

DISCUSSION PAPER

The European Parliament elections 2014 Watershed or, again, washed out?

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Several institutional and contextual factors could mark a turning point for the upcoming elections to the European Parliament in 2014:

- The proposal to have EU-level political parties enter the 2014 campaign with 'top candidates' for President of the European Commission could personalise and Europeanise the elections, raise the salience and stakes of the EP vote, and thus reverse the familiar pattern of low turnouts. However, nominating candidates who might not be up to scratch could further dent citizens' interest and participation in EP elections, as well as the democratic legitimacy of the Parliament/EU.
- In addition, the on-going crisis and its effects could unleash in the 2014 EP elections a wave of negative campaigning against European integration and might bring more protest voters to the polls; especially if advocates of the EU fail to state their case forcefully and persuasively to the electorate. This could consolidate the bloc of populist Eurosceptic lawmakers in the next European Parliament and severely affect the political landscape both in the EU and in individual member states.

To minimise such latent risks, three points appear to be particularly important:

- European political parties should put forward recognisable, credible and respectable candidates for the Presidency of the Commission.
- The campaign message should articulate clear and concrete proposals regarding both the resolution of the crisis and future reform steps for the completion of Economic and Monetary Union.
- National and European political parties should join 'forces' to challenge and deconstruct the myths of anti-EU/euro parties and movements.

The countdown to the next European Parliament (EP) elections is underway: in May 2014, Europe's citizens will be called upon, for the 8th time since 1979, to elect their EP representatives. With less than a year to go, the rumour mill has already kicked into overdrive, suggesting that the upcoming EP elections will be a game changer for European democracy, potentially boosting turnout but also support for Eurosceptic political options. Even if the buzz lives up to the hype, the devil is in the detail, so it remains to be seen whether the 2014 EP vote will in the end herald significant change.

The 'second-order' model of EP elections...

The vision behind the decision of EU governments in the early 1970s to introduce direct elections to the EP was to produce a European mandate for the majority in the Parliament, inject some sense of public control and

scrutiny over EU affairs, encourage the development of truly European political parties, and transform the European Union (then the European Communities) into a legitimate democratic polity.¹ However, ideal and praxis have so far been defiantly at odds.

Every round of EP elections to date has assumed the label of *Nebenwahlen* or "second-order national elections"² on account of being less important for the allocation of executive power than (first-order) national electoral contests: they did not influence the composition or political complexion of the European Commission, let alone that of the Council of Ministers, and voters found their consequences for policymaking in the Union difficult to discern. If anything, EP elections have simply given national parties an additional opportunity to rehearse national politics with campaigns focused mainly on domestic – rather than European – concerns and preferences.³ Therefore, by their very nature, EP elections soon became lacklustre affairs⁴ that repeatedly suffered from lower turnout than national elections.⁵

Moreover, due to the prevalent impression that there was 'little at stake', voters in EP elections could make different party choices than in a first-order context.⁶ For instance, they could withdraw support from governing parties to signal their disapproval of the incumbent government, knowing that such a 'warning' would not overturn power at national level.⁷ Or, they could "vote with the heart"⁸ ('sincerely' rather than 'strategically') by defecting from a large(r) party and choosing a small(er) but 'attractive' political party, without fearing that in so doing they would 'waste' their vote. Either way, 'vote switching' has meant that major, governing parties have tended to lose ground in European elections to opposition/small(er) parties, often new and more radical.

For all these reasons, EP elections are said to have failed as an instrument of democracy in at least two ways. First, fragmented into separate national contests and stubbornly driven by national cues, they have failed to express the will of European citizens on issues dealing with the process of EU integration and decision-making. In the absence of policy entrepreneurs to successfully politicise 'Europe' in EP elections⁹, voters have so far had to essentially put on hold their already clear-cut and diverse opinions about the European Union.¹⁰

Second, plagued by public apathy and lack of involvement, EP elections have failed to provide democratic legitimacy to the European Parliament and, more generally, to the EU. Successive treaty reforms since the mid-1980s¹¹ have tried to forge an 'electoral connection' between people and politics in the Union by expanding the EP's powers and relevance in the EU's institutional architecture and in the eyes of European citizens. Yet, progressive increases in the Parliament's status have flunked the reality test: voter participation in EP elections has dropped from 62% in 1979 to a record-low of 43% in 2009.

...turned on its head

However, the conditions that sustained this *status quo* have changed dramatically during this EP legislature, and a combination of institutional and contextual factors might be currently 'conspiring' to transform the next European vote into a watershed election.

New rules of play

From an institutional point of view, the 2014 EP elections will be the first since the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty in 2009, which has not only broadened significantly the legislative and budgetary powers¹² of the European Parliament but has also given the EP the responsibility to *elect* the President of the Commission on the basis of a candidate *proposed* by the European Council, after taking into account the outcome of the EP elections (Article 17(7) Treaty on European Union (TEU)).¹³ On its own, this innovation represents a significant upgrade of the Parliament's nominating rights compared to the previous Nice Treaty, which entitled the EP to merely approve the designation of the Commission President.

