

Still second order? The 2024 European Parliament election in Malta

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the fifth European Parliament election since Malta joined the European Union through the lens of second-order election (SOE) theory. Drawing on party manifestoes, media, citizens' priorities, electoral results, and preference transfers under single transferable vote system, we assess the extent to which the campaign and outcomes were shaped by domestic rather than European political dynamics. Campaign debates and media coverage were overwhelmingly domestically framed. Turnout remained high by EU standards but lower than in national elections. While the governing party experienced losses, small parties and independent candidates performed better than in national contests. Overall, the Maltese case provides support for SOE theory, while highlighting the growing role of abstention and ballot exhaustion as channels of second-order protest.

KEYWORDS

European Parliament; campaign strategies; media framing; electoral behaviour; national vs EU issues; second order elections framework; Malta

Introduction

While this article examines the 2024 Maltese European Parliament (EP) election through the lens of second-order elections (SOE) theory, assessing whether the Maltese case still aligns with its core expectations, the analysis also uncovers features of the local context that warrant further scrutiny regarding the extent to which it conforms to the SOE model and whether this classical framework requires revision or additional refinement. Malta's 2024 EP election reaffirmed the country's entrenched two-party system, dominated by the centre-left Labour Party (PL) founded in 1920, member of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D) Group in the EP and the centre-right Nationalist Party (PN), founded in 1880, member of the European People's Party (EPP), together winning 87.28 per cent of valid votes and securing three seats each. Turnout reached 73 per cent, well above the EU average, but much below the almost 86 per cent registered in the 2022 national election. The high turnout reflected the intensity of partisan competition, which often renders

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 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at <https://doi.org/10.1080/13608746.2026.2662942>

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abstention a visible break with partisan loyalty. Although small parties improved slightly on their national-election performances, none came close to winning a seat, and the contest ultimately operated as a national verdict on Prime Minister Robert Abela rather than a 'second-order' opportunity to experiment with alternatives. The result thus combined continuity in Malta's long-standing two-party dominance with a clear use of the EP election as a channel for signalling approval or disapproval of the government. This characteristic makes Malta an analytically useful case to assess whether the SOE model continues to offer a compelling explanation for EP election behaviour in highly polarised and domestically oriented political environment.

We find that the 2024 contest reproduced patterns familiar from previous Maltese EP elections and in line with SOE expectations (Cachia et al. 2020): small parties and independents performed better than in national elections, even if they again failed to win a seat; campaign debates centred overwhelmingly on domestic issues; and voter participation continued its gradual decline from the 2004 peak. The only major European theme to feature meaningfully was the Union's emerging defence agenda, which the PL employed to frame itself as the defender of Malta's constitutional neutrality. The high-profile re-election bid of EP President Roberta Metsola (PN – EPP) added an additional point of interest to this contest.

The remainder of this article assesses the relevance of the Maltese case for an SOE evaluation of the latest EP elections. We first overview the research design and then proceed with the empirical analysis starting with the EU-focus of the campaign and subsequently the electoral results.

European Parliament elections and the second-order framework

The second-order election model and its evolution

Although the European Parliament is the European Union's (EU) only directly elected institution, its elections have long been regarded as weak mechanisms for articulating public preferences on EU policy (Costello, Thomassen & Rosema 2012; Marsh & Norris 1997). Debates on the increasing politicisation of EU governance (Hooghe & Marks 2009) have raised questions about whether a genuinely European public sphere is emerging, yet EP elections have historically remained anchored in domestic political agendas.

SOE theory posits that EP contests are perceived as less consequential than national elections and therefore exhibit three recurring features: campaigns dominated by domestic rather than European issues, lower turnout, and losses for governing parties to opposition or smaller actors, with more sincere voting that often turns the contest into a referendum on the government (Reif & Schmitt 1980). These patterns were consistently observed across Europe for decades (Hix & Marsh 2011; Teperoglou & Schmitt 2017).

The 2019 EP election prompted renewed debate about the model's continued validity, given higher turnout and the heightened salience of EU-level issues in several member states (Braun 2021; Maier et al. 2021). Nonetheless, substantial cross-national variation persisted, leaving open the question of whether SOE dynamics still dominate, particularly in smaller, highly nationalised political systems.

In Malta, empirical evidence consistently shows that EP elections have been strongly shaped by domestic political considerations. The PL's victories in 2004 and 2009 are widely interpreted as rooted in national rather than European factors, especially given the party's historical opposition to EU membership (Harwood 2016). Declining turnout, abstention, and protest voting also align with SOE expectations, although earlier data limitations complicated long-term comparisons (Pace 2004, 2009). In contrast to the SOE model, the governing PL again secured a majority of votes in 2014 and 2019, winning three seats in 2014 and four in 2019. The latter outcomes reflected a combination of honeymoon effects, favourable domestic conditions, and the limited salience of EU-level issue voting (Carammia & Pace 2015; Pace & Carammia 2019).

The role of concurrent local elections

Concurrent local council and EP elections began in 2019. Although local elections broadly fit the characteristics of second-order contests, they are not the primary focus of this analysis. Their relevance lies in the fact that concurrent campaigning by the major parties in 2024 amplified locally salient political signals: i.e. personal, neighbourhood-level and community-specific signals that direct attention towards immediate local concerns rather than broader European issues. This dynamic further overshadowed the European dimension of the EP campaign and reinforced habitual local voting patterns. Future research could examine additional factors shaping turnout, including the gradual erosion of local councils' authority as responsibilities have increasingly shifted to central government, reducing their perceived relevance for many voters.

When 'Europe matters' – and when it does not

Research shows that 'Europe matters' and that parties with clear pro-EU or Eurosceptic profiles can benefit electorally when they Europeanise their campaign discourse (Beach, Hansen & Larsen 2018; Angelucci, De Sio & Paparo 2020). This dynamic was visible in Malta's 2024 EP election, though with mixed results. ADPD, formed from the merger of Alternattiva Demokratika (Democratic Alternative, AD) the Green party founded in 1992 and Partit Demokratiku (Democratic Party, PD) a centre-left party created in 2016 by two members of parliament (MPs) who split

from the PL, sought to frame national concerns within a broader European context and advocated more ambitious EU-level policy solutions, yet performed poorly. By contrast, independent candidate Arnold Cassola, whose longstanding pro-European and green credentials underpinned a strongly Europeanised and normatively driven campaign, performed exceptionally well, obtaining four times as many votes as ADPD.

Candidate-level effects and the limits of Europeanisation

Roberta Metsola's performance in the 2024 EP election was unprecedented: she secured 33.6 per cent of all first-preference votes, the strongest result ever achieved by a candidate in Malta's five EP elections. Her success reflects both her domestic appeal and the visibility she gained as President of the European Parliament since 2022. While SOE theory suggests that EP contests are shaped primarily by national partisan loyalties, her result demonstrates that EU-level prominence can resonate with voters, even if its effects are ultimately filtered through domestic party competition. The 'Metsola effect' helped the PN narrow its gap with the PL and fuelled speculation about her future PN leadership prospects, illustrating how individual candidates can shape outcomes in Malta's highly personalised single transferable vote (STV) system.

Yet the presence of a sitting EP president on the ballot did not weaken SOE dynamics. Rather than elevating the salience of European institutional politics, Metsola's European role was largely absorbed into national partisan conflict, with criticism focusing on perceived inconsistencies and domestic positioning rather than her institutional leadership. This underscores the resilience of SOE patterns even under conditions that might be expected to favour Europeanisation.

Intra-party competition and personalised politics

In proportional STV electoral systems such as Malta's, intra-party rivalries and candidate-centred competition can significantly shape election outcomes. As Hix and Høyland (2011) note, preferential systems like Malta's STV generate strong intra-party competition because candidates from the same party must compete directly for personal votes. While such factors typically influence voter behaviour only at the margins, their effects are amplified in small states where personal familiarity between voters and candidates is high. This was evident in the prominence of former Prime Minister Joseph Muscat's possible candidacy for the PL, which became a major campaign issue in the early stages and shifted attention away from EU-level considerations towards domestic personalities.

