

Analyzing the 2024 Election to the European Parliament: The Swedish Perspective



Abstract

This thesis is an analysis of Sweden's 2024 election to the European parliament. Its primary research question is whether or not this election can still be classified as an election that adheres to the model of second-order elections (SOE). Secondary research questions concerns how the 2024 election compares to the 2019 EP election as well as how the Swedish results of the 2024 election can be compared to the election results on an EU-wide basis.

The second-order election theory is based on the idea that national elections are considered primary elections by both the parties and the electorate whilst EU elections are not and are therefore called second-order elections. These second-order elections are therefore treated as less important by the voters and there are certain characteristics to the elections that come with that. This includes lower electoral participation, more invalid ballots, more votes for extreme or populist parties, as well as losses for larger parties and incumbent government parties.

The methodology is a quantitative case study of the 2024 election that uses comparisons to the most recent 2022 national election as well as previous EP elections. Data is gathered from various agencies that collect results of EP election results. Data on what parties can be considered "populist" is gathered from the database called Populist.

The results show that the 2024 EP election has many characteristics of the second-order election model such as the incumbent government losing a fairly large amount of its vote share and a much lower electoral participation. Its differences from the 2019 election can also largely be explained by the SOE model. Comparing it to the EU as a whole there are some interesting ways that Sweden differentiates itself such as the Swedish Social Democratic party receiving a larger part of the Swedish vote share than the S&D political group did in the rest of the EU.

Introduction	3
Research Questions	5
Theory	6
Second Order Theory of Elections	7
Criticism of the Theory of Second Order Elections	10
Politicisation of European Integration	12
Swedish Voting Patterns	13
Background on the 2024 EP Election	16
The European Parliament	16
2019 EP Election in Sweden	18
Comparison between Sweden and Europe in the 2019 EP election	20
The Run-Up to the 2024 EP Election	21
Sweden and the 2024 Election	23
Hypotheses	24
Methodology	28
Weaknesses	31
Data	32
Results	34
Was Sweden's 2024 election to the European Parliament a second-order election?	34
How does the Swedish 2024 EP election differ from the 2024 EP election in the rest of the EU?	36
How does Sweden's 2024 EP election results differ from the Swedish 2019 EP election results?	39
Regional comparison	41
Conclusion	43
Discussion	45
Bibliography	51
Appendix	56

Introduction

Sweden joined the EU in 1995 after a narrow referendum, with 52,3% of the populace voting for membership, while 46,8% voted no. However, during its whole time of membership Sweden has in many ways been one of the more Eurosceptical members of the EU. For instance in 2002 a union-wide poll showed that in the whole union an average of one in ten citizens thought their country's membership in the union was a bad thing. For contrast, in Sweden, one in four citizens thought Sweden's membership was a bad thing (Aylott, 2008).

The EU has a number of important institutions that are all required for the union to function and decide over legislation for such a large and complex union. Of these different governmental bodies the one that is the closest to the people in the EU is the EU parliament. Elections to the EU parliament are held every five years and the number of MEPs, which change after every election, is usually over 700. Due to its power and closeness to the various constituencies of the EU; it is the institution of the EU parliament and specifically the elections to the parliament that I will analyze in this paper.

Sweden held its first election to the European parliament in 1995 where 7 out of Sweden's 8 major parties gained at least one MEP. The Christian Democrats, who received only 3,92% of the vote in 1995, finally entered the parliament after the election in 1999. The only major and permanent addition to Sweden's representation in the European parliament since then has been the Sweden Democrats who joined in 2014 (Bolin 2015).

Parties such as the Social Democrats, the Center Party and the Christian Democrats have had historical factions of soft-eurosceptic sides of the parties according to Aylott (2008). The dynamic in the Social Democrats shows a split between the more traditional, more hard-core left faction of the Party. This part wanted Sweden to remain outside of the EU. It was the more modern and perhaps pragmatic part of the party which pushed the party to being positive to gaining EU membership (Aylott, 1997).

Every five years since 1995 Sweden has held elections to the European parliament. These elections have traditionally had much lower electoral participation than the national elections. They have also garnered much less interest from the general public. Despite this the Swedish delegation to the European Parliament do indeed have an important role to play in international politics which makes the lack of interest somewhat paradoxical.

This lower interest has traditionally been explained by the model of Second-Order Election (SOE) which claims that elections other than national elections (these being first-order elections) are often considered less important. According to this theory there are certain characteristics (such as lower electoral participation) that can be expected to appear in

second-order elections. However, recently there has been debate and discourse as to whether EP elections can still be considered SOE due to the increasing debate and visibility of EU questions. I am interested in exploring if Swedish elections to the European parliament can still be considered second-order.

Elections to the European Parliament are also interesting as they happen simultaneously in all EU countries. This means that by comparing different countries certain trends can be ascertained. Sweden for instance has often gone with trends similar to other countries but has also sometimes had noticeably different results. For instance in the 2019 election the Conservative group in the EU lost seats overall whereas in Sweden that group gained seats.

Another angle of examining Sweden's EP elections is by looking at the overall domestic trends between different EP elections. Sometimes something unexpected can happen on that level as well, such as Feminist Initiative (FI) gaining enough votes to join the EU parliament in 2014 only to lose massively and leave the parliament after the 2019 election.

In this thesis I want to delve into the relation between Sweden and the EU. I think this will increase our understanding of Swedish politics and Swedish EU politics. Understanding the patterns of elections to the EU is of the utmost importance to the understanding of modern European politics; and therefore I think it is very important. This thesis will hopefully be a contribution to our understanding of political science. The EU is one of the most important institutions in our modern political landscape and I am very interested in delving deeper into its relationship to my home country of Sweden.

In our complex and multifaceted world the EU has a very important role. It plays an important role in global politics and globalization. Understanding the way elections to the EU work can therefore be considered one small piece of a larger puzzle regarding a broadening understanding of global politics. On the local-global continuum, understanding the Swedish context can hopefully increase understanding of EU and other SO elections in other countries.

The EU has also been in the spotlight repeatedly the last couple of years. The democratic legitimacy of the EU has been particularly questioned along with the economic and Eurozone crisis as well as the refugee crisis of 2015-16. Therefore it makes sense to further explore at least one aspect of the EU's institutions, this being the elections to the EP parliament. By gaining an understanding on what the latest EP elections results look like this can help us understand the role of the EU within Swedish society and democracy.

The gap in the literature I want to fill is to see whether the SOE theory can still be applicable to the Swedish EP election of 2024 which is the most recent data point to analyze. This can help us understand both the Swedish situation and also can make for interesting comparisons

with countries. If there are aspects of the Swedish election that can not be explained by the SOE theory this will perhaps lead to further gaps in the literature as it will invite for possibly new aspects and remodeling of the SOE theory. My goal is to understand and analyze the 2024 EP election with a basis in SOE theory. I will be utilizing a comparative case study methodology to make this analysis.

Research Questions

My main research questions is:

- Was Sweden's 2024 election to the European Parliament a second-order election?

Aside from that I also have two subquestions:

- How does the Swedish 2024 EP election differ from the 2024 EP election in the rest of the EU?
- How does Sweden's 2024 EP election results differ from the Swedish 2019 EP election results?

After this section there will be a theory section that does a literature review for theory behind EP elections. The focus of the theory section is on explaining second-order election theory and ascertaining what its most prominent characteristics are. This includes going through criticism of the SOE theory as well as characteristics of the Swedish voting system. After that there is a background section that discusses the background to the 2024 EP election and what the expected trends were. In the end of this section a number of possible hypotheses based on theory are stated. After that there is a discussion on methodology and data as well as what the potential weaknesses of the paper are. In the results section there is an analysis of the election data with the basis of the research questions as well as the hypotheses. Finally the conclusions, potential implications and possible future avenues of research are discussed at the end of the paper.

Theory

There are a number of different ways of analyzing elections. There is for instance theory about the voters and the psychology behind voting, as well as plenty of theories about campaigning and the various effects of different possible electoral systems. For instance McKelvey and Patty (2006) argue that voting is highly strategic and that voters attempt to maximize their expected margin of victory. Some aspects of these other theoretical frameworks will be touched upon, but the main theoretical focus of this paper will be upon the theory of second-order elections.

The elections to the European parliament must be analyzed somewhat differently than national elections as they have many unique characteristics; mainly the fact that they are cross-national, allowing the different parties and political structures in 27 countries to eventually elect one large body of parliament. The issues at stake in European parliament elections should therefore theoretically be expected to be different as the issues voted on would not be expected to be national but rather European. For these reasons many researchers have focused on European elections specifically and are trying to ascertain in what ways they can be theoretically explained and understood.

The EP elections are interesting because they were not an original part of the EU but were created in 1979 as a way of giving a direct voice for its citizens and as a way of garnering further democratic legitimacy for the union. This did not happen without criticism though, as Marsh (2010) explains there also existed a worry that this would undermine the sovereignty of EU states. There was doubt of the idea that it was possible to create interest and engagement in European political issues and there were worries that the EP elections would rather just become another forum for national politics (Marsh, 2010).

In the decades since the implementation of EP elections a number of studies regarding these elections and the pattern of voting behavior have been done. Many of these are specially meant to test whether the criticism of the elections have ended up being justified.

Some such as Mannheimer and Schmitt (1991) found that voting in EP elections was mostly driven by “habitual voting”. Similarly Van der Eijk and Franklin (1991) argue that parties gain votes in the EP election more so based on national politics and not European issues. Nonetheless Van der Eijk and Franklin (1991) also state that the results can still be viewed as a legitimation of the different parties' various stances on EU issues.

The behavior of the voter also differs based on the country. As for instance Van der Eijk and Franklin (2004) explain, the people in some countries are substantially more Eurosceptical while citizens in some other countries think that the EU should have even more power. Pro

versus anti EU attitudes is believed by Van der Eijk and Franklin to potentially be a “sleeping giant” that could grow to be a powerful factor in EU political behavior. It is not just attitudes regarding the EU that differs; different countries have different attitudes regarding social, economical and cultural issues. Countries and their electorates are different in where they would be placed on a typical left-right political scale which must be understood as a factor which could influence voter behavior (Van der Eijk & Franklin, 2004).

In recent years there has been further discussion about what new issues could divide and influence the European voters. One of the major themes in this area is the idea that the EU has become increasingly politicized. For instance van der Brug et al (2022) raises three new potential issues which are “(a) the common currency; (b) the increased pushback on the EU’s open border policies; and (c) the inability of the EU to prevent democratic backsliding in some countries.” (van der Brug et al, 2022).

