

THE CHALLENGES PRESENTED IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE 2014 EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTION

Odysseas Christou

Assistant Professor of Politics and International Law, University of Nicosia

The recent elections for the European Parliament in May of 2014 have raised, or rather served as confirmation of, serious issues with respect to the European Union's democratic legitimacy and accountability as a direct reflection of the shifting perceptions of the European electorate. These developments in political participation are concurrent with the economic crisis and its complex impact on political preferences (Fligstein, Polyakova and Sandholtz 2012). The constant fear – especially given the history of authoritarianism in Europe and its disastrous effects on the continent and the rest of the international system – is that disappointment in the European project may lead to the renationalization of Europe (Hartleb 2012).

Declining voter participation in EU-level elections is nothing new. In fact, the phenomenon continues a consistent trend whereby every election for the European Parliament has seen decreasing turnout from the previous one leading to an overall decline from 62% in 1979 to 43% in 2014. In fact, there has been growing academic consensus since the advent of elections to the European Parliament that they constitute second-order national elections rather than elections fought and won on their own merit at a European level (Reif and Schmitt 1980). Therefore, an inherent apathy for the elections themselves seems to have been compounded with a growing display of general disapproval by the electorate. The observation that these elections basically do not seem to matter to the European electorate is alarming considering that the European Parliament in turn approves the President of the European Commission. As a result, a mechanism intended to reduce the democratic deficit in EU politics and institutional configuration may end up subjugated to national-level fragmentation (Hix 1997).

The election results give credence to the perceptions of the resurgence of a complex set of European nationalist tendencies rife with populist claims and Euroscepticism and, even more alarmingly, fostering the potential rise of political extremism in the future. Developments in the three most populous states of the European Union are telling. Nowhere has the potential for backlash against the EU – and more specifically opposition to the Euro – been more potent than France and the UK where parties that campaigned on these positions actually won the elections. In France, the Le Pens' National Front has ascended from a marginal political power to the first party of the elections with a staggering increase of its seats from 3 to 24 of 74, a rise in popularity that has also been attributed to Marine Le Pen's succession of her father Jean-Marie Le Pen leading to a larger audience among women (Mayer 2013). In the UK, a party other than

Labour or the Conservatives has won an election for the first time since the Liberals won the 1906 general election with Nigel Farage's UK Independence Party (UKIP) taking 24 seats to Labour's 20 and – more crucially – to David Cameron's Tories 19. Thus, at long last confirming expectations, the UKIP was able to ethnically outbid the soft Tory rhetoric on immigration and the failures of the EU (Webb and Bale 2014). With the rising salience of EU issues for the British electorate, this trend may be difficult for the Conservatives to reverse (Lynch and Whitaker 2013). Lastly, in Germany – where the spectre of authoritarianism is most haunting, Alternative for Germany won 7 seats by running a campaign against the Euro, while the neo-Nazi National Democratic Party secured a seat.

Despite the general consensus of the existence of democratic deficit in EU politics, perception of signs of progress in terms of the relevance of EU-level elections to policy acceptance and promotion have been expressed, at least in terms of the political cohesion of Europarties leading to more democracy in terms of political organization and party competition (Follesdal and Hix 2005, 19). This assertion has been reinforced by the argument that EU-level political decision-making (including electoral contestation) has had limited impact on national-level party systems and political positioning (Mair 2000). Yet, in addition to the rise of political party organization counter to European integration at the national level as presented above, there is the phenomenon, which might even be characterized as a paradox, of Eurosceptic collective action at the supranational level which is an interesting – if not alarming – by-product of the processes of 'deepening' and 'widening' of the Europarties (Timuş and Lightfoot 2014). It is telling that the last three Europarties to be recognized, the European Alliance for Freedom (EAF), the Movement for a Europe of Liberties and Democracy (MELD) and the Alliance of European National Movements (AENM), all fall under that category. In the 8th European Parliament, EAF can have as much as 5% representation with the inclusion of the French National Front, together with far-right stalwarts such as the Italian Lega Nord, the Dutch Party for Freedom, the Freedom Party of Austria, and the Flemish Vlaams Belang.

What conclusions can be drawn from the aftermath of the election? The broadest implication is that equating the results with the effects of the economic crisis may be both premature – as that the impact of the crisis remains underspecified – and analytically superfluous given the existing trend of declining political participation. With the general acceptance of the premise that EU-level elections can be understood as national-level elections of a lower order, then the alarmism experienced in the aftermath of the 2014 European Parliament elections may be excessive; quite simply, the gains by populist and nationalist forces in these elections do not necessarily foretell a corresponding effect at the national level where stakes are perceived to be higher and policy implications more direct and immediate. However, overwhelming evidence of popular discontent with

the democratic deficit in EU institutions and a perceived lack of proposed alternatives by the established political order may indeed lend receptive ears to populist cries.

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