Reassessing the SOE framework in light of 2024

Malta's 2024 EP election provides a valuable opportunity to reassess the SOE framework. The country combines unusually high turnout by EU standards with a polarised two-party system, a highly nationalised public sphere, and a pattern in which small parties and independents routinely perform better in EP elections than in national ones, yet still fail to secure representation (Harwood 2016). The 2024 contest unfolded amid heightened domestic pressures – including intensified debate on governance and corruption, rapid population growth, and the high-profile candidacy of EP President Roberta Metsola. A Special Eurobarometer survey conducted shortly before the election found that 95 per cent of Maltese respondents perceived corruption as widespread, the third-highest level in the EU (European Commission 2024c). These conditions created a challenging environment for the governing party and reinforced the domestic anchoring of the campaign.

Research design

We analyse the 2024 Maltese EP election along the features predicted by SOE theory: (a) the Europeanness of the campaign and (b) the electoral outcomes including turnout in comparison to national elections and (c) the performance of opposition parties.

The Europeanness of the campaign is evaluated through an overview of the content of main party manifestoes, media coverage and citizens' stated priorities. Three manifestoes are analysed: those of the Labour Party, the Nationalist Party, and ADPD, which is a member of the Greens/European Free Alliance (EFA) group in the European Parliament (ADPD 2024; Partit Laburista 2024; Partit Nazzjonalista 2024).¹ We followed the Euromanifesto Project and the Manifesto Project's coding guidelines (Reinl & Braun 2023). Each quasi-sentence was coded according to its primary level of reference: EU, national, or general. Quasi-sentences referring simultaneously to national and EU levels were coded by dominant focus. The Euromanifesto and Manifesto Project define a quasi-sentence as the smallest unit expressing a single political idea. Each unit receives only one code, corresponding to its primary level of reference. The category 'general' covers statements that cannot be assigned to either the EU or national level – typically aspirational, rhetorical, or broad value-based formulations. This category is necessary to grasp value statements or programmatic claims that have no identifiable institutional anchor and coding them as either national or European would falsely inflate issue salience at one level. Manifesto

¹We focus on these three parties because they structure the core of Malta's party competition and together account for the overwhelming majority of electoral support. While smaller parties and independent candidates are included in the analysis where relevant, they did not produce manifesto documents that are comparable in scope, format, or level of detail, making systematic content analysis unfeasible.

coding was carried out manually by the authors. After an initial round in which each manifesto was read and provisionally coded, the coding scheme was refined. Ambiguous quasi-sentences were discussed until agreement was reached. Given the small number of documents, this consensual sifting was consistent with established qualitative content-analysis standards in political communication research, where small-N manifesto or media samples are frequently coded through iterative coder discussion (see Mayring 2015; Schreier 2012).

For media coverage, we conducted a qualitative content analysis of the three main independent Maltese newspapers – *Malta Today*, the *Times of Malta*, and the *Malta Independent* – across the entire formal campaign period (1 May–8 June 2024). These are the main independent English-language newspapers in Malta, broadly positioned within the centrist to liberal segment of the media landscape. While none are formally affiliated with political parties, they differ in tone, audience, and editorial emphasis, which allows us to capture variation in media framing across outlets. Articles were identified through systematic searches of each outlet's online archive using the keywords 'European Parliament', 'EP elections', 'EP', 'Metsola', 'candidate', and 'Brussels'. All articles focusing on the 2024 EP election were included. The unit of analysis is the article, and percentages reported refer to the share of articles containing a given type of reference. Each article was coded once according to its dominant focus, drawing on three indicators adapted from Schuck and de Vreese (2011): (1) whether EU-level political actors were present or quoted; (2) whether the thematic focus concerned EU policies, legislation, or institutions; and (3) whether political agency was attributed to the EU rather than to domestic actors.² Each of these three indicators corresponds directly to a core dimension of SOE theory: references to EU actors capture the degree of supranational political visibility; EU-focused themes measure the extent of issue Europeanisation; and EU-level location indicates the spatial anchoring of political authority. A low presence of these indicators therefore signals campaign nationalisation.

We complement the manifestoes and media analysis with an overview of citizens' priorities as reported in the special Eurobarometer Spring Survey 2024 (European Commission 2024c). Taken together, these dimensions reveal how politicians, media and citizens positioned themselves vis-à-vis the EP elections. We then analysed the main lines of the public debate immediately before and during the campaign as portrayed in the main media outlets. The media analysis shows how the intentions spelled out in the manifestoes materialised in the actual campaign and related debates.

To assess whether the 2024 Maltese EP election *outcomes* conformed to SOE expectations, we examine turnout trends since 2004 and results by party and

²Articles can contain more than one Europeanness indicator.

candidate. We examine voter behaviour under Malta's STV system, to gain insight into preference patterns, as surplus transfers and candidate eliminations reveal intra-party loyalty, protest voting, and cross-party flows.

Analysis

Party manifestoes

The analysis of the three party manifestoes shows differences in length and scope, although the topics addressed are broadly similar. All three manifestoes prioritise neutrality and defence, immigration (except for the PN), the environment, agriculture and fisheries, the rule of law, and Malta's competitiveness in the single market. The level of detail devoted to these issues varies considerably, with the Green Party (ADPD) presenting a substantially longer manifesto (232 quasi-sentences) compared to the PL (96) and especially the PN (24).

In terms of scope, the PN's manifesto is almost exclusively focused on the national level (75 per cent of quasi-sentences), while the PL's displays an even distribution between national and EU-level references. ADPD frames its proposals predominantly at the European level (50 per cent), with 38 per cent of quasi-sentences referring to the national level and 11 per cent classified as general. [Figure 1](#) summarises the distribution of quasi-sentences across levels of reference and provides the empirical basis for the qualitative interpretation that follows.

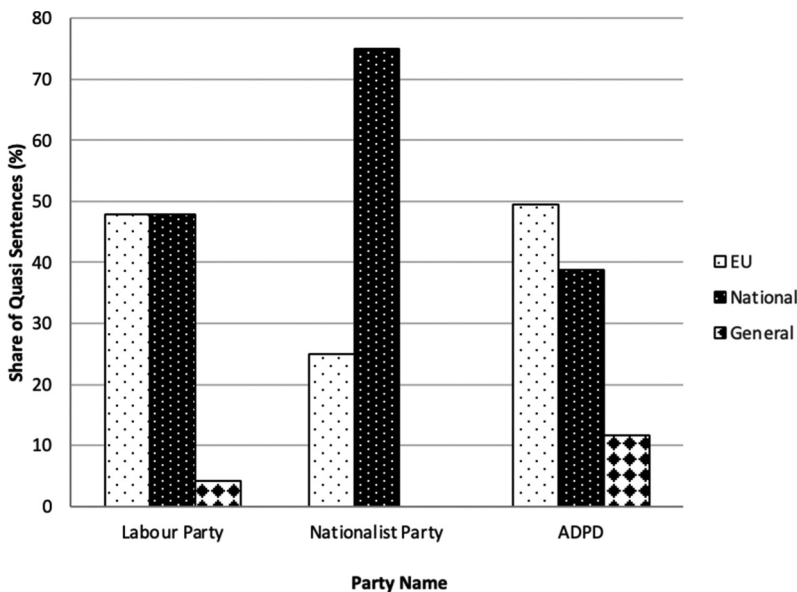


Figure 1. Dimensions in Maltese Euromanifestoes (May 2024). Own elaboration. Source: Maltese parties' electoral manifestoes.