Second Order Theory of Elections

While voting behavior of course differs between different countries, one of the absolute cornerstones of EP election research is the idea that voters in the same country are believed to vote differently in EP elections compared to national elections (Franklin & Hobolt, 2015). The seminal work exploring EP elections from this perspective is from Reif and Schmitt (1980) who introduced the theory of second-order elections. This theory gained enormous traction and while it has been both refined and criticized it remains the main theory to explain EP elections. Reif and Schmitt (1980) introduced the idea of EP elections being second order elections as they analyzed the very first set of EP elections in 1979. Second-order election theory holds that election results to the European Parliament do not directly reflect party support among the populace, but that they are a reaction to domestic political cleavages. Direct political power, according to Reif and Schmitt can be found in the national arena of politics. Elections to the EU can therefore be considered a reaction to the domestic political situation rather than based on what the parties' EU politics are. However, due to every country being on a different stage of their electoral cycle the dynamics of each country’s election will be different (Reif & Schmitt, 1980). Reif and Schmitt wrote the seminal paper on this theory in relation to the European Parliament in 1980 and it has been expanded upon and has been the basis of many election analyses ever since.

The theory has been tested on more or all elections ever since the first one in 1979. In 1998 Marsh (1998) tested the theory on the most recent four elections. His conclusion was that the theory still holds validity but that it is an even more effective explanatory model in countries where “alternation in government is the norm”. Marsh suggests that country-specific differences hold a great deal of explanatory power.

One of the most extensive tests of the SOE theory comes from Ehin and Talving (2021). They tested the theory on all 175 EP elections across the whole EU between 1979 and 2019. Ehin and Talving come to the conclusion that the SOE model still holds significant explanatory value for EP elections. They find that particularly party size as well as incumbency are significant predictors of party gains and losses. They also find that the nature of the electoral system and at which point the election is held, plays a role in how well the model functions, though this effect is not always found.

The idea of second-order elections is that there are “first-order” elections, generally assumed to be the national or presidential elections that are considered the most important by both the establishment and the electorate. The second step of the theory is that second-order elections, such as regional, local or EU elections, have their own unique characteristics specifically in relation to first order elections and specifically because they are considered the less important elections.

While this paper will focus on second-order election theory as it pertains to elections to the European Parliament; the theory can also be applied to regional and other “secondary” elections where the mechanics may be assumed to be similar. These other second-order elections can be both smaller regional or local elections as well as various mid-term elections.

The psychological backdrop of the second-order election theory is that due to voters considering the EP election to be less important they will use it as a protest vote. They will vote more so to “punish” the incumbent government rather than due to their own convictions or EU policy.

There are a number of characteristics that are considered typical of second-order elections (Schmitt et al, 2020; Reif & Schmitt, 1980). These are:

- Lower turn-out than in the preceding national elections. The perceived unimportance of the election means fewer people will vote and fewer people will even know that an election is being held.
- More invalid ballots.
- Incumbent parties lose votes.
 - However, this depends on when in the national electoral cycle the election is held. Research shows that incumbent parties will peak in popularity right after the national election, only to slowly decline afterwards. This is sometimes referred to as the honeymoon effect. A second-order election held right before a national election will similarly receive a similar amount of votes as they will later receive during the first order election. The popularity of the incumbent party or party coalition is believed to slowly decrease during the electoral cycle. The incumbent party/parties are the least popular during mid-term and

then the popularity will slowly increase again. So a SOE held right after a national election may show a stronger vote for the incumbent party, but otherwise it is assumed that incumbent parties will lose votes during SOE. The opposition parties may also be more likely to galvanize voter support. People who ordinarily support the government party may also strategically vote for the opposition as a protest vote.

- Large parties tend to lose votes. The theoretical motivation behind this is similar to the motivation behind why incumbent parties would also lose votes, which is that SOE elections lead to more sincere votes for smaller parties.
- Small and populist parties gain votes. During first-order elections one might vote strategically for a large party that is likely to be able to win whereas in less important elections voters are more likely to vote according to their true desires and interests.
 - There are a number of contested definitions one could use for populism and populist parties. In this essay I define populist parties as the same as Mudde (2004) does. This definition contends that populist parties are primarily based on the antagonistic dividing of the people in a society into two different groups. There is the general “pure people” whose will is continuously ignored by the “corrupt elite”. Politics, according to populist parties should be an expression of the will of the pure masses and not the supposed corrupt elite (Mudde, 2004).

Reif and Norris (1997) maintain that one of the most important aspects to keep in mind regarding the SOE model is when in the first order election election cycle that the second order election takes place, this is important as this can hugely alter what sort of results one would expect.

Additionally, there are aspects specific to elections to the EP that could play a role. One such factor is that due to elections to the EP having an almost referendum-like role, parties that are divided over EU membership could potentially do worse than parties with a clear stance.

Other aspects that could potentially shift EP election turnout is when the election is held. For instance an EP election that is held on the same day as national elections may expect a significantly higher turnout (Reif & Schmitt, 1980).

On a procedural level differences to the voting system between national and EP elections may have an effect on different results and different kinds of campaigns. For instance countries like France use a majority two-round voting system in their national elections but for EP elections they, like all EU countries, must use a system of proportional representation. That means that in France there may be an expectation that smaller parties might be more successful in EP elections than national elections as a result of the difference in voting

systems. This is because it would theoretically be worth more for a smaller French party to campaign for EP elections rather than national elections where smaller parties are at a disadvantage (Reif & Schmitt, 1980).

An issue with the model as well is that it can not predict exactly how certain social or cultural movements will naturally change election results. For instance, a wave of anti-immigration sentiment may lead to far-right parties being electorally successful in an EP election without that having anything to do with the SOE model in itself.

Regions that consider themselves more “European” than nationalist may also have higher election turnouts (Reif & Schmitt, 1980).

Many authors agree that in order to properly judge an EP election result you also need to have the election results of the next national election after the EP election. For instance Marsh (1998) finds that larger political trends may also influence the EP results even before the next national election.

The SOE has been questioned and expanded upon in a number of ways throughout the years. Some people have questioned whether it can still be applied to EP elections as they have grown more prominent and gained further importance. For instance Ehin and Talving (2021) examine the 2019 EP elections looking at whether the SOE model still applies. They found that the SOE model is still a significant explanatory model for the EP elections though not consistently for every year and every party.

A number of papers have tried to find if, due to the growing power of the EP, there may be other factors that determine election performance rather than just the SOE model. Bartels (2023) hypothesizes that smaller parties may be more invested in EP elections due to them having a larger chance of gaining seats. However, the results seem to indicate that smaller parties also mostly treat EP elections as second-order elections.

Hix and March (2007) examined whether European issues had gained more prominence in influencing voting behavior. The results seem to indicate however that most of the voter volatility has to do with people “punishing” the incumbent parties. This fits the SOE model and the effects of the actual European policy positions that the parties have is minor.

Criticism of the Theory of Second Order Elections

Over the years a number of critiques have been leveled at the theory of second-order elections (Berg, 2019).

For instance a major form of criticism is simply that the theory does not always hold up on an empirical level. There are plenty of examples where the expected results from the SOE model simply do not occur. It can also have to do with elections where a large portion of the voters split their votes between different parties when there are multiple elections occurring the same day (Berg, Erlingsson & Oscarsson, 2019). These are indicators that not everything about second order election results has to do with national politics. For instance some studies such as Schmitt (2005) and Koepke and Ringe (2006) found that the SOE model did not hold up as well in the newer Eastern member states as it does in the established western member states. Koepke and Ringe (2006) found that in newer eastern member states voters did not conform to the expected behavior of punishing incumbent governments. However, some newer studies such as from Ehin and Talving (2021) found that while the model was slightly more consistent in the older western states it still overall held explanatory power in the newer eastern states as well.

That the theory is overly general is also a criticism. Many studies argue that one can not always assume that everything is about national politics. There are studies that indicate that opinions about the EU is for instance something that motivates electoral choices. Voting for different parties on different levels may also be because people think that a party has better politics on a certain level. There is for instance a wide number of studies that show that EU attitude matters for vote choice (Hobolt, 2015; Van Elsas et al., 2019; Van Spanje and De Vreese, 2011).

A study by Hix and Marsh (2011) found that there were some broader shifts in voter behavior that could in fact be identified as “pan-European” and be viewed as European shifts instead of just shifts at the national level. These shifts included the electorate moving away from socialist parties and moving toward green parties (Hix & Marsh, 2011).

Regarding the Swedish case specifically there has been a number of studies that show that the perceived importance of a specific question on the EU level is what has led parties to overperform on that level. For instance Blombäck and de Fine Licht (2017) show that many voters split their votes to be able to vote for Feministiskt Initiativ (Feminist Initiative) in the EP election because they thought equality was of great importance. Another example is Erlingsson and Persson (2011) who found that voters who voted for Piratpartiet (the Pirate Party) in 2009 really did prioritize internet safety and privacy, and it was not just a protest vote for a party with a silly-sounding name.

The theory also does not examine the level of individuals and there is no room in theory to acknowledge that there may be different factors influencing different individuals into their voting choices (Berg, 2019).

Politicisation of European Integration

European integration commonly refers to the ongoing process of increasing political, economic and judicial cooperation within the EU (Hutter et al, 2016). It does not exclusively refer to integration within the EU but in my text that is the version of the term that I am using. In this process the EU states have gradually given up certain aspects of their sovereignty to allow for a more unified Europe in which some responsibilities typically decided by the states are instead decided by all the states together in the EU. An typical example of this would be the implementation of the Euro as a common currency within large parts of the Union.

European integration was initially viewed fairly neutrally and was not considered political. This early mindset was sometimes characterized as “permissive consensus” (Lindberg & Scheingold, 1970). However, in the last two decades a number of crises within the EU has led to increasing politicisation of European integration and a much more substantial resistance toward it (Hutter et al, 2016; Hutter & Kriesi, 2019). Hutter and Kriesi (2019) find empirical evidence suggesting that in particular the Eurozone crisis of 2008 as well as the refugee crises of 2015 acted as “critical moments” leading to a furthering of politicization of European integration and rising Euroscepticism. This echoes what van der Brug (2022) said who also warned that both problems with the Euro and border policies could lead to pushback within the EU. Evidence of this broader politicization can be found in elections results, street protests, news media and public debate (Hutter et al, 2016).

Overall the evidence suggests a substantial increase in politicization of European integration however the exact nature of this remains different depending on region and political system. For instance according to Hutter and Kriesi (2019) in northwestern Europe pro-European integration politics is strongly associated with left and liberal parties whereas in southern Europe it is associated with mainstream parties on both the left and the right.

Papers such as Hutter and Kriesi (2019) and Brack (2020) discuss Euroscepticism as something that can be described as a U-turn. This is a metaphor describing the phenomena that parties to the far-left as well as the far-right that are the most Eurosceptical. Brack further describes this as a phenomena driven by for instance issues such as migration and concern for the economy.

In both the 2014 and 2019 EP elections there was a turn away from established parties and toward parties “with a strong message on Europe” (Brack, 2020). These messages were often

Eurosceptic in nature. In the prelude to the 2024 elections this question of Eurosceptic and particularly far-right parties became particularly discussed. There were worries of some of these parties showing support for Russia and being anti-Ukraine; as well as a worry about the established political group EPP adopting policies from the far-right (Hancock et al, 2023).

