outlined briefly in this section. Before presenting the results, it is necessary to provide information on the data sources that we use for our analysis, on the coding of the dependent and independent variables, and on the statistical method we adopt. The next section will present information on data and methods in more detail.

#### **4 Data and methods**

Our goal is to analyze whether attitudes towards European integration and the degree of programmatic alienation, particularly in terms of European integration policy, affected abstention at European Parliament elections. We study individual turnout in the 2014 elections for the European Parliament as this election is the most likely one where European issues influenced the decision process of citizens when considering going to the polls because of the increased salience of European issues as a consequence of the financial and economic crisis in Europe. The dependent variable of the empirical analysis is whether a respondent said that she participated or not participated in the 2014 EP election. Since the dependent variable is dichotomous, we apply a simple logit model with country dummies.<sup>1</sup> In a second step, we additionally take into account that there are circumstantial and non-circumstantial, voluntary non-voters when modeling our dependent variable (see Blondel et al. 1997). The dependent variable in the second step of the empirical analysis therefore provides information on whether a respondent voted in the 2014 EP election or whether she abstained for self-reported circumstantial or non-circumstantial reasons.

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<sup>1</sup> We also estimated a multilevel logit model which provides similar results compared to the logit model with country dummies. Because of the ongoing debate how many observations on the upper level are necessary to perform multi-level models (see, e.g., Stegmueller 2013), we refrain from discussing and presenting the results of the multi-level logit model in more detail.

Obviously, this notion contains two specifications of non-voters. First, the variable does not comprise actual non-voters, but those survey respondents who answered that they “did not vote” in the recent EP elections. Under the assumption that surveys are generally representative, there has been considerable over-reporting of electoral participation when compared to the actual turnout numbers (see, e.g., Karp and Brockington 2005). For the 2014 EP election, the self-reported, aggregated turnout is on average around 15 percentage points higher than the actual turnout rates of the 28 EU member states. While significant country differences exist in these over-reporting ratios, there seems to be no systematic variation related to the main independent variables of this analysis (see Figure 2).

\*\*\*Figure 2 about here\*\*\*

Second, the notions of circumstantial and voluntary abstention refer to the reasons of non-voting expressed by the survey respondents. Although the reasons for non-voting are manifold, we argue here that it is particularly important to distinguish between active non-participants and those non-voters that intended to vote, but were prevented from doing so by personal (non-political) circumstances. Our reasoning is that one group abstains deliberately, whereas the latter group fails to vote only accidentally and rather randomly. We expect that the reasons for ‘voluntary’ abstaining should be different from ‘circumstantial’ non-voting, so that ideological or programmatic alienation and the impact of policy positions towards European integration should have an effect on non-voting rather for the group of voluntary non-voters than for the ones who abstained for circumstantial reasons. It goes without saying that we are aware of the fact that the self-reporting of both the actual electoral participation as well as its justifications are not ideal measures, as they might suffer from memory lapses and the tendency for social desirability. Moreover, Schmitt and van der Eijk (2008: 213) argue that excluding involuntary abstainers could possibly lead to non-falsifiable propositions. If we find empirical evidence for different determinants of ‘voluntary’ and ‘circumstantial’ non-voting, then this would also provide evidence that respondents behaved consistently in the survey when providing reasons why they abstained from voting in the 2014 EP election.

The differentiation between these two groups of abstainers has already been applied in the study of non-voting on the national (Johnston and Pattie 1997) and the European level (Blondel et al. 1997). To be more specific, the group of ‘circumstantial’ non-voters comprises respondents who mentioned that they were exclusively unable to vote due to health problems, holidays, registration problems, or involvement in work, family or leisure activities. In contrast, ‘voluntary’ abstainers mentioned amongst other reasons that a lack of knowledge and/or interest or the feeling that their vote is not decisive was the cause for not participating in the 2014 EP election. Following the differentiation developed by Blondel, Sinnott and Svensson (1997), about 29% of all respondents who said that they abstained from voting in the 2014 EP election provided purely circumstantial, private reasons for abstention like health issues or family responsibilities. Our second dependent variable contains therefore three values: whether a respondent participated in the 2014 EP election, whether he abstained for ‘circumstantial’ or for ‘voluntary’ reasons. The adequate statistical technique for estimating the determinants of voting, circumstantial non-voting and voluntary non-voting is a multinomial logistic regression with country dummy variables (see also Hobolt and Spoon 2012).

