

Introduction¹

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This book is dedicated to the European Parliament (EP) elections of 22–25 May 2014. Elections that were expected to be the first truly European elections, rather than a collection of second-order elections, focused on national issues as had happened in all previous elections (Reif and Schmitt, 1980; Hix and Marsh, 2011).

There were good reasons for such expectations. After 2008, the financial and sovereign debt crisis has impacted Europe, with important, and sometimes dramatic, consequences in economic, social, and political terms. Indeed, the crisis did not have an immediate impact, in terms of economic policies that would affect the everyday life of ordinary people. As a result, the 2009 EP elections—held almost nine months after the Lehman Brothers default—did not show particularly clear effects of the crisis (De Sio and Legnante, 2010). But in subsequent years, the reaction to the crisis has seen the emergence of the European Union, its institutions, and other international institutions as key players in terms of economic policy of the Euro member states. Several of the states that were most impacted by the sovereign debt crisis had to negotiate bailout deals with the “Troika” committee (European Commission, European Central Bank, and International Monetary Fund) that strongly limited, if not temporarily cancelled, their economic policy sovereignty. Also, most other eurozone countries had to take economic measures with a strong impact on the everyday life of ordinary people.

It is in this context that according to many observers, the European Parliament elections of 2014 would become much more relevant than in the past—a first, key test to assess the response of European citizens to the austerity policies decided in Brussels. With the expected consequence of citizens becoming aware that what is decided in Brussels is not abstract, it is something with a strong and immediate impact on their real life.

¹ This text is original for this book.

Finally, further expectations of increased relevance were due to the new provision, after the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty, that—for the election of the President of the European Commission—the European Council would have to “take into account” the election results and thus the balance of power among different groups in the European Parliament. This represents a reinforcement of the connection between popular vote and the election of the President of the Commission, leading to an expectation of higher voter mobilization.

Based on these considerations, several commentators, in the months preceding the elections, suggested that the 2014 elections could seriously challenge the consolidated theoretical framework that identifies EP elections as *second-order elections* (Reif and Schmitt, 1980) compared to the more important national elections. For the first time since 1979, the 2014 elections could become the first truly European elections, with campaigns disputed on European (more than domestic) issues, albeit filtered and declined through national points of view. In other words, a general expectation was that these elections might be closer to *first-order* elections.

Yet, a more careful and articulated theoretical reflection suggests that in terms of pre-electoral expectations, more articulated and specific results should have been expected such as the following:

- 1) First and foremost, a differentiation within the European Union, between Euro and non-Euro countries. If a higher relevance of the elections was a consequence of the austerity policies, such higher relevance should be observed only in Euro countries.
- 2) In Euro countries, there was the expectation of a politicization of the conflict over the importance of Europe in regulating national economies—a politicization that would obviously boost Eurosceptic parties.
- 3) Still, even in this case, a differentiation might be expected. Our pre-electoral hypothesis was that the success of Eurosceptic parties would have been stronger in two (albeit very different) subgroups of Euro countries. On the one hand, debtor states that had to sign a *memorandum of understanding* with the Troika (Greece, Cyprus, Spain, Portugal, and Ireland) and on the other hand, the richest creditor countries (Germany, Austria, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands). In the former, austerity policies have created a strong social malaise, preparing fertile terrain for populist and anti-EU parties; in the latter, conversely, a populist and Eurosceptic protest could collect the resentment of citizens “forced” to finance debtor countries, fearing the loss of their prosperity. There is finally a third, intermediate group that includes countries with macroeconomic indicators (per capita GDP, yearly GDP growth, public debt-to-GDP ratio, and unemployment) mostly in line with EU averages. It is a very heterogeneous category, ranging from those closer to the creditor group (France, Belgium, and Finland) to those closer to the debtor group (Italy). These countries, albeit in

a situation of crisis, did not surrender their economic sovereignty to the Troika; at the same time, unlike the richest group, they do not perceive the Euro as a dampening factor for their economic development. In this third, residual category, we expected a less strong success of Eurosceptic parties and a general lower salience of European issues.

- 4) Finally, we expected a symmetrical differentiation—in terms of overall salience of European issues—among non-Euro countries. In particular, it is necessary to distinguish between Western European countries with a high economic status (UK, Sweden, and Denmark) and Central Eastern European countries, which strongly benefit from EU structural funds since their entry into the EU, being now almost economically dependent from them. It was then plausible to expect that Euroscepticism would find more fertile terrain in the former group, whose countries joined the EU to exploit the economic advantages of the single market, but would fear further integration because of the economic difficulties of the Eurozone. While in the latter group, the EU is still a fundamental engine of economic development.

So far on the main hypotheses on the general trends in the 28 EU countries. But of course, we dedicated a special attention to Italy. Partly because it is our home country and the main focus of the CISE activity and partly because—shortly after the elections—Italy would take the presidency of the Council of the European Union so that elections results in Italy might have an indirect impact on the negotiations for the President of the Commission and on the general policy priorities of the first semester of the new EP legislature.

The 25 May election in Italy represented a key electoral test for several political actors. First and foremost for the Democratic Party (PD), the main party in office. Such election came little more than a year after the previous general elections but in a completely different political context.

