

Titel:

Foreword

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The campaign

In the run up to the European Parliamentary elections on 23-26 May 2019 there was much speculation — much of it idle speculation — about the unstoppable rise of *populism*. Right-wing nationalists were said to be going to seize control of the new Parliament and disrupt the smooth running of EU business. The broadly pro-European consensus that had run the Union since time immemorial was at risk of being swept aside by anti-establishment troublemakers.

It is true, of course, that Europe's party politics are in flux. The days of traditional class-based or sectarian parties are numbered. European society, especially in the west, is increasingly secular, liberal and cosmopolitan. Citizens are no longer deferential. The arrival of social media into Europe's mainstream politics gives a platform to disrespectful and insurgent voices. Racism, xenophobia and homophobia can be aired openly (or at least anonymously) on Twitter and Facebook.

In central and eastern Europe, politics remain even more volatile. The transition from Soviet days has been longer and more problematic than expected. Poland and Hungary have in Jarosław Kaczyński and Viktor Orbán right-wing leaders who have created ruling parties on the basis of eurosceptic *illiberal democracy*.

The composition of the European Parliament reflects all this lively pluralism of opinion and interest. Group discipline within the House is weak. The connection between MEPs and the EU level political parties to which they are notionally affiliated is largely a pretence. For while parties at the national level are dying, new parties have not yet taken their place at the European level. European Parliament elections are still run according to twenty-eight national electoral procedures. Candidates are chosen, financed and deposed by national political parties, and they campaign largely on domestic party manifestos. The supranational element of the 2019 election campaign was the reserve of what is sometimes called *the Brussels bubble*.

The existence of the EU level political parties is formalistic: with money from the EU budget, they print logos on mugs, umbrellas and tee-shirts and organise flashy congresses. But these European confederations of national political parties are far from being proper campaigning

organisations capable of competing transnationally for votes and power. Their election manifestos, laboriously drafted to minimise differences between their national components, are swiftly archived.

In these circumstances, it is unsurprising that the conventional media struggles to report, let alone influence, the conduct or outcome of the European election. The EU's political and legislative system remains poorly explained to and rarely understood by an electorate which is naturally and rightly sceptical about those far-off supranational institutions in Brussels.

The result

In the event, however, the 2019 election results confounded expectations. The proportion of right-wing MEPs elected remains almost exactly the same as in the previous House, elected in 2014. Nationalist and populist parties lost votes in several states. Centrist parties scored better than expected. There was no major swing across the fault-line between nationalists and federalists. The broadly pro-European majority in Parliament remains solid, despite the fact that the size of turnover among MEPs is unprecedented.

The big story on Europe's election night of 26 May 2019 was the rise of the Greens and the Liberals at the expense of the Christian Democrats and Social Democrats. Power has shifted within the mainstream pro-European consensus. The two main groups of the European People's Party (EPP) with 182 seats and the Party of European Socialists (S&D) with 154 seats no longer command a majority in the House. This is unprecedented. To reach the critical threshold of an absolute majority of the House (376 MEPs), coalitions will now need to be built with either the Liberals (RE) with 108 seats or the Greens with 74 seats — or both.

Turnout

Encouragingly, voter turnout increased for the first time since the Parliament was directly elected in 1979 and recorded the highest poll since 1994. This book explores in detail why this was so. But it is clear that the electorate has begun to notice the European Parliament. Younger voters, especially, seem to feel themselves represented usefully by MEPs. According to Eurobarometer, levels of support for EU membership are at historic highs. Although not everyone loves the European Union — indeed, some loathe it — a majority of its citizens recognise its importance in daily life and respond accordingly at election time out of a sense of civic duty.

Eurobarometer suggests that concern about the economy provided the greater reason for voting at the 2019 European election, followed closely by climate change and human rights. The passage of recent controversial legislation by the Parliament, such as the General Data Protection Regulation, and its long-term record on greening the economy, will have helped to raise the profile and prestige of MEPs. The salience of immigration from the Middle East and North Africa has put the decisions of the EU institutions at the heart of everyday politics. Islamist terrorism that has hit Europe's cities in recent years has been widely understood as a common threat to the European way of life.

Doing politics at the EU level looks eminently sensible when combatting the climate emergency which so obviously bewilders and confounds Europe's old nation states acting individually. Challenges to Europe's international security incited by Presidents Putin, Trump and Erdoğan lead logically to the need for a concerted political response among the EU's states and citizens. And maybe that Erasmus generation of students who have lived and loved across the continent is now generating effective young leadership in politics.

Raising legitimacy

The belated upswing of over 8% in voter turnout will help the new Parliament lay claim to full democratic legitimacy. But MEPs cannot afford to be complacent about the general state of EU parliamentary democracy — or, in particular, about the state of their own organisation. If citizens have noticed and accepted the importance of the European Parliament, national parliaments have yet to do so. In fact, most national political parties seem so jealous of the transfer of power to the EU that they continue to resist the establishment of effective democratic European government up above the level of the nation state.

Political parties are an essential component of any representative democracy, connecting the people with the powers that be, and acting as shock absorbers in a democratic polity. EU voters who recognise that vital political choices can and must now be made at the federal level lack the democratic sinew to lever power politics in Brussels. European federal parties will not emerge smoothly as if by magic but only by contesting the monopoly enjoyed by national political parties over European parliamentary elections.