Closer qualitative reading reveals important differences in how Europe is framed. The PL's balanced distribution between national and EU-level references reflects a largely instrumental engagement with the EU. European integration is consistently framed through a small-state and interest-based lens, emphasising protection of national priorities within the EU. This is illustrated by quasi-sentences such as *'We will work towards a more social Europe with our country's interests at the forefront – Gozo and Malta first'* (p. 6) and *'The need for Malta to have representatives who prioritize the interests of their people has never been greater'* (Partit Laburista 2024, p. 7). The manifesto also strikes a defensive note, claiming *'we stood firm against international pressures to change our socio-economic model'* (p. 6).

The PN published both the EPP manifesto and a two-page manifesto in Maltese and English which was overwhelmingly national in orientation and became the fulcrum of its campaign. The EU is primarily framed as a resource of support to domestic objectives. The manifesto pledges to *'We will work to secure more EU funds to support workers and employers while also investing in new economic sectors'* (Partit Nazzjonalista 2024, p. 2). This strong nationalisation closely aligns with the SOE model's prediction that opposition parties use EP elections mainly to signal domestic priorities rather than articulate distinct EU-level programmes.

ADPD frames a substantial share of its proposals at the European level, presenting the EU as key to addressing transnational challenges. The manifesto calls for stronger EU-level action, arguing that *'it's in your interest that the European Union strengthens the Green and Social Deal'* (ADPD 2024, p. 2). Environmental risks are framed beyond the national scale, with references to region-wide climate impacts, such as *'our region is suffering from the effects of climate change more than other regions'*, and the increasing *'risks of flooding and rising sea levels, which will destroy coastal infrastructure'* (ADPD 2024, p. 2). This more explicitly Europeanised and transnational discourse partially challenges SOE expectations.

Media coverage

Media coverage of the 2024 EP campaign displayed a more marked national focus than the party manifestoes, indicating a disconnect between parties' programmatic commitments and the issues that dominated the public campaign. Party manifestoes articulate European-level priorities shaped by their transnational party families, whereas media coverage follows the immediate dynamics of the campaign trail, privileging statements, controversies, and themes judged to be of national relevance. This mismatch creates a gap between the issues parties formally prioritise and those the media amplify, offering a clearer picture of parties' *practical* rather than *programmatic* preferences.

The qualitative content analysis of *Malta Today*, the *Times of Malta*, and the *Malta Independent* shows that, despite some variation between outlets, domestic political issues overwhelmingly dominated reporting during the campaign period.³ The papers also tended to catch the same main issues on the campaign trail.

Figure 2 shows the share of EP-related articles in each newspaper that contained at least one of the three Europeanness indicators – mentions of EU actors, EU-focused themes, or EU-level locations. The denominator for each percentage is the total number of articles coded per outlet (16 for *Malta Today*, 36 for the *Times of Malta*, and 12 for the *Malta Independent*). Thus, for example, 62.5 per cent of *Malta Today*'s EP-related articles had an EU thematic focus, while only 25 per cent of them mentioned EU-level actors. A similar pattern emerges across outlets: even where European issues are discussed, political agency is primarily attributed to domestic actors, and responsibility is framed in national rather than European terms.

Overall, even when European issues entered media discourse, they were framed primarily through domestic actors, partisan competition, and national political consequences. Coverage focused on candidate selection, campaign controversies, corruption scandals, and government–opposition conflict, with

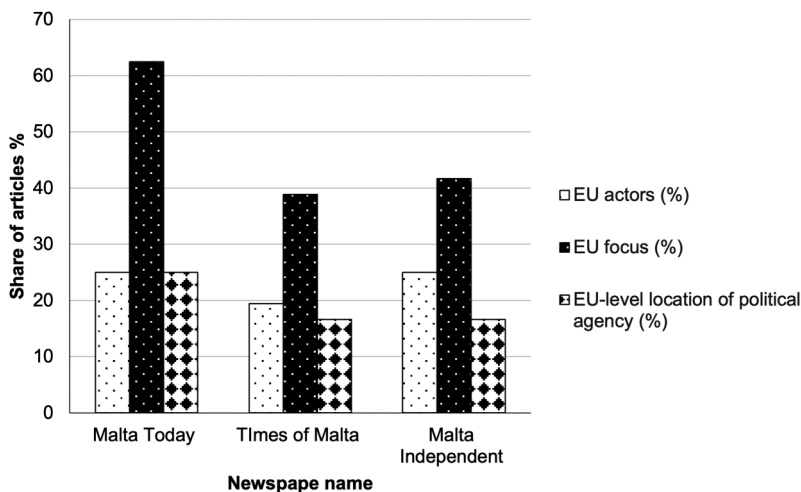


Figure 2. EU focus of campaign media coverage. Source: Own elaboration. Share of EP-related articles in *Malta Today*, *The Times of Malta*, and *The Malta Independent* containing references to EU political actors, EU-related themes, and EU-level locations. Percentages are calculated using the total number of EP-related articles per outlet as the denominator.

³The party media was excluded because of its partisanship and imbalance. The state media were biased in favour of the governing party while the independent newspapers – which also have a presence on the internet – were considered to represent most faithfully the content and flavour of the campaigns. Malta's English-language press spans a broad ideological spectrum: *Malta Today* generally adopts a liberal, reform-oriented and pro-EU stance; *Times of Malta* reflects a centrist to centre-right, institutionally grounded editorial tradition; and *The Malta Independent* tends towards a centre-right orientation historically associated with PN-leaning readerships. Long-standing editorial patterns shape each outlet's framing of political and policy debates, but they all carry opinion articles from all sides of the political and social spectrum.

EU institutions and officeholders appearing only marginally and rarely as autonomous political actors. This pattern reinforces the SOE expectation that EP campaigns are filtered through national media logics, limiting the visibility of European-level political contestation.

Citizens' expectations

Citizens' expectations are analysed using the Special Eurobarometer survey conducted in February–March 2024 (European Commission 2024a). Drawing on question QA14ab – ‘Which of the following topics should be discussed as a matter of priority during the electoral campaign for the next European Parliament elections? Firstly? And then? (%)’ – we chose to focus on the five highest-ranked priorities out of 16 identified by Maltese respondents including one per cent who gave no answer. Listed in descending order of importance, these are: migration, public health, the fight against poverty and social exclusion, the environment, and public finances. Migration emerges as particularly prominent, with 50 per cent of respondents identifying it as a priority, compared to an EU average of 25 per cent (Figure 3). These concerns relate primarily to the Maltese domestic context, where broader demographic pressures are resulting from the country's sharp population growth (Calleja 2025).

Climate change and environmental protection also feature prominently, with 42 per cent of Maltese respondents to the Spring 2024 Standard Eurobarometer

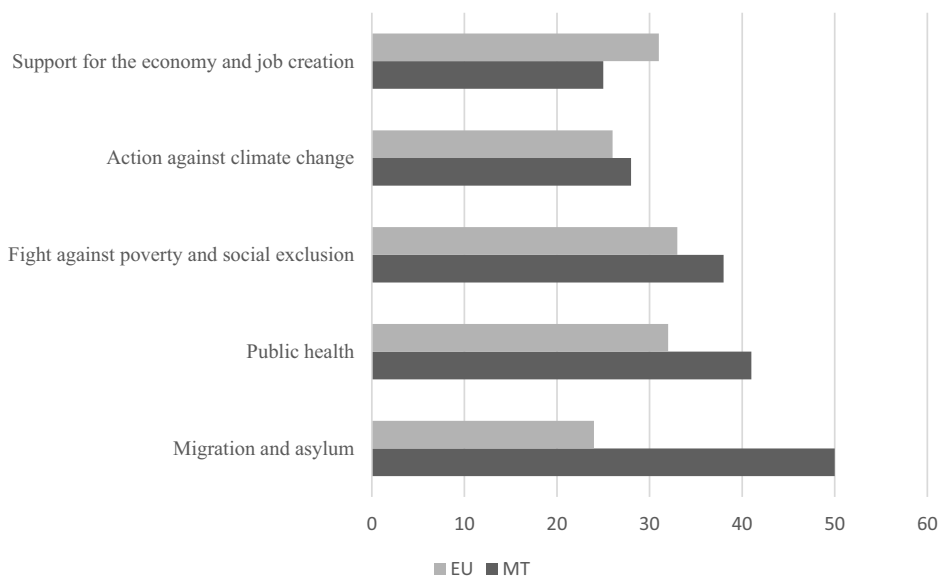


Figure 3. Which of the following should be discussed as a matter of priority during the electoral campaign for the European Parliament elections? Source: European Commission (2024a) Special Eurobarometer 101.1 – EP2024 Spring Survey – MALTA (Fieldwork 8 February–28 March 2024). Percentage values; comparing Malta and EU average.

