

VOX POPULI, VOX NEMINIS? WHAT THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS CAN TELL US

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Can a meaningless election ever have meaning? If so, how can we tell? European voters have faced these questions every five years since 1979, the first time that they were called to the polls to vote for the members of the European Parliament (EP). They are not unserious questions. They touch on fundamental issues not only about the European Union (EU) and its institutions, but also about the state of public opinion, the means available to measure it, and the responsibility of the political leadership in democratic societies to respond to public desires. Election results provide an opportunity for the voice of the people to be heard, even if we can't declare with complete confidence who those people are, or what exactly they meant to say.

On paper, EP elections are one of the most massive demonstrations of democracy in human history, second in size and scope only to India's recently completed national vote. Tens of millions of voters in 28 countries from Barcelona to Bucharest and Stockholm to Salonika were invited to cast ballots over a long weekend (voting began in Britain and the Netherlands on Thursday 22 May, and reached its climax in the rest of the EU on Sunday 25 May) to send about 750 deputies to Strasburg. The EP does many of the things that a real parliament does—it elects a speaker, holds committee hearings, debates policies, produces reports, and votes on resolutions. In the past decades it has even gained the right to vote on the EU budget and to approve or reject the slate of Commissioners who manage the EU. In that sense, elections for the EP are the sole mechanism through which the population of the EU can exert direct democratic influence on the Union's operations.

Alas, the pleasant surface papers over a less democratic reality. Despite the visible trappings of parliamentary responsibility, the EP lacks crucial powers that make parliamentary government a reality. The EP cannot initiate legislation, nor is it directly responsible for supporting a European government, since there are other elements of the EU, such as the European Council, that remain beyond the EP's influence. As such, the EP is primarily a debating society with small political influence, rather like a UN general assembly with the members elected rather than appointed by their governments.

The EP traces its roots back to consultative assemblies made up of appointed parliamentarians that the founders of the European Community created to encourage conversations among the European political class. Those original delegations were shaped according to existing proportions in the individual national parliaments, and were more

international than transnational. The EP was also seen as a sort of pasture where politicians either on their way up or on their way down in their national parties could be fobbed off with nice-sounding titles and generous per diems, hence the origin of the satirical German comment, “Hast Du einen Opa? Schick ihn nach Europa!” [Roughly, “Send grandpa to Europe.”]

The decision to stage direct elections beginning in 1979, and also to encourage the EP to organize itself according to transnational party groupings, such as the European People’s Party (Christian Democrats and conservatives); Socialists and Social Democrats; Liberals; Greens; and the like, were steps toward inspiring a more pan-European feel for the body. Efforts to widen the EP’s competence have also progressed, albeit slowly. Giving the parliament voting rights over the EU budget and the Commission were halting and careful steps to provide a greater role in the governance of the EU. At this rate, one can expect that the EP would have the full power and authority its name suggests sometime during the reign of King George VII.

Recognizing the gap between appearance and reality in the power of the EP, these Continent-wide elections are thus a form of democratic pantomime. They include all of the trappings of real elections, with parties and posters and campaign ads on radio and TV. They inspire a great many talk show conversations before and after the votes are cast. As with many other aspects of the EU, its organizers hope that even the practice of semi-empty rituals of participation will engender greater European sentiment, though that is a questionable assumption. Whatever significance these elections may have is thus not related to actual expectations of action from the EP. Furthermore, realization of the EP’s relative powerlessness makes it difficult to mobilize deep interest in the electorate. Voter turnout this year averaged forty-three percent [<http://www.results-elections2014.eu/en/election-results-2014.html>] across Europe. Those would be good numbers for a typical American off-year election, but well below the usual rates for national parliamentary elections.