Additionally, scholars such as Manucci (2021) suggest that right-wing populism is an ever-growing phenomena and that radical right populists are the most common type of populists in the parliament. Additionally, Manucci claims that though the radical-right once struggled with forming political groups they no longer have that problem.

Swedish Voting Patterns

Despite the dominance of the SOE model, there is also literature regarding what other factors motivate Swedish voters in EU elections. For instance the attitude of a Swedish voter regarding the EU in general has often been considered one of the major factors in party choice (Berg & Oscarsson, 2015). One study by Oskarson et al (2016) finds that the first factor in choosing what party to vote for is the typical right-left scale but that the attitude toward the EU and EU integration also plays a role.

An aspect of Swedish voting that would have a larger significance in national elections than EU elections is strategic voting. In Sweden's national elections a party must reach 4% in order to stay in the parliament. Studies such as Fréden (2014) show that voters will strategically vote for smaller parties that are part of the coalition they support in order to make sure that smaller party stays in the parliament. This is ultimately done to support the coalition the voter supports. The example found by Fréden is right-wing voters who in support of the right-wing coalition will cast strategic votes for the Christian Democrats. The logic of the right-wing voter is that if the Christian Democrats stay in the parliament that increases the chance for a right-wing coalition government.

This is relevant for studies of Swedish elections to the EP as due to voters considering them less important, they are probably less likely to use them for strategic voting. This means that some smaller parties may be expected to do even worse in EP elections due to them not receiving strategic support votes. On the other hand, according to the SOE model one would in fact expect smaller parties to do better in EP elections which makes it hard to know what will happen in the Swedish case.

Another notable aspect of the Swedish political system is that Sweden has a quite high electoral participation compared to most other countries, with electoral participation in national elections generally being above 80%. There are demographic differences as well

regarding electoral participation. Generally speaking evidence seems to speak for socioeconomic factors being hugely influential regarding electoral participation. Being highly educated, wealthy, employed and having resources are all correlated with voting more (Lindström, 2021).

The demographic differences in voting are fairly similar to each other in both EP elections and national elections but they are even stronger in EP elections according to Berg (2019). These include for instance that women tend to vote more left-wing whereas men tend to vote more right-wing. When it comes to electoral participation in the EP elections there are some stark differences across different groups. Areas where a higher percentage of the population has a foreign background tends to have a lower rate of voting. Additionally, overall the urban and southern parts of Sweden tend to have higher electoral participation. This can even be connected to general patterns of support for the EU. Support for the EU has always been higher in the southern and urban areas (Berg, 2019). These demographic differences can be traced all the way back to the initial EU referendum in 1994 which had very similar patterns (Gilljam & Holmberg 1996).

An interesting aspect regarding voting in EP elections is that there is evidence that voters decide significantly later in the process who they should vote for (Berg & Oscarsson 2015).

Another notable aspect of the Swedish case is that in both the national elections and EU elections a proportional voting system is used. This is important to note as there are studies showing that it can cause significant changes for the voting results if different voting systems are used in the EP election versus the national elections. Reif and Schmitt (1980) for instance theorize that using a different voting system for EP elections may lead to lower electoral participation. In Sweden however that should not be a problem.

There is also evidence that voters consider some questions, particularly questions about the environment to be of particular importance at the EU level which could be an explanation for why the Swedish Green Party tends to be quite successful in EP elections (Berg & Oscarsson 2015). How much it is EU integration versus domestic politics that determine the election outcomes seems to vary from election to election; for instance in 2014 EU questions played a more significant role in the EP election according to Berg (2019) than it did in the 2019 election.

In conclusion the theory review points to the Second-Order Election model as the strongest theoretical explanation for EP elections. While there are factors unique to Sweden such as a very high level of electoral participation the SOE model has explanatory power in Sweden as well. Additionally other political problems such as the increasing politicisation of European integration and for instance environmental problems also seem to be increasingly important

for understanding EU politics. Nevertheless the most overwhelming majority of data still support the idea that the electorate largely still view EP elections as second-order.

Background on the 2024 EP Election

The European Parliament

The European Parliament has existed in some form ever since the initial founding of the European Union. In the beginning, from 1958 and onwards, it was called the European Parliamentary Assembly and it had 142 members. Members of the Assembly were MEPs appointed from national parliaments. It initially had no legislative power but merely a consultative role. The MEPs in the Parliament all had a dual mandate in both their home countries and in the European Parliament. The first time the Parliament was elected by elections was in 1979. The parliament has also greatly expanded over time with the Union itself admitting more and more member countries. The current European Parliament has 720 members. Elections to the parliament are held every five years concurrently in each member state (Maciejewski, 2025).

The role and function of the European Parliament has changed over time and its power has greatly expanded through subsequent treaties. In the 1970s for instance the Union gradually gained more budgetary power. The 1992 Treaty of the European Union was extremely important both because it established the modern European Union and because it gave the Parliament the power of co-legislation in a number of areas. Subsequent treaties have done even more to expand the power of the European Parliament, making it one of the two legislative bodies along with the Council of the European Union (Maciejewski, 2025).

The modern role of the EU Parliament is to legislate and amend EU law, negotiate on the budget as well as approve the President of the EU commission. Notably the EU Parliament can not initiate any legislation on its own; that is only in the purview of the EU commission.

The parliament is “degressively proportional” which means that the more populous member states agree to have slightly fewer representatives than they would have in a strictly proportional setting. This is done so that less populous countries can have slightly greater representation in proportion to their population (Massay-Kosubek, 2025).

In the EU Parliament MEPS are seated and work together in different political groups. These political groups are transnational and are based on political ideology. There is for instance a Social Democratic group, a Green Party group, multiple far-right groups and so on which cover the whole political spectrum in the EU parliament.

Overlapping with the political groups there are also EU parties. The current EU parties are: the European People’s Party, the Party of European Socialists, Patriots.eu, the European Conservatives and Reformists Party, the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe

Party, the European Democratic Party, the European Green Party, the Party of the European Left, the Europe of Sovereign Nations Party, the European Free Alliance, the European Christian Political Party and the European Left Alliance for the People and the Planet (Massay-Kosubek, 2025).

These political parties largely overlap with the political groups in the EU. In an effort to strengthen the role and legitimacy of the EU Parliament prior to the 2014 EU election the EU parties decided to nominate their own party candidates for the role of President of the Commission (Spitzenkandidaten). After the 2014 EP elections one of the candidates, Jean-Claude Juncker was indeed made President of the Commission. However, after the 2019 election the European Council chose to disregard these procedures and Ursula von der Leyen was elected by the Commission even though she was not a party candidate.

The disregard of the Spitzenkandidaten is one of many factors which have led many to criticize the European Parliament over the years. The Parliament has been criticised for its perceived lack of democracy and subsequent lack of legitimacy among the people of the EU. The Parliament is also often perceived as a very complicated and expensive institution that is far removed from ordinary everyday people. The fact that it is the only EU institution with its members directly elected by EU constitutes means that it has also received criticism for its lack of power which some view as indicating the general democratic deficits in the EU. The EU Commission rejecting the Spitzenkanidaten in 2019 was therefore seen by some as the EU choosing to reject the will of the people and therefore undemocratic.

Elections of the EU have long been plagued by very low participation in comparison to national elections. It is believed by some that this perceived lack of democracy and efficiency must be seen as a contributory factor.

Additionally, the lack of a unified electoral model has often been criticized. The EU officially demands that the voting system must be proportional but otherwise leaves a great deal of freedom to each country to decide the specifics of the electoral system. This means in practice that each member state has different rules that may occasionally lead to different outcomes than a universal system would allow. It also makes comparing the outcome between different countries somewhat inherently unfair as there are some very important factors that differ between countries. For instance (A New Voting System, 2025):

- In Belgium, Greece and Luxembourg voting is compulsory, which is not the case in the rest of the union.
- In Austria and Malta people are allowed to vote from age 16, in Greece from age 17, and in the rest of the EU from age 18.

- In some countries such as Hungary, Poland and France there is a 5% limit for a party to be voted into the European Parliament whereas countries such as Spain, Belgium and Germany have no limit at all.
- Some countries choose to coordinate and hold national and regional elections on the same day as EP elections whereas for others the EP election cycle is completely separate from other elections (Drounau, 2020).
- The elections are also not held at the same date in the whole union but are instead split over a four day time span where different countries have elections on different days within this time span. This naturally leads to people in countries who are voting on the fourth day having access to the results in other EU member states (A New Voting System, 2025).

All this makes it hard to compare results and outcomes between different countries as the electorate in different member states would have had fundamentally different material outcomes.

The Swedish EU election system has a voting age of 18 and a 4% party which is the same as the national election. Swedish citizens who are registered as living, or who have ever lived in Sweden are eligible to vote, as are EU citizens of another country who have registered as living in Sweden for at least 30 days prior to the election. Early voting is allowed and Swedish citizens living abroad may vote via mail or going to a Swedish embassy. Swedish national elections are divided into 29 constituencies but in the EP election all of Sweden is just one constituency. This one constituency is divided to proportionally allocate Sweden's 21 EP seats to the political parties (*Elections to the European Parliament*, 2023).

2019 EP Election in Sweden

The 2019 EP election was held only eight and a half months after the 2018 national election. The aftermath of this national election led to an extremely prolonged and complicated governmental formation process due to neither side gaining a clear majority and neither wanting to cooperate with the Sweden Democrats. It took 129 days for a government to form and a new emergency election was only narrowly avoided. The Red-Green coalition was finally able to form a government on the 18th of January and the EP election was subsequently held on the 26th of May.

Table: Results of the 2019 EP election

Party	2019 EP Election
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Moderaterna	16,83%
Socialdemokraterna	23,48%
Centerpartiet	10,78%
Kristdemokraterna	8,62%
Liberalerna	4,13%
Miljöpartiet	11,52%
Sverigedemokraterna	15,34%
Vänsterpartiet	6,8%
Others	2,5%

The three biggest parties in the 2019 EP election were the Social Democrats (23,48%), the Moderates (16,83%) and the Sweden Democrats (15,34%). The government coalition of the Red-Greens, which includes the Social Democrats and the Green Party in government and the Left Party as a supporting party received 41,8% of the vote. This is more than a full percentage point higher than the same block's 40,67% share of the vote that they received during the 2018 national election. The right-wing alliance had received 40,26% of the vote in 2018 and during the EP election they got 40,36% which is almost exactly the same.

However, the winners of the 2019 EP election were largely the right-wing parties when compared to previous EP elections. The Center Party, the Christian Democrats, the Moderates and the Sweden Democrats who all gained seats in the election compared to the 2014 election. The Liberals and the Greens both lost seats while the Social Democrats and the Left Party kept the same number of seats. The only party representing Sweden in the EP from 2014-2019 which was not in the Swedish parliament during the same time was the Feminist Initiative which was elected in 2014 but lost their only seat in 2019 with only 0,8% of the vote.