Our main independent variables are, first, the respondents’ positions on European integration. More specifically, respondents placed themselves on a bipolar 11-point scale asking them European unification ‘has already gone too far’ (0) or ‘should be pushed further’ (10). The more a respondent favors further European integration steps, the more likely she should participate in the election to the European Parliament. Secondly, we incorporate the Euclidean distance between a respondent and the position of the party located closest to the position of the respective citizen. The larger the distance is, the more likely it should be that the respondent abstains from participating in the 2014 EP election, in particular if she belongs to the group of voluntary, ‘political’ abstainers. We follow the general literature on voting behavior in EP elections and on voting in the EP by differentiating between a general left-right dimension and a policy dimension differentiating between positive and negative positions on European integration (e.g., Hix et al. 2006; de Vries et al. 2011; Hobolt and Spoon 2012). By referring to the study by

Adams, Merrill and Grofman (2005) and because of data restrictions<sup>2</sup>, we calculate the distance between the self-reported position of a respondent on the general left-right axis and the mean perceived position of relevant parties on that dimension. The same applies for the European integration policy dimension. In the first regression model, we incorporate the combined Euclidean distance score, while the second model includes separate measures for the two policy dimensions under study, so that we are able to evaluate whether the degree of ‘ideological alienation’ or ‘European policy alienation’ mattered for abstention in the 2014 EP election (see for a similar methodological strategy Debus 2009). Again, these variables that cover the degree of programmatic alienation on the one side and the position towards European integration on the other should help to explain voluntary non-voting, whereas these factors should be less important for explaining circumstantial non-voting.

As indicated in the theory section, a battery of further factors influences individual turnout. We therefore also incorporate the existence of a party identification of a respondent, which should increase the chances for participating in an election, as well as measures for the individual political interest and political efficacy, which should negatively affect abstention in the 2014 EP election. We expect the same relationship for media exposure: the more a respondent received information on the 2014 EP election, the less likely it should be that she abstains. Moreover and by referring to the literature on retrospective economic voting (e.g., Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2000, Williams et al. 2015), we control for the individually perceived responsibility on economic policy: if a respondent considers the EU to be accountable, she should be more likely to participate in the EP election, while she should be more likely to abstain if she considers the national government to be responsible.

Besides controlling for structural variables like a respondent’s gender, age and degree of education, we constructed two variables on the macro-level that should be important for individual turnout. First, we control for the existence of compulsory voting, which exists in Belgium, Greece, Luxembourg and Cyprus. Secondly, we identify those countries that have been

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<sup>2</sup> The ‘first post-election survey’ of the EES 2014 does not include a variable that provides information on the perceived position of parties by respondents on the European integration dimension. What is, however, available from another dataset created by the EES study group (the ‘second post-election survey’) is the mean position of relevant parties on the European integration dimension as perceived by the respondents.

and still are highly affected by the Euro crisis – Cyprus, Greece, Spain, Italy, Ireland and Portugal – and where the interest in the EP elections should be higher compared to countries that had not to bear the consequences of austerity policy fostered by the European Union. Having described the characteristics and coding of the variables as well as the applied statistical method, we turn to the evaluation of our theoretical argument in the following section.

## **5 Analysis**

As already indicated, we first study the determinants of abstention in the 2014 EP election by simply differentiating between voting and non-voting. In a second step, we incorporate information on the reasons why respondents abstained from participating in the 2014 election, so that the dependent variable comprises three characteristics by providing information whether a respondent said that she participated in the 2014 EP election, whether she abstained from participating for circumstantial reasons or for other, rather non-circumstantial reasons. We estimate two logit and multinomial logit models respectively. In the latter, the category ‘voted in the 2014 EP election’ marks the baseline to which we have to compare the estimated coefficients. Country dummies are included in the regression analyses, but – for the sake of simplicity – the estimated country-dummy effects are not reported.

Table 1 below provides information on the results of the logit model, so that we can estimate the effect of our main explanatory variables – the position of a respondent on further steps towards European integration and her degree of policy alienation – on abstaining from participating in the 2014 EP election. However, while almost all control variables show significant effects pointing in the expected direction, this is not the case for the main variables of interest. The only statistically significant coefficient can be found for the ideological left-right distance in model 2, but in this case the estimated effect shows that the probability of abstaining from vote decreases when the distance between voters and their national political parties increases, which was not expected by our theoretical reasoning. All in all, it seems that our main variables of interest are not doing well at all in explaining non-voting in the 2014 EP elections if we model the dependent variable dichotomously.

\*\*\*Table 1 about here\*\*\*

We are now turning to the results of the multinomial logit model which differentiates between voters (which serve as the baseline category), circumstantial abstainers and non-circumstantial, voluntary abstainers. The upper part of Table 2 provides information on the impact of the theoretically derived variables on the self-reported circumstantial non-voting in the 2014 EP election. We here find – as expected – no evidence for the hypothesized direction of the main explanatory variables. Model 1 indicates that an increasing Euclidean distance – in particular on the general left-right axis (see model 2) – towards the party that comes closest to a respondent’s position on the left-right axis and on a dimension differentiating between positive and negative positions on European integration has a statistically significant negative effect, indicating that circumstantial non-voting was less likely the larger the distance to the party that comes closest to a respondent’s position was. According to model 2, there is no effect that the degree of programmatic alienation on the European policy dimension matters for circumstantial non-voting. In addition, the results of model 1 provide evidence that a more positive view on European integration increased the chance that a respondent abstained from voting in the 2014 EP election for circumstantial reasons (see the marginal effects presented in Figure 3).

