

Post-European Parliament Elections Analysis

Summary

European citizens went to the polls this month in order to elect a new European Parliament. Under the Lisbon Treaty the number of seats has been reduced to 751; and heads of state and government are compelled to take into account the result when choosing the next President of the EU Commission. This year's elections saw key gains for parties opposed to the EU project, particularly in France and the UK.

Despite the buzz, the 2014 European Parliament Elections might turn out to be not as 'historic' as some people had predicted. Janis A. Emmanouilidis, Corina Stratulat and Fabian Zuleeg explain in this report what this could all mean for Europe, at this stage.

EPC Senior Policy Analyst, Corina Stratulat believes that despite the hyperbole surrounding these elections, they were less historic and more 'business as usual'. Before the elections there had been various 'sensationalist' claims: that the European Parliament was on the brink of an invasion by Eurosceptics; that these groups would stop the Parliament from functioning; and that the now familiar 'voter fatigue' was at an end.

Turnout

With turnout only up very slightly, the European Parliament had in effect failed again to generate voter interest. Voter apathy stems from the perception among most citizens that there is 'little at stake' in EP elections: they do not determine the composition of the European executive, nor its policy agenda.

To try to inject a greater sense of purpose into the European vote/ballot, and thus raise citizens' involvement/participation, the European political parties had put forward and endorsed candidates for the role of Commission President. There was however, no clear evidence to suggest that this device had enticed more citizens to vote.

While turnout in countries such as Slovakia, Poland and the Czech Republic showed record lows, Stratulat speculates that it was probably greater public awareness about the relevance of EU for national politics in the context of the crisis in countries like Germany, Greece and Sweden, that had kept turnout stable at least/prevented the overall participation rate from declining again

Another factor influencing the turnout figures was that several Member States had held other simultaneous elections on various national issues (e.g. presidential election in Lithuania) at the same time.

The issue of the ongoing low turnout figures raised questions about the overall standing of the European Parliament as an institution and its role in representing EU citizens – not least the young, less educated and low status among whom engagement generally low. The relatively low turnout figures also raised questions about the legitimacy of the process for determining the next EU Commission President – assuming that one of the 'top candidates' is selected.

Stratulat perceives a continuing disconnect between the voters on one side then the European candidates, and their national parties. It is generally the national parties rather than European who campaign, and ultimately they are not taken with European issues, or in this case the Spitzenkandidaten experiment. This issue has not been properly addressed, and the procedures involved in the concept of the Spitzenkandidaten or 'top candidate' need further improvement.

Greater strength of the anti-EU parties

Many of the anti-EU, populist parties have increased their vote share but are not exclusively on the political right of the spectrum, as many may perceive. This grouping includes a huge range of parties and groups from the Right and the Left. While they collectively look set to take 24% of seats in the Parliament, this should not represent an impediment to the mainstream parties.

Some examples of these types of parties include:

- ECR (European Conservatives and Reformists), described as ‘soft’ Eurosceptics, would face problems re-forming in the new Parliament because they had lost various constituent MEPs and Parties.
- EFD (Europe of Freedom and Democracy), which includes Britain’s UKIP, as ‘hard-core’ Eurosceptics. Stratulat said this group too could face re-formation problems if it loses the support of Italy’s Lega Nord – who have said they may form an alliance with France’s Front National; and of the True Finns and Danish Dansk Folkeparti (who themselves were undecided). However there were now other parties (e.g. Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), and Italy’s 5 Star Movement) who might consider forming an alliance with the EFD.
- France’s Front National is at the forefront of the EAF (European Alliance for Freedom). Observers are now watching to see if the Lega Nord, Austria’s Freedom Party (the FPÖ) and the Dutch Freedom Party (the PVV) will join this grouping. It is questionable whether the Swedish Democrats would also join, given national elections are scheduled for the autumn making them unlikely to express an opinion beforehand. Despite this, if the EAF could reach the required threshold of 25 MEPs to form a Parliamentary group, there’s still some doubt as to whether the 7-member-states threshold could be achieved, especially as MEPs from the German National Party, Greece’s Golden Dawn and Hungary’s Jobbik Party might be seen as too radical to be permitted to join the EAF.
- GUE (the radical left group) had done reasonably well, not least in view of the performance of Greece’s Tsiriza Party, Spain’s Izquierda Unida and the Portuguese left.

Concluding on the anti-EU and/or anti-Euro, populist parties, Stratulat believes that it is unlikely that these groups and parties could come together to form coherent and lasting alliances. Continuing, she states that there is sufficient evidence to show that they regularly vote against each other; or, as in the case of UKIP, that they have a reputation for simply not turning up to vote at all.