A study by Berg (2019) interestingly finds that Swedish 2019 election to the EP seems to break from the expected SOE model. The 2019 EP election was right after the Swedish parliamentary election of 2018. Going off of theory this should lead to a lower level of voting participation. Instead, the 2019 election had its highest participation rate in an EP election in Sweden to date. Berg (2019) also says that there seems to be an increasing interest in the future of the EU which seems to go against the general pattern in the EU. However, there

were also significant divides between different groups regarding electoral participation. This lead to an overall uneven participation rate.

One study by Bolin (2023) finds that despite seemingly favorable conditions for EU questions to become more prominent, by the 2019 election, EU issues however remained peripheral. This would indicate that the elections are still to be considered second-order.

Comparison between Sweden and Europe in the 2019 EP election

One difference between Sweden and the EU as a whole was that in the EU as a whole the Social Democratic group (S&D) and the Conservative group (EPP) both lost a significant amount of seats in 2019. Sweden on the other hand broke against that pattern. In Sweden the Social Democrats kept their five seats and the Moderates and Christian Democrats gained one seat each (Berg, 2019).

Parties participating in the EU elections are generally speaking the same as national parties. In the EU they will therefore organise themselves into EU parties that are additionally combined into EP political groups based on political ideologies. Below is a table of the composition of the EU parliament based on political groups.

Table: EU Parliamentary Composition between 2019-2024* (Papakostas & Blavoukos, 2025)

Political Group	Ideology	Swedish Representation	Numbers of Seats
European People's Party Group	Liberal, Conservative, Christian Democratic	Yes: Moderates, Christian Democrats	187
Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats	Socialism, social democracy	Yes: Social Democrats	148
Renew Europe	Pro-market, Liberal	Yes: Liberals, Center Party	97
Greens-European Free Alliance	Social Democratic, pro-Environment	Yes: the Greens	67
Identity and	Conservative,	No	76

Democracy	anti-immigration, Euro scepticism		
European Conservatives and Reformists	Conservative, anti-immigration	Yes: Sweden Democrats	62
European United Left - Nordic Green Left	Socialism, communism	Yes: the Left Party	40
Non- Inscrit	MEPs without Political Group	No	28
Others	Other parties that were not able to reach the threshold to join the parliament	Yes: Feminist Initiative, Pirate Party	0

*The United Kingdom had voted to leave the European Union in 2016 but as their exit was not finalized until 1st of January in 2020 they did initially participate in the 2019 EP election. However, after their exit the distribution of 27 seats were re-allocated to different member states while 46 seats were removed. This table shows the post-Brexit seat distribution.

Swedish representation is noticeably lacking in the conservative and Euro sceptic “Identity and Democracy” group even though it is the fifth largest political group. This, along with the success of EPP and S&D in Sweden compared to the rest of the EU, seems to indicate that perhaps Sweden has a lower level of right-wing Euro scepticism than other countries.

The Run-Up to the 2024 EP Election

The 2024 election was held between June 6th to June 9th 2024. It was held in all 27 member states and it is notable as the first EU election after Brexit and the UK leaving the EU. The EU parties that were in the running for the 2024 election were largely the same as in 2019 but with the major exception of the UK no longer participating due to having left the Union in 2020.

The 2024 election was held five years after the 2019 EP election that had resulted in significant losses for the S&D political group and the EPP group. These are the two biggest groups in the parliament and they had lost seats to Renew, EFA and ID. The 2019 election

had however resulted in much higher participation than in 2014 and it was expected to rise again.

Despite the “failure” of the Spitzenkandidaten procedure after the 2019 election, where Ursula von der Leyen was nominated despite not being a chosen Spitzenkandidate many political groups still chose to nominate Spitzenkandidaten ahead of the 2024 election. The EPP group, which was favoured to win in polls, nominated von der Leyen to be chosen as Commission president again. However, while most political groups chose to nominate a candidate, the ECR (European Conservatives and Reformists) chose not to (Kreiling, 2025).

Before the 2024 election there were a number of scandals and issues that were particularly debated. One such is the problem of the country of Hungary which at the time was governed by Orbán from the far-right party of Fidesz. Orbán’s rule over Hungary was very controversial as many were upset at what they considered was Orbán eroding democratic institutions in Hungary and dismantling free speech. It was particularly controversial given Orbán’s close friendship with Russia and many viewed Orbán and MEPs from his party as indirect Russian agents. In January of 2024 the European Parliament had even voted in favor of a resolution demanding that the EU council strip Hungary of its voting rights (Griener, 2024).

In connection to this the general issue of rising far-right populism has also been an issue plaguing the EU. For instance the EPP making overtures toward the far-right ECR ahead of the election was considered controversial as upsetting the traditional power-splitting in the EU Parliament between the EPP, S&D and Renew (Hancock et al, 2023).

Additionally, the issue of Ukraine was also discussed prior to the election. Both in consideration of possible EU expansion to include Ukraine in the future as well as the issue of supplying weapons to Ukraine (Fornusek, 2024). The mainstream EU party has largely been supportive of Ukraine but there was a worry that pro-Russia political parties such as the AfD in Germany and the National Rally in France could gain further seats in the parliament and make it harder for the EU to grant aid to Ukraine.

Other issues that were considered important prior to the election were issues of the climate, economy and of immigration with different issues being considered of different levels of input in different countries (Politico, 2024).

Different countries also had different problems that garnered the most attention. In countries such as Spain and Germany the EP election was described as a “referendum” on the parties in power. In Romania on the other hand local elections are being held the same day as EP elections; this means that the EP elections were largely over-shadowed by local concerns of corruption and housing (Politico, 2024).

Overall the projected winner of the EP election was the EPP political group while the S&D was expected to come in second place (Fornusek, 2024). Summing up the discourse ahead of the EP elections shows a number of concerns surrounding for instance immigration that exist in many countries but at the same time local concerns are still considered paramount. This would be consistent with the SOE model.

Sweden and the 2024 Election

The 2024 EP election took place almost exactly in-between the 2022 and the 2026 Swedish parliamentary elections. Based on this one would expect the center-right ruling coalition to have a poor result. Additionally, the Social Democrat led opposition would be expected to have better election results.

One of the ways in which Sweden was different from the rest of Europe in the run-up to the 2024 election was in regards to which questions were prioritised. The Eurobarometer, conducted in the spring of 2024 before the EP election, showed that 58% of Swedes thought that fighting against climate change is one of the most important questions for the election whereas that number was only 27% in the whole of the EU. Based on this we would expect the Greens to perform better in Sweden than in the rest of Europe.

Additionally, whereas only 9% of the EU in general consider “gender equality, inclusion and diversity” an important priority in Sweden a total of 25% of respondents thought that this was an important question. This implies that more Swedes will perhaps vote for further left parties which tend to prioritize these questions.

When asked how happy people were with how democracy works in the EU; in the EU as a whole 52% were happy whereas it was only 65% in Sweden.

Additionally, in the whole of the EU 67% of people were happy with their country’s voice in the EU while it was 88% in Sweden. 47% of the whole of the EU has a positive view of the EU whereas for Swedes that is 67%. The relatively low level of EU-scepticism would indicate that EU-sceptical parties will receive a lower level of the vote share. The two EU-negative parties in Sweden are the Left Party and the Sweden Democrats.

Regarding the importance of voting, in the EU in general 53% consider voting to have a high importance whereas in Sweden this is 68% of respondents. Additionally, 71% of EU-wide respondents say that they would vote if the EU elections were held next week while the number is 81% for Swedish respondents. This, along with historically high electoral

participation in Sweden makes me think Sweden will have a higher electoral participation than the rest of the EU this time as well.

Additionally, the issue of immigration seemed to have been a large topic of discussion in Sweden as well. It frequently came up in the campaigns of multiple parties such as for instance the Sweden Democrats whose campaign slogan for the EP election was: “My Europe builds walls” (Politico, 2024).

Restrictive immigration policy was not reserved for the Sweden Democrats as many other parties also looked to appeal to voters on a largely anti-immigration basis. For instance, the Social Democrats highlighted the role played by the Swedish Social Democrat Commissioner Ylva Johansson in shaping new restrictive EU border policies.

Looking at the background to the election there are a number of ways that Sweden seems to distinguish itself from the rest of Europe. For instance Sweden seems to be a lot happier with the EU than many other countries. Additionally Swedes seem to care more about environmental concerns than the EU as a whole. This could also be connected to Swedish people viewing climate change as something that should be dealt with at an EU level. Immigration also seems to have been an issue that many parties campaigned on, however mainstream parties both on the right and the left both largely positioned themselves as anti-immigration. Questions regarding immigration and how to restrict immigration was a talking point prior to the EP election in many different EU countries.

Hypotheses

Based on the gathered theory and with regards to the three research questions there are a number of hypotheses that can be posed.

Evaluations of the hypotheses will be based on the empirical data that is available. The analysis will be comparative of one election to another as this is how the SOE model is evaluated.

- Was Sweden’s 2024 election to the European Parliament a second-order election?

The first four hypotheses have to do with the main research question of whether the 2024 election can be accurately classified as a second-order election. As the preceding national election to the 2024 one was held in September of 2022 and the next national election will be held in September of 2026 the 2024 (which was in June) is almost exactly in the middle of the electoral cycle. This means that the SOE model can be assumed to be fairly strong and

that there will be the expected effect of for instance the incumbent parties losing part of their vote share.

H1: Turnout in the 2024 EP election is significantly lower than the 2022 national election.

H2: Party size is negatively associated with electoral performance in the 2024 EP election relative to the preceding national election.

There is not one specific established definition of what a large party is as that would vary dramatically depending on the country and party system. In Sweden, which uses proportional representation, it is very rare that a party receives more than 30% of the vote and most lay way below that level. For that reason I have chosen to analyze the three largest parties in modern Sweden which are the Social Democrats, the Moderates and the Sweden Democrats. While the Sweden Democrats recent addition to the Swedish parliament they have grown significantly in the last decade and they were the second largest party in the 2022 national election.

H3: Incumbency is negatively associated with electoral performance in the 2024 EP election relative to the preceding national election.

H4: Populist parties gain votes in the 2024 EP election compared with the preceding national election.

H5: Small parties not in the national parliament will receive a larger part of the vote share compared with the preceding national election.

- How does the Swedish 2024 EP election differ from the 2024 EP election in the rest of the EU?

The next couple of hypotheses have to do with the comparison between Sweden and the rest of the EU. I am expecting a fairly moderate result with Sweden in comparison to the EU voting more for the established parties and less for the far-right.

H6: Sweden will have higher electoral participation than the rest of the EU.

H7: Sweden's Green Party will be more successful than other Green Parties in the EU.

