

The European Elections of May 2014

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So who won the European elections?

As the dust settles on the massive democratic exercise (dwarfed in scope only by Indian polls, as witnessed earlier this month), the question of defining the themes and ‘message’ of the electoral results forms the stakes for the customary second round of sparring among the commentariat. Will the eighth universal suffrage vote for the European Parliament be enshrined in memory with the likenesses of Marine Le Pen, Nigel Farage, Viktor Orbán, or perhaps with those of Matteo Renzi, Angela Merkel, or even Alexis Tsipras?

In interpreting the first election since the latest enlargement to EU-28 (Croatia joined the bloc last year), none of the traditional master narratives proves entirely satisfactory.

Did European voters take the opportunity to punish their governments and reward the opposition? Certainly many parties in office fared poorly, as in Portugal, but seen from Berlin or Rome the picture is quite different; elsewhere, though government parties took a beating traditional opposition forces fared even worse, as in Spain.

Turn-out was the usual bugbear, and one can definitely say that an equilibrium has been attained on levels resembling a U.S. midterm, well below general election numbers in most Member States: yet, overall participation was up –albeit slightly– with respect to 2009, driven by marginal upticks in large countries in the West, such as France, the UK, Spain, and Germany, and larger gains in Lithuania, Romania, and Greece [note to organizers: bundling the EU elections with national ones helps *a lot*].¹

There appeared to be some correlation between recent GDP performance and strength of government parties, as one would expect, but definitely not an iron-cast regularity of material interests driving voting patterns.

So was it an election of ideas, or at least of world-visions? Thus, a victory for anti-European forces and for outsiders more generally against the cozy Brussels consensus?

¹ Of course, turnout is considered important but not central to the EU democratic exercise. Otherwise, it would, for instance, be quite feasible, given the proportional representation framework within which the Parliament is elected, to attribute to each country only a share of its allotted seats equal to the turnout percentage. Imagine the benefits: competition between countries to boost turnout in order to maintain their respective influence in the Parliament, reduction of anti-system or protest votes to their proper abstention-corrected proportions, a stronger voice for those who bothered to show up at the polls in the first place, and a near-certain cost-saving exercise as several MEP seats would be left vacant (the current Parliament, e.g., would have had 323 members out of 751...). Unsurprisingly, this is a political non-starter with just about anyone.

Assuredly, the traditional political ‘families’ of the European Parliament, the Christian Democrats, the Socialists, and the Liberals, along with the Greens, are no longer hegemonic. In addition to the Conservative group (a strange, mainly Anglo-Polish political creature), two other anti-system factions further to the Right appear likely to arise, one with an anti-bureaucratic and populist tinge, the other more forcefully nationalistic and anti-immigrant. Moreover, nearly one in seven MEPs arrive in Brussels with no clear affiliation to a transnational political party or parliamentary group: much space is left for maneuvering and horse-trading.

Yet the protesters of various hues have hardly seized the commanding heights: parliaments, like all complex organizations, are things of habit, and it takes strong discipline and ideological cohesion to subvert their procedural logic from the inside. Unified, the anti-Europeans are not: the many expressions of protest do not coalesce into a single recognizable pattern, and even on specific policy points (breaking up the Euro; revoking Schengen; repatriating regulatory powers; seceding from the EU...) views are scattered. Indeed, voters are often appalled at the bedfellows their local protest movements find available to make common cause in Brussels (and, for that matter, there might be deeper logical consistency issues with constructs such as a federation of exclusive nationalisms...). Furthermore, the facile media labeling as anti-system, Eurosceptic, or iconoclastic is particularly misleading when it bundles under one banner movements that have a general philosophical aversion to government intervention, movements whose main foe is the location of such interventionist potential at the supranational level, and movements that are simply opposed to certain policies enacted by such supranational decision-makers. Economic crisis-fueled anger at ‘Brussels’ might work as a vote catcher, but obtaining results, even at the basic level of disruption of the status quo, through a coordination of these different critical sensibilities will be a wholly different matter.

Business as usual after all, then?

Not quite. All electoral politics may well be local politics, but the main interest of these polls from a systemic point of view was the unprecedented attempt made to centralize the political contest. The main groups nominated their champions (Juncker, Schulz, Verhofstadt, and so forth), who campaigned transnationally in a flurry of multilingualism, and even staged that perennial media ceremony, the presidential debate, a colorful affair complete with all the customary liturgies.

Of course, central control over national candidate lists was nonexistent, as were unified party platforms (for all intents and purposes), so the parliamentary discipline of the groups, especially the more ideologically heterogeneous ones, will rely entirely on the mutual goodwill of the constituent national delegations. This traditionally is all the harder to come by when votes are held that target a particular national interest or hot-button topic—that is to say, when the Parliament obtains some media visibility in the first place.

On the other hand, Westminster-like party discipline is not required as a matter of course for the day-to-day functioning of the system. The fact that such an attempt to turn the vote into a decision on the “government of Europe” was even possible rested on a creative disagreement on the rules set forth in the Lisbon treaty: in particular, the established parties in the European Parliament campaigned as if a clear electoral decision would furnish a mandate for the victorious leader to claim the head of the Commission, a mandate which the governments’ representatives in the Council would find impossible to oppose.

It may be doubted whether such expectation contained any basis in reality: member-States have rarely acquiesced in this type of encroachment upon their prerogatives by the supranational level, as democratically legitimated as it may (or may not) appear to be. In any case, we will never know for certain, for the election produced the perfect hung parliament, with the shrinking of the biggest groups and increased atomization of representatives. The only viable majority, even for basic housekeeping matters such as the selection of the Speaker, is a Great Coalition between the Christian Democrats and the Socialists, that is to say the erasing of the fundamental ideological cleavage of Right and Left that structures most all European polities.

In this, however, it is possible to see a commonality between EU-wide electoral dynamics and national politics, confirming the EP in its role as a political magnifying experiment. Parliamentary majorities these days are harder to come by, everywhere. The basic function of legislatures, to provide for the stable production of normative products consistent with each other at a political-ideological level (whether by maintaining a Cabinet in office or sustaining an independent executive’s agenda), has increasingly entered into contrast with the representation of the societies they embody. Despite increasingly extreme tinkering with electoral systems, the production of homogeneous parliamentary majorities becomes ever more elusive in many States, perhaps emblematically in Italy. The largest country in the EU itself, despite having the most popular Chancellor since Reunification, is

governed by a Grand Coalition. Even the last redoubt of one-party majorities, Westminster, has seen its first Coalition government in a generation. Indeed, it has become increasingly difficult to have a majority of electorates agree on *anything*, except in the form of personalized (and aestheticized) contests such as presidential elections—whose political-ideological import is immediately undercut, as has been the case for several cycles now in France.

In these circumstances, to think of the European elections as a decision on the “government of Europe” was probably a false analogy all along. In any case, a Catch-22 dynamic could clearly be seen at work: Europe-wide parties attempted to respond to the perceived democratic deficit of the EU by turning elections into a political, ersatz-national contest, but voters responded by expressing their common European identity through abstentionism or support for splinter parties and protest movements; consequently, the EU continues to do what it is most efficient at, namely bureaucratic regulation in a context relatively devoid of democratic oversight or special-interest dominance, coupled with inter-governmental deals and diplomatic photo-ops. It was, in any case, rather ironic to see some of the greatest among the electoral losers claim, at the meeting of Heads of State on May 27th, that what the vote signaled was that the EU had to change, and change radically: something akin to Mitt Romney suggesting that the real meaning of the 2012 election was that Washington finally needed to get its house in order.