(European Commission 2024c) identifying them as priorities for EU action over the next five years, compared to 30 per cent across the EU (Figure 4). Yet the dominant concern were rising prices: 58 per cent of Maltese respondents cite this as one of the most pressing national issues, against an EU average of 48 per cent (Figure 5). These findings draw on two items from Standard Eurobarometer 101 that gauge citizens' preferred areas for EU action and the most important issues facing their country.

The broad content of manifestoes, media coverage and citizens' priorities, as they appear from the public opinion surveys discussed above, suggest a prioritisation of national political developments, even in the context of an EP election. In the ensuing sections, we provide a deeper view of the content of the campaign as it unfolded, where reporting styles tended to emphasise local controversies, domestic party strategies, and national political personalities, thereby downplaying events occurring at the EU level and limiting the visibility of wider European debates.

The main lines of public debate

Defence and neutrality

One of the first campaign matters on which the PL and PN clashed was about the future of EU defence. In February 2024, *Politico* reported that Roberta Metsola had called for increased EU defence spending in response to comments by U.S. presidential candidate Donald Trump (Hanke & Starcevic 2024). The PL reacted by emphasising its commitment to peace, contrasting it with 'others'

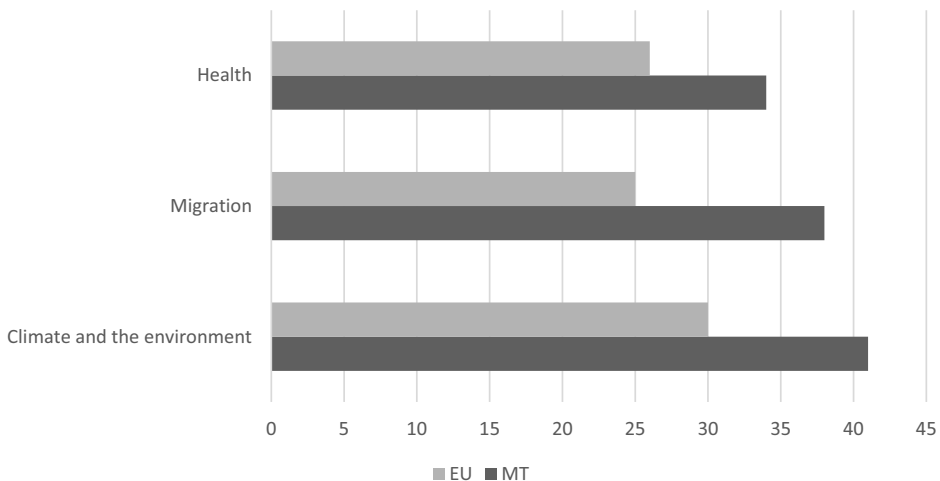


Figure 4. QB10ab. in your opinion, in which of the following areas should the EU take measures in the medium term, i.e. in the next five years? Firstly? And then? Source: European Commission (2024c). Standard Eurobarometer 101 (fieldwork Malta 3–24 April 2024). Percentage values; comparing Malta and EU average.

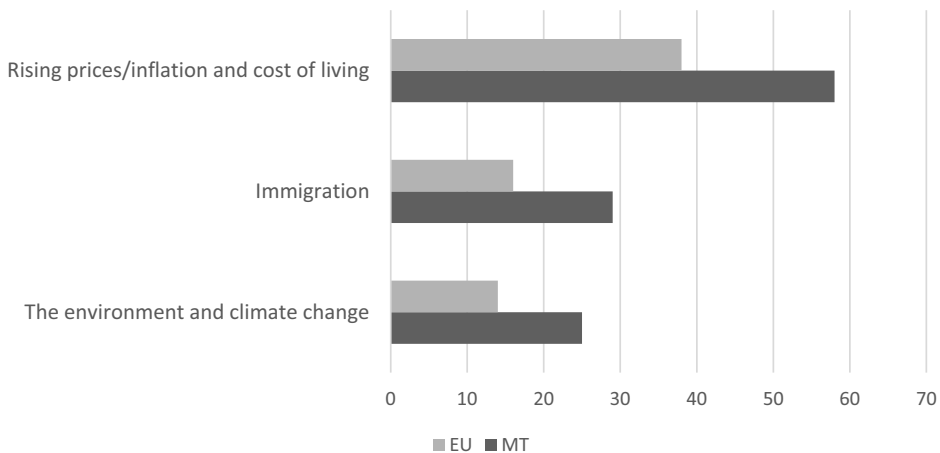


Figure 5. QA3. What do you think are the two most important issues facing (Malta) at the moment? (max. 2 answers) (%). Source Source: European Commission (2024c): Standard Eurobarometer 101 – (fieldwork Malta 3–24 April 2024). Percentage values; comparing Malta and EU average.

inclination towards war. Robert Abela, the PL leader and prime minister added, ‘We need to work strongly to elect PL MEPs who truly believe in the value of peace’ (Diacono 2024). This position reflects the widespread public support for neutrality in Malta, which transcends party lines but is particularly strong among PL supporters (Cassar 2024). Labour’s critique of Metsola’s statement was typical electoral rhetoric seen across all parties just before the start of the official campaign season. The PN challenged the PL’s credibility by accusing the prime minister of inconsistency for criticising EU defence policy in domestic discourse while simultaneously supporting it in the EU Council (Times of Malta 2024c).

The PL also sought to undermine Metsola’s credibility by highlighting a perceived inconsistency in her stance – comparing her support for Ukraine to her more restrained position on the war in Gaza. After the Hamas attack on Israel on 7 October 2023, Metsola, alongside European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, visited Israel to show solidarity, describing the incident as the worst terrorist assault the country had faced (European Parliament 2023). As Israel escalated military operations in Gaza resulting in significant civilian casualties, the PL criticised Metsola for being less vocal in condemning Israeli actions than she had been in denouncing Russia’s aggression in Ukraine (Malta Independent 2024b).

From that point onwards, PL candidates defended Malta’s approach to EU defence whenever the opportunity arose. In May, during a debate for MEP candidates at the University of Malta, which largely focused on the lack of application of EU environmental norms, all candidates expressed support for Malta’s neutrality, albeit with certain qualifications (Camilleri 2024). PN

candidate Peter Agius, who was later elected to the European Parliament in June, argued that neutrality should not prevent Malta from participating in EU defence initiatives. Independent candidate Arnold Cassola emphasised that Malta must still defend itself while maintaining neutrality (Vella 2024d). PL candidate Daniel Attard who eventually also won an EP seat, reiterated his party's stance against increased EU defence and armament funding, adding that 'In the EU, our position is in favour of the national interest, no matter who's in government. We will defend our neutrality and sovereignty' (Vella 2024d). From an SOE perspective, this episode illustrates how even EU-level security debates were fully refracted through domestic partisan competition, reinforcing the nationalisation of campaign conflict predicted by the model.

