

Imperfect mirror: the new European Parliament and ‘European’ politics

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Summary

Last weekend’s European Parliamentary elections the new European legislature has begun to compose itself for the next five year term. As usual, the multiple political markets of the EU have sent a wide mix of parties to a chamber that is very imperfect snapshot of the mood across Europe. The composition of the Parliament matters for its likely approach to legislation and it has reflected a turbulent political picture, but the extent of that turbulence can only really be understood on a national level, where the impacts will be felt most.

After last week’s European Parliamentary elections the new EU legislature has begun to compose itself for the next five year term. As usual, the multiple political markets of the EU have sent a wide mix of parties to a chamber that is an imperfect snapshot of the mood across Europe. It is also a poor guide to the turbulence in individual member states.

Media coverage of the elections was dominated by a new influx of far-right and Eurosceptic MEPs from across the EU, but especially from France and the UK where these parties topped the polls. However this is only one of the political threads reflected in the new Parliament, and possibly not the most important one for the policy choices the new Parliament will make over the next five years.

A mirror of European politics?

Despite efforts to ‘Europeanise’ the election of the European Parliament, these elections remain national in their focus and ‘mid-term’ in their political quality. Polls generally have significantly smaller turnouts than national ones and often feature high levels of protest voting. They are national in their focus and often dominated by local and national issues. Voter awareness of what the European Parliament does, and who they send

there to represent them varies across the EU but is generally low.

They are, however, often an imperfect mirror of national electoral politics. High levels of protest voting can skew results and the proportional voting systems used in the European Parliament elections can often produce very different results than the first-past-the-post or ‘double tour’ systems used in political markets like the UK and France for national elections, which narrow electoral races down to two main runners and exclude smaller or protest parties. In countries like the Netherlands and Germany where both systems are proportional the two sets of results mirror each other better.

That distorted picture applies to Europe as well. The European Parliament pools national political markets in a way that can smooth out more dramatic results at the country level and hide some of the diversity and turbulence. Eurosceptic parties with strong anti-migration agendas topped the polls in the UK, France and Denmark and did well in Poland and Austria. There was however much less of an institutional shock to the system at the EU level, because such swings to the right or Euroscepticism were not at all uniform across the EU. This does not mean they do not matter - UKIP and the Front

National have dramatically shaken up politics in the UK and France in a way that will affect the whole tenor of the countries' approaches to the EU. But those shocks are diluted in the European Parliament itself.

Nevertheless the evidence of turbulence at the national level can be seen in the ten percent of the total share of the European Parliament held by mainstream 'pro-European' parties lost to insurgent smaller and more 'radical' parties of the left and right. From holding eight in ten seats in the last Parliament, this mainstream now holds seven. This is a roughly accurate picture of a feature of politics in almost all EU markets - a squeeze of the pre-2008 mainstream by the political margins of both left and right.

Votes into influence

Since 2009 the European Parliament has had a dramatically expanded role in European legislation. The political composition of the Strasbourg chamber therefore clearly matters, irrespective of how well or poorly it reflects national political realities. If the new arrivals are to convert their new numbers into institutional strength their first challenge will be to build a political platform in the Parliament. Forming a group in the European Parliament - which is the prerequisite for access to committee posts and high profile speaking time on the floor - requires a minimum of 25 MEPS from at least seven member states.

The basic challenge for the Eurosceptic and far right new arrivals will be the considerable diversity under the basic political labels. The versions of national self-interest advocated by the Alternative Fur Deutschland or the True Finns and the racist Hungarian Jobbik or Swedish Democrats are a long way apart. While all are broadly opposed to migration, there are wide variations in their racial or cultural identity politics.

The variants of Euroscepticism on display were also fairly diverse. The Polish KNP are libertarian Eurosceptic, while the Austrian OVP or the Front National are racial/nationalist Eurosceptic. Some, like the UK Independence Party, openly advocate withdrawal from the EU. Many of the rest of the group of EU critics in this Parliament are as much critics of the direction or pace of integration in the

Eurozone or EU as advocates for its dismantling. The moderate Eurosceptic European Conservatives and Reformers Group (ECR) provides a potential platform for some of these groups. The AFD, True Finns, New Flemish Alliance and Danish People's party have expressed interest in joining it. However the Eurosceptic Polish Law and Justice party which currently already sits in the ECR has indicated that it might be interested in moving its 19 MEPs back into the EPP mainstream fold, which would sharply reduce the ECR's size and influence.