H8: The EPP and S&D will be more successful in Sweden than the rest of the EU.

H9: The Sweden Democrats will receive a lower vote share than populist far-right Eurosceptic parties in other countries.

My decision to limit the H9 to right-wing political parties has to do with both the literature dealing more with right-wing parties as well as right-wing euroscepticism being a growing part of the EP with many political groups in the EU having a significant number of Eurosceptic parties.

Additionally, there are parties that are Eurosceptic but not right-wing and there are populist parties that are not Eurosceptic, however I wish to explore parties that fulfil all three of these criteria. In other words this hypothesis deals with parties that are populist, far-right and Eurosceptic.

Additionally, it should be noted regarding H9 that some smaller parties will enter coalition with ideologically similar parties for EP elections and therefore there is no certain way to ascertain support for certain parties in some of these elections. However, due to these alliances being formed with ideologically similar parties I will count an alliance as belonging to the category of “populist far-right Eurosceptic” so long as there is one party in the alliance/coalition that is identified as such. This does mean that there must be some caution in interpreting the results for this particular hypothesis.

- How does Sweden’s 2024 EP election results differ from the Swedish 2019 EP election results?

The last couple of hypotheses have to do with the comparison between the 2019 EP election and the 2024 EP election in Sweden. The differences that will appear I believe will be able to be explained by the SOE model.

H10: The opposition parties in the 2024 EP election will be more successful than the opposition parties in the 2019 election.

The H10 is relevant because I want to test the theory that the SOE model is more powerful in the middle of the election cycle. Following the SOE model the opposition parties should be more successful in the 2024 EP election than in the 2019 election. This is because the EP election in 2019 was held less than a year after the national election whereas the 2024 EP election was almost two years after the 2022 national election and therefore in the middle of the election cycle.

The opposition parties to the government in 2019 were the Moderates, the Center Party, the Liberals, the Christian Democrats, and the Sweden Democrats. In 2024 the opposition is instead the Social Democrats, the Left Party, the Greens, and the Center Party.

H11: The regional differences in turnout and party preferences will be similar to the 2019 election.

Methodology

My work is ultimately intended to be one that is theory testing as it is based heavily on Second-Order Election theory and the ultimate goal is to test this theory to see how well it still applies to the 2024 Swedish EP election. If the theory does not seem to hold up this could be an indicator that the theory needs adjusting to fit in the current Swedish context or it could be an indicator that the Swedish EP elections are no longer to be considered a second-order election.

My methodology is based on works such as Berg (2019) which was a deep-dive into Sweden's 2019 EP election. Another inspiration which also chooses to delve deeper into a smaller number of elections comes from Martínez Arriba et al (2024) which delves into the most recent EP elections in Spain and Portugal. These works are among my prime inspiration as they too elect to do a quantitative analysis based on the SOE but still focusing on just one or a couple of elections instead of doing a larger quantitative analysis of dozens of elections in many or all EU countries.

I will be using a case study methodology to analyse the 2024 EP election. The 2024 EP election in Sweden is therefore my unit of analysis that I wish to analyze and gain a deeper understanding of. In order to do this I will use a number of sources to attempt a deep look at the 2024 election from a number of different comparatives. It will be a quantitative analysis that looks at and attempts to interpret the outcome of the 2024 EP election.

Case study methodology is based on digging deep into one case and ideally attempting to uncover the causal mechanisms within one certain phenomena. My choice to use a case study methodology is motivated by several factors. Primarily, I thought it seemed like a good methodology to use in order to gain a rich multi-faceted understanding of one specific event, in this case the 2024 EP election. By using a case study methodology it allows me to test my theory, the Second-Order Election Model, while using different data sources and different angles all analysing the same phenomenon. My goal is to gain a more holistic understanding of the 2024 election. My hope is that by understanding the 2024 EP election in Sweden and its causal mechanisms this can also be applied to other similar cases.

The typical argument against case study methodology is that it is hard to generalize any possible conclusions as there is no way of knowing whether the same mechanism can be found within other cases of similar phenomena. (Hammersley et al, 2000). Some researchers have argued against this by saying that even if there is a lack of generalizability there is still an intrinsic value in understanding one individual case. However some, such as Hammersley et al (2000) argue that it is in fact possible to make generalizations both within and across cases. These generalizations can be made through empirical generalization in which data is

gathered surrounding a specific case but generalizations can be made about other cases as well. In this example the other cases that generalizations could be made about are for instance other Swedish EP elections.

While it is a case study methodology it will also in some ways be comparative. This is because I aim to analyze the 2024 election by comparing it to other elections close in time. I will be analysing the 2024 EP election and comparing the outcome of the election with the 2019 EP election. This will be done in order to contextualise it as yet another EP election and find its context as a European election.

Practically, I will gather electoral data from reliable sources and compile them in an excel document. From this I will analyse the data on the basis of the research questions and the hypotheses. From this I will hopefully be able to answer the research questions and be able to gain a deeper understanding of Swedish EP elections.

I will be looking at all 8 parties in the national parliament for this comparison. These are:

- The Left Party (Vänsterpartiet)
- The Social Democrats (Socialdemokraterna)
- The Green Party (Miljöpartiet)
- The Center Party (Centerpartiet)
- The Liberals (Liberalerna)
- The Christian Democrats (Kristdemokraterna)
- The Moderates (Moderaterna)
- The Sweden Democrats (Sverigedemokraterna)

I have three different research questions and I will be looking at slightly different factors with these different questions.

My main research question has to do with Second-Order Elections. I will compare the 2024 results with the 2022 national election in order to gauge if the 2024 election can still be considered a SOE. There are a number of characteristics associated with SOE however I will choose the most relevant ones to examine. I will also compare it to the 2022 national election. This is the primary comparison with which it will be determined whether the 2024 EP election has the characteristics of a second-order election. This is because in order to determine how much an election fits the second order model it needs the most recent first order election to compare with. This is needed in order to see if the electorate do indeed “punish” and “reward” the parties they would be expected to do so in a typical second-order election.

The first factor I will be analyzing is party size. I will compare the share of votes for each major party from the 2022 and 2024 election. In this way I will see whether the parties increase or decrease votes as you would expect them to based on the SOE model. For instance I am expecting to see major parties lose vote shares and populist parties to gain.

I will also look at turnout to the 2024 election to see whether it is lower than turnout to the 2022 national election.

When comparing the Swedish 2024 EP election to the Swedish 2019 EP election I will look at party size to see which parties have gained or lost votes. I will do this while keeping incumbency and the electoral cycle in mind as these factors are likely to influence the result of the election which might then make the actual change for the parties harder to see.

I will look at turnout between the 2019 and 2024 election.

To examine regional differences I will look at voting patterns in different *län*s in Sweden. Sweden has 21 *län*s and I will look to see whether different patterns emerge in the difference between the 2019 and 2024 election. The reason for choosing *län*s as the comparative geographical unit is a practical choice. There is easily available and comprehensive data on the EP elections for each *län* in Sweden. It also feels more reasonable to use larger geographical units for this comparison rather than using Sweden's municipalities instead. Sweden has 290 municipalities but many of them are very small. Using the larger *län*s make more sense in order to make proper and understandable comparison between different geographical locations whereas using municipalities might end up confusing and simply being too small.

I will finally compare the Swedish EP election results with the 2024 EP election results from the rest of Europe. This will be done in an effort to contextualise the election results and try to gauge what results can be ascertained to be part of broader European trends and what can be seen as breaking against expected patterns. When comparing the Swedish 2024 EP election to the EU-wide 2024 EP election I will look at results for different EP political groups compared between Sweden and the whole of the EU.

I will also look at turnout in Sweden vs EU.

I will look at the share of party votes for populist Eurosceptic far right-wing parties in Sweden compared to the EU. Sweden's only populist Eurosceptic far-right party in the European Parliament is the Sweden Democrats. To find Europe's other populist Eurosceptic far right parties I used the database Populist and crossmatched the parties from each EU

country that, according to Populist are populist, Eurosceptic and far-right, and matched them with parties represented in the European Parliament after the 2024 EP election.

I will also compare the Swedish Green Party to the success of Green parties in all of the EU.

Additionally, I will compare the success of the different EU political groups in the EU as a whole versus just in Sweden. The main focus will be in comparing the success of the EPP and S&D in Sweden versus the whole of the EU.

Weaknesses

There are a number of possible weaknesses associated with my methodology. One of them is simply that the larger phenomenon that I want to look at, Swedish EP elections and whether they have second order characteristics, can not be properly answered by just looking at one election. By doing this I hope to gain some knowledge about the 2024 election and put it into context. However, there can still be broader trends that I will miss and there may also be aspects of the 2024 election that are outliers.

There is also the limitation that there may be broader trends that can not be properly seen until the next EP election takes place. The same problem exists with there not being a national election to compare the 2024 EP results to. There may be political trends that can be noticed in the 2024 EP election but dismissed as outliers without the next election to properly see what trends are emerging. It is therefore possible there may be results in the EP election that can not be properly analyzed. My analysis will in this way be limited by the time in which it is written.

Data

My data is collected from official election statistics from both Swedish and European election authorities. Most of the data on the Swedish EP elections and national elections come from the Swedish authority Valmyndigheten that collects data about elections and electoral participation. This includes information on vote shares for each party as well as electoral participation. The information on EU-wide results come from the official EU website on elections to the European Parliament. This similarly includes information on vote shares for each party, for different countries and electoral participation. Additional data comes from the Statistiska Centralbyrån (SCB) which is the main statistics bureau in Sweden. All data regarding voting in different läns in Sweden come from SCB. Unless stated otherwise all of the data that is analyzed in the results section comes from these three sources.

When doing analysis on populist far-right Eurosceptic parties I will be using the respected website Populist. Populist is a website that determines what parties that can be considered far-left, far-right, populist and/or Eurosceptic. I consider Populist to be a reliable source both as it is used in peer-reviewed academic papers and as it is regularly updated and has been compiled by more than 100 academics. Populist's definition of populist parties is based on Mudde (2004) and to make certain that the analysis will be consistent I am using the same definition as Populist. Notably, the EU country of Greece is not included in the Populist country report and therefore other sources have been used to compile information on Greece though the same criteria has been used. These sources are Tsagkroni (2023) and Vasilopoulou (2024).

In Sweden the two populist parties, according to the website Populist, are the Sweden Democrats and the Left Party. The Sweden Democrats are a right-wing populist party whereas the Left Party is a left-wing populist party. The only party in Sweden that fits the criteria of being far-right, populist and Eurosceptic is the Sweden Democrats.

Results

Was Sweden's 2024 election to the European Parliament a second-order election?

The first thing to look at regarding the 2024 EP election is its turnout which is seen in the table below.

Table: Electoral participation in the two latest national and EP elections.

	National Election 2022	EP Election 2024
Electoral Participation	84,2%	53,39%
Invalid ballots	1%	1,4%

The table above provides evidence that H1 is true. It is evident that electoral participation is significantly lower with a 30 percentage point difference. There are also more invalid ballots than in the national election which also makes sense conforms to the SOE model.

