

The European Elections in France: The paradox of a more European yet more eurosceptic campaign

Vivien Pertusot and Yann-Sven Rittelmeyer

Four months ahead of the European elections, the political landscape in France does not look promising. Despite the innovations introduced by the Lisbon Treaty, European elections in France seem set to remain ‘second-order national elections’.¹ Both small and protest parties are likely to do well, while the governing parties will probably suffer a ‘protest’ vote. The rise of the radical right party and eurosceptic *Front National* will play an especially important role in the campaign. Turnout will still be much lower than in national elections, and a better showing than the 2009 record-low turnout is far from certain. The electoral campaign may also show similar patterns, with little coverage of the political debates. Yet, they might be more about ‘Europe’ than in the past.

Because of local elections in late March the French electoral context is unfortunate, which could favour a Manichean debate ‘for or against’ the EU, without real debate about policies and issues. Despite the potential shift in the campaign towards European rather than national issues, the combined effects of the economic crisis and the unpopularity of political leaders could crystallise a protest vote for both national and European leaders, as well as for the EU as a whole.

The worst possible electoral context?

The European elections will take place at a time of difficult yet slowly improving economic conditions. In France, some positive elements are visible but the growth forecast remains low and unemployment high. Moreover, at the end of 2013, the crisis of confidence in the political leadership reached a record low for the Fifth Republic, with only 21% support for President Hollande.² These

¹ Karlheinz Reif and Hermann Schmitt, “Nine Second Order National Elections: a Conceptual Framework for the Analysis of European Election Results”, *European Journal of Political Research*, 1980, Vol. 8, pp. 3-44. See also: H. Schmitt, “The European Parliament Elections of June 2004: Still Second Order?”, *West European Politics*, 2005, Vol. 28, No. 3, pp. 650-679.

² Ipsos – Le Point Poll, 8-9 November 2013.

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factors will reinforce the tendency to use this election as a protest, as well as the propensity to consider the European elections as meaningless and thus not worthy of turning out to vote.

Coming only two months after the two-round local elections, France's electoral calendar will also hamper the success of the European elections. Participation may thus be even lower than the 40.6% of 2009 due to the 'voter fatigue' of having to vote three times in only two months.

The local elections taking place on 23 and 30 March leave only a few weeks to gear up for the European elections. Larger political parties – those who hold most town halls – will devote significant resources to the local elections, potentially relegating the European elections even to 'third-order' elections, not only behind the national elections but also local ones. Bigger political parties may consequently run two distinct electoral campaigns: largely uncoordinated efforts between the two elections' objectives; with different strategy and communication teams etc. The only parties likely to avoid this pitfall will be the small and protest parties. Because they have fewer staff, they cannot afford to disperse resources. Moreover, they know that their chances of taking whole cities are limited due to the single-winner majority voting system. They will likely bridge the two elections into a single strategy: the link could be their anti-European platform, which offers scope to put a local spin on many issues. Marine Le Pen has already started to play up the role of critic of the EU – and of Germany. Indeed, it was the high point of her first speech in 2014.