If any election expresses the voice of the people, however, what do EP elections tell us? This question appears especially timely considering that these elections offered Europeans their first chance whole to offer a verdict on the ongoing economic and political crisis of the Euro and the future of the EU in general institution. On the broadest level, the verdict has been negative. The traditional pro-European parties of the center-right and center-left, the Christian Democrats and Socialists, saw their share of the vote shrink. Meanwhile, protest parties of the Right and Left did relatively well. They include the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) and the Alternative for Germany (AfD), two parties that have largely mobilized middle-class conservative voters with their criticism of the EU project. UKIP especially scored a major victory, beating out both the Labour opposition and the governing Tories for first place overall in what its leader Nigel Farage has called a political “earthquake.”

On the Left, the coalition of the radical left (SYRIZA) in Greece and Italian comedian/activist Beppe Grillo’s Five Star Movement, who appeal to voter resentment against the austerity measures imposed upon Greece and Italy as a condition of their EU bailouts, both scored significant gains.

Most spectacular—and, for many observers, disturbing—was the triumph of the National Front (FN) in France. That right-wing populist party, led by Marine Le Pen (daughter of the party’s founder, Jean-Marie Le Pen) won a plurality of the French vote, besting every other party by significant margins with its criticism of European integration, anti-immigrant messaging, and general critique of contemporary mores.

The success of parties opposed to the elite consensus on Europe has grabbed most of the headlines in subsequent days. In general, it is thought/hoped/feared (depending upon one’s position on the EU) that the elections signal a growing frustration among Europeans about the undemocratic and distant European Union and a growing desire for significant reform, if not total abandonment of the EU. Beyond this broad theme, the specific messages gleaned from the results vary slightly from country to country.

For Greece and Italy, the success of the populists has fanned worries that a backlash against austerity will lead to further political radicalism and instability.

In France, where the FN’s success has coincided with a larger national crisis of confidence under the wildly unpopular and feckless socialist president Francois Hollande, commentators wonder whether the EP vote is a signal for significant realignment in future parliamentary and presidential elections.

In Great Britain UKIP's success under the leadership of the colorful Farage raises questions about the future not only of Prime Minister David Cameron's coalition government (Conservatives and Liberal Democrats) but of his Conservative party as a whole in the run-up to parliamentary elections next year. If UKIP, which places its criticism of the EU within a larger embrace of British national identity and nostalgia for a more homogenous British culture, is able to build on its EP success to attract significant Tory voters next year, it is hard to see how Cameron can stay in office. Whether UKIP will become part of a national government, let alone accomplish its stated goal of taking the UK out of the EU, is another question. At any rate, British politics, already unsettled by the scheduled referendum on Scottish independence in September, could become even more confused.

In Germany the relative success of the AfD shows the potential for that movement to siphon middle-class votes away from Chancellor Angela Merkel's Christian Democratic CDU/CSU. The CDU/CSU has maintained its position in German politics for five decades in part by making sure that there has been no legitimate democratic party on its right. The AfD threatens to disrupt that traditional strategy. In Bavaria, where the more conservative CSU governs with an absolute majority, the AfD surprisingly won nearly eight percent of the vote despite CSU efforts to hold onto conservative voters by emphasizing its own criticisms of the EU. The AfD narrowly failed to win any seats in last year's Bundestag elections, but their EP performance allows their leadership to look with optimism to state and national elections in the months and years to come.

These eye-catching developments have led to many a headline proclaiming a Eurosceptic wave and "seismic" elections, and with good reason. Nevertheless, one has to balance those gains against other results, such as the relatively weak performance of the radical right-wing Jobbik in Hungary, or the third place showing of the Eurosceptic Freedom Party in the Netherlands. Indeed, even considering the battering the EU has taken, the four consistently pro-European party groups—Christian Democrats, Socialists, Liberals, and Greens—still achieved more than two-thirds of the total vote. That may be a sign of complacency, or habit, but must be kept in mind by anyone who wants to speak of earthquakes and landslides.