This is completely not in line what we would expect according to our theoretical argument, but the results are reasonable since this group of respondents mentioned that they did not participate in the election because of private, family-related and non-political reasons. Circumstantial non-voters are in fact rather behaving as voters than non-voters, following our theoretical reasoning regarding the main explanatory variables. There is also no effect on circumstantial abstention of further political variables measuring whether the EU or the national government is responsible for the economy. Only a higher degree of political interest and political efficacy, the existence of a party identification, compulsory voting in the respondents’ country and a high degree of media exposure make circumstantial non-voting less likely compared to respondents who voted in the 2014 election.

\*\*\*Table 2 and Figure 3 about here\*\*\*



Our main interest is, however, to evaluate why voluntary non-voters – i.e. the ones who abstained not for private, circumstantial reasons – did not participate in the 2014 EP election. Here we should find evidence for our hypotheses on the impact of a respondent’s position on European integration and on the influence of the degree of programmatic alienation on abstaining from the 2014 EP election. As the lower part of Table 2 indicates, there is evidence for our first and second hypotheses: the more a respondent favors further European unification, the less likely she abstained in the 2014 EP election for voluntary reasons. Figure 4 shows the marginal effect of a respondent’s position on European integration on the probability to abstain in the 2014 EP election for voluntary reasons. If a respondent is not in favor of further steps in European integration, the chances that she voluntarily abstained is about 26%; if a respondent mentioned that she is very much positive on European unification, the probability is significantly lower and just at about 22%.

\*\*\*Figure 4 about here\*\*\*

Model 2 also provides evidence for our second hypothesis about the impact of programmatic alienation on abstention: while the effect of the overall Euclidean distance is positive, but insignificant according to model 1, only the effect of the Euclidean distance based on European integration policy reaches standard levels of statistical significance and has the expected positive direction: the larger the distance between a respondent and the party closest to her on the European integration dimension, the more likely it was that she will abstain from voting in the 2014 EP election. Figure 5 clarifies the impact of this ‘alienation’ variable graphically. If the distance between a respondent and a party on the European policy dimension is zero, then the likelihood that these citizens abstained were 23%; if, however, the distance between a respondent and the party closest to her on the European policy dimension reached its maximum, the chances that she abstained increased to 26%. This provides evidence that not only the European policy position of voters influence voluntary non-voting, but also that the offers of parties on European policy matter and to which degree these offers match with European policy positions of citizens who were allowed to vote in the 2014 EP election. This implies that turnout in EP elections

would increase if parties would provide European policy positions in their election manifestos that come closer to the positions of the electorate.

\*\*\*Figure 5 about here\*\*\*

The remaining effects are in line with what one would expect: the more a respondent considers the European Union responsible for the economic situation, the more likely she abstains for voluntary reasons in the 2014 EP elections. Since there is no effect of the variable indicating that a respondent who blames the national government for the state of the economic, we find once more evidence that voluntary non-voting can be traced back in the 2014 EP election to European policy issues, meaning that in 2014 – maybe because of the financial crisis, its implications for EU decision-making and the high degree of politicization – abstention was stronger influenced by European issues than by national issues. The latter would imply that – at least in terms of individual turnout – the 2014 EP election was not a second-order *national* election. The effects of the remaining variables show the expected directions, for instance, party identifiers are significantly less likely to abstain voluntarily; the same is true for respondents that are very interested in politics and that feel that their vote counts, i.e. respondents who believe in political efficacy. In line with our expectations, the effect sizes of all control variables are higher for voluntary than for circumstantial non-voters.

## **6 Conclusions**

The aim of this paper was to evaluate the impact of citizens' attitudes towards the European integration process and their perception of being represented by political parties for their individual decisions whether or not to participate in the elections to the European Parliament. We have theoretically argued that a negative stance on European integration as well as a high distance to the closest party on this policy dimension increases the probability of abstaining in European elections, because both factors lead to a reduced utility in the individual calculus of voting. In the empirical analysis, we have tested these two propositions using post-electoral survey data of the 2014 EP elections and found evidence for both hypotheses. However, we have

seen that our main explanatory variables only matter for non-voters who deliberately stayed away from the ballot boxes, but not for those abstainers who were prevented from voting by personal circumstances.

