

Netherlands, Ireland and UK: Euroscepticism does (not) triumph

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On Thursday, May 22, citizens in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom (UK) voted to elect national delegates to the next European Parliament (EP). Irish citizens voted on the following day, Friday, the 23rd. In the UK, the electoral system in use is a closed list system with regional districts. In the Netherlands, the system is ordered (belonging to the group of open list systems), and there is one constituency for the whole country to choose the 26 Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), one more than in 2009. Irish voters elected their 11 MEPs, (one less than in 2009) through proportional single transferable vote (PRSTV),¹ a proportional system that allows voters to give ordered preferences to each and every candidate in the list. PRSTV is also used Northern Ireland, where 3 of the 73 UK representatives are elected. The possibility of given preferences to every candidate and the consequent transfer of votes result in a slow tally process that lasts for days after the polls close.

In the Netherlands, turnout was 37%, and in the UK, 36%, while Ireland was among the few member states where turnout was above 50% (51.6%). Turnout figures are important to a fuller understanding of the elections' results. The Netherlands and the UK are two key arenas to sense the strength of Eurosceptic right-wing parties. In the former, the Party for Freedom (PVV) of the Europhobic Geert Wilders gained popularity and votes over the past few years. Wilders calls for a limit on the number of immigrants and the defence of national culture against the alleged threats of multiculturalism. In the UK, Nigel Farage's UK Independence Party (UKIP) voices a similar position, but Farage's discourse focuses on the economic implications of immigration far

¹ Farrell, David. 2011. *Electoral Systems: A Comparative Introduction*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

more than on the cultural ones. Many observers see these two parties as a signal of a growing anti-European Union (EU) movement that comprises also the French Front National. However, such a movement crucially lacks a transnational dimension and appears deeply fragmented. Moreover, the electoral fortunes of the UKIP and the PVV were very different last week.

Netherlands

We begin analysing the results of the 2014 elections by looking at what happened in the Netherlands. The PVV lost 3.5 percentage points from the EP elections of 2009 (–2 points when compared with the 2012 general elections) but managed to secure four MEPs, as many as in 2009.

With regard to government parties—a coalition formed by Labourists (PvDA) and Liberals (VVD)—both the PvDA and the VVD maintain the same number of MEPs, three each, than in the past European Parliament. The Christian Democrats lose 5 percentage points but keep their five seats, while

Table 1. Results of the 2014 European Parliament elections – Netherlands

Party	EP Group	Votes (%)	Seats	Votes (change from 2009)	Seats (change from 2009)
Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA)	EPP	15.0	5	–4.8	+0
Democrats 66 (D66)	ALDE	15.4	4	+4.0	+1
Party fo Freedom (PVV)		13.3	4	–3.5	+0
Labour Party (PvDA)	S&D	9.4	3	–2.6	+0
People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD)	ALDE	12.0	3	+0.6	+0
Green Left (GL)	G-EFA	6.9	2	–1.9	–1
Socialist Party (SP)	GUE-N-GL	9.6	2	+2.5	+0
Christian Union–Reformed Political Party (CU-SGP)	ECR/EFD ²	6.8	2	+0.9	+0
Party for the Animals (PvdD)		4.2	1	+0.6	+1
Others		7.4	0		
Total		100	26		+1
Turnout (%)		37.0		+0.3	
Legal threshold for obtaining MEPs (%)		none			

the centrist D66 gains one MEP, sending to Strasbourg four representatives. On the left side of the political spectrum, the Green Party and the Socialist Party win two seats each, while the former loses 2 percentage points and the latter gains 2.5 points. The remaining three seats go to the Animals Party (1) and the Christian Union (2). Table 1 shows very little change from 2009 and that the most remarkable element of this election remains to be the low level of turnout. Dutch commentators point at a low intensity campaign as one of the key determinants of such low turnout.

United Kingdom

Voters' apathy has also characterised the election in the EU. However, unlike in the Dutch case, quite a lot has changed in the UK when we look at the electoral results (Table 2). The government coalition—Conservatives and Liberal Democrats—lost 17 seats (–10 for the Liberal Democrats and –7 for

Table 2. Results of the 2014 European Parliament elections – United Kingdom

Party	EP Group	Votes (%)	Seats	Votes (change from 2009)	Seats (change from 2009)
UK Independence Party (UKIP)	EFD	27.4	24	+11.0	+11
Labour Party	S&D	25.4	20	+9.7	+7
Conservative Party	ECR	23.9	19	–3.8	–7
Green Party of England and Wales	G-EFA	7.8	3	–0.8	+1
Scottish National Party (SNP)	G-EFA	2.4	2	+0.3	+0
Liberal Democrats	ALDE	6.8	1	–6.9	–10
The Party of Wales (Plaid Cymru)	G-EFA	0.7	1	–0.1	+0
British National Party (BNP)		1.1	0	–5.1	–2
Others		4.2	0		
Total		100	25		
Turnout (%)		36.0		+1.7	
Legal threshold for obtaining MEPs (%)		none			

Note: The results of Northern Ireland are not included.