Therefore the centre-ground parties could continue to dominate in what she described as a ‘Europhile consensus’.

Significance of the results

Stratulat poses the question about the significance of the stronger showing for the ‘anti’ parties. In this view, these MEPs could have the ability to shift the discussions in Parliament, particularly on such subjects as immigration – especially as now they would receive increased speaking time in Parliament and would inevitably assume the chairs of some committees. As already seen in France and the UK, these parties also have the ability to make an impact on national politics in their home countries.

The success of these parties has shifted the focus, from a financial crisis, to a political crisis and it is clear that no one is clear about how to deal with this ‘new’ crisis.

The EPC’s Director of Studies, Janis A. Emmanouilidis, has analysed the elections in four main parts: turnout, rise of the anti-EU parties, selection of the European Commission president, and finally the long term lessons that can be drawn. He believes that despite it being too soon for a deep analysis, the situation had remained fluid enough for preliminary conclusions to be made.

Turnout

Emmanouilidis believes that while voter turnout had stabilised to around 43%, it could not yet be said whether the downward trend had been stopped, nevertheless there is a clear issue with citizens still appearing not to understand that their votes made a difference.

The apparent rise of the anti-European parties and its consequences

Janis A. Emmanouilidis uses the term 'antis' as most of this group which appears to be heterogeneous can be described anti-establishment and anti-elite; and could therefore votes cast could be interpreted as protest votes, showing the 'yellow or red card' to more established parties. In addition, despite the results in the UK, Greece and France, which is 'worrisome' in itself, several of these 'antis' parties had not done as well as predicted: The Netherlands Freedom Party (PVV); Finland's True Finns; Hungary's Jobbik.

What would be the consequences of this? The influence of these votes, and the power of these parties, much as Stratulat has said, would be felt more at national parliament level than in the European Parliament. Emmanouilidis believes that the European Parliament has shown itself to be adaptable, and that it would therefore cope with the new political landscape. There would however have to be more 'grand coalitions' in mainstream politics in order to combat the impact of the 'anti' parties. It must be remembered that despite the popularity, anti-establishment parties are not a coherent force and tend to use the European Parliament as a platform to 'broadcast their views to a home audience'; but are less interested in the real work of the European Parliament.

It is then the impact at national level which is more concerning, indirectly allowing EU policy making to be more difficult, as national parties and governments would adapt their positions to align with some of the rhetoric of the 'anti' parties, being seen currently in France. Currently French President Hollande has been unfavourable in the polls, and that weakness has been manipulated by the Front National. As in Germany, some members of the ruling CDU-CSU party have been espousing some of the ideas of the AfD (Alternative für Deutschland).

Emmanouilidis believes that UKIP's top position in the UK polls was a strong message, and would strengthen anti-EU sentiment in the UK eventually likely to influence the UK's in/out referendum. Voters in Scotland's referendum on leaving the United Kingdom (to be held in September 2014) might also take the UKIP poll into account, considering that if the rest of the UK is indeed moving towards leaving the EU, then the referendum for the Scots this year also becomes a choice between staying in the EU or leaving it (assuming that an independent Scotland would be permitted to stay in or join the EU).

Would this lead to political instability? In the case of Greece, the situation is complex. Tsiriza's impact has peaked meaning early elections are not likely. National parties – e.g. the UK's Conservatives, Germany's CSU and Italy's Forza Italia – had also taken some of the rhetoric of the populist parties, but had not fared so well in the European polls. It is too soon also to provide an analysis of this, but should be watched closely.

Impact of the elections on the selection/election of next EU Commission President

For Emmanouilidis, the process of how to select the next EU Commission President is clearly set out in the Lisbon Treaty – but has seen many varying interpretations by the European Parliament and national governments. This could turn into a 'battle' between the Parliament and the Heads of State and Government. One which might develop from a political battle into a war.

A meeting of Heads of State and Government in Brussels on Tuesday 27 May is not likely to find a decision, and is more likely to come either at the June summit or in the autumn, in which case incumbent President Barroso would be asked to stay on as a caretaker president. In between, there is a lot of compromises to be made and much horse-trading to be done,

especially as UK Prime Minister, David Cameron, has already said 'no' to both Mr Schulz and Mr Juncker becoming president, saying they were too federal in outlook; and the Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, had said he also would not support the candidacy of Mr Juncker.

Emmanouilidis therefore predicts that neither Mr Juncker nor Mr Schulz would become EU Commission President, but rather that a compromise candidate would be found.

Long-term lessons to be learned from the 2014 Elections

The new 'top candidates' process had been an experiment and cannot be judged too quickly but does require improvement for the next elections. National governments need to give more thought to the link between the European Elections and the candidacies for the role of Commission President, given that this was being 'sold' to the electorate as one way in which their votes had more impact on the running of the EU.

