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The 2009 European Election in Italy: National or European?

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ABSTRACT *In June 2009, European citizens voted in the European Parliamentary elections. Despite the relevance of the election, turnout across countries was particularly low. In Italy, too, abstention is growing and this paper aims to explain why. Traditionally, low turnout in European Parliamentary elections is explained by the fact that they are considered second-order elections and, thus, less important than national elections. According to this perspective, national factors are the main cause of lower turnout as compared to national elections. Thus, it is generally considered that low turnout is not related to citizens' support for the European Union or other European attitudes, such as European identity. In this article, this perspective is questioned and other individual factors are considered. In particular, a number of European attitudes are considered as independent variables together with national factors. The findings show that abstention in European Parliamentary elections in Italy is directly linked to citizens' disaffection with politics, rather than disaffection with government performance. Furthermore, attitudes toward the European Union integration project play a role only when the level of political involvement is high. Thus, European questions matter and turnout in European Parliamentary elections is driven not only by national-level factors, but also by citizens' satisfaction with the European Union and sense of European identity.*

KEY WORDS: European vote, European attitudes, political involvement, turnout, Italy

Introduction¹

In 2014, European citizens will vote in the eighth European Parliamentary elections. There are certain expectations concerning these elections as they will take place at a particularly delicate time for the European Union (EU) due to the economic and financial crisis in Europe, which calls into question the very existence of a united Europe. Voting is also a key behavioural indicator of EU engagement and, thus, interest is especially strong. The last elections were held in June 2009 and, despite their importance, the average participation rate in European countries was particularly low: 43% for the 27 EU member-states (EU-27). In Italy, for a long time an example of high turnout, scrutiny of the rate of turnout reveals a rather sharp decline, down by 7% compared to the 2004 elections and by 20% compared to the first European Parliamentary elections held in 1979.

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Various considerations lead to the hypothesis that the fall in turnout observed in Italy in the 2009 European elections was not entirely due to physiological reasons and cannot be explained only by the fact that they are second-order elections. Nor should the decline be explained only in terms of the natural declining trend that characterizes the participation rates in national elections in Italy.

The decline in the participation rate in the 2009 European elections in Italy was higher than in other European countries. In addition, the difference in the abstention rate between the national and European elections is growing – that is to say that abstention in the European elections is increasing to a greater extent than in national elections. Finally, the decline in voting seems to be closely associated with a decrease in indicators of Italian Europeanism.

Although the literature assigns European elections the status of second-order elections, there are reasonable justifications for assuming that the decline in voter turnout in the European elections is due to several reasons and that it reflects an increasing level of Euroscepticism. Using Eurobarometer data with individual level analysis, this paper aims to examine voter turnout and the relationship between European attitudes (in particular, European identity and support for the European integration project) and European Parliamentary elections in Italy.

The 2009 European Parliamentary Elections: Europe and Italy

The European Parliamentary elections, held in June 2009, were particularly important because they took place at a very critical time for the EU. Although the Lisbon Treaty introduced only a few innovations in the institutional architecture of the EU, it undeniably helped to increase the accountability of the system, linking the results of the elections and the appointment of the President of the European Commission. Yet, Europeans do not seem to have perceived the real importance of the elections: European participation was, on average, very low. The turnout in Europe was 43% (in other words, almost six out of 10 Europeans did not vote in the polls). Participation rates were especially low in Lithuania and Slovakia (around 20%), slightly higher for Poland (25%) and, in contrast, more than 90% in nations such as Belgium and Luxembourg, which always have a high turnout. [Figure 1](#) shows the distribution of voter turnout among countries in the European elections in June 2009. At the bottom of the list, with very low participation rates are the Eastern European countries as well as the most recent EU member-states. However, abstention also affects countries with the oldest membership in the community, such as Germany and France.

The very low average European turnout rate is due primarily to recent accession countries, as can be seen quite clearly in [Figure 2](#), whereas the citizens of the most established European nations show higher rates, with the exception of Germany and France as already indicated. At first glance, it seems indubitable that the European elections are perceived as second-order, or less important, elections and that this was even more the case in 2009. This is borne out by the fact that the average participation in national elections among the 27 EU countries is much higher, standing at 70%.²

Turning specifically to the Italian voters' behaviour in the 2009 European elections, the participation rate was 65%, one of the highest percentages among the European countries and considerably above the average (the reference being the EU-27), but also significantly higher than the average turnout of the founding countries of Europe (just above 61%, as

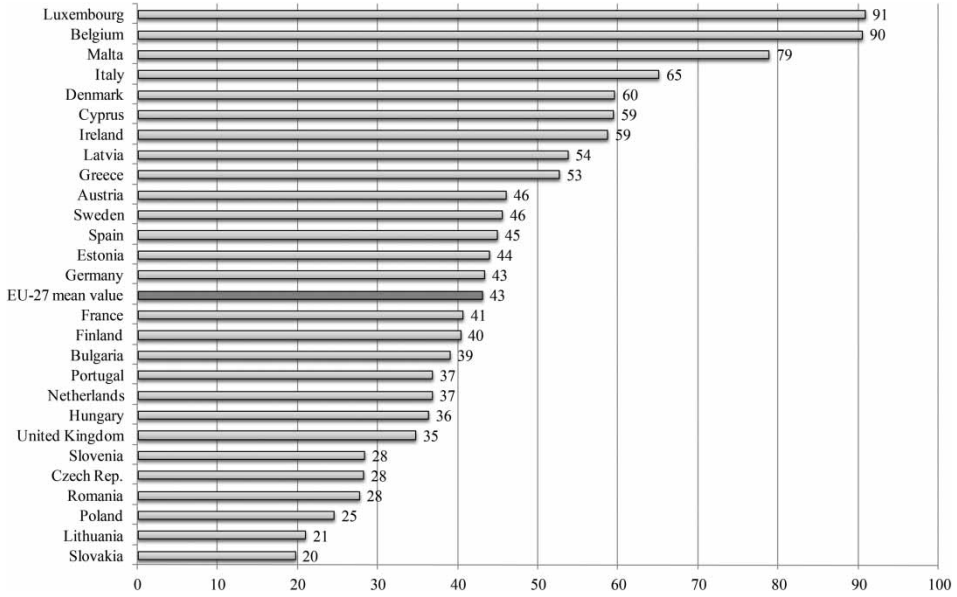


Figure 1. European election: Turnout among European countries (%)

Source: European Parliament.