Seeking to make full use of its Lisbon Treaty prerogatives in order to shape the next executive office of the EU, the Parliament urged European political parties in its Resolution¹⁴ of 22 November 2012 to nominate

candidates for the Presidency of the Commission in the context of the 2014 EP elections, noting also that it expected those candidates to play a leading role in the electoral campaign, in particular by individually presenting their political programmes in all member states.

Moreover, in a Report¹⁵ dated 12 June 2013, the EP asked pan-European parties to make the nomination "sufficiently well in advance of the election" so as to allow the candidates to mount an EU-wide campaign that concentrates on European (not national) issues. According to this proposal, the nominee for Commission President put forward by the transnational party that wins the most seats in the 2014 EP vote should be the first to be considered with a view to "ascertaining his/her ability to secure the support of the necessary absolute majority in the new Parliament".

In the same Report, the EP also called on national political parties to inform citizens, before and during the election campaign, of their affiliation to a European political party (such as by stating its name – and, where appropriate, the emblem – on the ballot paper), as well as their support for its candidate for the post of Commission President and his/her platform.¹⁶ National parties have not done so in any previous EP elections.

If all political parties commit to implementing these initiatives, the aspiration is that the 2014 European vote will *inter alia* raise public awareness and interest in EP elections, boost the accountability of the Commission *vis-à-vis* the Parliament and the electorate, spark pan-European debates, increase the democratic legitimacy of decision-making at EU level, and ultimately persuade citizens to vote in greater numbers – all of which are seen as pre-requisites for closer European integration.

In crisis mode

The potential implications of these arrangements must be considered against the backdrop of the on-going crisis – a second major difference compared to previous European elections. Soaring (youth) unemployment and unyielding economic stagnation have in recent years spurred massive public anger¹⁷ towards both national and EU politicians, whose decisions to 'bail out' a number of EU countries and to pursue austerity as the main path to recovery have cast serious doubt on the merits and democratic legitimacy of the political response to the crisis. As popular trust and support for the EU institutions and integration project have been plummeting¹⁸, parties from across the political spectrum, with an overall populist and Eurosceptic discourse, have strengthened their appeal in many member states since the onset of the crisis.¹⁹

The next EP elections will thus take place in a different context in which 'Europe' has moved to the very heart of national debates and election campaigns in the member states, in circumstances defined by a widespread popular perception that the EU is 'part of the problem' and not 'part of the solution', and in conditions which are particularly auspicious for the electoral success of the anti-EU political camp. As such, the 2014 European elections could witness more debates about the EU, albeit in a largely negative manner, as well as more citizens casting their vote²⁰, though probably in favour of Eurosceptic lawmakers. The jury is still out on whether this is a 'desirable' scenario for Europe but, overall, it appears that the next EP elections are bound to mark a critical juncture for the landscape of democracy at EU-level in terms of both turnout and party/policy choices.

Turning out or turning off?

If the present conditions set in motion a series of positive dynamics with regards to turnout in the 2014 EP elections, they would reverse the negative trend witnessed since 1979. Recent Eurobarometer data²¹ confirm that a majority of European citizens would be more encouraged to vote if some of the above-mentioned initiatives were realised, that is: (i) if people were better informed about the impact of EP elections on the ground and about parties' programmes (84%); (ii) if competing parties were to display their European political affiliation during the campaign (73%); and (iv) if the European parties were to nominate their own candidate for the Presidency of the Commission (62%).

The possibility that such developments might bolster voter participation in the next European elections is supported by academic research²², which explains the low turnout at EP elections so far mainly in terms of their low salience among electorates. By this line of reasoning, and through the prism of the crisis, more voters could be persuaded to show up at the ballot box if the stakes and transparency of the 2014 EP elections were to increase – that is, if the outcome of the vote were connected to the (s)election of the President of the Commission and if citizens became aware of the affiliation between national and European political parties, supporting a common election manifesto.

In turn, greater participation in the upcoming EP elections could have important consequences that go beyond that of arresting the long-standing trend of poor turnouts. The more votes are cast, the easier it will be for elected representatives in the next Parliament to take the pulse of European citizens and echo their voice at a time of pending critical decisions about the future direction of the Union. A higher turnout could also improve the democratic legitimacy of the European Parliament and the Union against a backdrop of mounting Euroscepticism and public distrust in the EU institutions.

Conversely, the choice not to vote in EP elections – an experience already familiar to many Europeans – could have a negative socialising effect that might deter participation also in subsequent EP/national elections.²³ Precisely because low turnout tends to leave a cumulative 'footprint' in the electorate, political parties should exploit the current opportunities to increase the salience of the 2014 EP elections in order to mobilise EU citizens, especially young/first-time voters, and thereby help them to develop the habit of voting.²⁴

Putting faces to the electoral race

The most promising avenue for increasing the interest of European citizens and media in EP elections is the proposal for EU-level political parties to enter the 2014 campaign with designated 'top candidates' for the Commission Presidency. Rival nominees would compete against each other alongside European party families, while being backed by national parties affiliated with their 'sponsor' transnational party. Each of these candidates would take an active role in the electoral contest, competing across member states on the basis of a common political platform.

