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# **The 2009 Elections to the European Parliament: Expectations and Results**

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## **The Expectations**

Elections to the European Parliament (EP) have a double character. On the one hand, members of a supranational institution are elected, on the other hand, these elections are national „second order elections“, the results of which are determined by the national political level. It is therefore legitimate and necessary to compare the results of the 2009 European elections both with the previous national “first order elections”, i.e. the elections to the national parliament, and with the European elections of 2004/2007. The comparison with the national elections is useful to reveal systematic differences in voting behaviour between first and second order elections, the comparison with the previous European elections shows the change in the composition of the EP.

The most important differences in voting behaviour discussed in electoral research are: Compared to national parliamentary elections, turnout in European elections is lower and the big national government parties come off worse. Both differences can be explained by the fact that in the eyes of the electorate there is “less at stake” in European elections because (1) the people ascribe relatively low importance for their daily life to the decisions of the EP and (2) European elections do not decide upon the party composition of a government, so that the “effectiveness” of their vote is not really clear to the citizens. Turnout will be dealt with in the paper of Richard Sinnott, I will concentrate on the party vote.

Because European elections do not decide upon the party composition of a government, the voters are more willing to vote “by the heart” (expressive voting) than “by the head” (strategic voting), i.e.: The clear profession to the ideology and politics of a party ranks before strategic considerations concerning the possibility of parliamentary representation or participation in government. This behaviour is an advantage for small, new, single issue or extremist parties and a disadvantage for big parties. Expressive voting is even more likely in countries with majority voting system in national elections because for the European elections proportional representation – an electoral system favouring small parties – is used in all member states.

In addition, the considerably lower turnout has different effects for different types of parties. On the one hand, the voters of small parties often have a higher ideological party identification and can therefore be better mobilized than the voters of the big “catch-all parties”. On the other hand, the European election is an “election of the interested”, i.e. the political interest in general and the interest in European politics plays an important role. Because political interest is strongly influenced by education and profession, parties who politically represent socially underprivileged strata of the electorate have more problems in mobilizing their clientele.

Moreover, European elections can be used by the voters to express their opinion about the national government parties. Between two national parliamentary elections, governments usually are subject to a “popularity cycle”. They have aroused high expectations before the election, which they mostly disappoint by their politics. This is the case especially in the first years of the legislative period, because the logic of government action demands to pass unpopular laws as soon as possible after the election so that the voters possibly have forgotten them until the next election. Shortly before the next election, on the one hand the governments begin to deal out “electoral gifts” and on the other hand the long-term party identifications of the voters come to the fore. Therefore it can be expected, that European elections – if they are not held shortly before or after national parliamentary elections – are used by part of the voters to give national government parties what for. Especially government supporters can “punish” their party without consequences for the national distribution of power. This electoral behaviour is detrimental especially to the head of the government’s party because it determines governmental action most strongly.

Therefore, the results of European elections are to a great extent determined by the internal political situation of the respective country. It is therefore legitimate and necessary to compare the 2009 European election results with the results of the previous national parliamentary elections in the EU member states.

Part of the voters, however, orientate their voting behaviour to European politics and the EU issue plays a – more or less important – role in the electoral campaigns of the parties. The role of European politics in the campaigns depends on two factors: (1) how important are European matters in the national party political cleavage structure?, (2) is an EU-conflict institutionalized in the national party system by pro- and anti-European single issue parties?

The more or less important influence of European politics on the voting behaviour is a reason for comparing the 2009 European elections with the previous ones. The main reason, however, is the analysis of the changes in the composition of the EP and their political consequences. From an European perspective, this analysis has to concentrate not only on the change in the relative strength of the different ideological party families but also on the distribution of different EU-orientations in the EP, especially on the strength of “Euroscepticism”.

To answer the second question, one can divide the parties according to their EU-orientations into different types and analyze the relative strength of these groups. One can distinguish between: (1) anti-EU parties (advocating the withdrawal of their country from the EU), (2) EU-sceptical, anti-federalist parties (advocating a strengthening of the national sovereignty of the member states), (3) EU-sceptical, pro-federalist parties (advocating another form of federal European integration) and (4) pro-EU parties (advocating the current EU-system).