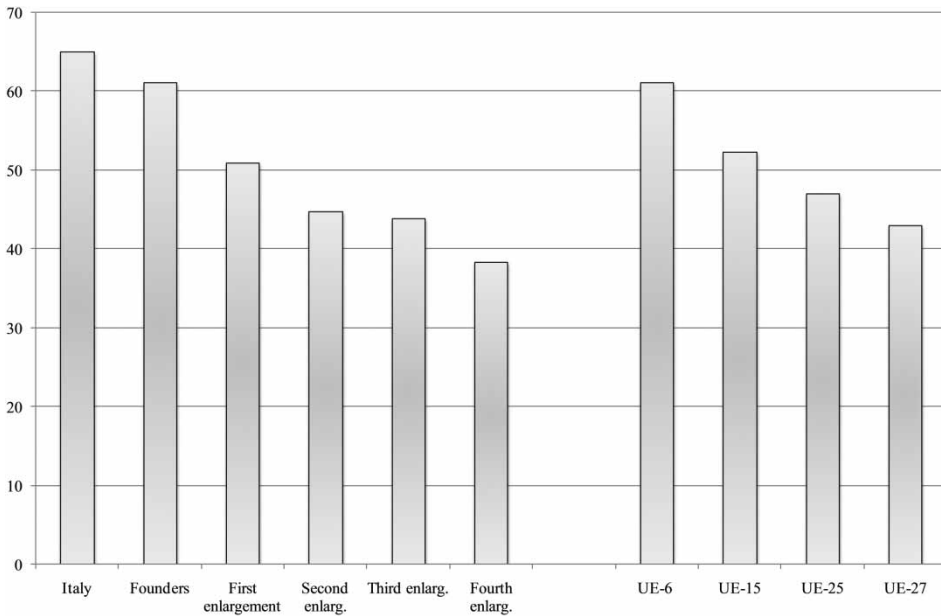


Figure 2. Turnout in European Parliament election (2009) according to length of European membership (%)

Source: Author's calculation based on European Parliament data.

shown in Figure 2). In other words, Italians still participate in the European elections by a large majority, but this is only true when considered from a synchronic perspective, i.e. if the benchmark is the participation rate in other nations. If the comparison is made over time in the same country, the overall picture changes considerably.

In greater detail, as summarized in Figure 3,³ there was a decrease of almost 20 percentage points between the participation rate in the first European Parliamentary elections in 1979 and that in the 2009 elections. To propose some terms of comparison, the participation rate in Belgium is stable over time (91% participation in 1979 and 90% in 2009, although this trend is to be expected because, in Belgium, voting is compulsory); in the United Kingdom, participation is even growing, albeit slightly (32% in 1979 and 35% in 2009).

If one examines the data on participation in voting for the national Parliamentary elections – for many years emblematic of very high participation – a slight decline is also observed, but it is generalized (the reasons are beyond the scope of this paper, but see Steinbrecher & Rattinger, 2012a). Thus, participation in national elections in Italy is also declining, but this is still considered physiological, similar to other Western democracies: the average attendance was close to 90% (this value takes into account all the elections for the Chamber of Deputies for the period 1948–2008 and changes slightly if the 2013 national elections are included, in which turnout was 75.15%), but over time, this has decreased by almost 12 percentage points (more than 17%, if we include 2013). A brief comparison of turnout in Italy at the European and national levels across time reveals how the difference is growing: in 1979, the difference between the two elections was only 5 percentage points in favour of the national elections, in 1994, the gap had risen

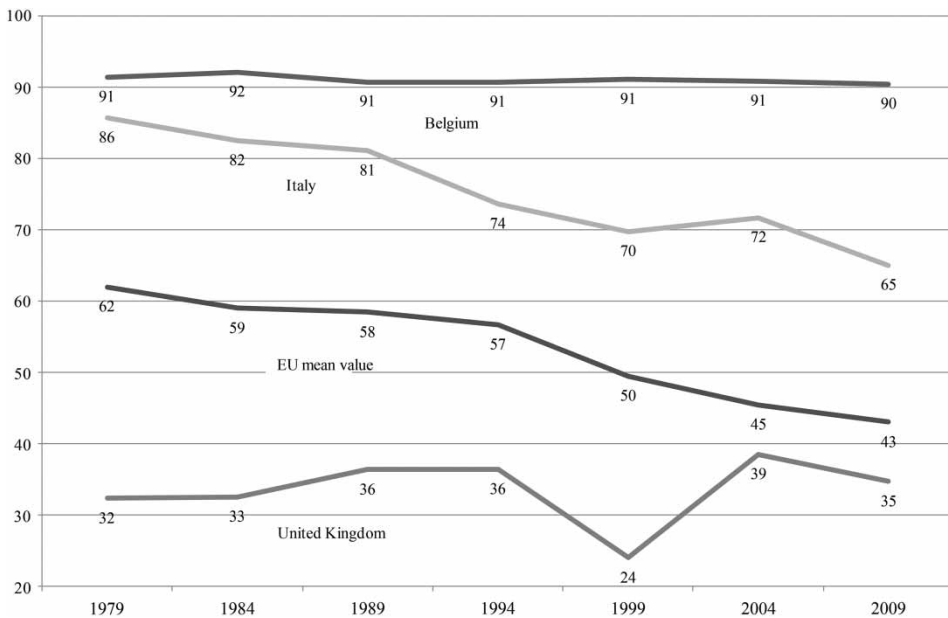


Figure 3. European election turnout across time in selected countries (%)