Compared to the past, this novelty could foster EU-wide campaigns and encourage political parties to put forward recognisable heavyweights, thereby increasing the visibility of EP elections at national level. Moreover, the possibility that some European parties²⁵ might stage (online) primary ballots to designate their candidate(s) for the Commission Presidency could help to grasp/capture the public's attention for EP elections from early on in the process.

The nomination of 'top candidates' could also strengthen the profile of European political party families. The need to agree on joint candidates, coordinate support for them across member states and win over heads of state or government, who formally control the nomination process in the European Council, would 'force' political parties to intensify their organisation and interaction. As such, the competition of European political families for executive office would acquire a real transnational patina. It might not lead to the emergence of a fully-fledged transnational party system (as long as European parties do not compete for the votes of a European electorate), but would probably come as close as possible to that target given the current Treaty framework.

And finally, if the next EP elections were to supply the runner(s) for the position of Commission President, they could reduce the hitherto 'secretive horse-trading' in the European Council by putting in place a more transparent and democratic nomination process. A clearer link between the EP elections and the (s)election of the President of the Commission could also enhance the legitimacy and political 'clout' of the successful incumbent, and could strengthen the democratic and political standing of both the European Parliament and the Commission *vis-à-vis* the (European) Council.

Quo modo et cui bono?

Despite the manifold potential benefits of this institutional innovation, the nuts-and-bolts issues of how the nomination of crowd-pulling household names would play out in practice – before, on the day and after the EP elections – are not immediately clear, and some of the latent implications of changing the *status quo* might not be all that positive.

Before the elections

With respect to the pre-election nomination of standard bearers, finding 'A-list candidates' with EU-wide appeal, political skills and a programmatic message could prove more challenging than *prima facie*. Even if top talents were identified – including among the 'best and brightest' already in leadership positions at national level – one cannot assume that such candidates would 'jump' at the opportunity to vie for their political party's nomination in the EP elections while holding an executive post 'at home'.

As only one candidate will in the end be (s)elected as Commission President, it is not obvious why a high-calibre aspirant, who is sitting in the front political row at national level, would risk having to 'go back' to the domestic political arena as a 'loser'. And it is equally unclear why national governments would endorse a top-ranking candidate instead of pushing for a nominee to become, for example, President of the European Council, where the EU Treaties allow national governments to agree on a name behind closed doors, in a less politically hazardous manner.

But even if prominent national politicians were willing to run for the Commission Presidency, their campaign efforts would most likely be fraught with practical challenges. First, they could struggle to reconcile the responsibilities of national office with the imperatives of an intensive EU-wide quest for votes. Second, they could face hurdles in personalising their campaign in line with the potentially different expectations of both their national parties and affiliated European family. Third, 'top candidates' would have to adapt their campaign to different national contexts, as it is hard to imagine how one manifesto would be fitting and politically attractive in all member states; unless, of course, the transnational political message were to be diluted, albeit at the risk of undermining the credibility of the electoral platform and citizens' interest in EP elections.

On the other hand, if the potential *crème de la crème* decline, second-ranking figures could 'volunteer' to become 'top candidates', but they might prove incapable of overcoming their anonymity to the average European voter across member states. Alternatively, charismatic and publicity-conscious candidates, offering voters a choice between Tweedledum and Tweedledee rather than between real policy options, could step forward, but they would turn the EP elections into 'beauty contests', without much added value for the quality of European democracy.

Other twists and turns in choosing 'top candidates' refer to the not-so-insignificant detail that the nomination of the European Commission President is merely one element in a complex EU leadership 'puzzle' that also involves the Presidencies of the European Council, the European Parliament and the Eurogroup, as well as the position of High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs & Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission. Moreover, in the interest of gender equality as well as regional and political proportionality, women and candidates from different EU corners and political families will have to occupy some of these prominent posts. Bearing in mind this very complex leadership configuration, national and European policymakers might refrain from nominating their finest people for the Commission Presidency, particularly should another 'top' EU political job prove more attractive to them.

During elections

Then, come election day, the nomination of 'top candidates' will not in itself make it any easier for Europeans to mark their ballot. First, citizens might be faced with the difficult decision of whether

to choose their preferred European party even if they dislike its proposed 'top candidate' or else to express their preference for a nominee even if he/she was put forward by an ill-favoured transnational party. This might be the case if the nationality of the proposed candidate for Commission President is not well accepted in a given member state. A recent Gallup survey²⁶, for instance, indicates that a relative majority of voters in Denmark (13%), France (10%) and Germany (12%) would take issue with a Romanian candidate, 15% of the electorate in the Netherlands would abstain from voting if the nominee was Bulgarian, and many Britons (13%), Poles (13%) and Dutch (15%) would not support a contender from their own country.

Second, the link between the people's vote and the ensuing leadership division at EU level will not necessarily acquire more clarity by virtue of this novel nomination process. In part, this is because the next Commission President will not determine the composition of the College, which will continue to bring together commissioners from all the member states, each proposed by their own government.²⁷ In addition, whatever the ideological orientation of the next Commission chief, it will not define the overall political orientation of the Union as the other Presidents (that is, of the European Council, the EP and the Eurogroup), as well as the High Representative/Vice-President of the Commission, will be chosen in such a way as to be of different political stripes for the sake of 'ideological balance' in the EU institutional quad (that is, the European Commission, the European Parliament, the European Council, and the Council of Ministers).