Former PL prime minister contemplates joining the race

Another controversy that further deflected attention from EU issues concerned the potential candidacy of former Prime Minister Joseph Muscat (Debono 2024). This dominated political debate from January to late May and primarily affected the PL. Muscat had resigned in 2020 following revelations surrounding the murder of Daphne Caruana Galizia and was later charged with corruption. A February 2024 *Malta Today* poll indicated that while 70 per cent of Labour supporters backed his candidacy, only 36 per cent of all voters favoured it (Debono 2024). An internal PL survey similarly suggested that Muscat's entry would produce a landslide victory by mobilising supporters who otherwise intended to abstain, although the party was still projected to win comfortably without him (Zammit 2024a). In the end, Muscat chose not to contest and instead campaigned for the PL's lead candidate, Alex Agius Saliba, who topped the Labour poll and was elected on the first count. The prominence of Muscat's possible candidacy and his campaigning for one of the candidates, illustrates how, in Malta's STV system, candidate-centred dynamics can overshadow programmatic or European-level debate – a pattern consistent with Hix and Høyland's observation that preferential proportional systems generate strong intra-party competition and personalise electoral campaigns (Hix & Høyland 2011, p. 150).

The broadcasting authority and 'a level playing field'

State media again drew controversy when on 18 April, the Broadcasting Authority (BA) ordered broadcasters to handle coverage of the European Parliament and its President, Roberta Metsola, with strict caution – prompting criticism from the PN and Metsola. The BA argued that the directive was intended to ensure a level playing field (Times of Malta 2024a). In effect it had little practical utility given that political party media are exempted from observing it. The episode inflamed partisan debate, consistent with second-order election expectations. It also underscores why relying on state media for the

present analysis would have risked reproducing partisan distortions, and therefore why these outlets were excluded.

Official campaign kick-off: May 1 speeches and party populism

Although the real campaigning and positioning started months before as shown above, the PL and PN leveraged the May 1 celebrations to officially launch their 2024 EP campaigns. As the campaign unfolded, EU-related themes surfaced intermittently, usually framed through local concerns, but domestic issues dominated throughout.

In their first of May speeches, the leaders of the PL and PN addressed both EU and national issues. References to the EU were primarily aimed at stirring populist and nationalistic sentiments. The PN leader criticised the prime minister for his frequent reproaches of the judiciary, while the prime minister accused PN members of the EP (MEPs) of attempting to block EU funds to Malta (Meilak 2024). This accusation was directed at a PN MEP who had requested the president of the European Commission to apply the rule of law conditionality mechanism, effective from 1 January 2021⁴ to withhold financial transfers to Malta. This request referred a social security benefit scam allegedly orchestrated by a PL MP, who subsequently resigned, along with several high-ranking party officials. The issue became legally contentious when the government decided to grant a presidential pardon to the fraudulent benefit recipients, provided they returned the benefits, while prosecuting the masterminds. This was another example of how domestic issues intertwined with EU issues and diverted public attention from more serious EU subjects (Zammit 2023).

The 'vitals' inquiry report

Another contentious issue concerned allegations of irregularities in the 2015 privatisation of three state-owned hospitals, which were under magisterial inquiry. This wholly domestic controversy likely pushed corruption to the top of voters' concerns. Tensions escalated on 24 April when the inquiry was completed. The prime minister suggested the timing, coinciding with the opening of nominations for the EP and local council elections, was deliberate (Falzon 2024), later describing it as an attack on democracy by an undefined 'establishment'. The PL framed the magistrate's conduct as an issue for voters to judge, turning the inquiry into a central campaign theme. The party repeatedly criticised the inquiry's methods, findings, as well as sections of the media linked to the 'establishment'. These claims intensified debate over judicial independence, drawing criticism from legal experts and the opposition, while rallying PL grass-roots supporters (Vella 2024b).

⁴Regulation (EU, Euratom) 2020/2092 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 December 2020 on a general regime of conditionality for the protection of the Union budget.

The inquiry led to the criminal prosecution of former Prime Minister Joseph Muscat, together with current and former ministers, businesspersons, and senior civil servants. On 28 May, ten days before the election, Muscat and others associated with the case appeared in court charged over multi-million-euro contracts awarded to Vitals Global Health Care and later Steward Health Care – marking the first time a former Maltese prime minister faced criminal charges (Zammit 2024b). A demonstration by Muscat’s supporters outside the law courts on the same day ended peacefully but was criticised as an attempt to intimidate the judiciary (Vella 2024a). The political debate escalated to the point that, on 8 May, the president of the republic had to appeal for calm and respect for due process.

Malta’s standing in EU institutions was shaken as the deputy prime minister, who was slated for a European Commission post, resigned and withdrew his nomination while the similarly charged central bank governor refused to step down, invoking Protocol 4 of the EU treaties (Borg & Arena 2024).

The overwhelming salience of the Vitals inquiry exemplifies the SOE mechanism whereby EP elections become mid-term referenda on domestic governance rather than contests over European policy. Eurobarometer data (Table 1)

Table 1. Trust in political parties and the government.

	How much trust do you have in certain institutions?					
	Political Parties (QA9.1 for 2014 and QA6.2 for all subsequent years)			The National Government (QA9.2 for 2014, QA6.8 for 2019 and 2024; QA6.9 for 2023 and QA6.10 for 2025)		
	Tend to Trust	Tend not to Trust	Don't Know	Tend to Trust	Tend not to Trust	Don't Know
All figures are percentages						
EB81 Spring 2014 (June)						
Malta	36	47	17	52	34	14
EU28	17	78	5	27	68	5
EB91 Spring 2019 (June)						
Malta	33	55	12	58	26	16
EU28	19	77	4	34	61	5
EB99 Spring 2023 (May/June)						
Malta	14	80	6	43	51	6
EU27	20	77	3	32	63	5
EB101 Spring 2024 (April May)						
Malta	17	75	8	36	53	11
EU27	22	73	5	33	61	6
EB103 Spring 2025 (Mar/April)						
Malta	26	68	6	49	46	5
EU27	24	73	3	36	60	4

Source: Compiled by the authors from the Standard Eurobarometer Survey data. Standard European Barometer – European Commission (2014, 2019, 2023, 2024b, 2025).

suggests that the issue contributed to a further erosion of public trust around the time of the election. Malta's trust trajectory between 2014 and 2025 is more volatile and domestically driven than the broadly stable EU-wide trends. In 2014 and 2019, trust in political parties and the national government exceeded EU averages, aligning with the PL's strong EP performances. After 2019, however, trust in parties collapsed: by 2023, only 14 per cent expressed trust and 80 per cent mistrust. Trust in government also declined, with total mistrust rising from 34 per cent in 2014 to 51 per cent in 2023 and 53 per cent in 2024. By 2025, trust in both institutions rebounded marginally – party trust to 26 per cent and government trust to 49 per cent – yet mistrust remained high (68 per cent and 46 per cent respectively). These indicators show a structural feature of Maltese public opinion: deepening distrust of the partisan system alongside comparatively more resilient, though fluctuating, confidence in government performance. It may also be contributing to declining voter turnout, a trend that warrants further investigation.

Election results

2019–2024 contrasts

The analysis in this section compares the 2024 European Parliament election with 2019, highlighting shifts in party performance, the rise of independents, the limited appeal of ultra-conservative actors, the underperformance of ADPD, and the exceptional showing of Arnold Cassola to illustrate broader patterns in Malta's evolving party system.