Source: Author's calculation based on European Parliament data.

to 13%, and the gap between the 2008 national elections and the 2009 European elections was 15%, as shown in Figure 4.

In other words, in Italy, voter turnout is decreasing both in national and European elections, but the abstention rate in European elections is more accentuated. Such considerations inspired the first comments on the European elections in Italy, made by researchers at the Istituto Cattaneo (Bellucci, Garzia & Rubal Maseda, 2010; Natale, 2010). With some caution, it can be assumed that the growing abstention in the European elections is an indicator of increasing scepticism on the part of Italians towards Europe, which is the object of study of other research (e.g. Serricchio, 2011).

But is this really the case? Are the two phenomena actually linked? Are the growth in Euroscepticism in general and the decrease in the levels of support for and identification with Europe really among the possible causes of this alienation regarding European Parliamentary elections in Italy? Certainly, Italians are now more distant from Europe than in the past: using the membership indicator, the trend of European support is clearly in decline in Italy, as Figure 5 shows.

Studies have assessed the role of cultural (also termed ‘ascribed’) national identity (e.g. Serricchio, 2010) and the impact of the economic and financial crisis (e.g. Serricchio, Tsakatika & Quaglia, 2013) on the growth of Euroscepticism and these elements could also influence vote behaviour.

The factors considered thus far give only partial explanations and the question of what affects turnout is actually far more complex. Voter turnout in the 2009 European Parliamentary elections in Italy is not distributed homogeneously: in Sardinia, only 41% voted, whereas in Umbria, the rate was 78%; generally, in the southern regions, fewer citizens voted than in the ‘red’ regions and in the north and centre). Thus, the decrease in turnout in the European Parliamentary elections in Italy can partially be explained by the increase in disaffection in the southern regions, but the differences between the several

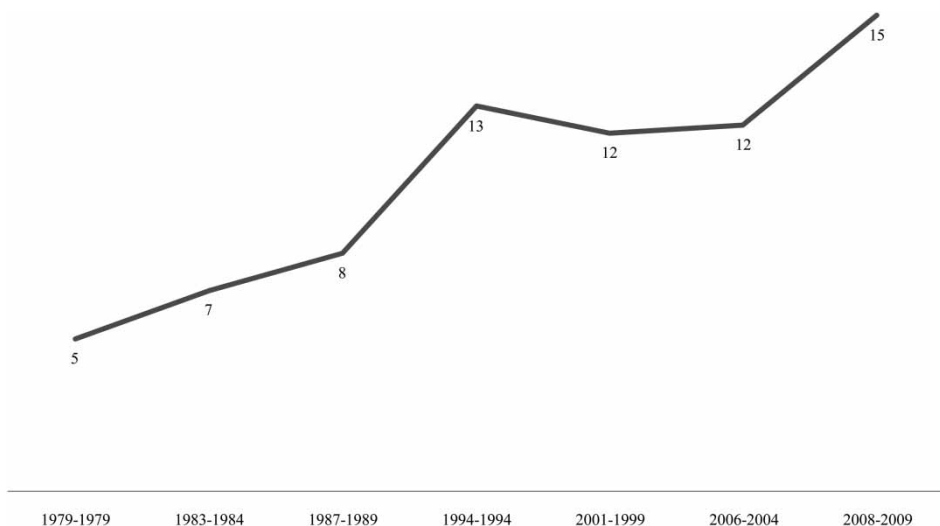


Figure 4. Differences among turnout in national and European elections (Italy, %)

Source: Author’s calculation based on official data (EU Parliament and Italian Minister of Interior).

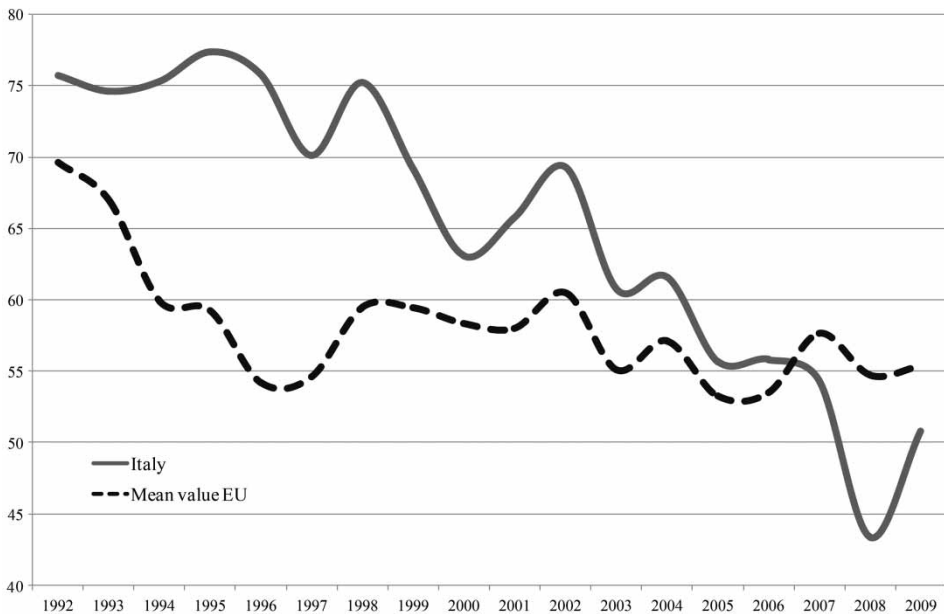


Figure 5. The evolution of support for European integration in Italy (1992–2009)