EP group abbreviations: EPP, European People's Party; S&D, Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats; ALDE, Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe; G-EFA, The Greens–European Free Alliance; ECR, European Conservatives and Reformists; GUE-NGL, European United Left–Nordic Green Left; EFD, Europe of Freedom and Democracy; NI, Non-Inscrits.

the Conservatives). Liberal Democrats suffer a dramatic loss in terms of vote share, losing half of the votes when we compare it with the outcomes of the 2009 election. The Labour party gains 10 percentage points and registers a +7 in terms of elected representatives. All in all, the UKIP emerges as the clear winner of the election, and Farage, commenting on the results, claimed that his party's performance represents an earthquake in British politics. The UKIP wins 4 million votes, 27% of vote shares, and sends 24 Eurosceptic MEPs to the new European Parliament. Clearly, UKIP emerges from the election as a key domestic and European actor.

Importantly, the notorious British Euroscepticism seems to be stronger than ever. Over 50% of voters gave their preferences to parties that want 'less Europe' and promise to British voters an in/out referendum. Farage pushes for a referendum to be held before the 2015 general election and the conservative Prime Minister David Cameron promised to hold a referendum in 2017²—given that his party gets to lead a government after the 2015 election, which at the moment seems unlikely.

Ireland

With regard to Ireland, where voters on May 23 also cast a vote for local elections, results led quickly to the resignation as party leader of the labourist Eamon Gilmore, who is also deputy prime minister (Tánaiste). The Labour Party is in government with Fine Gael since March 2011. Both parties performed poorly: Fine Gael, the party of Taoiseach (prime minister) Enda Kenny, lost 7 percentage points, while the Labour party lost 9 points and, notably, did not secure any MEP. Gerry Adams's Sinn Féin makes a large gain (+8 percentage points) and secures three seats. Adams—a key player in designing the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, which brought peace to Northern Ireland after decades of violence—has been at the centre of media attention in the past few weeks. The Northern Ireland police recently questioned him—and then released him with no charges—for several days, in relation to an execution perpetrated by the IRA over 40 years ago. Despite such a controversial event, Sinn Féin's campaign succeeded in attracting a large number of votes and gaining a strong position in the Irish political system. The other key element of this election regards the electoral performance of Fianna Fáil,³

² <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/may/11/david-cameron-european-union-referendum-pledge>

³ Fianna Fáil is also known as the Republican Party for its opposition to the 1921 Treaty

Table 3. Results of the 2014 European Parliament elections – Ireland

Party	EP Group	Votes (%)	Seats	Votes (change from 2009)	Seats (change from 2009)
Family of the Irish (Fine Gael)	EPP	22.3	4	-6.8	0
Soldiers of Destiny – The Republican Party (Fianna Fáil)	ALDE	22.3	1	-1.8	-2
We ourselves – Independence Party (Sinn Féin)	GUE-N-GL	19.5	3	+8.3	+3
Labour Party	S&D	5.3	0	-8.6	-3
Independent candidates	Others	25.7	3		+2
Others		4.9	0		
Total		100	11		
Turnout (%)		51.6		-7.0	

EP group abbreviations: EPP, European People's Party; S&D, Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats; ALDE, Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe; G-EFA, The Greens–European Free Alliance; ECR, European Conservatives and Reformists; GUE-NGL, European United Left–Nordic Green Left; EFD, Europe of Freedom and Democracy; NI, Non-Inscrits.

the most successful party in the history of the Republic of Ireland. Fianna Fáil led coalition governments between 1997 and 2011, when suffered a major electoral defeat (-24 percentage points) at the February 2011 general election.⁴ The management of the economic crisis by Fianna Fáil's ministers and Taoiseach was both questionable and unpopular, but the party seems to have now remerged as a key actors. At the local election of May 23, Fianna Fáil won the largest share of votes despite losing two MEPs.

Finally, we note the presence, and success, of a large number of independent candidates. This defining trait of Irish politics⁵ appears even more promi-

signed with Great Britain. The treaty while formally guaranteed independence to the Republic of Ireland established British control over the six counties of Northern Ireland. Republican therefore connotes the position of those who support the idea of a united Ireland completely independent from British rule (Fianna Fáil and Sinn Féin) versus those who accepted the treaty (Fine Gael). Over the years Fianna Fáil has deemphasised the Northern Ireland issue and established itself as centrist party.

⁴ Michael Gallagher and Michael Marsh, eds, *How Ireland Voted 2011: The Full Story of Ireland's Earthquake Election*, Dublin: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011.

⁵ Liam Weeks, *We Don't Like (to) Party. A Typology of Independents in Irish Political*

ment at the 2014 EP election, where of 11 newly elected MEPs, three do not belong to any party.

In conclusion

In summary, the electoral results of the Netherlands, the UK and Ireland tell three different stories: in the Netherlands, the parties in government did not suffer any significant loss with respect to the 2009 European elections; on the contrary, the sitting governments of Ireland and the UK were severely punished by voters. Geert Wilders did not manage to secure large support, while in the UK, Nigel Farage succeeded in bringing anti-EU concerns at the top of the political agenda. Turnout was low, in line with the 2009 elections, in both the UK and the Netherlands; on the contrary, turnout in the Republic of Ireland was 8 percentage points higher than the European average, while lower than in 2009 (–7 points). These three different stories confirm the second-order nature of EP elections,⁶ with domestic considerations outweighing European ones.

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⁶ Reif, Karlheinz & Schmitt, Hermann. Nine Second Order National Elections: a Conceptual Framework for the Analysis of European Election Results. *European Journal of Political Research* 8, 10980.