



Stability amid change: Impact of the 2014 European Parliament elections at the European level



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1. Introduction

With European Parliament elections operating as national contests in twenty-eight member-states, this essay instead focuses upon the impact of the 2014 European Parliament elections on policymaking in the coming parliament and considers the extent to which results indicate further party system instability in Eastern and Southern Europe. As political scientists and political pundits alike review the results from the 2014 European Parliament elections, attention quickly turns to the success of EU-skeptic parties. Political parties in support of European integration will nonetheless continue to dominate the parliament and other EU policymaking institutions. The results of the 2014 European Parliament elections do not indicate a major shift in legislative priorities at the EU level or a significant shift away from the ideological mainstream by the European electorate as a whole.

The elections do reveal nonetheless that a substantial portion of the European electorate is at the least skeptical of not only European integration but of the European political establishment as a whole (further evidenced by continued poor voter turnout). Voter skepticism is perhaps most evident in the success of new political parties in Eastern and Southern Europe which indicates growing stresses upon the party systems and ongoing democratic consolidation in these regions. The 2014 European Parliament elections may foreshadow success for new political parties in subsequent national contests.

The impact of the European Parliament elections extends as well to the selection of the European Commission President. According to the criteria set in the Treaty of Lisbon (2007), the European Council (which consists of heads of member-state governments) is obligated to take the European Parliament election results into account when nominating a Commission presidential candidate from among the European political party families (Christian Democrat, Social Democrat, etc.). The nominee would then have to be confirmed by the European Parliament. With the

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Christian Democrats and other center-right parties winning the most seats in the parliament, attention immediately turned to the party family's nominee, former Luxembourg Prime Minister Jean-Claude Juncker. Expectations of Juncker's swift nomination though were quickly replaced with uncertainty as many national leaders including German Chancellor Angela Merkel expressed reservations about his nomination. Citing voter angst, the European Council considered nominating a candidate for Commission President who had not been selected by the various European party families prior to the election. While Juncker was eventually nominated by the European Council, the failure of most national leaders to initially commit to the Juncker candidacy and adhere to the preferences of a majority of the electorate underscores the ever-present democratic deficit at the EU level.

Lost amid accounts of the success of EU-skeptic parties and the controversy over the selection of the Commission President is the impact of the election results on party group formation in the parliament. While the four mainstream party groups will likely continue to work together on most issues, the composition of the new parliament will influence coalition patterns on legislation where ideological divides are more evident. With reduced numbers, the ALDE (Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe) and the Greens/EFA (European Free Alliance) will no longer play the pivotal role of deal-maker and the two largest party groups (the center-right European People's Party and the Socialists and Democrats Group) will have to cooperate on an even more extensive basis than in previous parliaments to ensure the passage of prominent or controversial legislation.

2. Interpreting the 2014 European Parliament elections

From May 22 through May 25, 2014, voters in twenty-eight EU member-states went to the polls and selected candidates among national political parties to serve as MEPs (Members of the European Parliament) for the eighth European Parliament which will sit in Brussels and Strasbourg from this July through June of 2019. Most national parties are members of decades-old party groups which function as ideological umbrella organizations in the European Parliament. There are seven party groups in the European Parliament. The largest both prior to and following the elections is the EPP (European People's Party) which brings together pro-EU Christian Democratic and conservative parties followed by the S & D (Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats). The other party groups in descending order by membership are: the ALDE, Greens/EFA (an alliance between Greens and regionalist parties), the ECR (European Conservatives and Reformists opposing further integration), the GUE-NGL (European United Left and the Nordic Green Left), and the EFDD (Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy) which is a collection of far right and EU-skeptic parties headed by Nigel Farage of UKIP (United Kingdom Independence Party). The remaining seven percent of MEPs (mostly representing the extreme right) are non-attached to any party group.

While national leaders such as German Chancellor Merkel and French President Francois Hollande continue to shape the direction of most major policy decisions, decision-making as a whole is increasingly shifting from the nation-state to the EU level. Accordingly, the stakes behind the selection of MEPs, the Parliament's leadership, in addition to the Commission presidency are higher than ever before. Since the first direct elections in 1979, the European Parliament elections have functioned largely as second-order contests (Reif and Schmitt, 1980) in which voters turn out in smaller numbers compared to national elections and reward or punish national parties largely on the basis of national issues and personalities. Despite their second-order status, the results of the 2014 European Parliament elections will have significant impact upon the shape and content of ongoing European integration. Following the Treaty of Lisbon, the European Parliament holds co-decision authority in nearly every policy area. The co-decision procedure requires the approval of both the European Parliament and the EU Council (also known as the Council of Ministers) for legislation falling under the procedure to become law (www.europarl.europa.eu).

Amid this back-drop, the 2014 elections reveal an electorate that has expressed its support in larger numbers compared to previous elections for political parties outside the European ideological mainstream as evidenced by record support for the far right, the far left, and what may be best described as anti-establishment or single-issue parties. Though this essay does not address the causes of or propose remedies for low voter turnout in European Parliament elections, it is important nonetheless to place the results within the context of turnout rates.

While voter turnout for the European Parliament elections continues to lag behind national elections, average turnout across EU member-states for the first time since 1979 increased rather than declined, though at a very slim margin. As Table 1 depicts, voter turnout increased in ten member-states, most of which are EU-15 states (EU

Table 1
2014 and 2009 European Parliament election turnout.

Member-state	2009	2014	Member-state	2009	2014
Austria	45.97	45.70	Italy	65.05	60.0
Belgium*	90.39	90.0	Latvia	53.70	30.04
Bulgaria	38.99	35.50	Lithuania	20.98	44.91
Croatia	NA	25.06	Luxembourg*	90.76	90.0
Cyprus	59.40	43.97	Malta	78.79	74.81
Czech Republic	28.22	19.50	Netherlands	36.75	37.0
Denmark	59.54	56.40	Poland	24.53	22.70
Estonia	43.90	36.44	Portugal	36.77	34.50
<i>EU Average</i>	<i>43.0</i>	<i>43.09</i>	Romania	27.67	32.16
Finland	38.60	40.90	Slovakia	19.64	13.0
France	40.63	43.50	Slovenia	28.37	20.96
Germany	43.27	47.90	Spain	44.87	45.90
Greece	52.61	58.20	Sweden	45.53	48.80
Hungary	36.31	28.92	United Kingdom	34.70	36.0
Ireland	58.64	51.60			

Note: Table depicts turnout percentages in each of the EU member-states in the 2009 and 2014 European Parliament elections as well as average turnout in each election across all member-states (EU Average). An asterisk indicates compulsory voting laws. NA indicates that Croatia was not part of the EU in 2009 having joined only in 2013. Data Source: www.results-elections2014.eu.

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