Source: Eurobarometer (various). % of citizens answering Italy's EU membership is a good thing (missing excluded).

geographical areas of Italy may reflect other attitudes and orientations, related to several factors. Thus, I argue that the interpretation of voting behaviour in the European elections needs to consider explanations that differ from those traditionally adopted.

Who Voted in Italy?

The previous section presented the distribution of voting patterns among the European nations in 2009, the trend over time of participation in the European elections in Italy (and in some selected cases), pointing also to the geographic variations within Italy. As the main goal of this paper is not to explain increasing abstention over time, but the causes of abstention in the 2009 European Parliamentary elections in Italy, the question is: who voted in Italy? An examination of voting behaviour in relation to socio-demographic profiles may not prove decisive in understanding the causes of abstention, but the data collected in the Eurobarometer 71.3, conducted in 2009 a few days after the European elections, allow us to draw a raw map of the voters.⁴

Women and men voted in a substantially similar way, while turnout increased in the intermediate categories of age, being lower among the younger and older voters. The distribution of voting according to educational level is as expected (the more educated tend to vote more); the picture is similar for profession, with more managers voting and, conversely, the unemployed tending not to vote. Ultimately, the distribution of voting according to socio-demographic variables seems to confirm the initial impression: the citizens belonging to social groups that are more 'central' (better educated and wealthier) tend to vote

more. However, in general, the differences in turnout based on socio-demographic variables do not appear high, so the main conclusion is that socio-demographic characteristics do not exert a decisive impact on the decision to vote or abstain.

In contrast, the picture that emerges from an examination of the distribution of voting patterns according to selected economic variables is more interesting. The perception of the national economic situation influences the decision to vote in European elections: the turnout level was 37.7% for those who considered that the national economy had worsened, as opposed to 61.1% for those who judged it more favourably.

Analysing the distribution of voters according to socio-political variables gives a more articulate picture. As expected, people who are interested in politics tend to vote more than those who are not (64.5% vs. 41%). In this, political parties seem to play a decisive role, as the percentage of voters tends to rise considerably from those who are distant from political parties (20.7%) to those who declare themselves close (68.8%). Trust in the national government also exerts quite a strong effect (low trust 44% vs. high trust 58.2%), and those who vote in national elections also tend to vote in the European elections (57.9%, as opposed to 27.9% for those who did not vote in the national elections).

This kind of analysis, although rather simple, provides the first indications of the possible reasons for abstention. However, before we delve further into searching for the causes, it could be useful to consider what citizens said had directly motivated abstention when answering questions included in the Eurobarometer 71.3 (Papacostas, 2009). For Italian citizens (considering only those who stated that they had abstained), the main reason for abstention in the 2009 European elections was lack of trust and disaffection with politics in general (31.2%, EU average 28%). Among the reasons for not voting, Italians claim to be influenced by a feeling of helplessness, the perception that their votes are useless and that voting will not change the situation, in other words what the political scientists define as a sense of personal inefficacy (16.3%, EU average 17%). Again, they cite lack of interest in politics in general (9.5%, EU average 17%). Also, among the Italians who abstained, 8% indicated their lack of knowledge of European issues as the reason (EU average 10%), and only 5% justified their abstention by lack of interest in European issues (EU average 9%) and lack of trust in the European Parliament (EU average 8%). The results are summarized in [Table 1](#).

In short, from a first evaluation, conducted through monivariate analysis, Italians' electoral behaviour in relation to Europe seems to be driven by political factors, comprising general mechanisms of various kinds that are activated in the national context, rather than by purely European motivations.

What Drives Italian Voters' Behaviour in European Elections?

In order to assess the predictors of voting in European elections, in the next sections, I present and discuss the literature that explains voting behaviour, in particular abstention. I then introduce the operationalization of the theories and the variable employed in the study.

The explanation of voting behaviour is a particularly fruitful research tradition. Purely an individual choice, voting is primarily explained by two types of factors: 1) long-term, such as party identification, the voter's social position, values, and the context in which the voter lives; 2) short-term, such as the individual's view of the government in power, the image of

Table 1. What are the main reasons you did NOT vote in the recent European Parliamentary elections? (Italy vs. EU-27)

	% Italy	% EU-27
Opposed to the European Union	1	4
Rarely or never vote	2	10
Lack of public debate/ lack of electoral campaign	3	6
Not interested in European matters	5	9
Not really satisfied with the European Parliament as an institution	5	8
Involved in a family/ leisure activity	6	5
Too busy/ no time/ had to work	6	10
Sick/ health problem	8	7
Do not know much about the European Union/ European Parliament or the European Parliament elections	8	10
Not interested in politics	10	17
On holiday/ away from home	13	10
Other	14	6
Vote has no consequences/vote does not change anything	16	17
Lack of trust in/ dissatisfaction with politics generally	31	28
<i>N</i>	353	10.796

Source: Author's calculation based on Eurobarometer 71.3, 2009. Multiple answers possible.

the leader, the issues raised during the election campaign, and the impact of the campaign (Bellucci & Segatti, 2010b).

