



FEPS

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**TEN OBSERVATIONS
ON THE OUTCOME
OF THE
2009 EUROPEAN ELECTIONS**

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This document was elaborated on the basis of contributions and comments from the different political foundations and think tanks members of FEPS

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1) Turnout and participation

Much of the post-election commentary in the media has focussed on the low turnout of 42.94%. However, this figure is in line with voting trends since 1979 and represents a stabilisation in voter turnout, albeit at a disappointingly low level. There were some exceptions, turnout increasing significantly in Denmark, Estonia and Latvia. Conversely, the most notable decrease took place in Cyprus, Greece and Lithuania.

2) Composition of the new parliament

The new parliament is not changed to any great extent but there has been a slight increase in fragmentation. The PES lost most heavily as its constituent parties in larger member states such as the UK and France suffered a deplorable election day. This could not be helped by the gains made in small states such as Ireland and Malta. The EPP managed to hold its ground as the largest group in the now enlarged parliament despite its member parties being in government in many states. This indicates that they have not been punished for the financial crisis by voters. ALDE had a relatively bad day, as with the PES, due to the poor performance by their members in the UK and France. The Greens, by contrast had an excellent election day while small populist, far-right parties also featured. There has been a notable increase in "Others" although it remains to be seen whether the Italian Partito Democratico will join the PES Group, potentially mitigating their losses.

3) Specific cases:

Generally speaking, all the left-wing parties who are in power at national level lost European Parliament representation (to varying degrees) while the same cannot be said for centre-right governments.

- a. United Kingdom: Severe losses for governing Labour Party which falls to third place on thirteen seats behind the Conservative Party and the UK Independence Party. Also, the far-right British National Party gained two seats for the first time. The Greens (SNP) and GUE (Sinn Féin) have also returned representatives. The concurrent local elections show Labour at their lowest ebb since the First World War.
- b. Germany: The SPD suffered its worst results ever at 21% while their partners in the Grand Coalition, the CDU, is still in first place but fell in percentage terms given Germany's increase in seats. The liberals of the Free Democrat Party almost doubled their vote to 11% while the Greens gained 12.1% and Die Linke (GUE) 7.5%. Votes lost by the SPD spread in several directions: 650,000 to the Greens and 550,000 to conservatives. More surprisingly, 330,000 SPD votes went to liberals while only 230,000 went to Die Linke. As such, the SPD suffered doubly through being in coalition government with the CDU and through not running an adequately European campaign. By contrast, the Free Democrats and the Greens both ran highly personalised and European campaigns and gained significantly through these efforts.
- c. France: Sarkozy's UMP Party emerged as the party with the greatest European representation (and 29 seats and 28% of the vote) which puts them in a position of considerable strength compared to the 14 seats each attained by the Socialists and the Greens. Of course, this is a fantastic result for Europe écologie under Daniel Cohn-Bendit, while the Parti Socialiste will have cause for worry. It was in France that Libertas gained their only seat while the far-right Front National received three.

- d. Hungary: The two EPP members held their own with Fidesz increasing from 14 to 15 and the small Conservative Party maintaining its single seat. The governing Socialists had a terrible day, reduced by more than half from 9 to 4 seats. Worryingly, a significant vote of 14.77% went to the extremist Jobbik Party who gained 3 seats.
- e. Poland: Civic Platform (EPP) had a particularly successful election, increasing from 15 to 25 seats while the Farmers' Party (3 seats) will also join the EPP. The constituent parties of the PES Group went from 8 to 7 seats. Meanwhile the Law and Justice Party (UEN) attained 15 seats at 27.4%, a sizeable increase from their 12.7% in 2004, but a drop in relative influence given the increased representation of Civic Platform.