After the elections

Turning to the post-election phase, there is no guarantee that the candidate of the European political party that wins most votes in 2014 will automatically become the head of the Commission. While bringing the EP elections forward from June to May gives the new Parliament more time to decide on a nominee, MEPs could prove unable to reach agreement on time. This is quite plausible given that polls on voting intention in different member states²⁸ already estimate that accumulated public frustration with socio-economic difficulties will usher a wave of Eurosceptic and/or radical parties into the next European Parliament, which could make it more difficult for the EP to assemble (on time) a majority behind a candidate for the office of Commission President.

But even if the Parliament settles on a nominee, the European Council might not endorse the EP's choice. According to Declaration 11 on Article 17(6) and (7) TEU, the European Council and the EP are jointly responsible for the smooth running of the process leading to the election of the President of the Commission, and must hold "appropriate consultations" in order to agree on a candidate. However, it is not a foregone conclusion that the two EU institutions will interpret the Treaty provisions in the same way, supporting the same candidate, which might then cause inter-institutional turf wars.

EU governments could, for example, argue that they considered the result of the European elections when selecting not 'only' the nominee for the President of the Commission but also the contenders for the other prestigious EU jobs. In all probability, the Parliament would strongly oppose such an interpretation of the Treaties, and this could then lead to a political stand-off between the EP and the European Council. Therefore, in order to avoid confusion, the two EU institutions should, before the start of the 2014 elections, agree on the detailed arrangements that will govern their post-electoral consultations over the new Commission President.

Finally, engaging transnational political parties in indirect competition for executive office has not just merits but also some potential perils: the EP's scrutiny role *vis-à-vis* the Commission could be weakened if parliamentarians were inclined to support and protect 'their' Commission President. And *vice versa*, the role of the Brussels' executive as an honest broker and guardian of the Treaties could be jeopardised by a reinforced political link between the European Parliament and the Commission, at a time when this role is ever more important given the increased reliance on the European Council and on (particularly strong) national governments in the context of the crisis.²⁹

Not just another campaign

The 2014 European elections could become more salient for voters if the substance of the campaign in the member states were less about national concerns and more about European issues. The latter could relate to: a further intensification of European cooperation in the framework of Economic and Monetary Union; the encroachment of supranational decisions on domestic policies and practices, especially as regards the EU's response to the crisis; and/or the relationship between individual member states and the Union.

Such debates about European 'polity' issues would tap into people's opinions about whether their country's membership is a 'good'/'bad' thing and whether integration has gone 'too far'/'not far enough'. Thus far, citizens' pro- or anti-EU orientations did not have much impact on party choice at EP elections, because political parties competing for the Parliament have hitherto focused on the national arena (in which left-right issues dominate) and offered voters limited choice between different visions of Europe.

In most member states, the articulation of a particular European orientation – mostly based on Eurosceptic sentiments – has been the privilege of parties at the fringes of the party system, usually small and extremist (in left-right terms). Large and moderate (in left-right terms) parties have so far failed to compete on the EU dimension, brushing aside potentially deep rifts among their supporters on matters related to 'Europe'.³⁰ Consequently, until now, the majority of voters have had to choose between either expressing their party choice along left-right lines while ignoring their preference about European integration or, the other way around, choosing parties on the basis of their EU positions at the expense of their left-right inclinations.

This time around, a highly contested electoral race in 2014 with regard to European rather than merely national policy issues would render the 'second-order' label previously coined for EP elections far less appropriate. It would also offer voters, for a change, the opportunity to choose a party according to its EU position, without having to simultaneously ignore their party preference in left-right terms. If European citizens no longer faced a trade-off between EU and left-right ideological issues when expressing their party choice, EP elections could function as a better 'transmission belt' between people's preferences and those of their ensuing Parliament representatives.

Moreover, the need to produce common election manifestos to be communicated by 'top candidates' and debated transnationally could foster agreement among European parties on joint solutions to shared problems, especially concerning potential measures to abate the crisis. However, EU-level parties might not be able to agree on programmes that go beyond the 'lowest common denominator' because different national parties from the same political family often hold staunchly diverse preferences, for example concerning the 'right' crisis recipe.

Furthermore, if mainstream political parties had to compete in the 2014 EP elections both along the left-right divide and against anti-EU/euro parties, their political message could become 'blurred'. The task of waging a simple but pungent campaign could (once again) prove easier for Eurosceptic parties that tend to pitch either for exit from or the dissolution of the euro/EU. Yet, in most member states (except for the UK), this twofold choice is still met with lukewarm support by European citizens³¹, not least because anti-EU/anti-euro parties have not been able to deliver a credible alternative to European integration.

In addition, empirical evidence³² reveals that, largely thanks to the standardising effect of the left-right dimension, party systems across the EU are compatible with each other in that citizens in different member states vote for similar reasons for similar parties belonging to a particular family. Consequently, the aggregation of the left-right dimension of contestation from the national to the EU level has led to reasonable congruence between the views of European electors and those of their EP representatives. In other words, despite the fact that European elections have been dominated by national parties and national issues, the outcome of the system of representation in the EP has been more effective than is often assumed, and has worked far better for policy issues related to left and right than for 'polity' issues concerning European integration.

