

EUROPEAN ELECTIONS: FIVE REFLECTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

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1. Is abstention intractable?

Average turnout across the EU for these elections of June 2009 was assessed at 43.2%. It was 45.5% in 2004 and 62% in 1979. The paradox of European elections persists: for 30 years participation has fallen with each election, while in parallel the European Parliament's competencies have grown significantly. The Parliament was already a major winner of the treaties of Maastricht, Nice and Amsterdam; if the Lisbon Treaty is ratified it will become co-legislator, with the Council, in a large majority of the Union's policy areas, and will have blocking power throughout the budget negotiation procedure. Before the elections, analysts were already pointing to the risk of decreasing turnout and explaining it by a lack of interest – this in turn linked both to a feeling that the vote would have little effect, and to a dearth of knowledge and understanding of the European Parliament¹.

Since 1998 Notre Europe has recommended that each European political family designate a candidate for Commission president and that these figures then engage in debate. After these latest elections Notre Europe observes once again that the current system of European parties has failed to produce any such confrontation between projects and candidates. This despite the fact that a debate would have been particularly useful in order to delineate the political alternatives for citizens, and to Europeanise the issues. Apart from the European People's Party (EPP), which publicly supported a renewed mandate for Mr Barroso, and the European Democratic Party (EDP), which later proposed the candidatures of Messrs Verhofstadt and Monti, the other European parties either would not or could not designate a candidate – in the first of these cases the Greens and Liberals (the Greens content to campaign against Barroso); in the second the Socialists (due in particular to the support of three socialist governments for a new Barroso mandate). We can be pleased at

¹ For more details on this paradox, see G Ricard-Nihoul's policy brief, «European Elections 2009: actors, issues and choices» at www.notre-europe.eu.

the progress made by this idea since 1998. But given the fall in turnout, we can only regret that once again the idea has not been put into practice.

Of course, the situation is not entirely gloomy. Participation increased in 8 member states and remained stable in 7. But such increases or stability are relative to 2004 figures which were somewhat low – or in certain cases very low. It is interesting to note the rising participation in two Scandinavian countries where opinion has seemed increasingly favourable to European integration in recent years (59.52% against 47.89% in 2004 in Denmark; 43.8% against 37.85% in Sweden). Participation also rose slightly in Austria (45.34% against 42.43% in 2004), and significantly in two Baltic countries and Bulgaria (52.56% against 41.34% in Latvia; 43.9% against 26.83% in Estonia; 38.9% against 29.22% in 2007 in Bulgaria). Higher figures were also recorded in Poland and Slovakia, but these remain unsatisfactory (24.53% against 20.27% in 2004 in Poland; 19.64% against 16.97% in 2004 in Slovakia).

By the same token, of those countries where turnout is similar to that of 2004 we must distinguish between states where the rate is traditionally high, such as Belgium (90%) or Luxembourg (91%),² and others which remain below the 50% bar, such as Spain (46%), Germany (43%), Finland (40%), the Czech Republic (28%), or Slovenia (28%). In eight countries there was a slight drop since 2004, but once again in a contrasting way. In this slight-drop category were high-participation countries (78.81% against 82.39% in 2004 in Malta; 66.46% against 71.72% in Italy; 57.6% against 58.58% in Ireland), and countries where the rate hovers around 30-40% (40.48% against 42.76% in 2004 in France; 37.03% against 38.6% in Portugal; 36.5% against 39.26% in the Netherlands; 36.29% against 38.5% in Hungary; 34.48% against 38.52 in the United Kingdom; and 27.4% against 29.47 in 2007 in Romania). Finally, three countries

² Voting is compulsory in these two countries.

saw a significant fall in comparison to 2004: Lithuania (20.92% against 48.32% in 2004 – but the 2004 election was paired with the first round of the presidential election), Greece (52.63% against 63.22%), and Cyprus (59.4% against 72.5%) - despite compulsory voting in these last two states (though without government enforcement).