After the lack of a clear victory by the PD in 2013, its leader Bersani resigned—after failing to form a government. Complex negotiations led then to the formation of a cabinet led by Enrico Letta, with an oversized majority including Berlusconi's PDL. Political tensions continuously surrounded the life of the Letta cabinet: first, with Berlusconi passing to the opposition (but a splinter from his party, forming the government-loyal Ncd—*Nuovo Centro-Destra*—led by Angelino Alfano, allowed the government to survive); and secondly, with the election of the new secretary general of the PD, seeing in December 2013 the triumph of Matteo Renzi. As a result, the Letta cabinet was in crisis already at the beginning of 2014, and a new Renzi cabinet was already in office in February 2014.

For Renzi, and for the popularity of his newly-formed cabinet, such election was a crucial test. The PD is a particular case of a mainstream party which,

through innovative procedures (open primaries) was able to radically change its leadership and public image. The question before the election was then whether the use of an innovative strategy (which also in part borrowed some communication strategies from populist parties) would pay off in electoral terms, especially for a party in office, which is usually penalized in second-order elections. While it is true that as stated by *electoral cycle* theory (Van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996), government parties are less disadvantaged when EP elections are held shortly after the last general elections (during the so-called “honeymoon” period), however, Renzi came to office without an electoral legitimation and, moreover, in a time of economic crisis and extremely low trust in political parties and the political class in general. As a result, the context for Renzi’s PD was not extremely favourable.

In the centre-right camp, the other large mainstream party, Silvio Berlusconi’s *Forza Italia* (the old label revived by Berlusconi after the splinter from the Pdl of the pro-government Ncd led by Alfano), was in an extremely difficult time of its political history, with Berlusconi not only banned from public office and thus not running but also facing severe campaign limits due to its alternate-punishment social work obligations.

For the Five Star Movement (M5S), on the contrary, the context of the EP election was extremely favourable. For the first time in a large European country, a nonmainstream party had arrived, in February 2013, on the verge of joining a government, after obtaining 25.6% of votes. As an antiestablishment, opposition party, it would enjoy in an EP election a particularly favourable arena, according to *second-order elections* theory. Yet, after more than a year of hard opposition (and of a total refusal of any collaboration with the whole party system), the election would be an interesting test of the popular approval of such strategy.

Finally, due to the austerity measures adopted in Southern Europe (including Italy), support for EU institutions in Italy had strongly decreased. Thus, yet another crucial aspect would be to observe the electoral performance of Eurosceptic parties (not only the M5S but also the Northern League and Brothers of Italy, which openly support exiting the Euro) and finally of those parties that had clearly focused their campaign on a radical critique of the EU-imposed austerity measures (Lista Tsipras).

In this book, we confront these research questions from a variety of viewpoints, in looking for an overarching interpretation of the 22–25 May vote. The book is structured as follows: Part I presents a set of pre-electoral analyses, dedicated to various aspects of the EP election (a brief history of the EP and of its functions, electoral systems across Europe, the selection of the newly-introduced potential candidates to the presidency of the EU Commission, and finally, a brief electoral history of the five main EP groups). The book then moves on

to the election results, starting in Part II with a quick spotlight on Italy, while Part III is dedicated to all other 27 EU countries, with concise reports covering the campaign, the results, and providing first interpretations. Finally, Part IV analyses the overall result at the European level, in terms of turnout, results of different EP groups, and the structuring of different party systems.

Once again, we need to state clearly the scope of this book. In offering a pack of analyses just few weeks after the election, we aim at providing an agile, essential tool able to deliver basic, essential—yet accurate—information on the 22–25 May EP election results, covering all 28 EU countries. With this contribution, as in the previous CISE book in English on Italian elections, we target an audience that is well beyond the academia, aiming at spreading greater knowledge and data on the functioning of electoral democracy in Italy and across Europe.

In terms of the group of scholars involved, this book marks a strong discontinuity with the previous books published by the CISE, both in Italian and in English. Just until a few days before the elections, our project was still aimed at covering essentially Italy, with some reflections about the general results at the EP level. Then we thought it might be interesting to also cover some other European countries, perhaps by local scholars, in order to provide information and insights both on the campaign and on the general interpretation of the results. We then first contacted our Italian colleagues (and friends) working abroad—a lively, well-connected and technically skilled community of young, brilliant scholars of elections and public opinion. Even more, they would be able to comment in Italian shortly after the election. We received an unexpected, enthusiastic response from *all* of them, who accepted to write short reports to be immediately published on the CISE website, in a matter of few days after the election.

This changed the whole picture and inevitably whetted our appetites; we then moved on to the goal of covering all 28 EU countries, by tapping into our broader international network of young friends and colleagues from all around Europe. Needless to say that the response was just as enthusiastic, if not more. As a result, we think we did something pretty unique. In a matter of few days after the elections, we published on the CISE website a set of concise yet informative reports, both in Italian and English, covering elections in *all 28 EU countries*. Together with the contributions prepared by CISE researchers, this external contribution forms an important part of this book. This is why we want to reward with a special thank you all those external scholars whose enthusiasm made this possible. It's all your fault (!): Konstantinos Athanasiadis, Marcello Carammia, Mikołaj Cześniak, Patrick Dumont, Marta Fraile, Vlastimil Havlík, Andrija Henjak, Henrique Hernández, David Johann, Raphaël Kies, Michał Kotnarowski, Sylvia Kritzinger, Simona Kustec-

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