For the European parties at the 2014 EP elections, this means that the left-right dimension can provide a suitable vehicle for meaningful communication between voters and politicians across the member states. In fact, research shows³³ that voters' pro- and anti-EU attitudes are not systematically related to their left/right attitudes across different member states. Thus, tapping into debates over the general direction of EU integration might actually threaten the prospect of a 'single European electorate' that responds in similar ways in left-right terms.

Last but not least, issues related to the future institutional shape and competences of the European Union are subject to the intergovernmental rather than the supranational level of European decision-making. Put differently, the relevant authority ('master of the treaties') is not the EP but rather the governments, parliaments and electorates in the member states. Therefore, fighting campaigns on European 'polity' issues that are not an established competence of the EP (like treaty change or key decisions related to economic policymaking) would be irrelevant for EU policy outputs and might create false expectations with respect to the Parliament's actual influence. This strategy could backfire if in the end the EP were to prove incapable of fulfilling some of the expectations raised during the 2014 EP election campaign.

A sea-change result

Irrespective of whether or not European political parties will put forward candidates for the Presidency of the European Commission or build their campaigns around EU integration issues, the 2014 EP elections are likely to break the mould from past European electoral contests.³⁴ Driving this change is the crisis in the member states, which has blurred to an unprecedented extent the line between the EU and national levels of governance and between what is European and what is domestic, and has unleashed more scepticism among citizens towards both the national and EU political entity/'polity'.

The shorthand for capturing these developments is protest voting. Mainstream, pro-EU political parties have been losing ground in many member states to what are often – but not always – small and radical populist parties, which claim to offer alternatives to the current policy options and ponder their country's terms of EU membership. This could reach a peak in the next EP elections if European voters in some member states chose to side with the anti-EU camp and against the national and European political 'establishment', which is often blamed for people's (growing) discontent.

This scenario could benefit Eurosceptic and populist radical (right) parties and MEPs – most of whom are currently non-attached or part of the Europe of Freedom and Democracy (EFD) group – to the detriment of mainstream European politicians and parties, especially if turnout is again low, as protest voters are traditionally more inclined than 'mainstream' citizens to vote.

At present, the European Parliament is made up of rather distinct political groups which are organised according to their position on the left-right spectrum and, particularly as far as the largest groups are concerned, are increasingly cohesive (that is, their members vote the same way, more along the left-right divide than according to national lines).³⁵

A change in the ideological makeup of the EP could undermine the internal coherence of the largest groups as well as their voting discipline/behaviour. Core groups might coalesce around common principles/causes against a potential tide of Euroscepticism, but if an inflow of 'radicalised' members were to swell their own ranks in the next Parliament, they could be faced with more frequent defections – votes against the group line or alliances beyond the 'usual (mainstream) suspects'. The implications for the substance of the EU's policy outputs could be vastly different in each case. Moreover, if the numbers of Eurosceptic MEPs were to grow in the 2014 EP elections, their 'blackmail potential' could also increase, particularly on traditionally divisive issues for the main political groups, such as civil liberties or the environment.³⁶

Overall, however, the ability of fringe parties to form strong alliances – whether with mainstream parties or with each other – is likely to remain limited. Their hard-line rhetoric, at times at odds with European democratic principles and values, will probably continue to keep at bay mainstream parliamentarians.

As a loosely knit force in the EP, the policy influence of Eurosceptic parties is not likely to improve either. The far right and far left could make a common front against the EU's economic policy – albeit for different reasons: breaches of national sovereignty and opposition to austerity respectively.³⁷ However, torn between their hostility towards the EU and the benefits (financial, promotional) derived from being an MEP, Eurosceptics have little incentive to change their habits and start focusing on making laws rather than gaining publicity by using the European Parliament as a platform for increasing their popularity 'at home'. Ultimately, their potential failure to leave a mark on policy might, at the end of the day, not bode well with their electorate, which in return could hit the already scant legitimacy and popularity of the EP, and by extension, of the Union itself.

But even if in light of these arguments the EP should prove able to cope with a consolidated bloc of 'in-house' Eurosceptics, the success of anti-establishment parties could have a destabilising effect in some member states. The success of such forces in the 2014 European elections could in some EU countries (further) boost the standing of Eurosceptic parties in the national arena, putting mainstream political parties under (more) pressure and fostering the radicalisation of domestic politics and European policymaking. It is difficult to imagine how member states might treat and overcome such a potential development, but it is quite clear that the EU institutions are not at present well placed or properly 'equipped' to 'intervene' should decision making and rhetoric in individual countries stray away from the core democratic laws and tenets on which the Union is founded.³⁸

'Europe' might be ripe for a higher level of politicisation and this could attract media attention at the next EP elections. However, mainstream parties should not allow anti-EU political actors to 'steal the show'. Instead of avoiding 'difficult' conversations, pro-EU forces should commit to discussing the fears and grievances that lie behind protest voting with arguments that challenge the unfounded narratives of the anti-system parties, and with concrete solutions to people's problems. Equally importantly, mainstream parties should make the case for the EU to voters, and start communicating a transnational message on why the Union/EP matters.