Since our original research interest was to assess the question whether ‘Europe matters’ for citizens in their participation in European politics, particularly during the years of economic crises in Europe, we can conclude that it apparently does. While the popular ‘second-order national elections’ paradigm would suggest that citizens make their participation in EP elections dependent on factors located on the national level, we have seen in this paper that this is not totally true. In fact, both Eurosceptic attitudes as well as the alienation from political parties in their stance on European integration are helpful to understand why voters choose not to participate in elections on the European level. We acknowledge, however, that this is the case only to a certain extent and that the explanatory power of these variables is rather low compared to the traditional determinants of turnout and political participation more generally. Nevertheless, our results support the findings of other studies (Blondel et al. 1998, Flickinger and Studlar 2007, Stockemer 2012) concluding that Europe matters for turnout in European elections.

Three more limitations of our analysis have to be mentioned here: one being of theoretical nature whereas the other two relate to the data we have used. First, our theoretical assumption that Euroscepticism leads to a lesser likelihood of participating in European politics ignores the mobilizing potential of Eurosceptic parties. It is therefore very plausible that negative attitudes towards European integration have also positively affected turnout in the 2014 EP elections. Integrating this reasoning in the theoretical model and thereby differentiating between Eurosceptic voters and Eurosceptic non-voters could be a promising way for further research to identify the effect of EU-related orientation on turnout more clearly.

Secondly, our results concerning policy alienation can be questioned on the basis that we have used aggregated – or ‘objective’ – policy positions of national political parties to measure the distance between voters and parties. However, it could be very well argued that the individual decision whether or not to vote depends more on the ‘subjective’ policy positions of political parties that voters perceive. This data was, yet, not available in case of the 2014 EP elections.

Thirdly, we are aware that survey respondents are often unreliable in accurately recalling past behavior, which is the main reason why over-reporting of turnout is such a frequently observed phenomenon. This problem which is caused by forgetfulness, non-attitudes, and cognitive bias (see van Elsas et al. 2013) have even led some researchers to conclude that “recall data should not be incorporated into models of voting behavior” (Weir 1975: 53). Other studies, however, have shown that “substantive conclusions about the factors that influence voting or non-voting are largely unaffected by the use of validated as opposed to reported voting data” (Sigelman 1982: 47). Although we are convinced that it is conceptually important to distinguish between voluntary non-voting and abstention due to circumstantial reasons, we admit that the problems connected to recall questions should be particularly strong when respondents are asked to justify their past behavior. Empirical findings that rely on recall data have to be therefore treated with a certain caution. Future research should take these restrictions into account and provide additional measurements of voluntary non-voting.

Lastly, another promising route for further investigating to what extent European orientations matter for participation in European elections lies in identifying more ways in which this could be the case. While we consider the two main explanatory variables and their causal link to the turnout decision to be highly relevant, we also agree that there are be even more attitudinal concepts that could help explaining citizens’ engagement and participation in European politics, as it has been shown in past research as well (see for example Clark 2014). In our view, the finding that ‘Europe matters’ for citizens’ political participation in EU politics will eventually benefit rather than suffer from such further research efforts.

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Figure 1: Illustration of the policy alienation model

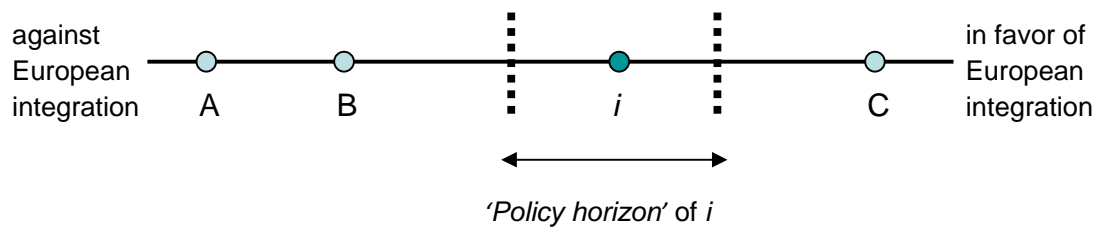


Figure 2: Differences between reported and actual turnout rates in the EU member states