The solution is to introduce a pan-European constituency for which a number of MEPs will be elected from transnational lists. This will provide the necessary platform of partisan competition. Such a reform, long discussed among federalists, has been resisted until now by a coalition of conservatives and eurosceptics. With the election of Ursula von der Leyen, there is

now a chance to achieve electoral reform before the next elections in 2024. If that chance is missed and a constitutional crisis ensues, expect a loss of credibility for the Parliament and a return to disillusion among EU citizens.

Top jobs

The first test of the need for fresh coalitions was, naturally, the election of the new Commission President. In 2009 the federalists ran a campaign under the banner *Who's your candidate?* In 2014, the first election after the entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon, Jean-Claude Juncker beat Michel Barnier in an internal election of the EPP to the candidacy for the top Commission job. The EPP made advances at the election. Although he was not a candidate for election to the European Parliament, Juncker — a Social Christian, federalist, ex-prime minister — was acceptable to both the Socialists and Liberals. In return, Martin Schulz, who led the Socialist campaign, was allowed to continue in the European Parliament presidency. Guy Verhofstadt, the Liberal champion, was promised the next top job — which, in 2016, turned out to be the coordinator of the Parliament's scrutiny of Brexit. So, the story of the Spitzenkandidat developed.

However, Article 17(7) of the Treaty on European Union says otherwise. According to the treaty, the duty to nominate the candidate falls to the European Council; he or she is then elected by the Parliament. In 2019 the EPP blundered. They chose Manfred Weber as their Spitzenkandidat. Weber is no Juncker. He had no ministerial experience and was a conservative Christian Democrat from a largely eurosceptical Bavarian party. Significantly, Weber had actively opposed the introduction of transnational lists, which meant that the Liberals and Socialists would not support him after the election. To compound their poor choice of top candidate, the EPP lost support at the elections. It was obvious for a long time (though curiously not to him) that Weber would not become Juncker's successor.

The stage for the appointment of the top jobs had been set at the summit of the EU leaders at Sibiu in Romania on 9 May. President Tusk insisted that there would be no automaticity about the Spitzenkandidat process. He stressed the need for the new leadership to be balanced not only in terms of party politics but also of gender, region and size of state. In a somewhat desperate attempt to sustain the fiction of Spitzenkandidaten, at a dinner in Berlin on 26 June Chancellor Merkel deserted Weber and instead proposed to nominate Frans Timmermans, the Socialist champion. But her own EPP refused to accept her deal, as did the leaders of Italy and the Visegrád Four. Tusk himself was lukewarm.

President Macron then took charge. Ursula von der Leyen was first mentioned on 30 June as a possible High Representative to run the EU's foreign policy. By 2 July she had been promoted to stand for the Commission presidency. On 16 July she won the backing of 383 MEPs against 327 — just nine votes more than the required threshold of an absolute majority (and well short of the combined total of EPP, S&D and RE troops).

The European Council had reasserted its authority over the business of appointing the top jobs — and Parliament gave its unenthusiastic consent. Tusk's criteria of Sibiu were met when Von der Leyen appointed the EPP's Valdis Drombovskis to join Timmermans and Margrethe Vestager, the Liberal Spitzenkandidat, as the three executive vice-presidents of the Commission. But Tusk wanted a candidate from central Europe to become President of Parliament. That was a mistake. Parliament acted autonomously and elected David Sassoli, an Italian socialist, to its chair.

In a bizarre sideshow, the four *pro-European* groups in the House attempted in vain to reconcile their many policy differences in order to present a common programme for the edification of the President-elect. Meanwhile, Von der Leyen produced her own political guidelines which later evolved into the basic work programme of her new college. She also set to work to build a stable cross-party majority in the Parliament.

In the parliamentary hearings of the Commissioners-designate, MEPs obliged France, Hungary and Romania to find replacement candidates — neatly, and predictably, one from each of the three larger groups. Despite some synthetic outrage stirred up in the partisan squabble over who gets which job, it is clear that combatting corruption in public life has become a major concern of MEPs. The European Parliament does not like being told what to do by national capitals: even German MEPs from the EPP were unsupportive of the President-elect's original team.

Having tasted blood, however, the Parliament eventually confirmed the appointment of the whole college on 27 November by 461 votes to 157. Von der Leyen had managed to improve on her slim majority from July and beat Juncker's tally of 423 in 2014. The new Commission took office one month late on 1 December 2019.

Reform

It is no accident, therefore, that electoral reform of the European Parliament coupled with amendment of the process of choosing the next Commission president are featured as priorities in the reform agenda of all three EU institutions. Even the European Council now seems to

accept that the only way to validate the concept of Spitzenkandidat and to build federal political parties is to introduce transnational lists.

Another important proposal for political reform is the idea, also originating from Emmanuel Macron, to hold a Conference on the Future of Europe. This exercise will last for two years from 2020 and is expected to prepare treaty amendments. Twenty years after the constitutional Convention under Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, this is a timely and estimable plan. The European Parliament must play an important part in the Conference. If it plays its cards well and displays real leadership, Parliament can be instrumental in building a system of real democratic government for Europe's new polity.

This book should be compulsory reading for all those engaged in the Conference on the Future of Europe.

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DOI: 10.1007/978-3-658-29277-5_1

URN: urn:nbn:de:hbz:465-20220707-094655-0

This is a post-peer-review, pre-copyedit version of: Duff, A. (2020). European Elections 2019: Swings and Roundabouts. In: Kaeding, M., Müller, M., Schmälter, J. (eds) *Die Europawahl 2019*. Springer VS, Wiesbaden, p. 1-6. The final authenticated version is available online at:
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-29277-5_1

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