In the 2024 EP election, results summarised in [Table 2](#), 39 candidates from six parties and 13 independents contested the election, with the PL and PN together winning 87 per cent of valid votes and three seats each, while small parties and independents secured 12.7 per cent. Only one woman, Roberta Metsola (PN, EPP), was elected, compared with three in 2019, and overall levels of registered voters, valid votes, and invalid ballots were almost identical to the 2019 EP election. Relative to 2019, the PL lost 23.5 thousand (k) votes and the PN gained 10.7k, while independents and small parties rose to 33k votes – 12.8k more than in 2019 and far above their 9.3k total in the 2022 national election, when both major parties performed more strongly. This election reflected a broader surge in support for independents: 13 contested and collectively obtained 22,352 first-count votes, though this support was overwhelmingly concentrated among anti-establishment or issue-driven figures, namely Arnold Cassola, Conrad Borg Manché, and James Muscat who accounted for 91 per cent of all independent votes – indicating that voters gravitated towards candidates expressing systemic dissatisfaction rather than traditional conservative alternatives.

Table 2. Vote tallies of the main parties in the European Parliament elections of 2019 & 2024 and the general election of 2022.

	European Parliament Elections [Votes as a percentage of valid votes]		European Parliament Seats Won		General Election	Party Performance [Increase/decrease in votes compared]	
	2024	2019	2024	2019	2022	2024 EP & 2019 EP Elections	2024 EP & 2022 General Election
Voter Turnout [valid votes cast as % of registered voters]	73 per cent	72.7 per cent	–	–	85.6 per cent	–	–
Party/Party Label & EP Group							
Labour Party/Partit Laburista [PL – S&D]	117,805 (45.3 per cent)	141,267 (54.3 per cent)	3	4	162,707 (55.1 per cent)	–23,462	–44,902
Nationalist Party/Partit Nazzjonalista [PN – EPP]	109,351 (42.0 per cent)	98,611 (37.9 per cent)	3	2	123,233 (41.7 per cent)	10,740	–13,882
Democratic Alternative/ Alternattiva Demokratika [AD – Greens/EFA]*	–	1,866 (0.7 per cent)	–	–	–	–	–
Democratic Party/Partit Demokratiku [PD – Renew Europe]*	–	5,276 (2.0 per cent)	–	–	–	–	–
AD+PD (ADPD – Greens/EFA)*	3,109 (1.2 per cent)	–	–	–	4,747 (1.6 per cent)	–4,033*	–1,638
Imperium Europa [IE – no European Group]	6,816 (2.6 per cent)	8,238 (3.2 per cent)	–	–	–	–1,422	–
ABBA [A – European Christian Political Movement]	527 (0.2 per cent)	–	–	–	1,364 (0.5 per cent)	–	–837
VOLT Malta [VM – Volt Europa]	298 (0.1 per cent)	–	–	–	382 (0.1 per cent)	–	–
Independent Candidates [IC – non-attached]	22,352 (8.6 per cent)	2,674 (1.0)	–	–	1,282 (0.4 per cent)	19,67	21,070

Source: The table was compiled by the authors from data published online by the Malta Electoral Commission. Not all parties and independent candidates are included but only those whose vote-tally is important for the analysis.

Notes: S&D = Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats; EPP = European People's Party; EFA = European Free Alliance.

(*) Note: since AD and PD contested the EP election separately in 2019, their votes in that election were added to compare gains/loss of votes in the 2024 EP election.

Ultra-conservative parties' limited appeal

The 2024 EP election underscored how conservative and right-wing actors struggled to gain traction despite rising public concern about immigration. Immigration ranked as Malta's second-highest concern in the Spring 2024 Standard Eurobarometer (European Commission 2024c), yet this did not translate into stronger support for right-leaning parties or candidates. The far-right, ultranationalist Imperium Europa (IE) failed to make any electoral progress: after gradually increasing its vote share from 0.7 per cent in 2004 to 3.2 per cent in 2019, the party lost 1,422 votes in 2024 and fell to 2.6 per cent of the national vote. More moderate conservative actors fared similarly. Partit ABBA (ABBA

Party) and conservative-leaning independents performed worse than in 2019, a pattern widely attributed to the PL and PN having themselves adopted more restrictive positions on immigration, thereby narrowing the political space available to smaller conservative challengers. Edwin Vassallo's result illustrates this constraint: running as an independent on an explicitly conservative platform, the former PN junior minister obtained 717 votes – an improvement on his 2022 national election performance but still marginal relative to other independents (Times of Malta [2024b](#)). His limited support suggests that voters defecting from the major parties tend to favour candidates perceived as reformist, environmentalist, or anti-establishment rather than those offering a traditional ideological conservative agenda.

ADPD – a disappointing result

The merger of AD and PD into ADPD was intended to consolidate Malta's third-party space, yet this strategic unification did not yield electoral gains in the 2024 European Parliament election. ADPD obtained 3,109 votes – below its 4,747 votes in the 2022 national election and below the combined AD (1,866) and PD (5,276) totals in the 2019 EP contest. This outcome runs counter to SOE expectations, which typically predict stronger performances for minor parties in EP elections. Instead, the result reflects how Malta's highly nationalised and polarised political system continues to reinforce the PL – PN duopoly, limiting opportunities for smaller parties even in electoral arenas where they often perform better. AD had long positioned itself as the principal challenger to the two-party system, and the 2020 merger with PD sought to reduce vote fragmentation, pool organisational resources, and articulate a unified platform centred on good governance, environmental protection, and institutional reform, supported by clearer European alignment through the European Green Party (Caruana [2020a](#), [2020b](#)). Despite this rationale, ADPD's reduced vote share in 2024 raises questions about the merger's effectiveness and highlights the structural constraints facing new or reconfigured actors in Malta's party system.

Arnold Cassola – star outsider

Among the independent candidates, Arnold Cassola stood out. Running independently for the first time in 2019 with little success, Cassola had previously served as secretary general of the Green Party in the European Parliament for two terms beginning in 1999 and 2003. Although he nearly won a seat in the 2004 European Parliament election as AD's leader, his later electoral performances were less notable. In 2024, he received 12.7k preference votes and was eliminated with 22.9k votes in the 34th count. When eliminated from the race, 34 per cent of his votes went to the PN, helping it secure a third seat, 9 per cent

to the PL, and 58 per cent were non-transferable (Electoral Commission Malta 2024). Cassola campaigned almost exclusively through the social media focusing on the environment and the rule of law

Former mayor: from a socialist to a right-winger

Another significant independent candidate was Conrad Borg Manché (CBM), the former mayor of the Gzira PL majority local council. He resigned from the PL in 2023, accusing the party of straying from its socialist values (Malta Independent 2024a). However, during his EP campaign, he may have alienated some voters, especially from his former Labour base, by stating that he would join the political group of Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni if elected (Vella 2024c). When he was eliminated in the 29th count, 43 per cent of his votes went to Arnold Cassola, the next candidate on the ballot. The PL benefited the most from the remainder of his vote transfers.

Voter turnout

This final section examines voter turnout and electoral behaviour in Malta using turnout data, post-electoral survey evidence, and STV vote transfer patterns. Voter turnout in Malta has been declining in both national and EP elections since 2003. From 2019, local council elections have been held in a single nationwide cycle alongside the European Parliament elections; previously, they were conducted in three separate rounds. The idea of synchronising the two contests was first raised by the Prime Minister Joseph Muscat shortly after the 2014 EP elections, on the grounds that consolidation would reduce administrative costs, mitigate voter fatigue, and boost turnout in European contests. However, this reform has not altered the longstanding pattern: participation in local council elections continues to trail behind turnout in both national and European Parliament elections. In 2024, turnout for the European elections registered a slight increase – from 72.7 per cent in 2019 to 73 per cent – while participation in the local council elections fell from 62.6 per cent to 59.6 per cent.⁵ Future research could explore additional factors shaping turnout, including the gradual erosion of local councils' authority as responsibilities have increasingly shifted to central government, diminishing their perceived relevance for many voters.