The analysis can therefore be nuanced, but it remains that 18 countries – two thirds of member states – have turnouts of less than 50%. In addition, turnout improvements are sometimes helped by other elections taking place on the same day as the European poll – for example, a referendum on the order of royal succession in Denmark, and local elections in Latvia and Ireland. After seven direct elections to the European Parliament, the temptation to despondency is strong. After all, both the American president and Congress have been elected with only 40% participation. The European power structure may never mobilise crowds, simply because of its distance. Additionally, there is the general context of democratic disenchantment to take into account – a hazard also present at the national level.

And yet Obama's election belies the American comparison, and referendums have proved that the Europe issue can mobilise. As for the theory of a wider crisis of democracy, this is well-grounded in certain respects but becomes difficult to support when one looks at recent turnout in member states' parliamentary elections: in most cases participation is between 55% and 85%. For example, 53% of Poles and 60.2% of the French voted in 2007 parliamentary elections; 64.5% of Czechs and 80.4% of the Dutch did so in 2006.

We must be lucid, therefore. Abstention in elections to a higher and relatively new authority can be understood to a certain extent, but the fall in turnout over 30 years must be seen as a failure of the European project. Starting today, everything must be done to reverse this trend by the time of the next elections in 2014. The proposals aiming to Europeanise the

elections by means of confrontation between candidates for Commission president (mentioned above) and the possibility of transnational lists are of course important. But much must also be done at the national and local levels to keep the European debate alive outside periods of referendums and (to a lesser extent) elections.

Politicians at national level must take responsibility for and explain decisions taken in Brussels, in order to encourage the media to cover European issues more often. National parliaments must play a greater role, in particular by making constructive use of their new powers under the Lisbon Treaty, if the treaty is ratified. Citizens must also be able to gain concrete experience of the European construction, by means of mobility (and the linguistic and educational policies which support this mobility), and they must have the opportunity to take part in exercises of democratic participation. An effort to teach citizenship at all levels must be made in schools. Among the major issues to be dealt with by the next European legislature there is the revision of the European budget. It is time to give flesh and means to warm wishes, and to stop thinking that legitimacy for the European project will come “naturally” from the results and “outputs” that it produces. Legitimacy by “inputs” – that is, by education and by connecting with citizens upstream of decisions – is fundamental.

This is not simply a question of respecting a high standard of democracy that all should share. It has become a matter of the European project's survival. For if citizens feel that European Parliament elections do not allow them to influence the course of the European project, they will instead express themselves through constitutional referendums. And negative results in such polls should worry heads of state and government – who claim to want to promote the EU's role in the world – much more than any plan to increase member states' contribution to the Union budget beyond the current 1% or to create a new own resource for the EU.

2. Victory for the right, or status quo?

Following a European election transformed once again into 27 national elections, it is not surprising to note that analyses and commentaries on the results tend to be based on extrapolations or (at best) juxtapositions of national viewpoints. In particular, we hear that the poor showing of socialist parties reflects the decline of social democracy in Europe, which is irreversibly losing ground to the conservative and liberal right. There is of course a great deal of reason in this analysis. The extent of the socialist group's shrinkage in the European Parliament was a surprise. A study published in April 2009 had predicted that the EPP would remain the Parliament's largest group but that the socialists would slightly improve their position.³ We may also legitimately ask why the economic crisis and prospects of lasting social consequences did not create a political opportunity for socialist parties to promote their ideas of a regulated market economy.

However, like all initial reactions, this analysis needs to be nuanced. Firstly, there has been no blue landslide in the European Parliament. The relative majority of the EPP has been maintained, a majority which exists since the 1999 elections (the socialist group having been in front at the previous elections). With 263 seats out of 736, the EPP has in fact done slightly less well in percentage terms (35.7%, against 36.7% for 284 MEPs out of 785 in the outgoing legislature). In addition the European People's Party will no longer be allied to the British Conservatives during the next legislature, since this party has declared that it wants to form a new group with the Czech ODS and the Polish Law and Justice party.

