

FACES ON DIVIDES: THE MAY 2014 EUROPEAN ELECTIONS

Extracts

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Foreword by Julian Priestley

STUDIES & REPORTS
104
APRIL 2014

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Extract from:
Yves Bertoncini and Thierry Chopin,
"Faces on divides: the 2014 May European elections",
Studies & Reports No. 104
Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, April 2013.

The European elections that will take place from 22-25 May next are an important democratic event for the European citizens that we are, and as such, they need to be approached with as much background information as possible.

In this respect, having been Secretary-General of the European Parliament placed me in a paradoxical situation. I had to participate in a very direct manner in the functioning of this great institution and observe the way in which its members organised themselves to form majorities during the voting process. At the same time, I was constantly able to measure the lack of familiarity, and sometimes understanding, of my fellow EU citizens vis-à-vis the coalition logic at work within the EP and the decisions resulting from it.

Against this backdrop, I believe it is particularly welcome that such a study is published, as part of a pan-European partnership between VoteWatch Europe and Notre Europe-Jacques Delors Institute, which was also joined by the Robert Schuman Foundation for France.

For several years now, VoteWatch Europe has endeavoured to produce benchmark information on how MEPs vote on the important issues that are put to them. It thus provides crucial information for the citizens electing these MEPs, and this information should be circulated as broadly as possible (see www.votewatcheurope.eu). Since its creation, Notre Europe-Jacques Delors Institute has also made efforts towards more democratic functioning of the EU, particularly based on strengthening the role of parties working at EU level, and that make up the "missing link" of European political life.

It was therefore totally natural that they would work together to mobilise the think tanks of some 20 EU countries around a project aimed at clearly elucidating how the MEPS voted in relation to their partisan beliefs, for the

symbolic votes of the 2009-2014 parliamentary term. Just as it was natural that the Robert Schuman Foundation fully participate in this partnership concerning the votes of French MEPs, given the priority that it has given also to these issues for many years.

The result of this partnership is this study, co-written by Yves Bertoncini and Thierry Chopin. It contains several extremely enlightening elements of information and analysis for citizens living in France and invited to vote on 25 May next.

The first part of the study firstly recalls the extent of powers exercised by the EP, the importance of the political issues on which its members are requested to decide, but also the key role played by the political groups established within this institution. It usefully recalls that the proportional representation system in place during European elections allows a good representation of parties that are much less present in national parliaments, while at the same time preventing a single political group from holding the majority alone - hence the need to form majority coalitions.

The second part of this study presents the “variable-geometry majorities” that form within the EP, in relation to the issues put to the vote of the MEPs: “consensus majorities” which include European MEPs from almost all parties with elected representatives, accounting for approximately 40% of the votes; “broad-coalition majorities”, which include MEPs from centrist political groups, namely, Conservatives from the EPP, Socialists and Democrats, as well as Liberals (around 30% of votes); lastly, “confrontation majorities”, which include centre-left and centre-right parties (also around 30% of votes). The 21 votes analysed by this study illustrate how such “majorities of ideas” can be formed in relation to particular issues, based on negotiations between the main political groups in the EP. It is particularly useful that it be published in a country such as France, which, just like the United Kingdom, is characterised by a political culture that is much more binary, marked by an almost systematic and therefore simplistic opposition between the majority and the opposition.

Lastly, the third part of this study provides highly informative elements on the impact of the vote of 25 May next, based on available opinion polls. It confirms that no political group will be able to take the majority of seats alone, and that

majority coalitions will therefore continue to be formed. It also explains that the EPP and S&D groups should be in a leading position and that today it is difficult to predict which of the two will take the lead. The fact that both of these groups will maintain a certain preeminence, consistent with the wishes of the majority of Europeans, should not however lead readers to underestimate the importance of their vote. Majority coalitions at work within the next EP will not make decisions of the same nature according to the identity of the largest group and the exact balance of power that will be determined on the evening of 25 May.

My wish, therefore, is that the greatest number of people will read this study so that they can make the most informed decision possible ahead of the great electoral event this May.

Julian Priestley

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of Directors of Notre Europe - Jacques Delors Institute*

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The European elections of 22-25 May 2014 will lead to the election of 751 MEPs (74 of them which from France), called on to represent some 507 million inhabitants. They represent a major democratic event for European citizens, and will be centred around three series of political issues.