Paving the way ahead

There is a lot riding on the upcoming elections to the European Parliament in 2014. EU critics and supporters alike have high hopes that the next round of EP elections will shake off the familiar voters' fatigue and 'awaken' citizens' interest in participating in the European ballot. There are valid reasons why this might prove to be the case: the next EP elections could be the first to witness European political party families competing across member states to back candidate(s) they have nominated to the Presidency of the European Commission.

This could personalise and Europeanise the electoral campaign, increasing the salience and stakes of the EP vote, and thus halt the trend of decreasing turnout witnessed since 1979. But careful implementation is key if the nomination of 'top candidates' is to avoid bringing to the fore mediocre contestants with inadequate election manifestos and insufficient EU-wide appeal.

To be sure, voters falling through the net cast by this innovation could still be whisked to the polls by the current socio-economic and political climate in Europe. Record-high (youth) unemployment, continuous recession in numerous EU countries, and growing Euroscepticism and anti-establishment orientations in many member states mean that the next EP elections will give European citizens the opportunity to speak their mind about how political leaders have so far responded and should in future attend to the manifold crisis-related challenges. Dissatisfied voters – of which there is no shortage at the moment – will probably not miss their chance to vote *against* (further) European integration.

Political entrepreneurs are likely to see to it that the anti-EU/euro arguments are all effectively covered. Indeed, if nothing else, the 2014 European elections will almost certainly shift the 'centre' of the debate towards the extremes. As a result, considerably more Eurosceptic populist lawmakers might enter the new European Parliament, especially if the pro-EU political camp fails to persuasively and cohesively state its case to the electorate. Such an outcome might not just be damaging for the EU and European policymaking, it could also have negative political spill-over effects at national level, strengthening the position of populist parties in individual member states.

In order to minimise some of these latent risks, three points seem particularly important:

First, the candidate(s) put forward by European parties for the President of the Commission should offer voters politically visible, credible and respectable choices. In other words, it is in the interests of the EU and its members for European political parties to nominate the 'best and the brightest' as top candidates for Commission President, and for national parties to actively support the front-runners.

Second, political families' campaign messages should be clear and meaningful, articulating concrete policy proposals that aim to counter the manifold negative economic, financial and social effects of the crisis (with proposals going well beyond the lowest common denominator). European political parties need to spell out not 'only' their vision of 'Europe' but also concrete suggestions of how to further complete Economic and Monetary Union in the years ahead.

Third, mainstream political parties at both European and national level need to deconstruct potential myths propagated by anti-EU/euro parties and movements. It is imperative that they confront such populist rhetoric head on, and that they argue convincingly why some of the 'easy solutions' brought forward by Eurosceptic parties are neither feasible nor in the interests of Europe and its citizens.

The present context and the careful implementation of the current proposals related to the conduct of EP elections could turn the 2014 European vote into a watershed moment for democracy at EU level. But all European and national actors need to assume their responsibilities: with expectations running high, if it all comes to naught, then the next elections to the European Parliament could amount to little more than a flash in the pan and fail to set a positive precedent for the future, with negative long-term consequences not just for the EP but also for the Union more generally.