Secondly, even if the socialist group's tumble is undeniable 184 seats out of 736 against 215 out of 785 previously, equal to a fall from 27.6%

to 22.9%)⁴, it must be emphasised that in many cases it is governing parties that are being punished (majorities in the United Kingdom, Spain, Portugal, Bulgaria and Hungary; in coalition in Germany, the Netherlands, Austria, Belgium, Estonia and Slovenia). It is of course a mistake to write off these polls as simple protest voting, but honesty demands recognition that these governments have had to confront unprecedented crises – sometimes in a brutal manner, as in the case of Hungary. Opposition social-democratic parties have done better. The cases of Sweden, Denmark and Greece have often been cited, but we must also mention the Czech Republic (where the social democrats moved from 2 to 7 MEPs), Ireland (where Labour will have 3 seats in place of 1 in 2004), and Malta (where the centre-left opposition scored 54%).

Among better-performing governing parties are the Romanian PSD and the Slovak SMER, which will provide MEPs for the PES (even if the SMER is contested among socialists and has been suspended for alliances with nationalists). And other opposition parties have done honourably: the Italian Democrats gained 26% (but some of its members used to sit with the ALDE); the Lithuanian social democrats did better than in 2004 (18.62% against 14.4%); the Polish left democratic alliance also bettered its 2004 result (12.33% and 7 MEPs against 9.35% and 5 MEPs – putting it ahead of the hard-line League of Families, which has experienced a debacle relative to 2004); and the Luxembourg social democrats have repeated their 2004 score of 22%.

In reality it is the cases of France and Finland which raise the most questions, because despite their opposition status these countries' social democrats achieved mediocre results – 16.48% and 17.5% against 28.9% and 21.2% in 2004, respectively. In France the slump mainly benefited the

³ The Burson Marsteller study predicted that the PPE-DE would obtain approximately 249 seats, with the Socialist group gaining 209 seats and increasing its weight from 27% to 28%.

⁴ Since the drafting of the Frech version of this note, the Socialist group in the EP has been renamed the Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament in order to include the Italian Democratic Party. Without them the group would count 163 MEPs.

Greens, who achieved almost the same score as the Socialists (16.28%, with both parties sending 14 MEPs). In Finland the Greens also advanced (to 12.4% from 10.4% in 2004, making two seats instead of one), as did the alliance of Christian Democrats and True Finih (far right), who gained 14% and 1 seat. It should be noted however that these results do not necessarily augur a long-term debacle – in 2004 in France it was the UMP which scored poorly at 16.64%.

Beyond these two specific cases, the other pertinent question is why, in the case of governing parties, citizens preferred to punish social democrats rather than parties of the right. In the case of coalitions it is very probable that the constituent parties found it difficult to highlight their differences over management of the crisis, in a way that would today encourage voters to trust them to find solutions with the least possible damage to social programmes. In Germany the SPD's decision to support a renewed mandate for Mr Barroso probably did not help their efforts to highlight their own distinctive identity (a stance they seem ready to drop, given their poor showing). In the case of majority governments it is possible that the genuine victims of the economic crisis stayed at home, whereas the majority of those voting chose a conservative right which they saw as "reassuring" in a time of major economic instability.

The fragmentation of European elections into national polls clearly demands case-by-case study, but it seems hasty to conclude that European social democracy has died. We must also remember that the PES, under the Dane Poul Rasmussen, is in rather good shape. It was the one of the first parties to publish its campaign manifesto, which was drawn up after a major civil-society consultation and contains a wealth of concrete ideas. The PES is in a good position to help its sick member parties. The reality is that the PES is ahead of its members, who have been very slow to integrate the European reflex into their campaigns.

Any analysis of a centre-right victory must also look at the liberal family. Liberal complexions are strikingly variable (for example, between British Lib-Dems and the German FDP), but the group is an important part of the European centre-right. In this sense it is also more correct to talk of a continuation of the 2004 weighting than of a strengthening. As was emphasised by Ms Neyts, the president of the European Liberal Democrat and Reform Party, the gains (such as in Germany and the Netherlands) cancel out the losses (such as in Hungary and in France, where the Modem's European Democratic Party is a member of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe). The ALDE group remains stable – it is currently credited with 80 seats out of 736, against 100 out of 785. Ms Neyts was also frank enough to say that the liberals' score was rather good, considering how much of the blame they have taken for the financial crisis. But just as with the EPP, this cannot be seen as evidence for a centre-right sweep of the European Parliament.