Taking into account, that 177 national political parties were represented in the previous EP, this is not feasible. A more practicable way is to have a look at the parliamentary groups of the EP which not only represent different ideological party families but also different EU-orientations. Among the seven parliamentary groups of the previous EP, the Social Democrats (PES) and the Liberals (ALDE) belong to the pro-EU type. This is also the case for the Christian Democrats (EPP), whereas the Conservatives, who formed a common group (EPP-ED) with the Christian Democrats in the previous EP, rather belong to the EU-sceptical, anti-federalist type advocating a strengthening of the national sovereignty of the EU member states. Clear-cut EU-sceptical, anti-federalist views are taken by the national-conservative parties of the UEN and especially by the IND/DEM parliamentary group, which also has openly anti-EU parties in its ranks. Pronounced anti-EU orientations are also taken by the right-wing extremist MEPs who failed to found a parliamentary group and therefore belonged to the independents. The green and regional parties of the GREENS/EFA and especially the left-wing parties of the GUE/NGL are not anti-federalist, but they more or less heavily criticize the current EU-system and its policies for various reasons.

## **The Results**

The hypothesis, that compared to the previous national parliamentary election the big national government parties come off worse in European elections is 2009 empirically confirmed in most cases. In more than four fifths (22 out of 27) of the EU member states the head of government's party had to suffer more or less dramatic losses. In ten cases these parties belong to the Christian Democrats, seven of these parties were Social Democrats and five of them were Liberals (including the Irish Fianna Fáil who had announced before the election to join the ALDE). Thus, parties from all three big ideological party families have been "punished" by the voters (it has to be mentioned, however, that shortly before the election, the Latvian governing coalition broke down and the Czech government was brought down by a no confidence vote). Two parties from the EPP-ED (the French UMP and the Swedish Moderates), five Social Democratic parties (the Bulgarian BSP, the Portuguese PS, the Slovenian SD, the Hungarian MSZP and the British Labour Party) and three Liberal parties (the Danish Venstre, the Reform Party from Estonia and the Irish Fianna Fáil) had to sustain dramatic losses of more than one fourth of their national voter potential.

The five exceptions with gains instead of losses of the biggest government party are the EPP-ED parties of Germany (CDU/CSU), Lithuania (TS-LKD) and Poland (PO) as well as the Social Democratic party of Slovakia (Smer-SD) and the AKEL of Cyprus which belongs to the left-wing GUE/NGL.

To analyze the change in the composition of the EP in order to show which parliamentary groups belong to the winners and which to the losers, one has to change the perspective of comparison. The following remarks are preliminary. A few days after the election it is not absolutely certain how strong the various parliamentary groups will be at the time of the constituent meeting (July 14<sup>th</sup>), because several parties have not yet decided which parliamentary group they will join.

Looking at the current composition of the EP (June 11<sup>th</sup>) it seems at first sight that all three big groups came off worse. On further consideration, however, one has to differentiate. If one adds the member parties of the previous EPP-ED, they gained 40,6 percent of the seats instead of 36,7 before the election. However, three parties previously belonging to the ED-wing – the British Conservatives and UUP as well as the Czech ODS – have left the common group and their 35 MEPs currently count as independents. The new EPP group therefore has only 35,9 percent of the seats.

The British Conservatives plan to found an own Conservative parliamentary group. Up to now, the UUP, the ODS and the Polish PiS are willing to join it. According to a decision of the EP of July 2008, however, a parliamentary group has to consist of at least 25 MEPs of at least one fourth of the member states (i.e. of seven countries). The Conservatives therefore will have to convince parties from another four member states to join the group. Possible candidates come especially from the UEN, but not all of them are welcome.