H1: Turnout in the 2024 EP election is significantly lower than the 2022 national election.

The next thing to look at is the actual election results regarding party vote shares.

Table: Vote share comparison between 2022 National Election and 2024 EP Election

Party	2022 National Election	2024 EP Election	Difference
Moderaterna	19,1%	17,53%	-1,57%
Socialdemokraterna	30,33%	24,77%	-5,56%
Centerpartiet	6,71%	7,29%	+0,58%
Kristdemokraterna	5,34%	5,71%	+0,37%
Liberalerna	4,61%	4,38%	-0,23%
Miljöpartiet	5,08%	13,85%	+8,77%

Sverigedemokraterna	20,54%	13,17%	-7,37%
Vänsterpartiet	6,75%	11,06%	+4,31%
Others	1,54%	2,25%	+0,71%

The analysis of the 2022 national election results compared with the 2024 EP election shows several important differences. The Moderates, the Social Democrats, the Liberals and the Sweden Democrats all perform worse in the EP election than in the national election. The Center Party, the Christian Democrats, the Greens and the Left Party all perform better in the EP election than in the national election.

That the Social Democrats, the Moderates and the Sweden Democrats all perform worse makes sense according to the SOE model as they are the three largest parties and the theory holds that larger parties lose during second order elections. Of the three large parties: the Social Democrats, the Moderates and the Sweden Democrats all of them significantly lost part of their vote share in the 2024 EP election compared to the 2022 national election. The Social Democrats lost 5,56 percentage points, the Moderates 1,57 percentage points and the Sweden Democrats lost 7,37 percentage points. This provides evidence for H2 as all the largest parties significantly lost party size.

H2: Party size is negatively associated with electoral performance in the 2024 EP election relative to the preceding national election.

The ruling coalition by the time of the EP election is parties in the Tidö-agreement. These four parties (the Moderates, the Sweden Democrats, the Liberals, the Christian Democrats) received 49,54% of the votes in 2022. In the EP election they received merely 40,79% of the vote share. This is a significant decrease in support with a total of nearly 9 percentage points less. This would make sense according to the theory of second order election as the EP election was held in the middle of the election cycle which is then the incumbent government tends to have the lowest level of support. This then provides support for H3 being accurate.

H3: Incumbency is negatively associated with electoral performance in the 2024 EP election relative to the preceding national election.

When it comes to populist parties gaining votes the Left party did indeed get a higher support whereas the Sweden Democrats received a much lower share of the vote. However, regarding the Sweden Democrats this may be because the party is now large enough, as the second

largest party, to receive the effects of being a large party in support of the government rather than being an extreme one.

The support for H4 is then mostly strong but not entirely proven.

H4: Populist parties gained votes in the 2024 EP election compared with the preceding national election.

Additionally, the last hypothesis related to the main question is whether the amount of votes for small parties increased. In the 2022 national election small parties that are not in the government received 1,54% of the vote whereas in the 2024 EP election they received 2,25% of the vote. This is an increase of 0,71 percentage points or a 46% increase. This provides support for H5.

H5: Small parties not in the national parliament will receive a larger part of the vote share compared with the preceding national election.

In conclusion, when it comes to the first research question the evidence seems to indicate that four out of five hypotheses have evidence provided for them while H4 has mixed evidence for it. This indicates that the 2024 EP election indeed is an election that can be explained with the second-order election model.

How does the Swedish 2024 EP election differ from the 2024 EP election in the rest of the EU?

Of all eligible voters in the EU 51,05% of the populace voted. In Sweden it was 53,39% which is quite similar to the total average.

This proves H6 true.

H6: Sweden will have higher electoral participation than the rest of the EU.

Table: Results for Sweden's 2024 EP election

Political Group	Percentage	Seats
S&D	23,48%	5
EPP	25,45%	5

G/EFA	11,52%	3
ECR	15,34%	3
Renew	14,91%	3
GUE/NGL	6,80%	2

The two political groups with the most seats in Sweden are the social democratic S&D and the conservative EPP. The Social Democrats are in S&D whereas both the Moderates and the Christian Democrats are in EPP. G/EFA (the Greens), ECR (the Sweden Democrats) and Renew (the Liberals and the Center Party have 3 seats each). The far-left group GUE/NGL has two seats and their Swedish representation is the Left Party.

Table: Results for the whole of the EU (excluding Sweden)

Political Group	Percentage	Seats
S&D	18,74%	131
EPP	26,18%	183
G/EFA	7,15%	50
ECR	10,73%	75
Renew	10,59%	74
GUE/NGL	6,29%	44
PfE	12%	84
ESN	3,58%	25
NI (no group)	4,72%	33

Of the 8 groups represented in the EU parliament after the 2024 EP election Sweden has representatives in 6 of them. Sweden has no representative in the Patriots for Europe group or the Europe of Sovereign nations. These are both far-right groups formed ahead of the 2024 election. Sweden's only major far-right party is fully represented in the ECR group instead. ECR is also more popular in Sweden (15,34%) than in the EU (10,73%). This could be explained by the far-right group in the rest of the EU being split between different parties and

factions whereas in Sweden it is all concentrated into one party. Sweden also has no representatives that are not in an EP political group.

The largest group in the EP as a whole is the EPP which is also the biggest group in Sweden when looking at the percentage of votes. The second largest group is the S&D. However, in Sweden this group has the same amount of seats as the EPP while in Europe as a whole EPP is quite a bit bigger. EPP received 26,18% of the vote in the whole EU and 25,45% of the vote in Sweden. The significant difference is that S&D received 18,74% of the vote in the whole EU but 23,48% of the vote in Sweden.

In total this means that in Sweden the two largest political groups are S&D and EPP which in total received nearly 49% (48,93%) of the vote. In the EU in total the same number for these two groups was 45% (44,92%). This provides some evidence for hypothesis 7.

H8: The EPP and S&D will be more successful in Sweden than the rest of the EU.

Another major difference is that the Green party group (G/EFA) seems to be more popular in Sweden (11,52%) than in the whole of the EU where they received 7,15% of the vote.

The Green Party in Sweden receiving a higher percentage of the vote than the G/EFA group provides evidence for hypothesis 6.

H7: Sweden's Green Party will be more successful than other Green Parties in the EU.

There are 27 countries in the EU. Of these 27 countries, 21 elected at least one representative to the European Parliament in 2024 that comes from a populist far-right Eurosceptic party. The 6 that did not are: Croatia, Ireland, Latvia, Luxembourg, Malta and Slovenia.

The Sweden Democrats received 13,17% of the vote. 11 EU member states had populist far-right Eurosceptic parties that ultimately received a higher percentage of the vote than the Sweden Democrats did, whereas 9 countries had such parties that received a lower percentage of votes than the Sweden Democrats.

Some countries such as France and Poland had very high support for such parties, with for instance the French National Rally receiving over 31% of the vote. Many other countries though seem to have levels of support for these parties that were at a very similar level to Sweden. For instance Vlaams Belang in Belgium receiving 14,5% of the vote, Conservative People's Party of Estonia receiving 14,8% of the vote, Vazrazhdane of Bulgaria receiving

13,95 of the vote, and the Republika in Slovakia receiving 12,53% of the vote. These are very similar amounts as the Sweden Democrats received in their election (13,17%).

This means that in the 2024 EP election 15 of the 27 EU member states had populist far-right Eurosceptic parties that were less successful than in Sweden whereas 11 member states had more successful populist far-right Eurosceptic parties. This places Sweden almost exactly in the middle when it comes to support for populist far-right Euroscepticism. In conclusion this seems to provide evidence against H9 which claims that the Sweden Democrats would receive a lower share of the vote than populist far-right Eurosceptic parties in other countries. While it is true that the populist far-right Eurosceptic vote share is lower than in some states (11 of them) it is higher than in 15 member states. See appendix 4 for a full accounting of the populist far-right Eurosceptic parties in the 2024 election.

H9: The Sweden Democrats will receive a lower vote share than populist far-right Eurosceptic parties in other countries.

How does Sweden's 2024 EP election results differ from the Swedish 2019 EP election results?

Table: Comparing party size in 2019 and 2024 EP elections

Parties	EP Election 2019	EP Election 2024	Differences
Moderates	16,83%	17,53%	+0,7%
Center Party	10,78%	7,29%	-3,49%
Liberals	4,13%	4,38%	+0,25%
Christian Democrats	8,62%	5,71%	-2,91%
The Greens	11,52%	13,85%	+2,33%
Social Democrats	23,48%	24,77%	+1,29%
Left Party	6,8%	11,06%	+4,26%
Sweden Democrats	15,34%	13,17%	-2,17%
Others	2,5%	2,25%	-0,25%

Comparing the 2019 and the 2024 elections there are some marked differences in some parties' performances. The Social Democrats, the Greens, the Left Party especially get

significantly stronger results whereas the Center Party, the Christian Democrats and the Sweden Democrats had a noticeable decrease. In total the Red-Green coalition received 41,8% in the 2019 election and then 49,68% in 2024. The increase in 2024 is a highly significant one of nearly 8 percentage points. This makes sense as the Red-Greens moved from being in government during the 2019 EP election to being in opposition during the 2024 EP election. As expected by the SOE model, opposition parties have stronger elections. Especially during the second-order elections held in the middle of the election cycle as the 2024 election was.

In 2019 the right-wing coalition, which at the time included the Moderates, the Center Party, the Liberals and the Christian Democrats received 40,36% of the vote and therefore less than the Red-Greens. The right-wing parties receiving less of the vote might be seen as contradictory to the SOE model but in actuality something called the “honey-moon” effect hypothesizes that when second-order elections are held right after the first-order election the winning parties actually tend to maintain or increase the party vote share.

On the other hand the 2024 EP election was held almost exactly in the middle of the election cycle which is when voters are expected to punish the incumbent parties the most. For the same reason the decrease of most of the Tidö-parties results also make sense.

The outlier for this result is the Moderates which makes a slight gain of 0,7 percentage points going from the 2019 to the 2024 elections. This shows the importance of analyzing the national elections as the true benchmark to compare against.

The Red-Green government coalition received 41,8% of the vote in the 2019 EP election whereas they received 49,68% of the vote in 2024 which is a significant increase. On the other hand the right-wing parties received 55,7% of the vote in the 2019 EP election but only 48,08% of the vote in the 2024 EP election. This is a very significant decrease of support.

The opposition parties in 2019: the Moderates, the Center Party, the Liberals, the Christian Democrats, and the Sweden Democrats, received a total of 55,7% of the vote in the EP election. In the 2024 EP election the opposition parties: the Social Democrats, the Left Party, the Greens, and the Center Party, received 56,97% of the vote. The opposition parties in the 2024 therefore received 1 percentage point more of the vote than the opposition parties in 2019. This shows evidence for H10.