Viewed through the lens of second-order election theory, Malta's electoral patterns display the classic features of lower-salience contests in the EP elections. As indicated in Table 3, although turnout in Maltese EP elections is

⁵Turnout in local council elections (LCs) is consistently lower than in EP elections. In both contests, all Maltese citizens aged 16 and over are automatically registered. For LC elections, EU and British residents in Malta are also automatically included in the electoral register. For EP elections, EU citizens must actively register their intention to vote in Malta, meaning many are not on the EP register. As a result, in 2024, the local council register listed 457,343 voters (272,697 voted), while the EP register listed 370,184 voters (270,142 voted). For this reason, turnout rates in the two elections are not directly comparable.

Table 3. Comparison of voter turnout in the EU and Malta in the EP elections and in Maltese national elections.

	2003	2004	2008	2009	2013	2014	2017	2019	2022	2024
EU EP		45.5		43		42.6		50.7		50.7
Malta EP		82.4		78.8		74.8		72.7		73
Malta General Election	95.7		93.3		93		92.1		85.6	

Source: National figures compiled from the data online provided by the Malta Electoral Commission; EP Election turnout from European Parliament’s Election Results webpage. All figures are percentages and rounded to one decimal place.

exceptionally high by EU standards, it remains consistently lower than turnout in national elections, indicating that voters still perceive EP contests as less consequential. The dominance of the two major parties, PL and PN, persists across all elections as indicated in Table 2, yet small parties and independent candidates perform noticeably better in EP elections than in national ones – an outcome fully consistent with SOE expectations that voters feel freer to defect from the main parties in lower-stakes arenas. Thus, despite Malta’s unusually high levels of electoral mobilisation, the relative turnout gap and the improved performance of minor parties confirm that European elections continue to function as second-order contests within the Maltese political system. They are also a kind of ‘mid-term’ electoral test for the party in government. What is most unique in this case is that the smaller parties and independent (non-attached candidates) have still not managed to overturn the dominance of the two main parties and win a European parliamentary seat.

Vote movements and general public mood

In the absence of detailed survey data, it is difficult to identify the cause of vote movements between the parties and to provide a full explanation of the turnout. It is speculated that the PL, whose core base is much more loyal than that of other parties, experienced a lower voter turnout in 2024 due to internal disgruntlement with the government’s performance. Although the economy was performing well, sections of the PL base were unhappy with the government’s handling of certain business practices, accusations of corruption, excessive construction and insufficient attention to the environment and key public services. This led to some protest voting and abstentions including among the latter, some who assumed that the party was going to win the election comfortably as the opinion polls were suggesting. Both the PL and PN lost some votes to the independent candidates, notably Borg Manch  , Cassola, and the small parties. The PN does not seem to have convinced many voters to switch from the PL, but it may have encouraged some voters who had abstained in the past to return.

A special post-electoral Eurobarometer (European Commission 2024b) asked a sample of Maltese voters to indicate what motivated them to vote and

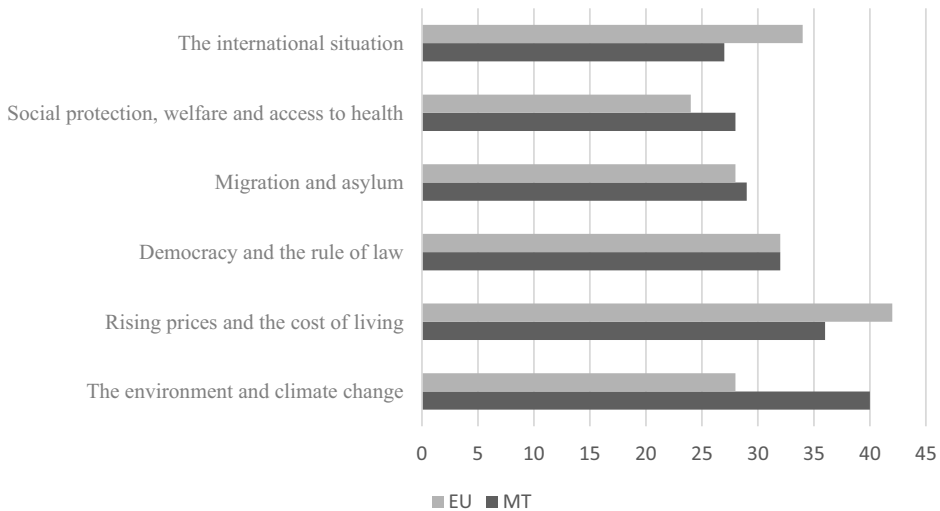


Figure 6. What made Maltese voters vote. Source: Own elaboration. *Special Eurobarometer EB046EP: EU Post-electoral survey 2024* (European Commission 2024b).

a sample of those who did not vote were asked why they did not vote. To the question ‘Which of the following is the main topic that encouraged you to vote in the recent European election?’, the six top topics selected in order of importance were: (1) the environment and climate change; (2) rising prices and the cost of living; (3) democracy and the rule of law; (4) migration and asylum; (5) social protection, welfare and access to healthcare; and (6) the international situation (Figure 6).

To the question ‘what are the main reasons why you did not vote in the recent European election?’, the six top answers were in this order: (1) lack of trust in politics; (2) not interested in politics as such; (3) the vote does not change anything; (4) too busy to vote; (5) not interested in European affairs; and (6) not really satisfied with the European Parliament as an institution (Figure 7).

STV and support for the small parties and independent candidates – SOE characteristic prevail

Table 4 provides a clear illustration of how the STV system functions and what it reveals about voter behaviour in this election. As candidates’ surplus votes are redistributed, a distinct pattern emerges: voters who supported smaller parties tended to do so expressively, by giving most of their other preferences to other small parties and independent candidates, a SOE hallmark of the contest. By contrast, the surplus votes of the two dominant parties (PL and PN) overwhelmingly remained within party lines, with only negligible transfers to their main rival.

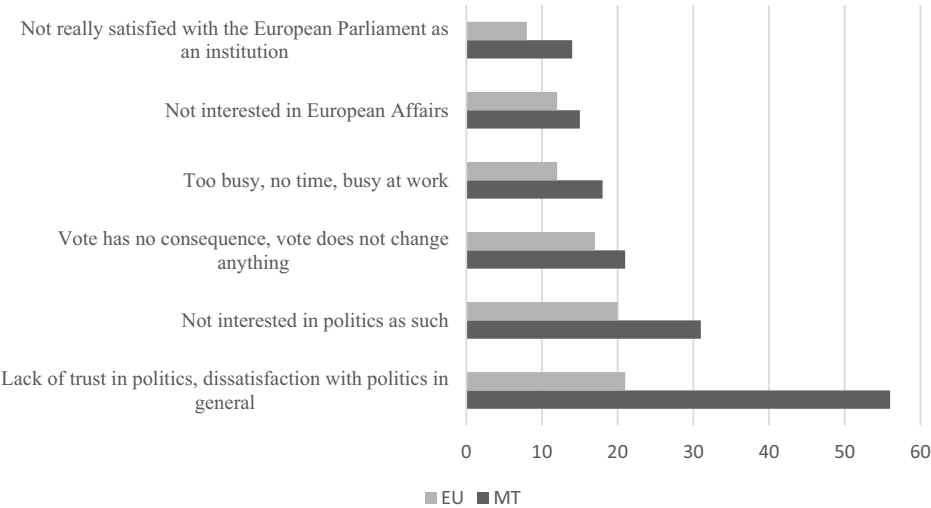


Figure 7. Reasons for not voting. Source: Own elaboration. *Special Eurobarometer EB046EP: EU Post-electoral survey 2024* (European Commission 2024b).

Table 4. Redistribution of surplus votes.