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Endnotes

- 1 As explained, for example, by Walter Hallstein, former President of the European Commission (in office between 1958 and 1967) in Hallstein, Walter (1972), *Europe in the making*, London: Allen and Unwin, p.: 74, cited in Hix, Simon and Hagemann, Sara (2008), "Could changing the electoral rules fix European Parliament elections?", *Politique Européenne*, Volume 28, Number 2, pp.: 27-41.
- 2 Reif, Karlheinz and Schmitt, Hermann (1980), "Nine second order national elections – A conceptual framework for the analysis of European election results", *European Journal of Political Research*, Volume 8, Number 1, pp.: 3-44; Reif, Karlheinz (1984), "National electoral cycles and European elections 1979 and 1984", *Electoral Studies*, Volume 3, Number 3, pp.: 245-255. See also, van der Eijk, Cees and Franklin, Marsh N. (1996), "Choosing Europe? The European electorate and national politics in the face of Union", Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press; Føllesdal, Andreas and Hix, Simon (2006), "Why there is a democratic deficit in the EU: a response to Majone and Moravcsik", *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Volume 44, Number 3, pp.: 533-562; Hix, Simon and Marsh, Michael (2007), "Punishment or protest? Understanding European Parliament elections", *The Journal of Politics*, Volume 69, Number 2, pp.: 495-510.
- 3 The exception here is Denmark, where the political parties that compete in the elections to the European Parliament do not run in national elections. This encourages Danish political parties to contest EP elections on the basis of European issues and makes it difficult for one to judge their performance in domestic political terms.
- 4 de Vreese, Claes H., Banducci, Susan A., Semetko, Holli A., and Boomgaarden, Hajo G. (2006), "The news coverage of the 2004 European parliamentary election campaign in 25 countries", *European Union Politics*, Number 7, Volume 4, pp.: 477-504; de Vreese, Claes H., Lauf, Edmund and Peter, Jochen (2007), "The media and European Parliament elections: second-rate coverage of a second-order event?" in van der Brug, Wouter and van der Eijk, Cees (2007) (eds.), *European elections and domestic politics*, University of Notre Dame Press, pp.: 116-130.
- 5 Turnout at EP elections (1979-2009): [www.europarl.europa.eu/aboutparliament/en/000cdcd9d4/Turnout-\(1979-2009\).html](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/aboutparliament/en/000cdcd9d4/Turnout-(1979-2009).html). See also, van der Eijk, Cees, Franklin, Marsh N. and Marsh, Michael (1996), "What voters teach us about Europe-wide elections: what Europe-wide elections teach us about voters", *Electoral Studies*, Volume 15, Number 2, pp.: 149-166; Wessels, Bernhard and Franklin, Mark N. (2009), "Turning out or turning off: do mobilisation and attitudes account for turnout differences between new and established member states at the 2004 EP elections?", *European Integration*, Volume 31, Number 5, pp.: 609-626; Clark, Nick (2010), "Explaining low turnout in EP elections: voters' perceptions of the European Parliament", Paper presented at the 2010 annual meeting and exhibition of the American Political Science Association in Washington, D.C., 2-5 September 2010.
- 6 See, for example, Reif and Schmitt (1980), *op. cit.*; Reif (1984), *op. cit.*; van der Eijk and Franklin (1996), *op. cit.*; Hix and Marsh (2007), *op. cit.*; Hix, Simon and Marsh, Michael (2011), "Second-order effects plus pan-European political swings: an analysis of European Parliament elections across time", *Electoral Studies*, Volume 20, Number 1, pp.: 4-15.
- 7 Erickson, Robert (1988), "The puzzle of midterm loss", *Journal of Politics*, Volume 50, Number 4, pp.: 1011-1029.
- 8 Reif (1984), *op. cit.*; Schmitt, Herman (1990), "Party attachment and party choice in the European elections of June 1989", *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, Volume 2, Number 2, pp.: 169-184.
- 9 Partly due to a lack of inter-party policy differences on European matters, with most political parties being pro-EU, but also out of fear that by putting European issues to voters, parties would politicise a latent (and at times manifest) division within their own ranks. See, for example, van der Eijk and Franklin (1996), *op. cit.*
- 10 van der Eijk, Cees and Mark, Franklin N. (2001), "The sleeping giant: potential for contestation on European matters at national elections in Europe", Paper delivered at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, San Francisco, CA, September 2001, find that European citizens have no difficulty placing themselves with regards to the EU and their EU positions are in fact more 'extreme' than in left-right terms. In other words, voters hold specific and very diverse attitudes towards the EU, unlike political parties, which offer electors very little choice on 'Europe'.
- 11 See, for example, Rittberger, Berthold (2005), *Building Europe's Parliament. Democratic representation beyond the nation state*, Oxford: Oxford University Press; Hix, Simon, Noury, Abdul and Roland, Gerard (2007), *Democratic politics in the European Parliament*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 12 See Emmanouilidis, Janis A. and Stratulat, Corina (2010), "Implementing Lisbon: narrowing the EU's democratic deficit", *EPC Policy Brief*, Brussels: European Policy Centre.
- 13 Exact wording of Article (17/7) TEU: "Taking into account the elections to the European Parliament and after having held the appropriate consultations, the European Council, acting by a qualified majority, shall propose to the European Parliament a candidate for President of the Commission. This candidate shall be elected by the European Parliament by a majority of its component members. If he does not obtain the required majority, the European Council, acting by a qualified majority, shall within one month propose a new candidate who shall be elected by the European Parliament following the same procedure."
- 14 EP's Resolution of 22 November 2012 on "The elections to the European Parliament in 2014", (2012/2829(RSP)). See also, the European Commission's communication of 28 November 2012 on "A blueprint for a deep and genuine economic and monetary union – Launching a European debate", COM/2012/0777final; the Commission's communication of 12 March 2013 on "Preparing for the 2014 European elections: further enhancing their democratic and efficient conduct", COM(2013)126final; and the Commission's recommendation of 12 March 2013 on "Enhancing the democratic and efficient conduct of elections to the European Parliament", C(2013)1303final.
- 15 EP's Report of 12 June 2013 on "Improving the practical arrangements for the holding of the European elections in 2014", (2013/2102(INI)).
- 16 See also the European Commission's proposal for a Regulation of 12 September 2012 on "The statute and funding of European political parties and European political foundations", COM(2012)499final; the EP's Resolution of 22 November 2012, *op. cit.*; and the Commission's communication of 12 March 2013, *op. cit.*