3. Environment or ecology?

As a highlight of these European elections, the remarkable result by the Greens deserves a closer look. As of writing, the group of Greens and the European Free Alliance (regional parties) is the only one to increase its size to any extent in the Parliament. It will go from 43 members out of 785 to 53 out of 736 – of whom 47 are Greens..

Concerning the Greens, three categories of results can be discerned. Firstly there are those who made an impressive leap compared to 2004. This is the case of Belgian Wallonia (whereas the Flemish Greens scored 8% as in 2004, the Wallonian Ecolo reached nearly 23% against 9.84% in 2004, giving a country total of 3 compared to 2 in 2004), of France (16.28% and 14 seats, against 7.7% and 7 seats in 2004), of Denmark (16.1% and 2 seats, against 7.9% and 1 seat in 2004) and of Sweden (10.9% and 2 seats,

against 6% and 1 seat in 2004). Next are those who repeated or slightly improved on their 2004 showing. This is the case in Germany (12.1% and 14 seats, against 11.9% and 13 seats in 2004), in Luxembourg (16.84% and 1 seat, against 15.04% and 1 seat in 2004), in the Netherlands (8.9% and 3 seats, against 7.4% and 2 seats in 2004), in Finland (12.3% and 2 seats, against 10.4% and 1 seat in 2004), in the United Kingdom (the Greens of England and Wales scored 8.7% and gained 2 seats, against 6.3% and 2 seats in 2004), and in Austria (10% against 12.9% in 2004, but they keep their 2 seats).

A third group is of green parties which were tiny in 2004 and made a breakthrough in 2009. This is above all the case in Greece, where their score of 3.4% (against 0.7% in 2004) gains them a seat. Two small breakthroughs in Poland (2.4% against 0.27% in 2004) and Hungary (2.6% against 0% in 2004) did not bring seats but should be mentioned because, alongside existing parties in the Czech Republic (2% against 3.16% in 2004), Estonia (3% against 2.3% in 2004), Slovakia (2.11% against 16.8% in coalition in 2004) and Slovenia (1.9% against 2.29% in 2004), the Polish and Hungarian parties strengthen green politics in Central and Eastern Europe – so far relatively weak a problematic handicap for the Green group in an enlarged Europe).

Initial analyses have rightly explained this green success as the reflection of citizens' concerns for the environment. The emphasis placed on raised environmental awareness even led some in France and Wallonia to blame the television broadcast of Arthus-Bertrand's film "Home" on the eve of the election – it was watched by 9 million viewers on France 2. This exaggeration shows again how important it is to stand back from initial reactions.

Firstly, this new environmental consciousness pre-dates the 2009 elections by several years. For some time Eurobarometer surveys have shown that the environment is one of the top concerns of citizens and also among

the priorities for action by the EU. In this vote for the Greens we can also discern a "return to the original" by voters who have tested the environmental ambitions of other parties – because today practically all of these parties include a green dimension in their policies.

The 2009 European green vote must above all be seen as a vote for political ecology, which is about more than just the environment. Citizens seem receptive to the concept of sustainable development, and in particular to two of its dimensions: firstly, the legacy of today's generation to future ones; secondly, the need to find a balance between economic, social and environmental goals. The message of green voters is perhaps the following: if the EU must endure hardship as a result of the economic crisis, they would prefer that this difficult period serve to help the transition to a sustainable economy.

Finally – and this is perhaps the most important factor – the Greens were rewarded for the constancy of their commitment to Europe, and for the relative coherence of their party at the transnational level. Voters are less and less easily taken in, and for European elections they want the talk to be about Europe. This demand was expressed particularly clearly in France, where the Socialists and the centrist Modem were punished for having spent so much of their time attacking the government. The Greens positioned themselves more clearly on the terrain of Europe.