4) Extremist and Eurosceptic parties

While 80% of representatives in the European Parliament sit with pro-European parties, thus fostering a significant consensus about the European project, the emergence of the far-right is a cause for concern. As mentioned earlier, Britain elected two BNP MEPs and 13 from UKIP, while far right representatives were also elected in Hungary, Austria, the Netherlands, Italy, Denmark, Slovakia and France. The threat of Libertas has been seen of in Ireland with Declan Ganley failing to win a seat and now promising to bow out of public life and, by proxy, the second referendum on the Lisbon Reform Treaty. The only Libertas candidate elected the French Eurosceptic Philippe de Villiers who had already sat in the European Parliament anyway.

It is worth noting, however, that many of the votes for populist, Eurosceptic and anti-immigrant parties came from what have traditionally been socialist and social democratic heartlands. As such, the centre right did not exactly *win* these elections. Rather, the centre left failed to appeal to its traditional base as extremists played on the fears that arise with increasing unemployment.

In addition, France and Germany saw gains for the far left.

5) The responsibility of the mass media

In the European political sphere, the broadcast and print media have, in many cases, abdicated their responsibility to provide coherent and analytical coverage on the European elections. Mostly, the media tended to focus on national issues, negating the fact that these elections go on to build an assembly that spans 27 states. It was noted that the BBC refused to put a link to the European elections on the front page of their site until the day before the elections there, focussing instead on the expenses scandal in the Westminster parliament.

However, unless politicians themselves include Europe in their national political discourse, European elections will remain secondary to national issues in the minds of political journalists.

6) Issues at stake at European level

Citizens will only turn out in large numbers to vote when they feel that elections have a real bearing on their lives. We need to be honest about Europe, indicating the increasing powers of co-decision that the European Parliament has gained *vis-à-vis* European legislation. It is doubtful that Europeans know the effect that the EP has had on such issues as workers' rights, gender equality and civil liberties. Furthermore, we need politicians within the member states to be honest about Europe too, rather than just using European legislation to suit the short term aims of the national parties. Until this is achieved, European elections will remain encumbered with poor turnout, anti-government protest votes, and frivolous or extremist parties.

7) The role of national parties

The project of putting together the original PES Manifesto showed the benefits of debating what socialists want to achieve in Europe. However, the manifesto itself was much influenced by national parties' interests at the conclusion of discussions prior to its adoption. Therefore, the manifesto failed to foster the feeling of something real and significant happening at European level. Interaction between national and PES campaigners is still limited and this relationship must be redefined in order to enhance left wing politics at a European level. For example, it ought to be possible to be a member of the PES without necessarily having joined a national party prior to this.

8) Strategy and personalisation

As other parties have started to use social-democratic programmes and messages in their campaigns, social-democrats currently face a serious identity problem. A successful European elections strategy has to be based on relevant policy platforms. Therefore, social-democrats should make their points clear and bring forward a real social-democratic message to show citizens what makes them different from other parties.

On the other hand, to make voters and the media interested in the European elections, they need strong personalities with whom they can identify. The personalisation of politics must be achieved both at European and national level. The PES need not be afraid to nominate a candidate as President of the European Commission and use it as a strong campaign element at the following elections. Successful MEPs from different member states should also get more visibility.

9) European election code

In order to shift the debate on European elections from a national level to a truly European level, concrete political action and legal changes also have to be done. Therefore, support should be given to creating a common European election code, which would determine one common European electoral system with the same Election Day all over Europe enhancing the symbolic aspect of voting as one European polity. This would include a transnational European candidacy list and constituencies. This is proposed so as to boost the citizens' participation in European elections, in the process making clear that this is not just another national election with national candidates and national subjects. The objective is to make the electorate feel that their vote can really make a difference at European level.

10) Strengthening the European project through the electoral process

The electoral process is a means of giving citizens ownership over their democracy. This was seen in the past through the extension of universal suffrage at national level. The twin fundamental objectives of the European project were that the peoples of the European Union would never go hungry and that they would never again go to war with one another. It now appears that there is a link missing between this great vision for Europe and the localised grassroots level of our democracy. As such, the shifting of the electoral process away from the boundaries of Europe's nation-states to units that link the vast European Union to its constituent parts will help to enhance European integration to the benefit of all its citizens.