

The European Parliament Election: What Is at Stake?*

Between 4 and 7 June 2009 almost half a billion of EU citizens can vote for a new European Parliament. The expectations are that the interest of voters will be minimal: according to the recent Eurobarometer, about half of the potential voters are not interested, with the countries of eastern and central Europe scoring highest. After the fiasco concerning the European Constitution and its successor the Lisbon treaty, the European Union seems to be farther removed from its citizens than ever. Whereas former European elections were often used by voters to react on national questions, this time the financial crisis will also play a decisive role. It is feared that many EU citizens regard the EU as part of the problem rather than part of the solution. Apart from low participation, the greatest danger for the vulnerable EU democracy is the likelihood that more right-wing, populist and eurosceptic parties will enter the European Parliament involving the risk that its functioning will be seriously hampered. In case of ratification of the Lisbon treaty, the Parliament will get more competences, amongst which the right to directly elect the president of the Commission. This is a further step towards the long called for democratisation of the EU decision processes and it could potentially increase the interest of the citizens, but what would it mean if election participation and election results undermined the legitimacy and credibility of the parliament? What is really at stake at the EP elections in June 2009 and what can be done to save the EU's credibility?

Because the interest for the European elections is low, they are often called “second order elections”. What is meant by that is: even though the importance of the elections has increased, votes are taken on national issues rather than on European issues and there are national campaigns by almost all parties and national candidates. The campaigns are also low profile campaigns (not as much money and time is spent as in national campaigns). More than half of the European citizens are not interested in the elections. People feel that they are not informed about what is at stake and think that their vote does not change anything. There is nothing which links the European to the national level. The European Parliament is a failure as a representative body: there is no real relationship between the representatives and their constituency.

Whereas national issues still play a crucial role in the elections for the European Parliament, the importance of the European level is rising. Topics voters consider relevant are in the first place economic and social aspects such as unemployment, tax questions, pensions, in second place internal and external security and only in third

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place EU related topics such as the Euro, the European social model and the EU institutions.

EP election campaigns are normalised in the sense that people expect the same things from the EP as they expect on the national level. People transfer issues which have been important for national politics to the European level and interpret them in a European sense. This is also reflected in the parties' manifestos: they show an attempt to europeanise these issues. This is the clearest signal that the second order election is moving towards a "one-and-a-half order election". Regarding voter interest the EP elections are still second order, but as far as the topics are concerned things are moving.

Communication problems

One reason why there is a communication problem between the EP (and the other EU institutions) and the public is the fact that the decision making among European institutions is an extremely difficult process to understand. Also, voters think they do not get a very good deal. What do they get when they vote? An EP that has no power, only influence. In the EP there is no situation as in the national parliaments where there are those in power and those in opposition. No agreement passes in the EP without an agreement between the large political families (Socialists and Christian Democrats). In the EP everything is about cooperation. This is seen in the way the presidency of the EP is divided between the two groups. And, if Commission president Barroso stays on, this is because there is no alternative candidate, no real opposition. In addition, candidates for the EP are often "has beens" or worse which is not an appealing idea.

It would be a good idea to organise European elections on the same day. The element of excitement is lost when you cannot watch the results on the same day. The treaty does not prescribe anywhere that the elections should be organised over a period of four days, it is just a matter of doing it. What can also help is the internet. It is a really strong tool in making people active. Unfortunately, the websites of the large European groups are – though interesting - one generation behind the Obama campaign. They are one-dimensional, talking to the people, sometimes with them, but never can the people talk with the parties. We will still have to wait another five years to see how the influence really can be.

Media coverage is low because the decision making process is so complicated and slow. It takes at least about three, four years and sometimes as long as eight years, from something which has come up from within the Commission to end up in national legislation. People don't have the time and the interest to follow this. Only the lobbyists can follow it, but they do not report it to the public, but to their clients.