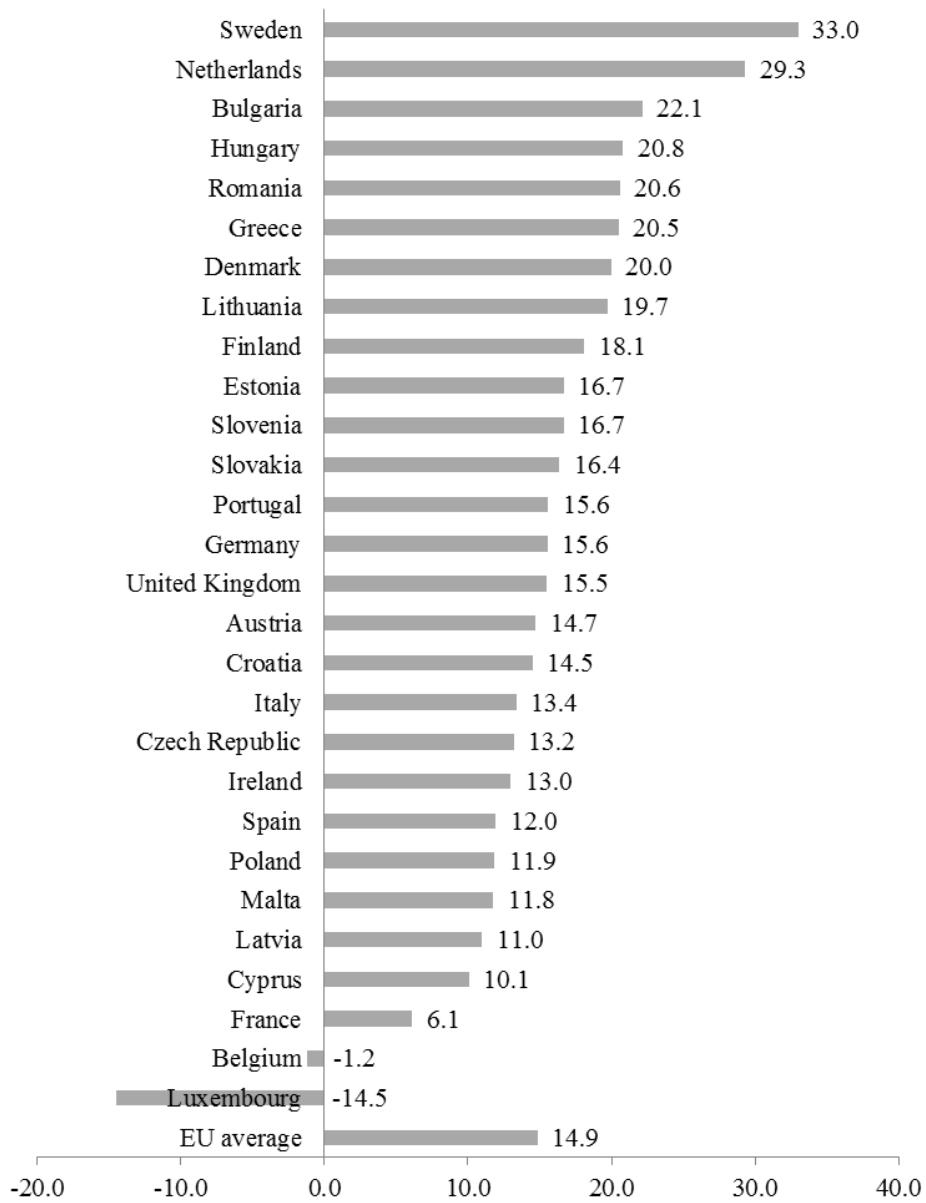


Figure 3: Marginal effect of the European integration policy position of voters on the probability to abstain in the 2014 EP election for self-reported circumstantial non-voters (based on model 2 in table 2)

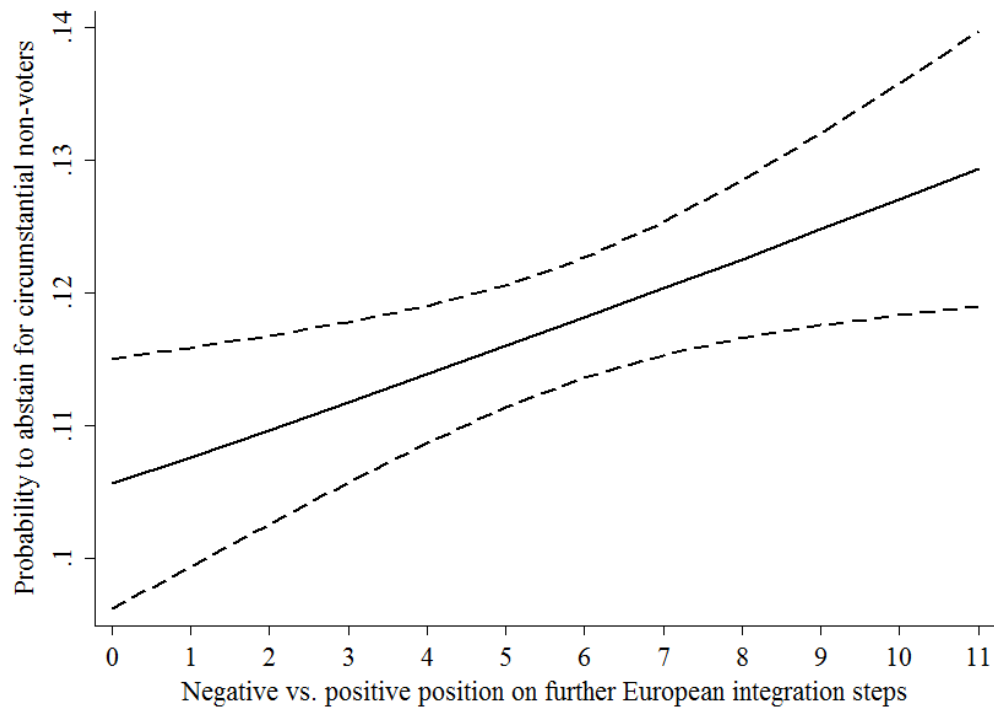


Figure 4: Marginal effect of a respondent's position on further steps towards European integration on the probability to abstain in the 2014 EP elections for non-circumstantial reasons (based on model 2 in table 2)