More precisely, voting behaviour is explained by traditional (or ascribed) factors, which may exert an effect even moments away from the election campaign, and acquired factors, which primarily relate to the immediacy of the vote itself. According to a more sophisticated point of view, ascribed factors can also be labelled as the antecedents of voting choices (Biorcio, 2010). Abstention, traditionally explained in Italy only by a lack of civic culture, can be traced to social factors or may derive from rational choices, which are substantiated in a judgement delivered by the voter (Tuorto, 2010).

These models have been applied successfully to the study of the electoral behaviour of Italian citizens in the national elections, i.e. first-order elections. To what extent are they applicable and valid explanations of voting behaviour in European elections? In the literature, there is general agreement that the explanation of European voting behaviour does not strictly follow the traditional interpretations of electoral behaviour because such elections are *sui generis*: the largely dominant explanation is based on the consideration that European elections are second-order (Marsh, 1998; Reif & Schmitt, 1980; Schmitt, 2007). According to this perspective, European elections are dominated by issues rooted in the national context and can also be seen as a mid-term election test, similar to the US mid-term elections, in which the incumbent government measures its appeal. The idea that the European elections concern and are decided by European topics and that citizens vote first on their opinion about Europe is quite remote (Bellucci, Garzia & Rubal Maseda, 2010; Hix & Marsh, 2007; Natale, 2010; for a slightly different point of view, see Mattila, 2003).

The second-order election model has been employed widely in aggregate level analysis. However, the aforementioned perspectives can also contribute to the operationalization of

explanatory models at the individual level. Based on this, I examine the factors that predict voting behaviour in European elections in Italy.

The main idea of the second-order election model, originally developed in relation to the first elections for the European Parliament in 1979, is that citizens' choice reflects, more or less, an opinion concerning national political actors and their behaviour in the national arena. Because information on and knowledge of European issues are scarce, citizens tend to use domestic factors as proxies. One of the key factors in the second-order model is voting in previous national elections. The mid-term election model shares with the second-order model the notion that domestic dynamics drive the choices of voters. Unlike the second-order model, however, the mid-term model emphasizes the role of the government and its performance: the European elections, depending on their timing in relation to the national election cycle and the proximity/distance from the national elections (which, of course, varies from case to case), can assume the role of a real test for the incumbent government, similar to the US mid-term elections.

With regard to Italy, the European elections took place one year after the national elections and, thus, the possible interpretation of the European elections playing a mid-term role is problematic: generally, at that stage, the government is still enjoying a honeymoon period with the voters (Bellucci, 2006) and consensus is, at least theoretically, still quite high. The trend in levels of popularity, in fact, typically follows a U-shaped pattern, high initially during the election campaign and in the aforementioned honeymoon phase, then settling at lower levels during the period of government itself, in which decisions and the implementation of policies divide public opinion (the so-called 'cost of ruling'). In the specific case of Italy, even though the severe economic crisis had a negative impact on consensus concerning the government in power, the levels recorded in June 2009 were still quite high.

Although national factors, both in relation to the second-order model and the mid-term variant, explain much of the voting behaviour in the European elections, alternative explanations cannot be ignored. From Downs (1957) and the following literature on the 'paradox of voting', we know that a major element that might explain rational decisions in voting is the expected benefits of voting. One of the expected benefits could derive from European governance performance, in a broad sense. According to this point of view, voting choice is centred on individual feelings toward Europe. Blondel, Sinnott & Svensson (1997) advanced a similar hypothesis, showing – with analysis at the individual level – that citizens who were more favourable to the European integration process were more likely to vote in the European elections. Subsequent to the institution of the European Parliament and the formation of the European Commission, Schmitt (2007), drawing directly on voting results, showed that voters' perceptions of the personal effectiveness of their votes was increased and this had a positive effect on voting behaviour; European attitudes are also key variables in Bellucci's arguments (Bellucci et al., 2010). From this perspective, individual orientation towards European institutions and the perception of benefits from European membership and support for Europe play a key role in European voting behaviour.

The hypothesis that European issues play an important role in the voters' choice, therefore, makes sense: 2009 was a crucial year for the EU as a few months later, the Lisbon Treaty would be implemented. Although the new Treaty did not change the essence of the institutional architecture of the EU or the heart of the decision-making process, by

establishing a more direct relationship between the result of the elections and the formation of the European Commission, it affected the sense of efficacy of individual voting.

In this discussion, we can see the absence of a relevant factor, namely European identity. What is its role in determining voting behaviour? Other studies (e.g. Serricchio, 2011) have attempted to identify the role of predictor in European voting: identification with a political system is a crucial feature in terms of legitimacy. Thus, among the possible causes of European voting behaviour, European identity should be considered, together with the image of Europe (Diez Medrano, 2003).

As stated, voting behaviour could also be predicted by long-term factors. According to the Michigan socio-psychological approach, attachment to a party promotes involvement in the political process (Campbell *et al.*, 1960), while cognitive mobilization theory (Inglehart, 1970; Janssen, 1991) predicts that citizens who are more interested in politics are more likely to vote in general and also in the European elections (for a discussion of the role of cognitive mobilization variables in explaining European voting, see also Steinbrecher & Rattinger, 2012b). National institutions also play a role in the political mobilization process: the level of confidence in national institutions is a form of proxy for political position overall when supranational governance is implied, as Anderson (1998) and Sanchez-Cuenca (2000) claim, showing its role in shaping citizens' attitudes and behaviour toward Europe. Parties are also key actors in shaping voter preferences as extremist parties on both the right and the left reveal higher levels of Euroscepticism, while mainstream parties tend to be more favourable to European integration (Conti, 2009; Taggart, 1998). Thus, left-right ideology could also aid us in explaining European voting behaviour.