There is certainly a lot here for well-informed readers to contemplate. It is, however, hard to say how significant these results are for the future of the EU, for five interlocking reasons:

1. Despite efforts by the pro-European parties to encourage voters to see EP elections as an important part of European identity, EP elections still fail to bring voters to the polls. In Britain, turnout was barely above 36 percent. Even in states considered interested more friendly to the EU, such as Germany, turnout was noticeably stronger in those areas who used Sunday for local elections as well. Without some local concern, most voters registered no strong feelings at all. Does this mean that Europeans are already skeptical enough about Europe, or does it reflect frustration that the EP does not have even more authority? Who can say; trying to divine the motivations of non-voters is an ongoing challenge.
2. Low-turnout elections work to the advantage of motivated voters, and thus can disproportionately reflect the opinions of the angriest. Thus it is hard to say whether the strong showing of protest parties is a sign of their inevitable future success, or a reflection of their hard core base, which in a national election would be swamped by the more centrist elements. UKIP won a bit more than 26 percent of a small British turnout, for example, enough for first place in a dispersed field. The same proportion of the electorate in a national election would be a major factor, but only if UKIP were able to maintain such proportions in the larger pool.
3. Furthermore, there is a tradition in EP elections for voters to be more willing to cast votes for protest parties in order to send a message to established organizations. In this way, meaningless elections become the perfect place to make statements about issues only partially related to the election at hand. The environmentalist Greens, for example, were able to win seats in the EP before they were able to win seats in many national parliaments, and the FN also used EP elections to gain notoriety. Conservative voters who cast ballots for UKIP or the AfD can be seen within this tradition. Whether they will be as successful as the Greens in carving out a place in the national parliamentary spectrum remains to be seen.
4. Experience has also shown so far that anti-European parties in the EP have had at best a minor impact on the workings of the EU. This is partially a reflection of the institutional weakness of the EP, where absenteeism among deputies is a notorious problem, but so far has also represented structural weaknesses in protest parties, which do not usually have a deep enough cadre of able politicians to send to Strasburg

and do much parliamentary work. As the most extreme example, the leader of a small protest party in Germany (known simply as “The Party” [Die PARTEI]) announced his intention to resign his seat after one month, to be succeeded monthly by other members of his party, so they can all share in the stipends and perks of office. That’s not exactly a program for EU reform. For bigger groups such as UKIP or the AfD, their focus remains on the domestic political landscape anyway.

5. Using EP elections to send messages can also help solve the problems that spurred the protests, thus taking the steam out of the protests. If these elections spur the current leadership of the EU to make progress with significant political and economic reforms, then perhaps there will be less enthusiasm for skeptical parties in the elections to follow.

Those five points together should make observers careful about drawing simple lessons from this weekend’s vote. The past does not predict the future; indeed, it doesn’t even always adequately explain the present. But just because we can’t precisely predict the consequences of these elections doesn’t mean we should disregard the hints they do offer. The European Union is still involved in a slow-motion political and economic crisis, involving not only the future of the Euro but also the future shape of its membership. The crisis in Ukraine has also highlighted the relative impotence and disunity of the EU when dealing with a significant challenge to the territorial status quo. Indeed, the expressions of admiration and support for Vladimir Putin from such EU critics as Marine Le Pen suggest that Europe’s disunity and lack of common identity can have significant geopolitical consequences. These elections do not portend the impending collapse of the EU, but they certainly offer very little comfort to anyone who would like to see the EU thrive as a factor in world affairs.

All of which brings us back to the basic problem of the European Union and its current state of semi-integration. The EU may be too centralizing and imperial for Nigel Farage, but it is still far from the strong and united Europe dreamed of by Adenauer, Schuman, and de Gaulle. For too long, the European elite has hoped that the steady accretion of regulations and economic cooperation, capped by a common currency, would lead to political unity without that same elite being required to make a strong case for Europe to the electorate. The result has been drift from crisis to crisis and a growing sense that the EU’s power and influence has outrun the ability of individual Europeans to participate, let alone control it. EU leaders have built a grand supranational structure on paper, but it remains a rhetorical and political vacuum. The EU’s critics, who dominated the headlines after the EP elections, are now filling that vacuum. The people have spoken, or at least some of them. The future of the EU depends on who chooses to respond, and how.