- 17 See Stratulat, Corina and Dhéret, Claire (2012), "A tale of modern-day capitalism and democracy: in view of the European protests", *EPC Policy Brief*, Brussels: European Policy Centre.
- 18 Standard Eurobarometer 79, "Public Opinion in the European Union", Spring 2013, especially pp.: 9 -11. Trust in the EU has gone down from 50% in spring 2008 to 31% in spring 2013. However, it remains higher than in national institutions
- 19 As illustrated, for instance, by the inroads into power made by the Attack Party (Bulgaria), the True Finns Party (Finland), the National Front (France), the Golden Dawn and Syriza (Greece), the Five Star Movement (Italy), the Dutch Freedom Party (the Netherlands), the Swedish Democrats (Sweden) or the UK Independence Party (UK).
- 20 Flash Eurobarometer 375, "European youth: participation in democratic life", May 2013, p.: 21, indicates that almost two thirds of all young respondents (64%) are 'likely' to vote in the next EP elections 2014; *Debating Europe* also suggests that young/first-time voters, dissatisfied with socio-economic situation in their country/EU, plan to show up in greater numbers at the next EP elections in order to make their voice heard (www.debatingeurope.eu).
- 21 Flash Eurobarometer 375, *op. cit.*; Pew Research Centre poll, "The new sick man of Europe: the European Union", May 2013. It should be noted, however, that both surveys reveal that support for the EU/institutions is still higher than for national political actors.
- 22 See, for instance, Reif and Schmitt (1980), *op. cit.*; Clark (2010), *op. cit.*
- 23 Franklin, Mark N. and Hobolt, Sara B. (2001), "The legacy of lethargy: how elections to the European Parliament depress turnout", *Electoral Studies*, Volume 30, Number 1, pp.: 67-76.
- 24 Research has shown that it takes about three successive electoral experiences to lock down the habit of voting, and it seems that an EP election, for many people, serves to counteract this process. See, for instance, Plutzer, Eric (2002), "Becoming a habitual voter: inertia, resources and growth in young adulthood", *American Political Science Review*, Volume 96, pp.: 41-56; Franklin, Mark N. (2004), *Voter turnout and the dynamics of electoral competition in established democracies since 1945*, New York: Cambridge University Press.
- 25 For instance, the European Greens and the Party of European Socialists have already signalled their intention to organise EU-wide primaries in order to select their frontrunners for Commission President in the 2014 EP vote.
- 26 Gallup Europe survey, "EU election 2014 countdown: one year to go", conducted in May 2013 in Denmark, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, and the United Kingdom.
- 27 The European Commission's college of Commissioners is currently composed of a total of 28 members (one for each member state), and this number includes the President and Vice-President.
- 28 For example, in countries like France, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, and the UK.
- 29 For a more detailed discussion of this point see Stratulat, Corina and Emmanouilidis, Janis A. (2011), "EP electoral reform: a question of trade-offs", *EPC Policy Brief*, Brussels: European Policy Centre.
- 30 See, for instance, van der Eijk and Franklin (1996), *op. cit.*
- 31 According to a Gallup Europe survey from May 2013, *op. cit.*, at least a plurality of respondents would vote to remain in the EU in case of a referendum. In the UK, a majority (55%) said they would vote to leave the EU, while in the Netherlands, the vote was split: 39% in favour of leaving and 39% in favour of staying in the EU.
- 32 Mair, Peter and Thomassen, Jacques (2010), "Political representation and government in the European Union", *Journal of European Public Policy*, Volume 17, Number 1, pp.: 20-35.
- 33 van der Brug, Wouter and van der Eijk, Cees (2007) (eds.), *European elections and domestic politics. Lessons from the past and scenarios for the future*, Southbend: University of Notre Dame Press; van der Eijk and Franklin (2001), *op. cit.*; van der Eijk and Franklin (1996), *op. cit.*, especially chapter 21.
- 34 This was discussed on 10 July 2013 in a high-level EPC Policy Dialogue on "The European Parliament elections 2014 – Breaking the mould or more of the same?" with prominent politicians from the main European political groups; the report can be found at: www.epc.eu/events_rep_details.php?cat_id=6&pub_id=3668. The event was part of a project called "The European Parliament – Why should I care?", which was organised by the EPC with the support of the EP, and which invited young EU citizens to express creatively why they plan to vote in the 2014 European elections. Highlights from this project are documented at: www.epc.eu/pub_details.php?cat_id=3&pub_id=3672. This Discussion Paper draws on the input received from the competition winners during their trip to Brussels, as well as on the contributions of the speakers at the EPC public event.
- 35 Schmitt, Hermann and Thomassen, Jacques (1999) (eds.), *Political representation and legitimacy in the European Union*, Oxford: Oxford University Press; Thomassen, Jacques, Noury, Abdul and Voeten, Erik (2004), "Political competition in the European Parliament: evidence from roll calls and survey analysis", in Marks, Gary and Steenbergen, Marco R. (2004) (eds.), *European integration and political conflict*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Thomassen, Jacques (2009), *The legitimacy of the European Union after enlargement*, Oxford: Oxford University Press; Hix, Simon, Noury, Abdul and Roland, Gerard (2006), "Dimensions of politics in the European Parliament", *American Journal of Political Science*, Volume 50, Number 2, pp.: 494-511.
- 36 See, for example, the annual reports of *VoteWatch Europe* (www.votewatch.eu).
- 37 Morris, Marley (2013), "Conflicted politicians: the populist radical right in the European Parliament", Counterpoint Report, London: UK.
- 38 As was amply demonstrated more recently by the EU's difficulty in dealing with democratic backlashes in Hungary and Romania. See, for instance, Stratulat, Corina and Ivan, Paul (2012), "Romania's democracy in reverse gear – *En garde, EU!*", *EPC Commentary*, Brussels: European Policy Centre.

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