Both the local and European elections could become mid-term tests for the government. The Socialist party (PS) will have two choices: either to adopt a deliberate European tropism or to run on the government platform and defend its reforms and policies. The former should be obvious in the European context, but elections tend to be pit-stops to gauge support for the majority party at the national level. This scenario may be further reinforced by the positions adopted by the right-wing *Union pour la Majorité Présidentielle* (UMP). In 2009, the PS, then in opposition, ran a strongly anti-Sarkozy platform and diluted its European arguments, which turned out to be unsuccessful. It won as many seats as the Green party, who then managed to federate the French ecology movements to create *Europe Ecologie*; soon to become the party *Europe Ecologie Les Verts* (EELV). The UMP is likely to attack the PS-EELV government this time, projecting most public debates onto national rather than European grounds. The centrist parties (the Modem and the year-old *Union des Démocrates et Indépendants*) will form a coalition to maximise their chances in the European elections, but at this stage they do not seem to be in a position to steer any European momentum in their favour. The EELV has been suffering substantial internal blowbacks in the past few years and, despite its presence in government, appears weak. Moreover, a rallying figure that did much to mobilise voters for the EELV in 2009 will not run: Daniel Cohn-Bendit. This leaves more room to the *Front National* (FN) and the *Front de Gauche*, whose two leaders, Marine le Pen and Jean-Luc Mélenchon, respectively, are MEPs. They are both critical of the government and of the EU. The FN made some headway on the national stage with the election of its first ever *députés* at the National Assembly last year and they fare well in many polls. The *Front de Gauche* is less prominent on the national stage, but Jean-Luc Mélenchon has managed to give the impression of being the only voice that counts on the far left. He appeals to the disappointed supporters of the PS and those who are disenchanted with the other dwindling far-left parties.

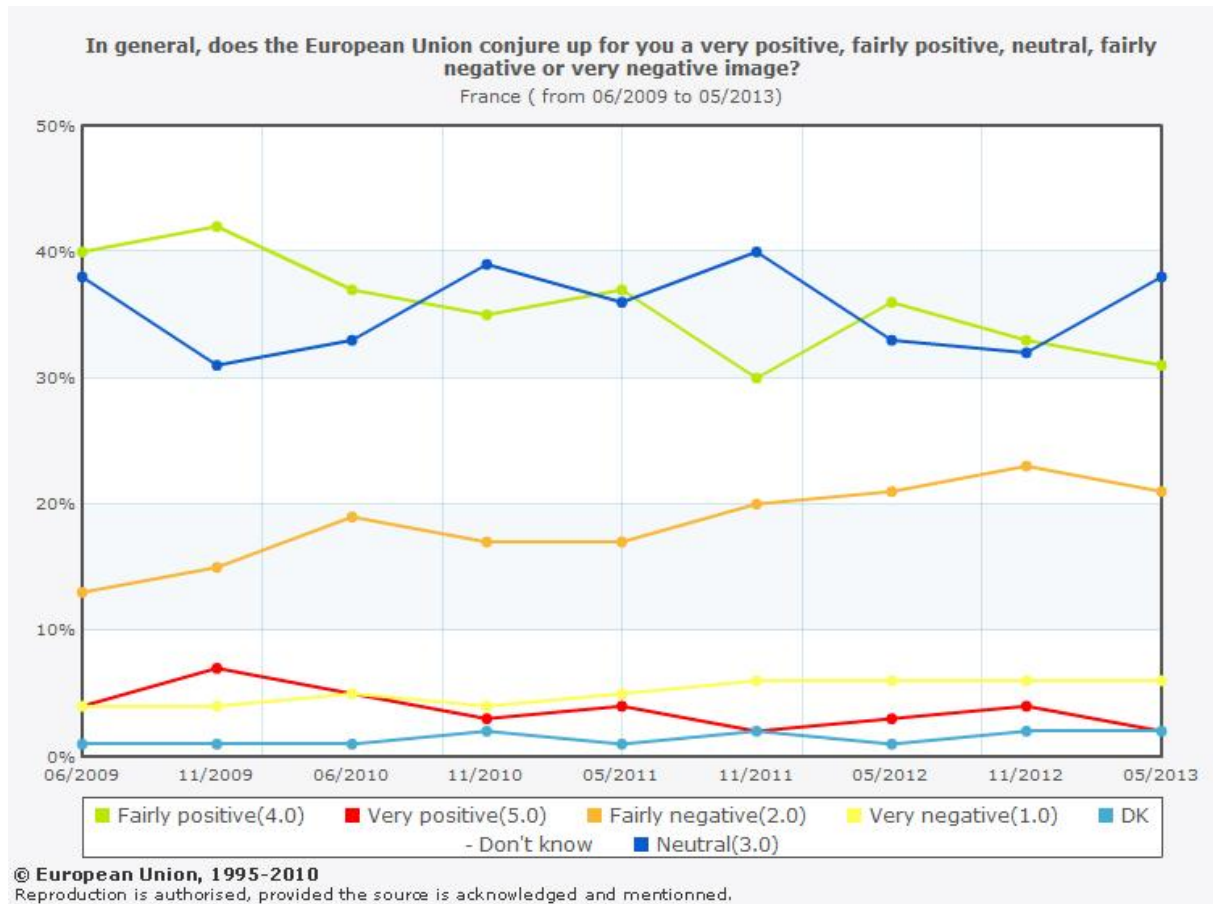
Given these observations, one of the core questions in France for the next European elections is whether there is any strong party – or even any party – left to defend a pro-European platform; one that does not disparage the work of the European Commission or question the nature and path of the European Union, not with a view to stimulating serious debate but to scoring easy points among French voters.