The one moment in EU history where it looked that something good was going to happen was Laken in 2001. The Laken declaration written by Verhofstadt and others – there were not many officials involved - was very good. It ended up in the constitution, and then we lost the track. It was taking people very seriously; it did not have the usual "the- people-need-to-be-better-communicated- at-attitude". It was turning it upside down, saying: we're here to serve the citizens, not the other way round. People ask for good governance.

Good performance

The EP - as a policy-making institution - has performed unexpectedly well after the 2004 and 2007 enlargements. It has had a much more pro-active role in terms of making suggestions to the Commission. In legislative terms the EP has been able to cope with the things presented, but it has also played a very pro-active role with Commission and Council. The reason for this is that the Council found the enlargement very difficult to cope with. The legislative performance of the EP demonstrates its importance, particularly as its committee structure has developed a high competence, politically and technically. This is a phenomenon comparable to the US Congress rather than to national parliaments in Europe.

Fears of new divisions (North/South/East divides) have not materialised in terms of decision-making. Instead, the EP has continued to develop its profile as a party political negotiating forum. The political groups have remained platforms that provide instructions to individual MEPs on how to position themselves on policy proposals.

The most significant change in voting behaviour between the previous Parliament and the current one relates to the Liberal Group which has voted significantly more often with the Christian-Democrats than with the Socialists. This change may have a significant effect on the balance of power within the Parliament. Whereas previously the left and right blocs were balanced, with the liberals determining which side would gain the majority in a particular vote, the group's behaviour in this Parliament has resulted in domination by a centre-right coalition.

It is foreseeable that the centre-right will also be dominant in the next Parliament. But the questions are: will the fringes be able to do well, are voters going to rebel against the political elite or will they ask the established parties for solutions to the economic problems?

Whereas the EP has done well concerning its political and legislative responsibilities, the link between voters' preferences expressed at the ballot box and the EU's policy choices has not developed to the same extent. This is due to the fact that there is a 'missing link' between MEPs and European citizens and there are too few incentives for voters to bother voting. The Parliament needs to find ways to balance pluralism, debate and representative politics with efficient policy-making better than it has done so far.

Legitimacy problem

The legitimacy question should be linked with all EU institutions, not exclusively the EP which is after all the only directly elected body. The EU in general is a top-bottom process and that has consequences. The question of involvement in a top-bottom process is different than in a bottom-up process. Also, the much criticised broad-based consensual mechanism of decision exists in all three EU institutions; it is the only way the EU can function. As far as the voting coalitions are concerned: the majorities change from one topic to another. In the current Parliament socio-economic topics have been dominated by a liberal-right-wing majority, but e.g. on environmental issues the coalitions have been different. Part of the electoral campaign is to explain why compromises are needed. What is very bad for political accountability and political debate are "first-reading-agreements". The whole climate-

and energy packet has been dealt with this way, which actually means that 20 MEPs negotiate with the Council and the Commission and then come back to the plenary. There is no room for manoeuvring – amendments are not possible.

The electoral rules for how voters go and cast their vote are different in all member states. Do the voters have the possibility to vote for party or a person, for a constituency or a national list for the whole country? This has an influence. In Slovakia, for example, the constituency is national and they have to vote for a party. As voters from outside the capital do not know the candidates, this will very probably have an impact on the turn-out.

Finally, the electoral system has to change. Whereas some plead for European parties and transnational lists which in other peoples' opinion would add to the disaster (of low-turn out): people hardly know national European candidates, let alone candidates from other countries. It is important that national leaders get involved in the election campaigns, maybe also the commissioners should go back to their countries and explain why voting for the EP is important. The media have to get more involved. If they only thing they show from Council meetings is people getting into and out of cars, it does not add very much to explaining European politics on a national level. In the end, if we end up in a situation where a majority of people think that the European Parliament does not do anything useful, there will be a legitimacy crisis. If the upcoming elections put more anti-EU politicians into the Parliament, this is a serious danger.



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