1. MEPs exercising their powers within a partisan framework
 - European citizens are called on to directly choose the people who will embody the EU within the EP until 2019; they can also influence the choice of the next President of the Commission and the distribution of responsibilities within the College of Commissioners (pages 7 to 10).
 - The MEPs elected in May 2014 will have substantial decision-making powers (90% of EU legislative powers), powers that the current MEPs have used extensively. They will have to define the EU's contribution to resolving the crisis, the evolution of the EU's basic values (Euro, free movement, etc.) and the nature of its international interventions (trade, Russia, etc.) (pages 11 to 20).
 - The new MEPs are called on to join the 7 or 8 political groups (Christian-Democrats, Liberals, Socialists, Greens, Radical Left, etc.) that structure EP functioning and the content of its decisions, based on a logic of compromise (pages 21 to 29).
2. MEPs forming variable-geometry majorities

SinceBecause the MEPs do not have to support a government, they can form three types of "variable-geometry majorities", which is insightful to analyse

by presenting the votes cast by the French and European MEPs on about 20 key issues:

- “Consensus majorities” (almost 40% of votes analysed by VoteWatch Europe) including MEPs from most political groups, including the French FN and Left Front, on issues such as GMOs or the Financial Transaction Tax (pages 30 to 32).
- “Broad-coalition majorities” (almost 30% of votes analysed by VoteWatch Europe) mainly including MEPs from the EPP (UMP and centrists) and S&D (SP) groups, on relatively diverse issues such as the banking union, the EU budget and/or reform of the CAP (pages 33 to 36).
- “Confrontation majorities” (almost 30% of votes analysed by VoteWatch Europe) opposing MEPs from centre-right and centre-left coalitions, especially on economic, social and environmental issues such as transatlantic trade negotiations, the extension of maternity leave or the taxation of activities that pollute (pages 37 to 41).

3. New political balance of power between the future MEPs

- The balance of power in the new EP will be largely determined by the results of the eight countries with the highest populations in the EU (or “Swing States”) as well as through the relative evolution in scores in relation to 2009 (pages 42 to 43).
- Opinion polls carried out for the past six months indicate suggest that the EPP and S&D groups are significantly ahead (a little over 200 seats apiece), but also point to a particularly unpredictable tussle to decide which of the two groups will lead, with EPP losing ground and S&D gaining it (pages 60 to 61).
- Liberals and radical left could vie for third place, while Europhobic right and far-right formations should see a sharp increase in terms of seats, without however occupying a central place within the EP (pages 61 to 63).

- The balance of power between national delegations is set to evolve within the main political groups: for example, the British could become the largest delegation within the S&D group, the Poles the largest within the ECR group, whereas the French delegations within the EPP, S&D and Green groups are set to see a loss of influence (pages 64 to 67).
- A broad right-left coalition could occur for the nomination of the President of the Commission and its members, whereas variable-geometry coalitions with a more left-wing influence is set to form for all votes cast during the 2014-2019 period (pages 67 to 69).

It is ultimately the vote of Europeans that will determine the partisan balance of power, on the basis of which the content of EP's legislative and budgetary decisions will be defined, from 25 May 2014 onwards for the five years to come.

Yves Bertoncini
Thierry Chopin

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The European elections that will take place from 22-25 May next are an important democratic event for European citizens. In this context, this study, co-written by Yves Bertoncini and Thierry Chopin and published by Robert Schuman Foundation and Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, contains several extremely enlightening elements of information and analysis for the citizens invited to go to the polling booths.

The first part of this study firstly recalls the extent of powers exercised by the European Parliament (EP), the importance of political issues on which its members are requested to decide, but also the key role played by the political groups established within this institution.

The second part of this study presents the “variable-geometry majorities” that form within the EP, in relation to the issues put to the vote of the MEPs: “consensus majorities”, “broad-coalition majorities” and “confrontation majorities”, thanks to data provided by VoteWatch Europe. It clearly elucidates how the French and European MEPs voted in relation to their partisan beliefs, for the symbolic votes of the 2009-2014 parliamentary term.

Lastly, the third part of this study provides highly informative elements on the impact of the vote of 25 May next, based on available opinion polls, which predict a very indecisive struggle. It confirms that, given the proportional representation system in place, no political group will be able to take the majority of seats alone, and that majority coalitions will therefore continue to be formed. It also recalls that it is in relation to the balance of power established by the European voters on the evening of 25 May, that the content of decisions within the EP will be determined for the five years to come.

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