A pre-referendum on the European Union?

Crises in the EU have previously been used as opportunities to strengthen the process of European integration. This crisis is different, however, not just because of its unequalled severity, but also because most of the improvements have been made outside of the EU-28 framework. In parallel, the discourse of 'disintegration' has become more evident. For instance, the Conservative party in the UK

wants to repatriate powers; the Netherlands started a ‘subsidiarity review’, and the German chancellor has questioned whether some competences need to be taken back. The electoral context and the evolution of French opinion toward the EU may lead the electoral campaign to dwell on debates around the nature of and support for the EU rather than be driven by issues.

Figure 1. Survey on the image of the EU



French fears about globalisation and growing scepticism regarding the benefits of the EU have led to a refocusing at national level. The economic crisis and the growing but largely negative press the EU has experienced in France have even reinforced the negative perceptions about the Union. As shown in Figure 1, the negative image of the EU has steadily grown since the last European elections, whilst the positive one has seen the exact opposite trend. A recent poll revealed that 52% of respondents want ‘less Europe’ (only 17% want more) and 58% think that the EU has a rather negative impact on the situation in France.³ This is likely to have substantial consequences for the European elections. Voting patterns differ between European elections and other national elections.⁴ Some voters may switch to parties that defend a European approach on a cross-border issue, which is what the Green party did successfully with environmental policies in 2009. On the other hand, some may cast a protest vote against the EU altogether, therefore amplifying the strength of euro-critical and anti-European candidates. The risk during this election campaign is that France will be riven by debate over the virtue of more or less Europe in a very short time span, with each party developing superficial

³ “Les Français et l’Union européenne”, CSA Poll for Terrafemina, October 2013 (<http://www.csa.eu/multimedia/data/sondages/data2013/opi20130904-les-francais-et-l-union-europeenne.pdf>).

⁴ Sara B. Hobolt and Jae-Jae Spoon, “Motivating the European voter: Parties, issues and campaigns in European Parliament elections”, *European Journal of Political Research*, Vol. 51, No. 6, pp. 701–727, October 2012.

arguments and with voters lacking information and knowledge about the EU. Seventy-one percent of respondents feel not very informed or not at all informed, as evidenced by the same recent poll.

Mainstream political parties will be in the awkward position – if they want to shape the debate – of choosing between full support for European integration and a diatribe against the EU’s direction over the past few years. More subtle arguments will likely have little resonance in political debates or in the media. This would benefit the ‘hard eurosceptic’ parties. Both the FN and the Front de Gauche have a tendency to use populist arguments that they know will strike a chord among public opinion, such as the EU ‘infringement of national sovereignty’. Additionally, the FN is already scoring high in the polls. In early October, Le Pen’s party polled first for the European election, which is unprecedented at the national level.⁵ A careful look at the polling data gives reason to believe that this was not a one-off headline: the FN ranks first among the 25-49 age group and its supporters are more urban than before. The now more polished image might help the party to achieve success during this election.