Party	Seats		Significant changes	
	2009	2014	May gain...	May lose...
European People's Party (EPP)	274	213	PiS (PL) +19	
Socialists and Democrats (S&D)	195	190		
Alliance of Liberals and Democrats (ALDE)	85	64		
Greens	58	53		
European Conservatives and Reformers (ECR)	56	46	True Finns (FI) +2 AFD (DE) +7 DVP (DK) +4 N-VA (BE) +4	PiS (PL) -19
Radical Left (GUE/NGL)	35	42	Podemos (ES) +7	
Europe of Freedom and Democracy (EFD)	33	38	M5S (IT) +17 KNP (PL) +4	Lega Nord (IT) -3 True Finns (FI) -2 TT (LT) -2 DVP (DK) +4
New Far Right Group?			FN (FR) 24 PVV (NL) 4 OFP (AU) 2 SD (SE) 2 Lega Nord (IT) +3 TT (LT) -2 Vlaams Belang +1	
No Current Group	30	105		
Total	766	751		

The more radically Eurosceptic Europeans for Freedom and Democracy Group (EFD) built chiefly around the UK Independence Party also provides a potential platform. However UKIP leader Nigel Farage has ruled out collaboration with the French Front National because of its anti-semitic flavour, which leaves only a selection of smaller partners such as the Polish KNP libertarian Eurosceptics. There is some suggestion that the Italian Five Star Movement might seek to seat its 17 MEPs in the ECR, but the Italian party's eclectic 'anti-system' politics

is not necessarily a good fit. Once all the shuffling is done this may leave these two existing groups much the same size as now, if not slightly smaller.

That leaves the parties of the far right, and here the Front National is engaged in a desperate search for national partners alongside the Dutch PVV and Austrian OVP. Neo-Nazi groups such as the German NDP, Greek New Dawn and Hungarian Jobbik are probably beyond the pale if Marine Le Pen wants to sustain political credibility in France, but the 2 MEPs of the Swedish Democrats and a scattering of others are options. Whether in a formal group or isolated, the political mainstream in the new Parliament will work hard to quarantine the far right from policymaking, using its weight to block far right MEPs from positions of influence on important Committees and generally marginalising them from Parliamentary business.

'Left' as well as 'right'

In contrast, the far left has a ready-made platform in the form of the Gauche Unitaire Européenne/Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL) and thus institutionalised access to influence. The GUE grew by 7 seats in this election, boosted by a strong result for Syriza in Greece. It is likely to be strengthened further by the some of the new arrivals like Podemos from Spain, where the two Spanish mainstream parties fell below 50% for the first time, shedding votes to a wave of new leftist and environmental parties. The GUE/NGL remains small, but its brand of far-left politics and environmental activism are nevertheless an important barometer for this Parliament.

This is because despite the focus on the rise of the Eurosceptics and the far right, this Parliament probably shifted as much to the 'left' as to the right, especially with respect to economics and the market. What unites a very large part of the new intake on both the left and the right is an anti-system, anti-globalisation, anti-market and generally anti-austerity worldview that is a conscious rejection of a lot of the political orthodoxy of the pre-crisis years. It has also set itself against important planks of the EU's response to the crisis - especially austerity and the deepening of integration in the Eurozone.

This is important because the 'leakage' of these

kinds of views into the political mainstream of the European Parliament is a lot easier than more politically taboo issues of race, migration or outright rejection of European integration. Much of the European centre left has already drifted perceptibly towards a greater degree of statism or market scepticism since 2008, often chasing voters migrating leftwards as a reaction to the crisis or the subsequent austerity.

Parliamentary attitudes to consumer protection, environmental protection and business regulation, which are all heavily regulated in Strasbourg, are likely to reflect this general shift in tone. Many of these views will actually draw support from the far right as well, because they are rooted in the same sense of alienation and suspicion of globalisation that drives a lot of European nationalism and hostility to migration. It is this which ensures that both the far right and the far left are often drawing from the same pool of European blue collar workers.

Where the shadow of the far right is most likely to be felt is in mainstream views on migration. Former French President and possible future French Presidential candidate Nicholas Sarkozy has already proposed suspending the EU's Schengen Treaty until the EU has a common immigration policy and the question of the access of migrants to national social welfare systems is already a live issue.

It will inevitably take time for this new balance to manifest itself fully. A very high turnover of MEPs - well over half - means that a very large freshman group will take time to learn the systems and establish networks and policy positions. For those member states with large Eurosceptic cohorts - France and the UK perhaps most notably - the fact that a third of national representatives are effectively not showing up for work is a potentially serious reduction in influence.

This points to the reality that the most important impacts of these elections are national. The European Parliament does not reflect 'European politics' because except in very broad brushstrokes these do not exist. It is at the national level, and thus in the European Council where governments will be reacting directly to the Eurosceptic challenge, or navigating the demands of far left and far right, that the impacts of these elections are most likely to be felt.

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