H10: The opposition parties in the 2024 EP election will be more successful than the opposition parties in the 2019 election.

Regional comparison

As in both previous EP elections and previous national elections there were significant differences in results based on various demographic characteristics. Geography is a major such factor and looking at the results it is clear that this includes regional variance.

There is widespread consensus on different electoral patterns in different parts of Sweden regarding both electoral participation and support for different parties. However, I also wanted to explore if different regions in Sweden (here the unit of analysis is län) had any significant deviations regarding the differences between the 2019 and 2024 EP elections, and specifically whether any of these differed greatly from the national results.

Overall, the results between 2019 and 2024 are very similar. In both elections the highest electoral participation rates are in the läns that encompass the major cities such as Stockholms län and Västra Götalands län.

In both elections the results for various parties were fairly consistent in where their geographic weak points and strengths could be found. For instance, while the Social Democrats were the biggest party nationally in both 2019 and 2024; they had their by far strongest results in the more rural and northern läns in the country such as Gävleborg, Norrbotten, Västerbotten and Västernorrland. In contrast to this the Moderates had their strongest results in both the southwest of the country, such as Hallands and Skåne län as well as in Stockholm. The third largest party in Sweden on the other hand, the Sweden Democrats had very weak results in Stockholm and its metropolitan region and instead excelled in the southern parts of the country. Regions that the Sweden Democrats were particularly strong in were in southern regions such as Blekinge, Halland and Skåne. These results were consistent in both elections though they did change in between them and the change was largely in line with national trends.

In 2019 20 läns had the Social Democrats as the largest party and the sole expectation was that the Moderates were the largest party in Stockholm. Interestingly, in 2024 the only län in Sweden where it changed what the biggest party was, was Stockholms län where the biggest party in 2019 was the Moderates with 20,5% of the vote share and in 2024 the biggest party was the Social Democrats with 20,7% of the vote. This means that in 2024 the biggest party was the Social Democrats in all 20 läns.

Table: EP election result for Stockholms län in 2019 and 2024

Stockholms läns	2019	2024	Difference
Electoral	59,4%	58,5%	-0,9%

Participation			
Moderates	20,5%	20%	-0,5%
Center Party	11%	7,3%	-3,7%
Liberals	5,9%	6%	+0,1%
Christian Democrats	7,7%	4,9%	-2,8%
The Greens	14,7%	17,1%	+2,4%
Social Democrats	18,7%	20,7%	+2%
The Left Party	7,7%	11,8%	+4,1%
Sweden Democrats	11%	9,6%	-1,4%
Others	2,8%	2,5%	-0,3%

However it is also interesting to note where the largest differences in various declines and increases among the different parties took place. Most of the regions are very similar to the national result, which of course makes sense. There are however some outliers. For instance in Jönköpings län the Moderates gained 2,1 percentage points of votes whereas that only was 0,7 percentage points nationally. See appendix 3 for a full accounting of the result in Jönköpings län. The same patterns can be found in for instance Kalmar and Kronobergs län which indicates that these are the regions in which the Moderates made the largest gains.

A huge outlier also exists with the Left Party which nationally gained about 4,3 percentage points of the vote but in Västerbottens län they made the huge increase from 10,7% of the vote in 2019 to 23,2% of the vote in 2024. This is an increase of a total of 12,5 percentage points.

Table: 2019 EP election compared to 2024 EP election in Västerbottens län

Västerbottens län	2019	2024	Difference
Electoral Participation	54,9%	53,1%	-1,8%
Moderates	9,8%	10,1%	+0,3%
Center Party	12,1%	7,8%	-4,3%

Liberals	2,8%	2,5%	-0,3%
Christian Democrats	6,6%	4,7%	-1,9%
The Greens	10,8%	12,8%	+2%
Social Democrats	34,9%	29%	-5,9%
The Left Party	10,7%	23,2%	+12,5%
Sweden Democrats	9,6%	8%	-1,6%
Others	2,6%	1,9%	-0,7%

Another party that has a strange pattern is the Liberals. On a national level they just barely grew in size with 0,25% of the votes being gained. However looking at a national level they did grow in 15 läns but they actually became smaller in 4 läns and they stayed at the exact same percentage point in 2 läns. This indicates an uneven growth in different parts of the country.

All of this taken together provides evidence for hypothesis 11.

H11: The regional differences in turnout and party preferences will be similar to the 2019 election.

Conclusion

The first research question concerns whether the 2024 EP election in Sweden can be considered a second-order election. It had five different hypotheses that were meant to evaluate the answer to this question. There is significant evidence found for four out of five hypotheses. Support for hypothesis 4: “*Populist parties gained votes in the 2024 EP election compared with the preceding national election.*” was found to be mixed as the Left Party did receive a higher share of the vote whereas the Sweden Democrats did not. Overall, as there was support found for a majority of the hypotheses this seems to show evidence for the 2024 EP election being a second-order election.

The second research question had to do with comparing Sweden’s results to the rest of the EU. There were four hypotheses for this question and there is evidence found for three of them. The evidence largely supports the Swedish electorate supporting more moderate parties than the EU electorate as a whole.

The third research question had to do with comparing Sweden's 2024 EP election result to the 2019 EP election result. There were two hypotheses for this question and there was evidence found for both of them. Specifically the evidence found for H10 provides broader support for the SOE model and for the idea that the model is stronger in the middle of the electoral cycle.

Discussion

In this paper I have done research into the 2024 EP election with a basis on second-order election theory. I have had three different research questions that all aimed to examine the 2024 EP election from different angles. Through comparative analysis I have come to a number of findings.

The main question was whether the 2024 EP elections can be classified as a second-order elections. In conclusion there is ample evidence found that Sweden's 2024 EP election can be considered a second-order election. Many of the expected characteristics of second-order elections are found, such as incumbent parties losing, large parties losing and overall much lower electoral participation when compared to the 2022 national election. There was mixed evidence for populist parties gaining votes. The Left Party received a significantly higher share of the vote whereas the Sweden Democrats did not.

The second research question has to do with comparing the 2024 EP election in Sweden to EU-wide results. In comparison to the EU at large Sweden has significantly higher electoral participation. The Social Democratic S&D political group also has more support in Sweden than in the EU as a whole. Sweden also distinguishes itself by having no representation in two of the far-right political groups in the EU; these being the Patriots for Europe group and the Europe of Sovereign nations. Overall this seems to indicate a lower support for far-right parties in Sweden than in the EU overall. There was evidence found for Sweden having a higher support for its Green party than there is in the EU overall. This seems to indicate that the Swedish electorate vote in a more moderate way and for more traditional parties than in the rest of the EU.

The third research question has to do with comparing the Swedish 2024 EP election to the 2019 one in order to ascertain differences and similarities. The results indicate that the Left-wing parties were more successful in the 2024 election compared to the 2019 one whereas the right-wing parties saw a decrease in overall vote share. Particularly noteworthy results is the Left Party gaining more than 4 percentage points whereas the Center Party lost more than 3 percentage points. The regional differences in electoral participation and party vote are fairly similar in both elections which was also to be expected. Some outliers existed though, most notably the Left Party gaining 4,3 percentage points of the vote nationally but in Västerbottens län they gained 12,5 percentage points of the vote. This indicates that while national trends were largely seen across the country there was still room for regional-specific differences. When comparing the 2019 oppositional parties to the 2024 oppositional parties the 2024 opposition was more successful. This provides further evidence for the SOE model as this difference can be explained by differences in the electoral cycle. As expected the SOE model seems to be stronger for the 2024 EP election which was held in the middle of the

national election cycle and that could explain why the oppositional parties were more successful in 2024.

As there has been speculation over whether EU elections have been getting more “first-order” this paper serves to contribute to the literature that examines whether this is truly the case. It does appear that at least so far as the 2024 EP election the second-order election theory still provides a valuable analytical structure for analyzing elections.

The main findings of this thesis is that the second-order election theory still appears valid for the 2024 EP elections. This can be inferred from a number of results found in the analysis. For instance this includes larger parties and incumbents losing a significant part of their vote share in the 2024 EP election compared to the 2022 national elections. Another finding is that there are indications that indeed the theory is stronger and has more explanatory power during the middle of the election cycle than closer to an election. This is indicated by incumbents seemingly losing a lot more votes for the 2024 EP election than the 2019 one. Taken together this seems to indicate that the second-order election theory still holds and still has a lot of explanatory power for EP elections in Sweden.

It is interesting to note that 6 of the EU's 27 member states did not have any party that was classified as "populist far-right Eurosceptic" while some others such as France, Hungary and Poland had parties fitting these characteristics that received over 20% of the vote. Yet there should be some caution in interpreting these results. In some countries there were parties that fit the definition of for instance populist and Eurosceptic but not far-right and therefore they would not be included in this analysis. It is also important to note however that due to different countries being differently far along their respective electoral cycle that without further investigation it is impossible to say how much any of this can be interpreted as saying something about broader European trends. Nevertheless it is interesting to note that the Sweden Democrats was more successful in the 2024 EP election than similar parties in 15 other EU member states. This is even with the Sweden Democrats having, by their standards, a very poor EP election with them receiving 7 percentage points less than in the national election seven years prior.

The reason for this poor result is not known but it may have to do with other parties in Sweden co-opting far-right talking points which may make it feel less necessary for people to give a “protest” vote to the populist right. Other potential explanations may be that people in Sweden simply have less populist right sentiment in general or that they are much further left. The Left Party in Sweden had an incredibly successful EP election which indicates that the “protest” votes might have gone to them.

There are also some theoretically interesting results as for instance the Sweden Democrats lost a significant share of votes compared to the 2022 national election which as a populist party would be very unexpected as they are expected to gain votes. However, this indicates that as the Sweden Democrats are now a supporting party for the government; they are instead viewed by the electorate as an incumbent party and are therefore as expected punished by the electorate.

There is however an interesting complexity revealed by the results. For instance the Sweden Democrats has long been called a populist party by both researchers and the mainstream. Based on that logic one would expect them to perform better in EP elections than in national elections, yet the Sweden Democrats received a markedly lower share of the votes in the 2024 EP election than in both the national 2022 election and the 2024 EP election. This could be a sign that as the Sweden Democrats have slowly become a more established and sophisticated party, culminating in them finally becoming an official support party for the current government, they might not be considered extreme by the voters anymore. Their lower performance might be a sign that the electorate views the Sweden Democrats as part of the establishment, even if official studies still consider them as a populist party. Other possible explanations might be that the EU is too well-regarded in Sweden and this might mean that people do not want to protest and vote for a historically EU-sceptical party. It might also be a sign of a weakness of the SOE model and future studies could explore how to deal with formerly populist parties that have gained real power. It might be interesting to explore when, in the minds of the public, a party goes from being a protest party to a part of the establishment.