4. Euroscepticism or far right?

The European Parliament's Eurosceptic right⁵ is the group which will change the most between the 2004-09 legislature and the one to come. Once again, at this early point it is important to nuance predictions of an explosion of Euroscepticism. However, we must remain vigilant with regard to the rise of certain extreme-right parties which mix Eurosceptic rhetoric with populism, xenophobia and Islamophobia. This development will not encourage calm debate of the type that will need to accompany important questions such as Turkish EU membership.

Two phenomena in particular can be cited to counter doom-mongering. First of all, there is the failure of Libertas, the sovereigntist movement which aimed to unite the opponents of the Lisbon Treaty and which fielded lists in France, Spain, Italy, Poland, Great Britain, Ireland, Latvia and the Czech Republic, among other countries. Libertas's campaign did not even allow the party's founder, Irish millionaire Declan Ganley, to win a seat. Parties standing under the Libertas banner suffered major losses compared to their 2004 scores. This was true of Philippe de Villiers's Mouvement pour la France (4.6% and 1 seat, against 8.84% and 3 seats), as well as ex-parliamentarians from Poland's League of Families and Samoobrona – though to a lesser extent, since these parties had already been marginalised by the rise of the PiS at parliamentary elections (specifically, Libertas scored 1.14% and no seats, against 2004 scores of 15.92% and 10 seats for the League, and 10.78% and 6 seats for Samoobrona – whose list, which remained independent of Libertas, only gained 1.46%).

The second phenomenon concerns established Eurosceptic parties or movements which are having trouble finding a second wind. This is the

⁵ Far-left Euroscepticism has made no major leap, in spite of the economic crisis, which would seem fertile ground for anti-capitalist parties. The Confederational Group of the European United Left / Nordic Green Left has more or less held its ground, with 32 seats out of 736 (4.35% – against 41 seats out of 785, or 5.2%).

case of the French National Front (FN) (6.3% and 3 seats in 2009, against 9.81% and 7 seats in 2004), and the Danish June Movement, born out of the campaign on the Maastricht Treaty, which – with 2.3% of votes, against 9.1% in 2004 – loses its seat, long occupied by the founder, Jens-Peter Bonde (but resigned to the Movement's president in May 2008). In France, the lower score of the FN (and of the MPF within Libertas) can be explained by the UMP's strategy of taking on certain preoccupations of the far right. In Italy, the National Alliance left the orbit of the far right and has ended up merging with Forza Italia.

Beyond these two observations, the landscape of the Eurosceptic right is liable to change for three basic reasons. Firstly, the two current groups, Union for Europe of the Nations (UEN) and Independence and Democracy (IND/DEM) – which, with independents, makes up the current landscape – will be affected by movements announced before or during the elections, and by the election results. In the case of the UEN, the merger of Forza Italia and the National Alliance will mean the latter's departure to join the EPP, while Ireland's Fianna Fail will leave to join the ALDE. The UEN will also suffer a setback in Poland due to the poor score of the League of Families and the probable departure of the Law and Justice Party to join the British Conservatives. Even though the UEN should benefit from the good result of the Italian Northern League (which joined it during the last legislature, and gained 10.22% and 9 seats, against 5% and 4 seats in 2004) and the Danish Folkeparti (14.8% and 2 seats, against 6.8% and 1 seat in 2004), the group's future is uncertain. As for IND/DEM, this group should gain from the good score of UKIP, which came second in the United Kingdom (16.5% and 13 seats, against 16.1% and 12 seats), but suffer from the poor results of the MPF and the June Movement. It could have difficulty fulfilling the conditions for creating groups in the European Parliament. The new rules, decided in July 2008, make it necessary to include 25 MEPs from at least 7 countries (against 20 MEPs from 6 countries, currently).

A second, disruptive, factor in the changing Eurosceptic landscape is the announcement by the British Conservatives – until now allied with the EPP under the European Democrats banner – of a rapprochement with Vaclav Klaus’s Czech Civic Democrats (ODS), and the Polish Kaczynski brothers’ Law and Justice Party. Although criticised even within his own party for this decision, Cameron seems determined to create a political force whose first objective is to put a brake on European integration. The new rules for forming party groups will oblige these three parties to widen their alliance.