	Initial Vote Count	1 Count	2 Count	26 Count	29 Count	31 Count	34 Count
Roberta Metsola (PN)	87,473	-50,293	0				
Alex Agius Saliba (PL)	63,899	0	-26,719				
ADPD	3,109	357	38	-3,603	0	0	0
K. Borg Manche (IC)	5,936	576	110	255	-7,641	0	0
IE (Imperium Europa)	6,816	176	160	243	722	-8,577	0
A. Cassola (IC)	12,706	2,490	121	942	3,290	1,365	-22,941
Rest of ICs + Small Parties	4,535	448	111	0	0	0	0
PL Candidates	117,805	516	26,080	425	1,039	1,478	2,019
PN Candidates	109,351	45,730	99	424	877	877	7,693
Non-Transferable	0	0	0	1,314	1,713	4,857	13,229
		50,293	26,719	3,603	7,641	8,577	22,941

Note: IC means independent candidate. Shading indicates the votes above the quota transferred to other candidates or votes transferred from an eliminated candidate to other candidates.

Source: the figures in this table are compiled by the authors from the result of the election published by the Electoral Commission, Malta.

In the first count, both Roberta Metsola (PN) and Alex Agius Saliba (PL) exceeded the quota by substantial margins, triggering significant surplus redistributions. Metsola’s surplus of 50,293 votes was allocated in the first count, while Agius Saliba’s surplus of 26,719 votes was distributed in the second. The vast majority of their second preferences went to candidates from their own party – 91 per cent in Metsola’s case and 98 per cent in Agius Saliba’s – indicating strong partisan loyalty. Cross-party transfers were minimal (1.0 per cent from Metsola to PL and 0.4 per cent from Agius Saliba to PN). The remaining surplus flowed to smaller parties and independents (8 per cent from PN and 2 per cent from PL).

The PL surplus demonstrates particularly high levels of intra-party loyalty. Yet among those PL voters who switched to smaller parties or independents, the

shift was decisive: PL candidates gained relatively little when these smaller formations were eliminated. Metsola's surplus also largely benefited fellow PN candidates, but of the portion that did not, roughly half transferred to Arnold Cassola.

The flow of votes towards smaller parties and independents underscores a meaningful level of support for alternatives to the major parties, even if not sufficient to secure representation. This pattern is consistent with sincere or protest voting, typical of second-order elections where the perceived stakes are lower.

When ADPD, Borg Manché, and IE were eliminated, Cassola absorbed the largest share of their redistributed votes – more than twice the combined amount received by PL and PN. This indicates that a substantial segment of voters who supported smaller parties and independents did not subsequently cross over to the two main parties.

Subsequently, upon Cassola's elimination, 34 per cent of his ballots transferred to PN, 9 per cent to PL, while 58 per cent became non-transferable, because voters did not indicate any further preferences on their ballot sheet. This high non-transferable rate suggests that many of his supporters preferred to let their ballot exhaust rather than express a preference for either major party. The share that did transfer to PN implies that several habitual PN voters opted for Cassola as their first preference in 2024. At the same time, the data shows that many voters were reluctant to support the main opposition parties at any stage, assigning them their lowest preferences and allowing their vote to stop with independents and smaller parties.

Concluding observations

Our results provide support for the second-order election model in the Maltese 2024 European Parliament election. Across multiple dimensions – campaign dynamics, media coverage, turnout, and electoral performance – the EP election was primarily structured by domestic political considerations rather than by contestation over European policy alternatives. At the same time, the findings reveal important nuances that call for refining how SOE dynamics are understood and operationalised.

Although party manifestoes displayed a non-negligible degree of European focus, this orientation did not extend to the broader campaign environment. Media coverage and elite debate were overwhelmingly shaped by domestic political logics, particularly corruption scandals, inter-party conflict, and evaluations of government performance. Even when EU-level issues such as migration, defence, or the rule of law entered public debate, they were framed chiefly through Malta-specific lenses rather than embedded within wider European policy processes. This gap between programmatic Europeanisation and

campaign communication reinforces the SOE expectation that EP elections are mediated through domestic political arenas.

The 2024 Maltese election also provides a demanding test for SOE theory due to the presence of a sitting president of the European Parliament on the ballot. In principle, such exceptional EU-level visibility could be expected to heighten the salience of European institutional politics and weaken second-order dynamics. The opposite occurred. Roberta Metsola's European role was largely absorbed into domestic partisan conflict, with criticism centring on perceived inconsistencies and national political positioning rather than on her institutional leadership at the EU level. This pattern underscores the resilience of SOE dynamics even under conditions that should, theoretically, favour Europeanisation.

Electoral outcomes further align with core SOE expectations, though with important qualifications. Voter turnout remained significantly lower than in national elections, and although the slight increase compared with 2019 interrupts a purely linear decline, it does not alter the long-term downward trend since Malta's accession. The governing party experienced notable losses relative to the last general election, while opposition parties, smaller parties, and independent candidates collectively improved their performance. However, these gains were insufficient to disrupt the structural dominance of the two main parties, highlighting the constrained nature of electoral punishment within the Maltese context.

Importantly, voter abstention emerges as a central mechanism through which dissatisfaction with the governing party was expressed. Rather than converting uniformly into support for opposition parties, discontent manifested increasingly as withdrawal from participation. This pattern of disengagement suggests that abstention functions as a form of silent protest in EP elections, a behaviour that classic formulations of SOE theory, focused primarily on vote switching, have tended to underemphasise.

The analysis of preference transfers under Malta's single transferable vote system further clarifies the expression of dissatisfaction in the 2024 EP election. While voters for the two major parties exhibited strong partisan loyalty, supporters of smaller parties and independent candidates showed little inclination to transfer their preferences to either PL or PN. Instead, a substantial share of ballots either went to other small parties or independent candidates or became non-transferable once these candidates were eliminated, indicating a reluctance to endorse the dominant parties even at later stages of the count. This pattern suggests that dissatisfaction did not translate into coordinated support for the main opposition but was expressed through sincere first-preference voting combined with disengagement – a behaviour consistent with the lower perceived stakes associated with a second-order electoral context.

Taken together, the Maltese case confirms the continued relevance of SOE theory while also highlighting its limits. The PL's continued strength across all five EP elections complicates the SOE expectation that opposition parties should benefit. While this held when the PL was in opposition (2004, 2009), it did not once it entered government (2014, 2019, 2024). Although the PN narrowed the gap and matched the PL's seat count in 2024, its gains were overshadowed by a larger rise in support for smaller parties and independents, whose vote share increased from 7.8 percent (2019) to 12.7 percent (2024).

The PN's prolonged internal crisis after losing power in 2013, coupled with the PL's politically reinforcing economic record – average annual growth of 6.81 per cent between 2013 and 2024 –helped sustain Labour's appeal. With EU membership no longer divisive after accession, PN critiques increasingly targeted the government's national performance, reinforcing the domestication of EP campaigns.

Rapid growth brought challenges – migration, health-system pressures, environmental degradation – which featured prominently in the campaign but rarely in EU terms. The war in Ukraine received limited and largely national framing. Attacks on Roberta Metsola backfired amid broad support for stronger EU defence cooperation. The release of the Vitals inquiry during the campaign further nationalised the contest, harming the PL and skewing polling expectations. Meanwhile, the decision to hold local and EP elections concurrently since 2019 has not improved turnout, raising questions for future study.

Eurobarometer data from June–July 2024 show that 56 per cent of Maltese non-voters abstained due to political mistrust – more than double the EU average. Voters were chiefly motivated by the economy, inflation, and environmental or governance concerns, again reflecting national priorities. Trust patterns since 2014 reveal growing volatility and deepening scepticism towards political parties, with citizens' trust in them falling to 14 per cent in 2023. Government trust also declined but remained more resilient and closer to EU averages. By 2025, trust partially recovered but mistrust remained high, underscoring a structural gap between confidence in government and in parties.

Overall, while the 2024 EP election in Malta conforms to SOE expectations, national politics overwhelmingly shaped its dynamics. It resembled a national election in every respect except that the government's hold on power was not directly at stake.

Author contributions

CRediT: **Marta Migliorati**: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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