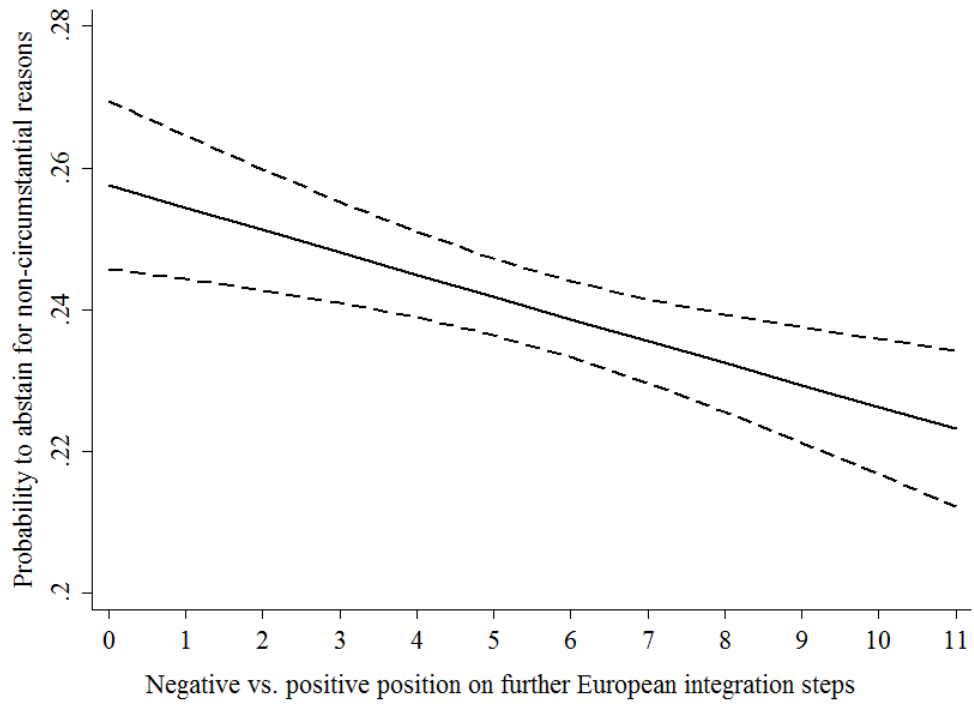


Figure 5: Marginal effect of the Euclidean distance on the European integration policy distance on the probability to abstain in the 2014 EP election for self-reported voluntary non-voters (based on model 2 in table 2)