The UEN will probably decompose because not only the 15 MEPs of the PiS but also the 3 MEPs of the Irish Fianna Fáil will leave the group. With the joining of the FF, the Liberal ALDE will have 11,3 percent of the seats instead of 10,9 percent now and 12,7 percent before the election.

The strength of the Social Democrats can also change somewhat. Up to now they have 21,9 percent of the seats instead of 27,6 before the elections. But it is likely that an additional big party will join the group: the newly founded Italian PD. The MEPs of its founding parties did not all belong to the PES and currently their 21 MEPs are counted as independents. If the PD joins the PES, it will increase to 24,7 percent of the seats. Even this possibility, however, cannot obscure the fact that the result of the 2009 European election is a bitter defeat for the Social Democrats who had hoped that their preferred way out of the financial and economic crisis would be broadly supported by the voters.

In contrast to the Social Democrats, the GREENS/EFA could increase their share of the seats. It has to be mentioned, however, that this result is almost solely due to the success of the French Greens which could increase their number of MEPs from 6 to 14. The German, Austrian and Dutch Greens together gained 19 instead of 17 seats and the small regional parties stagnated.

The media comments on the results of the election often emphasized that there had been a considerable strengthening of the right-wing populist/extremist party family. This hypothesis was supported by successes of the Austrian FPÖ, the British BNP, the Italian LN, the Dutch PVV, the Romanian PRM and the Hungarian Jobbik. One has overlooked, however, that the parties of this family which had been the strongest ones in the previous EP had to suffer considerable losses: The French FN lost 4 of its 7 seats and the Polish LPR which had 10 MEPs, did not win a seat now. In addition, some smaller parties like the Belgian VB and the Bulgarian Ataka have lost seats. Moreover, the former Italian parties AN and the small AS-LM, which had 9/1 seats in the previous EP, are now part of the PdL, founded in March 2009 by the Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. Altogether, in the old EP 44 MEPs were counted as right-wing populist/extremist. Even if one includes borderline cases like the Finnish PS and the Slovakian LS-HZDS, the newly elected EP has 39 MEPs of this kind. Although in addition some supporters of the former AN have gained seats under the PdL-label, one therefore cannot speak of a considerable strengthening of the right-wing populist/extremist parties in the new EP. In addition, the political impact of the right-wing extremists in the new EP should be relatively low because it is extremely unlikely that a common parliamentary group including all 39 MEPs from 14 countries and 16 parties will be founded. There are not only deep ideological differences between right-wing populist parties and extremist hard-liners but also personal rivalries, negative experiences with former attempts to cooperate and many party-specific reasons which stand in the way of an institutionalized cooperation.

The nationalist, xenophobic ideology of right-wing extremist parties includes an anti-EU orientation. But "hard" Euroscepticism is not only spread in this party family. Another formation of myths by the media was the assertion that there was a considerable strengthening of clear-cut Eurosceptic parties in general. High attention attracted the fact that the British UKIP scored second behind the Conservatives and ahead of Labour and gained 13 seats. But one has to mention, that on the one hand the UKIP got 12 seats in the 2004 European election and on the other hand its 2009 success had almost nothing to do with its anti-EU orientation, being a protest-vote against the scandal concerning the expense accounts of politicians from both big parties. In addition, the Austrian Liste Martin got 3 instead of 2 seats. The Irish millionaire Declan Ganley, however, who led the campaign against the Lisbon treaty in Ireland and afterwards founded a party named Libertas to fight europeanwide against the treaty, did not get a seat in Ireland. The only Libertas-MEP comes from a small French party (MPF-CPNT) who sailed under the Libertas flag and lost 2 of its 3 seats from 2004. In addition, the Danish and Swedish "June-Lists" and the Czech Nezávisli lost their parliamentary representation so that the Eurosceptic „hard-liners“ of the IND/DEM group are not strengthened

but weakened. A greater problem for the pro-European majority in the EP could be the fact, that the parties with “soft” Eurosceptic orientations will most likely be united in a Conservative parliamentary group who could become the fourth largest group in the EP and therefore considerably influence the decision-making.

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