



BULLETIN

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European Parliament Elections 2014: Will “Union Citizens” Reject the Union?

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Reversing the trend of decreasing turnout in European elections remains the core goal of the strategy to strengthen the democratic legitimacy of the European institutions. More voters at the polls, however, does not necessarily mean increased support for the European project: Eurosceptic and protest groupings may prove more effective than mainstream parties in mobilising the electorate. The result could be the more intensive anti-European campaigning by means of the European Parliament during the whole term.

The legitimacy of the European Union as offered by European citizens through its only directly elected institution, the European Parliament (EP), has slipped continuously since the first European elections in 1979. Voter participation has fallen from an early high of almost 62% to 43% in 2009 and, according to Eurobarometer surveys, trust in the EU institutions has worsened significantly during the current term of the EP and European Commission (EC). In some EU Member States, the erosion of public support for the integration process is evidenced by strong electoral outcomes for Eurosceptic parties, including in domestic elections..

“**This Time Is Different**”. A European Parliament resolution of 4 July and a Commission Communication of 12 March recommended measures to reinforce the legitimacy of the EU’s decision-making process to bring the system closer to Union citizens. As a result, concrete steps have been taken at the European level to optimise the EU’s electoral timetable or have been proposed for Member States and for political parties to create incentives for the electorate to use their vote.

I. Optimisation of the election date. The Lisbon Treaty strengthened the role of the European Parliament in selecting the Commission College—the new setup being tested for the first time in 2014. To reduce the risk of “a replay of 2009, when due to wrangling in the EP it took nine months to constitute a new College, the elections have been moved forward from June to May. This will enable the EP to vote on the Commission president before the summer recess, in turn allowing the new Commission to take office smoothly in November 2014.

II. “Personalisation” of the election. To overcome the so called second-order character of European elections, however, the electorate must presumably see a direct link between its vote and future developments at the European level. Accordingly, European parties shall indicate their preferred candidate for Commission president during the elections.

III. Competition. The current crisis could well give a truly European character to the upcoming elections. The cleavage around the issue of whether to pass more powers to the EU or return them to the national level is being matched by an emergent left-right cleavage on questions about austerity and growth. The European parties and their top candidates are supposed to present proposals for the EU and create clear competition between visions.

The Turnout Challenge. At the heart of these reforms lies a desire to boost voter turnout. Surveys show that more than 70% of respondents believe turnout will be higher if national parties display their European party affiliation on their campaign materials, and more than 60% assume a similar effect if parties propose a candidate for Commission president. The journey from theory to practice, however, may be more complicated than that. Confronted with the question of whether presenting a candidate for president of the Commission by European party alliances would

encourage the respondent to participate in elections, only 15% answered “yes, definitely,” 39% ticked “yes, probably,” while 36% say it would not.

Hopes for an increased youth vote may also be inflated. In 2009, the youngest voters were the most reluctant to take part in the elections. By contrast, recent surveys released by the Commission showed 65% of eligible voters under 30 plan to vote next year, with a particular rise among first-time voters. Yet, only 28% of respondents said that they would “definitely vote.” This percentage, though, is inflated by the fact that there are countries where voting is obligatory. This points to the risk that low turnout will again weaken the legitimacy of the European Parliament and, consequently, the Commission. What’s worse, expected turnout tends to be lower in those Member States most affected by the economic crisis.

Could Higher Voter Turnout Mean More Eurosceptic Votes? If turnout does rise, however, it is the Eurosceptic groupings that stand to gain most, as these parties are more successful in presenting the European dimension of national challenges. European issues, such as the economic and financial crisis, the free movement of persons in the context of high unemployment and shortcomings in welfare politics, as well as enlargement—although the latter to a lesser extent at present—are usually depicted by media and understood by a wide segment of the population as exactly those areas where the European Union fails or poses unwanted burdens on Member States. Even mainstream parties tend to use the EU as a scapegoat.

The increased representation of Eurosceptic parties in the European Parliament would ostensibly bring it into line with voter preferences. Indeed, with the next EP divided along left and right and losing its de facto “grand coalition” character, the voices of smaller parties and political groups could become occasionally decisive. Yet, the overall outcome might be rather different. If the current activities of the Eurosceptic MEPs are anything to go by, the new members would be marginalised. The EP’s rules of procedure limit the impact on policy of smaller groupings and non-attached MEPs when it comes to writing reports or opinions. Their ideological heterogeneity makes it difficult for Eurosceptic parties to institutionalise their cooperation, even when it would bring benefits such as additional speaking time on the floor of Parliament.

Given their restricted formal influence as well as their critical stance on the European Union system, many new Eurosceptic MEPs would likely—as is already common—direct their attention primarily to gaining domestic publicity, using the extended possibilities that come with a parliamentary mandate. The increased representation of Eurosceptics could not only hinder the smooth functioning of the European Parliament but influence the domestic political discourse and induce mainstream political forces—including ruling parties—to adopt a more critical stance towards the European project. In short, even if these new parties do not end up damaging the internal cohesion and effectiveness of the European Parliament, they may increase the expectations of and pressure on domestic systems.

Any improvements concerning the timing and form of next year’s election may, in other words, be counterproductive. The challenge will be to meet expectations made higher thanks to the personalisation of political competition and to ensure a real impact of the election results on the future shape of the European Commission. The smooth appointment of the new College and the credibility of the process will be crucial for regaining citizens’ trust. There is also a significant risk that the EP will become a forum and a tool for campaigning against European integration. In almost any scenario it will become more competitive and less consensual, which, however, could also limit its influence in the European decision-making process.

Conclusions and Recommendation for Poland. In Poland, the EU still enjoys relatively significant trust, however it has declined during the crisis to a level similar to that at the time of accession. Opinion on the functioning of European institutions has also worsened: the EP is seen positively by 48% of respondents (vs. 63% in 2009) and the Commission by 46% (vs. 58% in 2009). In the context of the upcoming European election, the greatest challenge will be to overcome the common belief among citizens about their limited influence on the EU, as only 15% of respondents are satisfied that they have any (CBOS, BS/56/2013).

Boosting turnout is also of primary importance to Poland. In 2004, turnout levels were only 21%, and in 2009 just 25%. Stronger participation should be encouraged to reduce the discrepancy between the still relatively positive attitude towards European integration and the limited electoral turnout. As with other countries that joined the EU in 2004, next year’s election campaign will take place in the special context of the stocktaking after the first decade of EU membership. However, if the debate looks backward rather than forward, it may not give an incentive to vote.

Finally, the European campaign gives Polish political parties the possibility to improve or extend cooperation within the European political platform, in particular their involvement in programmatic debates as well as in the elaboration of a concept for the future of European integration. EU-wide, the quality of the domestic debates will be key. Eurosceptics can be expected to campaign on issues such as managing the euro crisis and austerity, migration, border controls, and social policy. The emergence of these European issues in domestic debates is perhaps a positive sign. However, bearing in mind the impact of Eurosceptic rhetoric on the mainstream political discourse in Member States, this could further weaken the aspects of European integration appreciated by Polish political elites and society. Moreover, in the context of the debates on free movement laws and enlargement, some direct references to Polish migrants cannot be excluded—something which may alternatively require an adequate response by Polish diplomats.