My study found that small non-parliament parties did indeed receive a larger portion of the vote in 2024 than in 2022 which would fit the SOE theory. However, interestingly, it was not the same small parties that succeeded in the two different elections. In the 2022 national election the most successful small party was the Islam and immigration focused party “Partiet Nyans” with 0,44% of the vote and smaller far-right parties of “Alternativ för Sverige” and “Medborgerlig Samling” also had some success. In the 2024 EP election Partiet Nyans received a meager 0,04% of the total vote share. The most successful small party in 2024 was Folklistan which was a newly created party intended to cross party lines. The lack of success for Partiet Nyans in 2024 is perhaps an indication that small party support is more volatile and more fluctuating than for the major established parties. Another example of this is how the Feminist Initiative party was quite successful in the 2014 EP election and even gained a mandate but after failing to enter the parliament in 2018 it has since had little to no electoral success. The far-right parties, AFS and Medborgerlig Samling, on the other hand seem to be staying on a relatively stable level of support. In appendix 1 and 2 the results for the smaller parties for the 2022 and 2024 elections can be seen.

Comparing the 2024 election in Sweden to the rest of Europe also seems to show that Sweden has a relatively low proportion of people voting for the right-wing populist party which might then say more about a higher level of acceptance of the EU. The success of the EPP and S&D political groups in general seems to indicate that people in Sweden overall are quite content to vote for more established political parties even in the EP elections. In a time of political upheaval where for instance in France many of the established political parties have lost to Macron's party and Marine Le Pen's National Rally, in Sweden it is still the traditional largest mainstream parties that remain the most central and important political players.

The Swedish tendency to vote for established political parties could also be seen in how there are no Swedish representatives that do not have a political group in the EP.

It is also interesting to note that the two political groups that have no Swedish representations are Patriots for Europe group or the Europe of Sovereign Nations. Both of these political groups are notable for being right-wing Eurosceptic groups, with Europe of Sovereign Nations being described as particularly far-right and even "neo-fascist". Sweden's Eurosceptic far-right party is in the European Conservatives and Reformists political group and so there is no Swedish representation in the other two far-right groups. The total vote share for the Sweden Democrats was 13,17% while the total far-right vote share, combining the results of all 3 political groups was 26,31%. This could indicate both that the far-right in Sweden is more organized as it is just one party that has gained any real success in the EP and all of their MEPs are in the same political group, but it also indicates that the Swedish far-right is not as strong as in many other countries.

Sweden's Green Party on the other hand had a very strong 2024 election gaining 11,52% of the vote compared to the EU total of 7,15%. This could be both because the Green Party is stronger and green questions are more prioritized in Sweden but it could also be evidence for the theory that Swedish voters view environmental issues as issues that belong on the EU level (Berg & Oscarsson 2015).

Sweden also as expected had a higher electoral participation than the rest of the EU on average. However, it is notable that the electoral participation of Sweden was only about 53% in the EP election which while higher than the EU average of 51%, is still much lower than what an average Swedish general election garners. For instance in 2022 the electoral participation was 84,2%. The EP electoral participation is no less than 30 percentage points lower. This does fit with the SOE model as it predicts lower electoral participation but it is significant how much lower the electoral participation is. However, as the Swedish electoral participation was not that different from the EU one it might be the case that the true anomaly is how high the national election participation in Sweden is. Further studies could be made to

look into how over 30% of the Swedish population chooses to vote in the national elections but not in the EP elections.

The Left Party of Sweden did have a very successful 2024 EP election but this could be related to the Left Party being both a party considered extreme and also being considered a part of the opposition to the current government.

In comparing the 2019 and 2024 EP election there are some changes that can be seen. The most dramatic decreases in support can be seen for the Center Party (-3,49%), the Christian Democrats (-2,91%) and the Sweden Democrats (-2,17%). The largest increases were seen for the Left Party (+4,26%), the Green Party (+2,33%) and the Social Democrats (+1,29%). The Red-Green coalition in total received 41,8% of the vote in the 2019 election and then 49,68% of the vote in 2024. The remaining parties had shifts that were less than 1 percentage point. Any analysis of these results must take into consideration the shift in national government. In 2019 there was a Red-Green coalition government with the Left Party supporting, whereas in 2024 there was a right-wing government with the Moderates, Liberals and Christian Democrats being the ruling coalition with support from the Sweden Democrats. The 2019 EP election happened less than a year after the national election whereas the 2024 EP election happened two years after the 2022 national election, in the middle of the electoral cycle. In 2019 the right-wing coalition, which at the time included the Moderates, the Center Party, the Liberals and the Christian Democrats received 40,36% of the vote and therefore less than the Red-Greens who received 41,8% of the vote.

According to theorists the SOE model is in fact at its strongest in the middle of the electoral cycle, such as for instance the 2024 EP election, while it has its least explanatory factor for second-order elections held right after the national election such as the 2019 EP election. According to this idea the incumbent parties for instance can actually gain more votes in SOE elections held right after a national election as the “honey-moon” effect hypothesizes that the recently incumbent parties actually tend to maintain or increase the party vote share due to enthusiasm of the recent win. With this in mind the right-wing parties receiving a smaller part of the vote share than the Red-Green coalition in 2019 makes sense as the Red-Green coalition still would have been in their honey-moon period. It also makes sense that during the 2024 EP election, held in the middle of the national electoral cycle, the right-wing parties would in fact experience the full effect of the SOE model and therefore as the incumbent parties they would lose votes.

However some of the shifts in electoral support can still be seen and understood by the Second-Order Election model. It makes sense from this perspective that the left-wing parties all would have gained votes going from being in government to being in opposition. It also makes sense that the Christian Democrats and Sweden Democrats would have lost support

going from being an opposition party to being part of or in support of the government coalition. There are some interesting outliers to this though such as the Moderates and the Liberals gaining in the vote, if less than 1%, which is the opposite of what would be expected to happen according to the SOE. This then could indicate that there may be domestic political shifts that could explain the increase of these two parties.

The Center Party is a different case as they were in opposition to the Red-Green government of 2019 but also in opposition to the conservative Tidö-coalition. Despite this they lost a larger vote share than any other party. Here, the second possible explanatory factor must be brought up and that is national politics. Looking just at the Center Party through the lens of the SOE model their trajectory is difficult to understand which is why it is important to note that the Center Party have domestically gone through a tumultuous time, switching alliance from the right-wing to the left-wing causing them to lose some voters as well as going through multiple leaders and in general having a sort of identity crisis. From that point of view, with understanding and incorporating domestic politics, the decreasing support for the Center Party from 2019 to 2024 can be explained.

The comparison of Sweden's 2019 and 2024 elections show many similarities regarding regional differences. There are continually large differences between different parts of Sweden regarding both electoral participation and what parties are successful. It is however interesting that there have been some shifts. For instance the Left Party which was hugely successful in Västerbotten and gained 12,5 percentage points from 2019 to 2024. This is an interesting shift but that reasonably must point to regional political shifts and discourse, and must be considered an outlier to the national comparisons. While this paper is primarily interesting in examining Sweden as a case study it is still interesting to see what regional anomalies exist and what parties have uneven growth. For instance the Liberals grew in 15 läns but became smaller in 4. So while this adds up to a national success story it shows that they did not succeed quite as well in the whole country. In this case none of the parties seems to have had their national results affected by just one region; it is still worth keeping in mind that there may still be some regions that drive vote share differences that appear on a national level.

Future studies could look further into the 2024 EP election and make additional comparative analyses between different EU countries. As the 2026 Swedish National Election is coming up and there will be additional EU elections there will also be ample data in a couple of years to see how the electoral trends evolve.

I also chose to not delve that deep into the smaller parties and the question of whether smaller parties could be disadvantaged by the lack of strategic votes in the EP election as Fréden claims would happen. This could be explored in further research.

My paper also only analyzes one aspect of the election, that being the actual election results. Further studies could do deeper analyses with for instance interviews of both the general populace and voters, this would be a way to get into the motivation behind both voter and party strategy.

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Appendix

Appendix 1. Table: Five largest non-parliament parties in the 2022 election

Party name	Percentage	Ideology
Partiet Nyans (the Party Nuance)	0,44%	Pro-immigration
Alternativ för Sverige (Alternative for Sweden)	0,26%	Far-right, anti-immigration
Medborgerlig Samling (Citizen Collective)	0,2%	Far-right, anti-immigration
Piratpartiet (the Pirate Party)	0,14%	Libertarian, anti-corruption
Mänskliga Rättigheter och Demokrati (Human Rights and Democracy)	0,09%	Euroscepticism

Appendix 2. Table: Five largest non-parliament parties in the 2024 election

Party name	Percentage	Ideology
Folklistan (the People's List)	0,62%	Syncretism
Alternativ för Sverige	0,41%	Far-right, anti-immigration
Piratpartiet	0,37%	Libertarian, anti-corruption
Medborgerlig Samling	0,3%	Far-right, anti-immigration
Mänskliga Rättigheter och Demokrati	0,19%	Euroscepticism

Appendix 3. Table: 2019 EP election compared to 2024 EP election in Jönköpings län

Jönköpings län	2019	2024	Difference
Electoral Participation	54,8%	53%	-1,8%
Moderates	14,9%	17%	+2,1%
Center Party	12,2%	8,3%	-3,9%

Liberals	2,6%	3%	+0,4%
Christian Democrats	15,1%	10,5%	-4,6%
The Greens	9,6%	10,7%	+1,1%
Social Democrats	22,9%	25,2%	+2,3%
The Left Party	4%	7%	+3%
Sweden Democrats	17,2%	16%	-1,2%
Others	1,6%	2,1%	+0,5%

Appendix 4. Table: Populist far-right Eurosceptic parties in the EU Parliament and their percentage in the 2024 EP election.

Country	Parties	% of the vote in 2024 EP election
Austria	Freedom Party of Austria	25.36%
Belgium	Vlaams Belang	14.50%
Bulgaria	Vazrazhdane	13.98%
Cyprus	National People's Front	11.19%
Czechia	Svoboda a přímá demokracie	5.73%
Denmark	Danish People's Party, Denmark Democrats	13.76%,
Estonia	Conservative People's Party of Estonia	14.80%
Finland	The Finns Party	7.6%
France	National Rally, Reconquête	36.84%
Germany	Alternative for Deutschland	15.90%
Greece	Voice of Logic, Greek Solution	12.34%
Hungary	Fidesz	44.82%

Italy	Lega (Lega Salvini Premier), Brothers of Italy	37.72%
Lithuania	Tautos ir Teisingumo Sąjunga	5.45%
Netherlands	Party for Freedom, Farmer–Citizen Movement (BBB)	5.41%
Portugal	Chega	9.99%
Poland	Law and Justice, Nowa Nadzieja	48.24%
Romania	Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR), The Romanian National Conservative Party	14.93%,
Slovakia	Hnutie Republika	12.53%
Spain	Vox	9.63%
Sweden	Sweden Democrats	13.17%