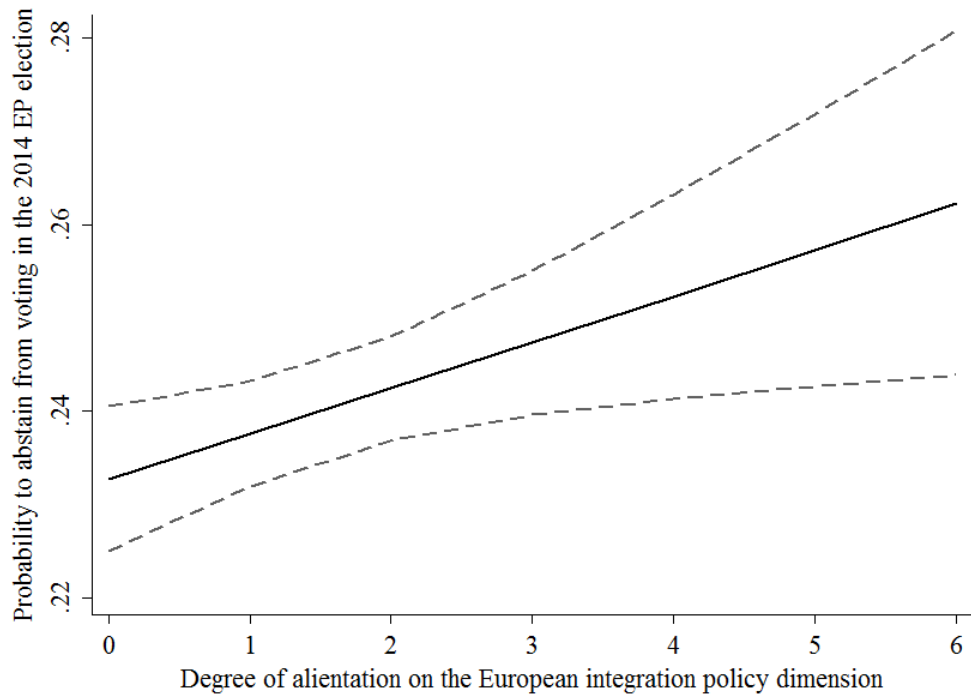


Table 1: Determinants of abstaining in the 2014 EP election

	Model 1	Model 2
<i>Main explanatory variables</i>		
Position on European integration	-0.005 (0.006)	-0.006 (0.006)
Euclidean distance	0.000 (0.013)	
Euclidean distance (left-right dimension)		-0.078** (0.027)
Euclidean distance (European integration dimension)		0.020 (0.013)
<i>Control variables</i>		
EU responsible for economy	-0.027** (0.008)	-0.026** (0.008)
National government responsible for economy	-0.015 (0.008)	-0.015 (0.008)
Party ID exists	-0.609** (0.040)	-0.594** (0.040)
Political interest	-0.385** (0.022)	-0.384** (0.022)
Political efficacy	-0.270** (0.012)	-0.269** (0.012)
Media exposure	-0.285** (0.014)	-0.285** (0.014)
Female	-0.141** (0.036)	-0.139** (0.036)
Age	-0.019** (0.001)	-0.019** (0.001)
Education	-0.119** (0.029)	-0.120** (0.029)
Compulsory voting	-2.646** (0.157)	-2.662** (0.157)
Crisis countries	1.770** (0.187)	1.753** (0.187)
Constant	3.999** (0.147)	4.017** (0.147)
Country dummies	Included	Included
<i>N</i>	19030	19030
pseudo <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.229	0.229
<i>AIC</i>	19215.562	19207.633

Note: Multinomial logit; Base category is voting in the 2014 EP election. Significance levels: \* =  $p = 0.05$ ; \*\* =  $p = 0.01$ .

Table 2: Determinants of circumstantial or non-circumstantial abstaining in the 2014 EP election

	Model 1	Model 2
<b>Self-reported circumstantial non-voters</b>		
<i>Main explanatory variables</i>		
Position on European integration	0.017* (0.009)	0.015 (0.009)
Euclidean distance	-0.039* (0.018)	
Euclidean distance (left-right dimension)		-0.120** (0.036)
Euclidean distance (European integration dimension)		-0.009 (0.017)
<i>Control variables</i>		
Compulsory voting	-2.009** (0.209)	-2.030** (0.209)
Crisis countries	0.939** (0.290)	0.922** (0.290)
EU responsible for economy	-0.015 (0.011)	-0.014 (0.011)
National government responsible for economy	-0.016 (0.010)	-0.016 (0.010)
Party ID exists	-0.386** (0.054)	-0.368** (0.055)
Political interest	-0.246** (0.031)	-0.246** (0.031)
Political efficacy	-0.124** (0.016)	-0.123** (0.016)
Media exposure	-0.240** (0.019)	-0.240** (0.019)
Female	-0.053 (0.049)	-0.051 (0.049)
Age	-0.020** (0.002)	-0.020** (0.002)
Education	-0.055 (0.040)	-0.055 (0.040)
Constant	1.705** (0.196)	1.725** (0.196)
<b>Self-reported non-circumstantial non-voters</b>		
<i>Main explanatory variables</i>		
Position on European integration	-0.018* (0.007)	-0.019** (0.007)
Euclidean distance	0.019 (0.015)	
Euclidean distance (left-right dimension)		-0.051



		(0.031)
Euclidean distance (European integration dimension)		0.033*
		(0.015)
<i>Control variables</i>		
Compulsory voting	-3.119**	-3.130**
	(0.203)	(0.204)
Crisis countries	2.247**	2.234**
	(0.230)	(0.230)
EU responsible for economy	-0.034**	-0.034**
	(0.009)	(0.009)
National government responsible for economy	-0.014	-0.015
	(0.009)	(0.009)
Party ID exists	-0.734**	-0.723**
	(0.045)	(0.045)
Political interest	-0.465**	-0.464**
	(0.026)	(0.026)
Political efficacy	-0.357**	-0.356**
	(0.014)	(0.014)
Media exposure	-0.316**	-0.315**
	(0.016)	(0.016)
Female	-0.196**	-0.194**
	(0.042)	(0.042)
Age	-0.019**	-0.019**
	(0.001)	(0.001)
Education	-0.160**	-0.160**
	(0.034)	(0.034)
Constant	4.270**	4.284**
	(0.167)	(0.167)
Country dummies	Included	Included
<i>N</i>	19030	19030
pseudo <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.192	0.193
<i>AIC</i>	27162.568	27156.513

Note: Multinomial logit; Base category is voting in the 2014 EP election. Significance levels: \* =  $p = 0.05$ ; \*\* =  $p = 0.01$ .