To sum up, voting behaviour – and abstention – can be explained by national and European factors that coexist in citizens' minds and influence their choice. The national factors concern civic duty and the evaluation of government performance. The European factors are strictly related to the image and the performance of supranational governance. Both national and European factors could be viewed as short-term factors; long-term factors are those related to political mobilization and political ideology. In terms of political support, there is a difference between institutional trust or confidence and political involvement (Easton, 1965; Norris, 1999); thus, I treat political involvement and national institutional trust as being comprised of two separate groups of variables.⁵ Based on these considerations, I seek to operationalize the aforementioned perspectives.

Operationalization and Hypotheses

Given the available indicators in the dataset employed in this study, I include five variables relating to national factors: voting in the previous national election, evaluation of the national economy, personal job evaluation, household financial valuation, and the judgement of national employment policies. The logic is quite intuitive: voting in the previous national election concerns a sense of civic duty, so those who have voted previously are more likely to vote again in a different election because of their civic commitment; this assumption is the basis of the second-order model, as displayed by Reif and Schmitt (1980). Economic evaluation, general and personal, is an indirect judgement about government. The expected sign is negative in all cases as those who support the national government (also because the economy is performing strongly) in the logic of a mid-term election are more likely to vote in an election, viewing it as a referendum about that government. Conversely, the more dissatisfied tend to abstain (Bellucci *et al.*, 2010;

Reif, 1984; van der Eijk & Franklin, 1996). Thus, the expected impact on abstention in the 2009 European elections is negative for all the variables and clearly also for the constructed index. I introduce and employ indices constructed through factor analysis, rather than single variables, because multivariate models are more parsimonious and the tables are more readable. In this case, the national vote is conceptually and empirically separated from the evaluation of the government's performance.

The European factors include a set of variables that aim to tap several individual attitudes toward European governance: image of Europe and European identity reflect affective orientations toward Europe (Niedermayer & Westle, 1995); European support, measured as favouring European membership and perceived benefits from EU membership; European attitudes, including trust towards the EU as a whole and trust towards its institutions; support for European policy-making and the view that members of the European Parliament are important. The logic is clear: citizens who view the integration project positively in relation to its various aspects are likely to be more in favour of going to the polls for the European Parliament (Blondel, Sinnott & Svensson, 1997). Based on factor analysis, these variables are combined in a single scale.

The political mobilization perspective is operationalized by interest in politics, strength of party identification and confidence in several national institutions, such as justice, parties, government and parliament. As already discussed, political involvement is conceptually independent from institutional trust and this assumption has been empirically confirmed; consequently, this perspective is operationalized by two derivative scales. The expected direction of association is negative for all mentioned variables because a high level of political involvement and confidence in national institutions should reduce abstention.

Finally, I include the role of political ideology as a predictor of European abstention: according to the literature discussed, mainstream (also labelled 'centrist') parties are more favourable to the European integration project and, thus, citizens positioned at the centre of the political spectrum may tend to vote more in European elections. Thus, in the model, I include a variable that taps centrism as a political ideology.

Table 2 summarizes the theoretical model, the operationalization of the concepts and the hypotheses.

Predictors of European Voting in Italy: The Empirical Analysis

As the main goal of this paper is to explain the reasons for abstention, in the following multivariate analysis, the dependent variable is voting in the 2009 European elections and is coded as a binary variable with two options: 0 (voted) and 1 (did not vote or abstained). The independent variables are those related to the theoretical perspectives discussed above.⁶ In order to obtain an answer to the main research question about the factors that could explain abstention in the 2009 European Parliamentary elections in Italy, I run a logistic regression model with two groups of variables: national and European factors; a set of socio-demographic variables is also included as a control in the equations. In Model 1, presented in Table 3, the predictors are the national and the European scales (together with the control variables) and the results, presented as odds ratios (OR), are quite clear:⁷ the main (negative) effect on abstention is exerted by voting in previous national elections, as expected (OR = 0.33). National and European factors have more or less the same weight, so they contribute equally to the explanation of abstention in the European

Table 2. The dependent and independent variables

Dependent variable	Expected impact on DV
Abstainers at 2009 European election	
Independent variables	
National factors (second-order and mid-term models)	
Vote previous national elections	
National economy evaluation	
Personal job evaluation	
Household finance evaluation	+/-
National employment evaluation	
European factors	
European support	
Benefit from EU membership	
European institutional trust	
Support for European policy-making	-
Image of Europe	
European identity	
Members of EP are important	
Political involvement	
Strength of party identification, interest in politics	-
National institutional trust	
Trust in: justice, parties, government, parliament	-
Political ideology	
	-

Notes: The signs indicate the expected direction of association of the predictors on dependent variables.

Table 3A. The individual predictors of European votes in Italy (2009)
Logistic regression

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Vote national election	.33***	.32***	.38***
Support national policy making	.92**	.93***	.97***
European factors	.89***	.92**	.96
Political ideology		.42***	.37***
Political involvement			.63***
National institutional trust			.98
<i>Socio-dem. vars (control)</i>			
Education	.89***	.90***	.89***
Urban residence	1.38*	1.34	1.30
Sex	1.10	1.07	1.14
Age	.99**	.99**	.98**
Social status	1.12*	1.10*	1.07
<i>Pseudo R quadro (Nagelkerke)</i>			
	.14	.18	.31
<i>Chi-quadro (sig.)</i>			
	.000	.000	.000
<i>N</i>			
	920	920	801

Notes: Author's calculation based on EB 71.3, 2009.