Finally, there is a third factor of change: the rise of certain extreme-right parties, whose positions are not yet all well known. The most uncertain case concerns the Dutch Geert Wilders’s Party of Freedom (PPV – 17% and 4 seats, the second best score after prime minister Jan Peter Balkenende’s Christian Democrats). It seems that in spite of his populist and Islamophobic positioning, Wilders is not prepared to sit with the extreme right. As for the Party of Greater Romania (PRM, 8.65% and 3 seats), it has already tried to join the EPP without success. Among other extreme-right parties with good results – and apart from the stable Vlaams Belang in Belgium and the rise of the Danish Folkeparti and the True Finns, already mentioned – important breakthroughs include that of the Hungarian Jobbik (14.77% and 3 seats), the British BNP (6.04% and 2 seats), and the Slovak nationalists (SNS, 5.56% and 1 seat). The Austrian FPÖ strengthened its position (12.78% and 2 seats, against 6.3% and 1 seat in 2004 – ensuring a victory for Austrian Euroscepticism when taken together with the list of Hans-Peter Martin, which gained 17.74%). In Bulgaria the Ataka party has lost ground but remains important (11.96% and 2 seats, against 14.2% and 3 seats in 2004).

Before the elections, bargaining took place with a view to re-forming a far-right group along the lines of the Independence, Tradition and Sovereignty group, which existed for a time in 2007 before collapsing due to the departure of 5 MEPs from the Party of Greater Romania (who had

been upset by declarations of Alessandra Mussolini). Apart from the PRM, the ITS group united the Front national, Ataka, the Vlaams Belang, the FPÖ, Alessandra Mussolini’s Alternative Sociala, Fiamma Tricolore, and a British former UKIP member. It would seem that, guided by the FN – already close to the PRM – contacts have been made with the BNP, Ataka and the FPÖ.⁶

5. Demands and reticence: a deepening rift?

However the Eurosceptic right reconstitutes itself, it can count on around 100 MEPs and so will have considerable clout. In parallel, the success of the Greens demonstrates what is on offer for parties which talk about Europe and give priority to the European level in the policies they advocate. Thus a deep rift seems to be forming among those who turn out to vote at European elections. The (more or less) convinced Europeans have become demanding vis-à-vis their representation in Brussels. They no longer accept that European action fall victim to national quarrels, and they reject the gap between rhetoric and deeds. On the other side, opponents of European integration are gaining in strength, for two reasons. Firstly, because of the rise of extreme-right parties who are making use of Euroscepticism as part of their wider xenophobia. Secondly, due to the Eurosceptics’ exploitation of the discourse of the EU’s undemocratic nature – which resonates well among those who do not understand why the rejections of the Constitutional Treaty and the Lisbon Treaty were, in their eyes, «bypassed».

In the coming legislature we must therefore expect a polarisation of positions regarding EU political integration. Alongside the reconstruction

⁶ Since the drafting of the French version of this note, the groups on the Eurosceptic rightwing side of the EP have been formed. With 55 members, the European Conservatives and Reformists group comprises, as previously announced, the Conservative Party of the United Kingdom, Law and Justice of Poland, and the Civic Democratic Party of the Czech Republic, as well as different MEPs from five other countries. The Europe of Freedom and Democracy Group is composed of 30 MEPs coming in majority from the previous UEN and IND/DEM groups. It includes parties such as the Italian Northern League, the United Kingdom Independence Party, the Danish Folkeparti or the True Finns.

of ideological majorities – for example it is conceivable that the Liberals move closer to the EPP and the PES to the Greens, making the choice of an EPP-PES grand coalition less obvious – this crystallisation of the debate over the EU’s political nature will be a welcome development. It will attract the media, which likes confrontation, to the European Parliament. It will also make the Parliament’s political positions more intelligible for the citizen. And perhaps it will allow a full airing of the fundamental divergences between political forces and member states – differences which have too often been swept under the carpet, thereby contributing to the recurring blockages of Europe’s institutions.