For Emmanouilidis, these elections are not a turning point for the EU project. Contrary to Stratulat, he believes that a 'business as usual' attitude would not be a good idea, but concedes that national governments would promote the idea of 'keeping calm and muddling through'.

The Chief Executive of the EPC, Fabian Zuleeg provided another analysis, focusing on the UK, posing the question: "Who won the elections in the UK?"

According to Zuleeg, the obvious answer was UKIP but a number of Conservative MPs were now saying British voters were actually voting in order to have an in/out referendum now. Losers then, were those led by the Conservatives who had been promoting the idea of reforming the EU with the hope to hold a UK in/out referendum at a later date. These election results nevertheless mean an increase in the probability of Britain withdrawing from the EU.

Would the results help the EU focus on its core tasks, such as tackling unemployment, creating jobs, dealing with the Russia-Ukraine crisis – as well as examining the so-called democratic deficit and looking at the future direction of Europe?

"I think we'll see a spread of the 'British disease'," he said. "People will say we can't move because of the strength of the anti-EU parties at home."

Zuleeg is of the opinion that even in the most pro-EU countries, people have had enough of 'more Europe', meaning there could possibly be a period of EU political stagnation during which time it would be difficult to tackle the problems faced by the bloc.

Discussion

During the discussion, one member of the audience commented that the rise of the 'antis' in the European Parliament would 'put the brakes on' national governments, afraid to upset the anti-establishment parties. But the audience member also hoped that the change in the make-up of the European Parliament might lead to a 'true' opposition in the Parliament. She expressed concern that the vote might turn into a trend. She also advised against 'lumping all the antis together' as this failed to understand the complexities involved.

Corina Stratulat said she felt the success of the 'antis' was a reflection of what she called a crisis of representation in the Member States and citizen disenchantment with European leaders. She said this had created a gap between governments and the governed; and the 'anti' parties had stepped in to fill that gap. Stratulat went on to say that politics was cyclical and the appeal of the 'anti' parties would come and go but were now part of what has been referred to as a 'pathological normalcy'.

On the subject of the selection of the next EU Commission President, Stratulat said there was a chance that the next President would not be one of the so-called 'top candidates'; but she felt if that were the case, it would be difficult to justify this to the electorate (as they had been led to believe that one of the 'top candidates' would take the role).

Janis A. Emmanouilidis said it was correct not to put all the 'antis' into one basket. He said it was necessary to look at each national picture on its own merits – but that made it difficult to come up with a European solution to the 'problem'; and trying to do so could even back-fire because amending rules to satisfy one member state would not necessarily go down well in other member states. Emmanouilidis concurred that in his view the 'antis' would not engage in the real work of the Europe Parliament.

Asked if he felt the election results represented a permanent shift to the Right, Emmanouilidis said 'no'. There was, he said, a lot of work to be done to deal with the problem but this would be mostly at national level. The worry was that people had dared to vote for the 'anti' parties – and so in some ways a rubicon had been crossed meaning calls for 'deeper' union now had eased.

Fabian Zuleeg said it was too easy to describe the crisis as one of neo-liberalism. There was a lot of opposition to austerity; that the Left parties were in some trouble; and that there was a strong mood of anti-establishment but felt that common European policies would now only come about if there were absolutely no alternative.

Asked about what impact the election results would have on the TTIP discussions (Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership), Fabian Zuleeg said that would depend on the deal being worked out and on what sort of coalition emerged in the Parliament. He felt TTIP would probably form part of coalition discussions among the parliamentary groups. He said on the whole he wouldn't expect 'antis' to oppose TTIP.

In response to a further question about the election of the next EU Commission President, **Janis A. Emmanouilidis** said if a row between the heads of state and government and the European parliament went on too long, the European Parliament would lose out, as it would be viewed as uncompromising.

When asked whether the election results would mean a more social Europe, **Fabian Zuleeg** said there would be no more funding at European level to work on this; so even if people saw this as a function of the EU, the EU would not be able to resolve this issue – and this in turn would lead to further citizen disaffection with the European project.

To a question about the impact of the elections on EU foreign policy, **Rosa Balfour**, the EPC's Director of Europe in the World, took to the floor. She said the EU's foreign policy was struggling and she didn't expect the European Parliament to hinder any major foreign policy decisions; but she said that as the 'antis don't really like the rest of the world', there might conceivably be problems with, for example, something like the ratification of a treaty for Montenegro joining the EU.

Balfour said the European Parliament played an important informal role on the international stage, as election observers for example. She wondered how this might be affected by the election results.