Dependent variable: abstainer at European election (voted yes/no).

Entries are odds ratio and level of significance.

*** p<.001; ** p<.01; * p<.05.

Table 3B. The role of political mobilization as predictors of European votes in Italy (2009)
Logistic regression

	Low Pol. Mob. Model 4	High Pol. Mob. Model 5
Vote national election	.33***	.31**
Support national policy making	.98	.85*
European factors	.97	.85*
Political ideology	.40***	.30***
National institutional trust	.93	1.12
<i>Socio-dem. vars (control)</i>		
Education	.86***	.96
Urban residence	1.15	1.65
Sex	1.01	1.09
Age	.98**	.98*
Social status	1.06	1.08
<i>Pseudo R quadro (Negelkerke)</i>	.17	.23
<i>Chi-quadro (sig.)</i>	.000	.000
<i>N</i>	531	270

Notes: Author's calculation based on EB 71.3, 2009.

Dependent variable: abstainer at European election (voted yes/no).

Entries are odds ratio and level of significance.

*** p<.001; ** p<.01; * p<.05.

elections. The OR is 0.91 for the national scale and $-.89$ for the European scale and both variables are statistically significant. The overall model has limited explanatory power as the low level of the pseudo r-square reveals (0.14). Nonetheless, in 2009, those who abstained clearly had in mind both national factors, such as civic duty and the judgement on government performance (the sign is negative, confirming the hypothesis), and European factors, such as political support, European identity, support for policy-making, trust in European institutions, and so on.

However, what about political mobilization and political ideology? In Model 2, political ideology was entered in the model and contributes in a very positive way to explaining European abstention. Its weight is quite strong with a negative direction, as expected (0.42). National and European factors keep their role, as in the previous equation, but the overall model significantly increases its explanatory power: the pseudo r-square is enhanced to 0.18 (still significant). In the subsequent step (Model 3), political mobilization was also entered in the model and the results are quite surprising: only voting in previous national elections and political ideology keep their weights (and statistical significance), but neither national nor the European scales are now statistically significant and their weights are halved. Hence, through the interaction with political mobilization, the roles of European and national factors simply vanish. The most powerful explanatory factor becomes political ideology (OR = 0.37) and the weight of the political mobilization scale (0.63) is quite strong. However, the overall model has better explanatory power than the previous model, as indicated by the pseudo r-square of 0.31.

Thus, this is the better model, but that does not explain why European and national factors disappear when political involvement is entered into the equation. As discussed, while European and national considerations are short-term factors, political mobilization

and political ideology are long-term factors and, thus, are probably antecedents not only of voting, but also of short-term factors.

At this stage, the goal is to assess the possible interactions among variables and, in order to do so, I run two separate regression models, one for citizens who declare a low level of political involvement and another for individuals who proclaim a high level of engagement in politics. The results, summarized in [Table 3](#), are quite interesting. There are only a few relevant differences between Model 4 (the regression model on Italians with a low level of political involvement) and Model 5 (the citizens with a high level of political engagement). One is the role played by European factors, which are weak and not significant in Model 4, but are stronger and – more importantly – statistically significant in Model 5. Also, the evaluation of the national government changes its impact and becomes significant. The other factors (voting in previous elections and political ideology) do not differ clearly between the two models. Thus, when political involvement intervenes in the relation, neither European nor national factors are significant, but when the level of political mobilization is higher, they become significant and their weights increase in the explanation of abstention in the 2009 European elections. Finally, the overall model is more robust in the case of high political involvement, as shown by the pseudo r-square values (0.23 vs. 0.14).

To sum up, the 2009 European Parliamentary elections in Italy were mainly decided on the basis of national issues. These are not entirely related to the electoral campaign or to domestic political dynamics, or indeed to the performance of the incumbent government or other institutions, but rather to the structural dynamics that define the national political debate. Italians were influenced in their decision whether or not to vote for the renewal of the European Parliament in June 2009 primarily by their proximity to politics and the ability (or inability) of political parties and other political actors to mobilize them, rather than by the will to reward or punish the incumbent government. The level of political involvement plays a key role: among citizens less involved in politics, voting in previous elections and political ideology are more relevant; among citizens who are more involved in political affairs, closeness to political parties and interest in politics – short-term factors, including European issues – become more relevant. With regard to this, European factors explain abstention only among those who are more involved in politics, whereas for those who are less engaged, the 2009 European elections were purely second order.

Conclusions

In this article, I have endeavoured to explain the reasons for abstention in the 2009 European Parliamentary elections in Italy. Assuming a synchronic perspective and taking note that participation in European elections is falling throughout Western Europe, I sought the reasons. Traditionally, the European elections have been considered second-order or comparable to the US mid-term elections, but little consideration has been given to European factors. My view is that in the choice of voting for the renewal of the European Parliament, next to national issues, European issues gain increasing importance and can help to explain the declining turnout. I consider that the results are quite interesting, but confirm only partially my main hypothesis.

The European elections, in Italy as in the rest of Europe, are still second order in the sense that they are dominated by domestic issues and this means that short-term factors, such as endorsement of the government and European support, have a limited impact on voting behaviour, the only exception being a sense of civic duty, as expected. Traditional

predictors of voting behaviour – long-term factors – such as party identification or interest in politics do indeed have a stronger impact; more precisely, the level of political involvement plays a key part and its conditioning role is evident looking at the different impact of variables among people with low and high levels of political involvement. Among those in the latter group, short-term factors also become relevant in explaining voting behaviour. This is quite an interesting finding because, in Italy, national voting behaviour has long been considered only in relation to long-term factors and contextual variables (ecological analysis) and has only recently begun to be explored increasingly in relation to short-term factors, as research by the Itanes group shows. Furthermore, European elections have always tended to be considered only as second order, with no qualification. In contrast, this paper proposes a third way of exploring the voting phenomenon.

