

Towards the European elections: An introductory framework

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In about two months, precisely between the 22nd and the 25th of May depending on the country, voters from 28 member states of the European Union will be called to the ballot boxes to elect the new members of the European Parliament.

Traditionally considered “second order” elections (Reif and Schmitt, 1980) with respect to the more important national ones, the 2014 European elections appear to have acquired centrality and wider importance compared to the past. This does not depend exclusively on the growing importance of the European Parliament and of its legislative functions in the Union but especially on the consequences of the economic crisis that hit sovereign debts across Europe since 2008, leading the EU to emerge as the main decision maker regarding the political economy of member states.

The next European elections can thus be deemed as the “first” true European elections, in which the electoral campaigns in the various states is not connected to domestic politics but rather to the European policy orientation proposed by the national actors. The reform introduced with the Lisbon Treaty (coming into force in December 2009) is also contributing to push towards the Europeanization of the electoral campaign. For the first time, it is stated that the President of the Commission will be practically elected by the European Parliament while the European Council would maintain exclusively a control role. In practice, the relationship between popular vote and the election of the highest charge in the EU (the head of the executive branch) will be strengthened.

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In the last weeks, the main political groups in the European Parliament (EP) have indicated their own candidates to the presidency of the Commission. The European political group that will achieve the relative majority of the seats in the EP will have its own candidate to the presidency obtaining the charge, and this will introduce an element of electoral competition closer to that characterizing competitive parliamentary democracies. The two main candidates are the Luxembourgian Jean-Claude Juncker for the European People's Party (EPP) and the German Martin Schulz for the Party of European Socialists (PES). The other candidates include the Belgian Guy Verhofstadt for the Liberals, the Greek Tsipras—leader of Syriza—for the European Left, and the co-candidates Keller and Bovè for the Greens. The group of European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR)—that includes the British conservatives—will not present any candidate to the presidency of the Commission. The group of Eurosceptic parties (Europe of Freedom and Democracy, EFD)—led by the National Front of Marine Le Pen—shared the same decision. The Northern League and the Brotherhood of Italy-National Alliance represent the group in Italy.

Further than choosing indirectly the President of the Commission, European voters will vote to select the members of the EP. As a consequence of the entrance of the 28th member state—Croatia, which joined the Union in July 2013—the number of EP members will increase from this election to 751 (from 736). Table 1 resumes the changes in the seats for each state with respect to 2009. As we can see, Germany loses three seats, reducing to 96; Italy gains one seat increasing its number to 73, the same as the U.K.; France and Sweden obtain two additional seats; and Spain even four while Croatia will have 11 seats assigned. It is interesting to notice how the two basic principles of representation on which all democratic parliaments are grounded—namely the one of people's representation usually concerning a lower chamber and the one of territorial representation expressed by a higher chamber—are present and act as counterbalancing forces. The representatives assigned to each MS in fact depend on the ratio between the country's resident population and the population in the EU. However, would this principle be entirely applied, smaller countries such as Malta, Luxembourg, Cyprus, or Estonia would have very few representatives. To safeguard territorial representation—i.e., member states—the Treaty establishes that no country can have less than six representatives. Thus, while Germany obtains an additional representative every about 860,000 citizens, in case of Malta, the same amount reduces to 69,000.

Each member state can decide the electoral system for the election of the European Parliament although with the Treaty of Amsterdam, it has been established that member states are constrained to adopt a proportional system and to apply electoral thresholds up to a maximum of 5%.

Table 1 – Seats' distribution in the EP and changes between 2009 and 2014

Country	Seats 2009	Seats 2014	+/-
Austria	17	18	1
Belgium	22	21	-1
Bulgaria	17	17	0
Croatia	n/a	11	n/a
Cyprus	6	6	0
Czech Republic	22	21	-1
Denmark	13	13	0
Estonia	6	6	0
Finland	13	13	0
France	72	74	2
Germany	99	96	-3
Greece	22	21	-1
Hungary	22	21	-1
Ireland	12	11	-1
Italy	72	73	1
Latvia	8	8	0
Lithuania	12	11	-1
Luxembourg	6	6	0
Malta	5	6	1
Netherlands	25	26	1
Poland	50	51	1
Portugal	22	21	-1
Romania	33	32	-1
Slovakia	13	13	0
Slovenia	7	8	1
Spain	50	54	4
Sweden	18	20	2
United Kingdom	72	73	1
Total	736	751	15

For voters in traditionally majoritarian countries, as France or the United Kingdom, the possibility to vote with a proportional system represent an important change that generally produces an underrepresentation of the main political actors with an advantage of the political options in the minority, typically marginalized in the national political system. To a similar extent, however, also in the other countries, the “second order” competition dynamic

Table 2 – Composition of the EP after the 2009 elections

Group	N seats	% seats
European People's Party (EPP)	265	36.0
Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D)	184	25.0
Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE)	84	11.4
Greens (Greens-EFA)	55	7.5
European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR)	54	7.3
European United Left (GUE-NGL)	35	4.8
Europe for Freedom and Democracy (EFD)	32	4.3
Non-Inscrits (NI)	27	3.7
Total	736	100

characterizing the European elections—namely the smaller relevance of the charges at stake—implies patterns recurring over time: turnout decrease with respect to the national elections, a loss in the support for incumbent parties, and growing vote shares for smaller parties. More broadly, the consequence is a fragmented electoral contest and the smaller room for strategic² considerations for vote decisions compared to domestic electoral arenas.

Notwithstanding these tendencies to favour smaller parties over governing parties, the larger European party families of the Populars and the Socialists have always been largely majoritarian within the EP. In the 2009 elections, these two groups have collected more than 60% of the seats jointly considered. As reported in Table 2, the leaving parliament presents a relative majority of the EPP (36%) while the PES with no more than 25% of the seats, the lowest share ever. In 2009, the EPP achieved its third victory in a row, and since 1999, it outperforms the PES as a consequence of its effective policy of integration of political parties that has expanded to include almost all the conservative political parties and not merely those identified with a Christian-social and Christian-democrat tradition as originally pursued. Moreover, with the Eastern Enlargement of 2004, the advantage of the EPP on the PES has further crystallized given the weakness of socialist parties in Central and Eastern European countries while the EPP has benefited from the support of the stronger conservative parties in those countries.

² On the concept of strategic voting, see Cox (2005).

Far from the position of the EPP in the EP, the Liberals (ALDE) represents the third European political group. Having collected 11% of the seats in 2009, they outperformed the Greens (7.5%) and the group of Conservatives and Reformists (7.3%). The latter group has been formed by the decision of the British Tories to leave the EPP, given the growing anti-Europe stance. Then we find the two most extreme political groups, namely, the radical left and the anti-Europe and anti-Euro one. In 2009, they both achieved less than 5% of the seats although they are likely to expand their support in the next elections under the weight of the economic crisis and the strong leadership of political figures as Tsipras and Marine Le Pen. Finally, 27 members in 2009 were simply “non-inscrits” to any political group. This process is in constant decline, given the increasing “institutionalization of the European party system” (Bardi, 2002).

References

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