

Elections to the European Parliament and the trouble with *vox populi*

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Recent evidence of declining support for the European Union (EU) in many member states is causing some disquiet – not least about the possibility of an even lower voter turnout in the upcoming European Parliament (EP) elections in May 2014. Discontent with the management and the impact of the euro crisis might well be exploited by populist anti-European parties and boost protest-vote participation, but this would pose a serious risk for EU decision-making and undermine the sense of common identity and any plans for further integration.

The surge of populist parties

In Greece, the two main political parties (PASOK and New Democracy), which held 84% of the seats in the previous legislature, won only 149 out of 300 seats in the May 2012 general election. The Coalition of the Radical Left-Unitary Social Front (SYRIZA), which focused its electoral campaign on the unilateral cancellation of the EU-IMF memorandum, became the second largest party in the parliament with 52 seats, ahead of the Socialists. Anti-European discourse also helped the extremist right-wing Golden Dawn (XA) to win 21 seats. In fresh elections held again in June (due to the impossibility of forming a coalition government), PASOK lost even more votes and SYRIZA consolidated its role as the main opposition party, with 71 seats. In total, the number of seats won by political parties that made staunch objections to the EU's management of the crisis and austerity measures amounted to 46%. In Italy, this year's general elections swept former Prime Minister and EU 'favourite' candidate Mario Monti to fourth place and brought the populist anti-European Five Star Movement up to the third position (with 25% of the vote).

In France, anti-European discourse also yielded rewards for the far-right National Front and its candidate Marine Le Pen in the first round of 2012 presidential elections, winning over 6 million votes. In the last by-elections, the National Front beat the Socialist party to third place and, according to recent opinion polls, they will do so again in the next European elections. As a prelude to the electoral campaign, and in reference to the dispute between the French ruling party and the President of the Commission Marine Le Pen is quoted as saying that José Manuel Barroso is a catastrophe for France and Europe and the symbol of "a European system gone mad that is supported by both the UMP and the Socialist party" (*Financial Times*, 24 June 2013). Populist anti-EU parties also made substantial gains in elections in Finland and the Netherlands. The True Finns party made important gains in 2011 elections, thanks to a campaign focused on staunch opposition to a Portuguese bailout. A recent poll suggests that the Cyprus bailout is also swinging Geert Wilder's party back to leading positions in the Netherlands.

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Eurobarometer polls also show that support for the EU has in fact decreased almost everywhere. Distrust in the EU increased from 32% in 2007 to 60% in 2012. Last year, opposition to the Economic and Monetary Union and the euro grew to 40%; 45% of the population felt pessimistic about the future of the EU and 29% had a poor view of the EU. This trend was particularly marked in southern member states, but not exclusively. Euroscepticism has also soared in the six largest member states, which elect half of the MEPs. Seventy-two per cent of Spaniards say that they do not trust the EU, compared to 24% six years ago. In the UK, the number is 69%, 58% in Germany, 56% in France, 53% in Italy, and 42% in Poland (compared to 18% in 2007). According to a recent Harris poll, 73% of Spaniards and 56% of Italians believe that Germany was wrong to impose tough austerity measures on them at a time when economic growth was weak. Concerns about the increasing influence of Germany in the EU were voiced not only in Spain and Italy, but also in France and the UK.

The outlook for 2014 European Parliament elections

The participation rate in EP elections has dropped steadily since the first call for a direct vote in 1979, with the most recent elections in 2009 showing a historically low turnout low of 43%. Turnout in the elections in Croatia last April was below 21%. Eurobarometer surveys reveal that most European citizens (more than 50%) do not think that their vote is going to change anything; they think that the EP does not deal with problems that really concern them, they lack information about the elections and the EP and are not interested in EU affairs. For most potential voters, the EP elections lack the clear purpose of national elections. These elections do not constitute an instrument to sanction the incumbent government (largely the Commission and the Council). EP elections do not submit a specific legislative programme for approval, since the right of initiative lies mostly with the European Commission (and exceptionally with the Council). Furthermore, the political differences across European political parties are not easily understandable, which makes these elections even less attractive for voters. European parties are more of a confederation of national delegations with different ideologies, idiosyncrasies and interests, rather than a typical national party with a clearly defined political programme and strong internal discipline to implement this programme. It is national parties that select the candidates as MEPs and carry out the campaigns. Moreover, the main political groups in the EP tend to vote together on many legislative files to reinforce the EP's position in negotiations with the Council and the Commission. All this, together with the difficulties that many citizens encounter in following EU affairs (not helped by the complexity of EU decision-making, multifarious policies and poor media coverage), tends to relegate the elections to the European Parliament to second-order elections largely focused on domestic rather than European issues.

To counter this trend, a recent EP initiative urged the main European political alliances to name their candidates for the post of European Commission president well in advance so that they could run an EU-wide campaign focused on EU issues, in the assumption that this would encourage citizens to go and vote. It also calls upon national parties to make clear which European party they belong to and the candidate they will support. The euro crisis has also made citizens all over Europe (both in the 'rescued' and the 'rescuer' member states) much more aware of the consequences of EU decisions for their daily lives. The impact of 'Brussels' on national fiscal and economic policies is being felt directly by EU citizens, and not in a positive way. As a result, the debate about the EU has moved away from bureaucrats' offices onto the street, and the divisions over EU affairs across national and European parties are becoming more marked.

However, it might be eurosceptic rather than pro-European parties that reap the benefits of these developments in the end. An increase in the number of votes for radical eurosceptic parties would quickly be mirrored in their representation in the EP, given the electoral systems operating in member states. Most of them use proportional methods in the distribution of seats and a single electoral district, which increases the proportionality of the system. Only 11 member states have a legal threshold, which is always below 5%. It is therefore likely that these parties will obtain parliamentary representation should they manage to sweep up the protest vote against the EU and the ruling parties

that backed its decisions. They might even try to form a big anti-European coalition. This could pose an unprecedented risk for the functioning and identity of the EP. Since 1989, the number of EP parties has increased steadily, due to EU enlargements and the 2002 reform of the electoral law, which established a more proportional system. However, the number of political groups has decreased. In the last two legislatures the two main groups (conservatives and socialists) held more than 60% of the seats. A wide representation of parties not belonging to the main pro-European parliamentary groups would make the majority of the component members required in many votes very difficult to reach. This would stall decision-making in the Chamber, and therefore in the EU, including the election of the president of the Commission itself. It could also hamper the EP's firm stand on promoting the principles of democracy, human rights and EU integration.

Conclusions

The nomination of candidates for the position of president of the European Commission by European political parties might not turn out to be such a brilliant idea after all. Some nominees currently being discussed are unknown in many countries and would therefore not inspire citizens to go out and vote. Others could simply underline dissatisfaction and boost the EU protest vote in some member states. Moreover, the proposal of the Commission president by the EP might lead to a further politicisation of this EU institution, at a time when a strong and independent Commission is needed more than ever.

Alternatively, what is needed is a campaign by European and national political parties and by EU institutions to extol the virtues of the European Union and expose the costs of less or no Europe. The main European parties should also reflect on the reasons behind this growing disenchantment with the EU and come up with actual political manifestos for the elections that respond to real concerns. They should explain their positions in the relevant legislative dossiers currently in the pipeline (e.g. banking union) and state which others they intend to push forward (for instance in the area of employment, or immigration). In parallel, the EU should adopt a sound strategy to create jobs and a better communication strategy to justify its (economic) decisions. Citizens need to believe that both their votes and the European Union matter, and the EU undoubtedly has to show that citizens also matter.