Whether the trends observed in this paper reflect a structured orientation or other motivations that are rather more immediate and contingent is a matter for academic debate. For instance, it could be useful to extend this type of analysis to other European elections in Italy and other national contexts. In the meantime, the next European elections will yield some (maybe raw) answers.

Notes

- ¹ A preliminary version of this paper was delivered at the XXV SISP (Italian Society for Political Science) Annual Congress, 8–10 September 2011, University of Palermo.
- ² The comparison is made with the last national Parliamentary elections.
- ³ Turnout rates in European elections in all European countries across time are presented in [Table 4](#) (see Appendix).
- ⁴ The results using the European Election Study are more or less the same.
- ⁵ This structure has been empirically confirmed through exploratory factor analysis. More details on the reliability of the derived scales are in the Appendix ([Table 5](#)).
- ⁶ The descriptions of the variables and the coding procedure are in [Table 5](#) (see Appendix).
- ⁷ I prefer to show the odds ratio for a more direct comprehension of the results.

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APPENDIX

Table 4. Turnout in European elections in European country across time

	1979	1981	1984	1987	1989	1994	1995	1996	1999	2004	2007	2009
Belgium	91.4		92.1		90.7	90.7			91.1	90.8		90.4
Denmark	47.8		52.4		46.2	52.9			50.5	47.9		59.5
Germany	65.7		56.8		62.3	60.0			45.2	43.0		43.3
Ireland	63.6		47.6		68.3	44.0			50.2	58.6		58.6
France	60.7		56.7		48.8	52.7			46.8	42.8		40.6
Italy	85.7		82.5		81.1	73.6			69.8	71.7		65.1
Luxembourg	88.9		88.8		87.4	88.6			87.3	91.4		90.8
The Netherlands	58.1		50.9		47.5	35.7			30.0	39.3		36.8
United Kingdom	32.4		32.6		36.4	36.4			24.0	38.5		34.7
Greece		81.5	80.6		80.0	73.2			70.3	63.2		52.6
Spain				68.5	54.7	59.1			63.1	45.1		44.9
Portugal				72.4	51.1	35.5			39.9	38.6		36.8
Sweden							41.6		38.8	37.9		45.5
Austria								67.7	49.4	42.4		46.0
Finland								57.6	30.1	39.4		40.3
Czech Rep.										28.3		28.2
Estonia										26.8		43.9
Cyprus										72.5		59.4
Lithuania										48.4		21.0
Latvia										41.3		53.7
Hungary										38.5		36.3
Malta										82.4		78.8
Poland										20.9		24.5
Slovenia										28.4		28.3
Slovak Rep.										17.0		19.6
Bulgaria											29.2	39.0
Romania											29.5	27.7
EU-27	62.0		59.0		58.4	56.7			49.5	45.5		43.0

Notes: 1979 – EU9 = 9 member-states: Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Belgium, United Kingdom, Denmark and Ireland.

1984 – EU10 – 9 member-states + Greece in 1981.

1989 – EU12 – 10 member-states + Spain and Portugal in 1986.

1994 – EU12 – 12 member-states.

1999 – EU15 – 12 member-states + Austria, Sweden and Finland in 1995.

2004 – EU25 – 15 member-states + Poland, Hungary, Slovenia, Slovak, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Cyprus and Malta in 2004.

2009 – EU27 – 25 member-states + Bulgaria and Romania in 2007.

Source: European Parliament. Available at [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/aboutparliament/en/000cdcd9d4/Turnout-\(1979-2009\).html](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/aboutparliament/en/000cdcd9d4/Turnout-(1979-2009).html) (accessed 30 August 2013).

Table 5. Descriptive statistics and coding information of employed variables

	Obs.	Mean	Std dev.	Min.	Max.	Cronbach's Alpha	Description. Coding/recoding
Vote European Parliament	1036	.47	.50	0	1		Voted yes/not. Missing excluded
Vote previous national elections	980	1.80	.40	1	2		Voted not/yes. Missing excluded
National government evaluation	1036	4.03	2.02	0	10	.70	0–10 scale obtained combining evaluation on: national economy, personal job, household financial, national employment evaluation. Missing replaced with mean and coded as intermediate cat.
European factor	1036	6.65	2.43	0	10	.87	0–10 scale obtained combining European support, benefit from EU membership, European institutional trust, European identity, image of Europe, support for E-policy making scale, European parliamentary member important. Missing replaced with mean and coded as intermediate cat.
Political involvement factor	1036	2.23	1.62	0	5	.50	0–5 scale obtained combining strength of party identification and interest in politics
Trust national institutions	980	1.51	1.91	0	5	.86	0–5 scale obtained combining trust in national parliament, national government, parties, justice. Missing replaced with mean and coded as intermediate cat.
Political ideology	1036	1.62	.90	1	2		Left-right scale recoded as: 4-5-6-7 as 2 (centrism) other as 1. Missing coded as 1
Education	1001	4.93	3.03	0	10		Age when stopped education
Urban residence	1036	1.84	.37	1	2		1 Rural; 2 Urban
Gender	1036	1.44	.50	1	2		1 Female; 2 Male
Age	1036	45.79	16.67	15	92		Age exact
Social status	991	5.65	1.46	1	10		Level in society self-placement. 1 Lower level – 10 higher level

Notes: All variables are coded from minimum to maximum value.