The unexpected negative effects of a Europeanised electoral campaign

A potential rebuttal to the gloomy outlook for the European elections could be the new rules introduced by the Lisbon Treaty. It grants additional powers to the European Parliament to elect the president of the European Commission and urges the European Council to name a candidate “taking into account the elections to the European Parliament” (Art. 17.7 of the Treaty on European Union).

Some expect that it can foster additional interest, a better sense of ownership and a more cross-European debate. This might be the case, but not necessarily with the expected outcome. In France, a more politicised debate over Europe could end up favouring far-left and far-right parties, because of public opinion’s growing concerns over what the EU is aiming at. A debate about the EU is long overdue, but the lessons of the past, notably the referenda over the Maastricht Treaty and the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe, should serve as cautionary tales. Debate about the EU is needed, but only doing so close to a vote carries some risk.

In 2009, the opposition parties called to sanction both the national (Nicolas Sarkozy) and the European (José Manuel Barroso) leaders. This time, due to the role played by Germany since the beginning of the economic and financial crisis, Angela Merkel might well be associated with Barroso. This could constitute a unifying motto for a transnational eurosceptic movement. In November 2013, Marine Le Pen tried to give it impetus by formally announcing an alliance with her Dutch eurosceptic counterpart, Geert Wilders. They intend to unify eurosceptic parties in several countries in order to form a group in the next European Parliament. Even if it is unlikely to influence French voters, it also contributes to the perception of the party by underlining the scale of eurosceptic feeling. Finally, the biggest paradox in France, and in Europe more generally, could be that the electoral campaign would be the most ‘Europe focused’ in the history of European elections, but with very vocal and numerous critical discourses.

⁵ “L’intention de vote pour les élections européennes de 2014”, Ifop Poll for Le Nouvel Observateur, October 2013 (http://ifop.fr/media/poll/2355-1-study_file.pdf).

About EPIN

EPIN is a network of European think tanks and policy institutes with members in almost every member state and candidate country of the European Union. It was established in 2002 during the constitutional Convention on the Future of Europe. Then, its principal role was to follow the works of the Convention. More than 30 conferences in member states and candidate countries were organised in the following year.

With the conclusion of the Convention, CEPS and other participating institutes decided to keep the network in operation. EPIN has continued to follow the constitutional process in all its phases: (1) the intergovernmental conference of 2003-2004; (2) the ratification process of the Constitutional Treaty; (3) the period of reflection; and (4) the intergovernmental conference of 2007. Currently, EPIN follows (5) the ratification process of the Lisbon Treaty and – should the treaty enter into force – (6) the implementation of the Treaty.

Since 2005, an EPIN Steering Committee takes the most important decisions. Currently there are seven member institutes: CEPS, Clingendael (the Netherlands), EIR (Romania), ELCANO (Spain), HIIA (Hungary), Notre Europe (France) and SIEPS (Sweden).

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Structure

Currently there are 34 EPIN members from 25 countries, also from countries outside of the EU. The 'hard core' work of the network is based on the cooperation of about 10 most active institutes. The member institutes are quite diverse in size and structure, but are all characterised by political independence and the absence of any predetermined point of view or political affiliation.

EPIN organises at least three events across Europe per year. The network publishes Working Paper Series and other papers, which primarily focus on institutional reform of the Union. The network follows preparations for the European elections, the EU's communication policy, and the political dynamics after enlargement, as well as EU foreign policy and justice and home affairs.

Achievements

EPIN is a network that offers its member institutes the opportunity to contribute to the 'European added-value' for researchers, decision-makers and citizens. The network provides a unique platform for researchers and policy analysts to establish personal links, exchange knowledge and collaborate on EU-related issues. Members bring their national perspectives to bear on the issues tackled and through collaboration they contribute to establish a 'European added-value' (e.g. on EU communication, flexible integration). By doing so, they strengthen a common European dimension in the national debates on Europe.



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