Table 3: Operationalization of variables

Variables	Item in EES 2014	Coding
<i>Dependent variables</i>		
Non-voting (abstention)	QP1: European Parliament elections were held on the (INSERT CORRECT DATE ACCORDING TO COUNTRY). For one reason or another, some people in (OUR COUNTRY) did not vote in these elections. Did you yourself vote in the recent European Parliament elections?	1 = "did not vote", DK excluded (rest = 0)
Non-circumstantial, voluntary non-voting	QP4b: What are the main reasons why you did NOT vote in the recent European Parliament elections?	1 = mentioned at least one reason that is non-circumstantial (lack of trust in or dissatisfaction with politics in general, not interested in politics as such, not interested in European matters, not really satisfied with the European Parliament as an institution, opposed to the EU, do not know much about the EU or the European Parliament or the European Parliament elections, vote has no consequences or vote does not change anything, rarely or never vote, did not know there were European Parliament elections, lack of public debate or lack of electoral campaign, other, don't know)
Circumstantial non-voting	QP4b: What are the main reasons why you did NOT vote in the recent European Parliament elections?	1 = mentioned purely circumstantial reasons for abstention (sick or health problem at the time, on holiday or away from home, too busy or no time or at work, involved in a family or leisure activity, registration or voting card problems), but no non-circumstantial reason (see above)

*Independent Variables*

Position on European integration	QPP18: Some say European unification should be pushed further. Others say it already has gone too far. What is your opinion? Please indicate your views using a scale from 0 to 10, where '0' means unification "has already gone too far" and '10' means it "should be pushed further". What number on this scale best describes your position?	Original 11-point scale not altered, refusal and DK excluded
Euclidean distance (EU dimension)	Euclidean distance between own position on European integration dimension (QPP18) and next national political party on the very same dimension (value averaged over all respondents, item taken from EES 2014 second post-election survey)	Scale ranges from 0 (no distance) to 5.26 (maximum distance)
Euclidean distance (left-right dimension)	Euclidean distance between own position on 11-point ideological left-right scale (QPP13) and next national political party on the very same dimension (value averaged over all respondents, item: QPP14)	Scale ranges from 0 (no distance) to 3.46 (maximum distance)
Euclidean distance (total)	Combined Euclidean distance on both dimensions (see above)	Scale ranges from 0,01 (minimum distance) to 6.27 (maximum distance)

*Control variables*

Compulsory voting	Macro-level variable	1 = Greece, Cyprus, Belgium, Luxemburg (rest = 0)
Crisis countries	Macro-level variable	1 = Portugal, Italy, Ireland, Greece, Spain, Cyprus (rest = 0)
EU responsible for economy	QPP7: Now I would like to ask you some questions about how much responsibility the different institutions have in the current economic situation in (OUR COUNTRY). Please use a scale from 0 to 10, where '0' means that you think they have "no responsibility" and '10' means that they have "full responsibility": <i>The European Union</i>	Original 11-point scale not altered, refusal and DK excluded
National government responsible for economy	QPP7: Now I would like to ask you some questions about how much responsibility the different institutions have in the current economic situation in (OUR COUNTRY). Please use a scale from 0 to 10, where '0' means that you think they have "no responsibility" and '10' means that they have "full responsibility": ( <i>NATIONALITY</i> ) <i>government</i>	Original 11-point scale not altered, refusal and DK excluded
Party ID exists	QPP21: Do you consider yourself to be close to any particular political party? If so, which party do you feel close to?	1 = any party is indicated, 0 = no party is indicated, refusal and DK excluded
Political interest	QP6: For each of the following statements, please tell me to what extent it corresponds or not to your attitude or opinion: <i>You are very interested in politics</i>	4-point scale: 0 = "No, not at all", 3 = "Yes, totally", DK excluded
Political efficacy	D72: Please tell me to what extent you agree or disagree with each of the following statements: <i>My voice counts in the European Union; My voice counts in (COUNTRY)</i>	Sum index of the two items on 7-point scale: 0 = "totally disagree" to both statements, 7 = "totally agree" to both statements, DK excluded

Media exposure	QP11: How often did you do any of the following during the four weeks before the recent European elections? How often did you...: <i>Watch a program about the European elections on television?; Read about the European elections in a newspaper?; Read about the European elections on the Internet (websites, social media, etc.)</i>	Sum index of the three items on 7-point scale: 0 = "never" to all items, 7 = "often" to all items, DK excluded
Female	D10: Gender	1 = female (rest = 0)
Age	D11: How old are you?	Not re-scaled
Education	D8: How old were you when you stopped full-time education?	0 = "-15" and "no full-time education", 1 = "16-19", 2 = "20-" and "still studying", refusal and DK excluded