

European Elections Under Scrutiny

Lessons for a European Democracy

Almut Möller

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Die zentralen Ergebnisse der Europawahlen lassen sich auf der Basis der offiziellen Parlamentsstatistiken leicht zusammenfassen: 43 Prozent Wahlbeteiligung in den 27 Mitgliedstaaten, ein neuer Tiefstand seit den ersten Direktwahlen zum Europäischen Parlament im Jahr 1979. Die europäischen Konservativen haben Sitze verloren, gehen aber erneut als stärkste Kraft aus den Wahlen hervor. Die Fraktion der Europäischen Volkspartei wird im neuen Parlament 265 der insgesamt 736 Sitze innehaben. Verloren hat auch die Fraktion der europäischen Sozialisten, die nun nur noch auf 184 Sitze kommt. Gewinne für die Liberalen (84 Sitze) und die Fraktion der Grünen (55 Sitze). Es wird eine neue konservative Fraktion mit 55 Sitzen geben, die European Conservatives and Reformists Group. Auch die kleinen Parteien gewinnen an Stimmen, darunter europa- und ausländerfeindliche Gruppierungen.

In den Medien wurden die Ergebnisse der Europawahl schnell abgewickelt: Verluste der Sozialdemokraten, Dominanz nationaler Themen, geringe Wahlbeteiligung, Stimmengewinne für die Europegegner und Ausländerfeinde, das waren die Schlagzeilen; erneut wurde europäische Krisenrhetorik bemüht. Weiterführend ist es jedoch, sich mit einigen elementaren Fragen zu beschäftigen: Gibt es inzwischen auch den ‚wirklichen‘ Europa-Wähler? Was wissen wir über ihn? Gibt die Europawahl Aufschlüsse über das Entstehen einer europäischen Demokratie? Welche Lehren können Europastrategen, Wahlkämpfer und Medien jenseits europäischer Gemeinplätze für künftige Europawahlen ziehen?

Von Nöten ist eine intensivere, mit statistischem Material unterfütterte Debatte zu diesen Fragen, wenn es mit der Demokratisierung der Europäischen Union tatsächlich ernst gemeint ist. (Ein Gesamtüberblick über die Europawahlen und die Ergebnisse nach Ländern finden sich unter http://www.elections2009-results.eu/de/index_de.html)

Overall Results of the European elections 2009

To sum up the main results of the European elections 2009: Just over 43 per cent of eligible voters across the 27 member states of the European Union went to the ballots between June 4-7, 2009. The turnout reached another record low since the first direct elections to the European Parliament in 1979. The European People's Party lost seats but will remain the strongest political group holding 265 of the European Parliament's 736 seats. Europe's Socialists will be represented with only 184 seats in the new Parliament. Both Liberals and Greens won seats compared to 2004 (Liberals: 84; Greens: 55). So did other smaller parties, including anti-European and xenophobic groups. There

will be a new conservative group by the name of *European Conservatives and Reformists Group* that will have 55 seats. It is certainly worth and necessary to look into further details of the new composition of the European Parliament, but these are the basic facts for now.

Political group	Number of seats	Score in %
EPP	265	36,0
S & D	184	25,9
ALDE	84	11,4
GREENS / EFA	55	7,5
ECR	55	7,5
GUE / NGL	35	4,8
EFD	30	4,1
NA	28	3,8

Limited Debate About the Election Results

In the immediate aftermath of the elections there has been to some extent a more in depth analysis of the results in the 27 member states. However, in an overall perspective, the topics discussed have been rather limited so far. Media and analysts have focused on four major

Legend:

EPP: Group of the European People's Party (Christian Democrats)
S & D: Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament
ALDE: Group of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe
GREENS/ EFA: Group of the Greens / European Free Alliance
ECR: European Conservatives and Reformists Group
GUE/ NGL: Confederal Group of the European United Left - Nordic Green Left
EFD: Europe of Freedom and Democracy Group
NA: Non-attached
Source:
European Parliament, http://www.elections2009-results.eu/en/index_en.html as of 9th July 2009



aspects: The poor performance of the European Socialists, the dominance of national rather than European topics during the election campaign (“national vote”), the record-low turnout, the gains for eurosceptics and xenophobics. The post election analysis was not very energetic and only a few days after the elections they had already disappeared from the headlines. It is tempting to go back to business as usual fairly quickly now.

The new European Parliament will be perfectly able to operate, so from a cynical perspective one might argue: Why bother? If one is serious, however, about a more democratic Europe, there should be more attention paid to what *those* Europeans who actually *did* go to the ballots expressed precisely with their votes. Further assessments based on statistical evidence are perhaps in the making at the moment. They should be made part of a wider European debate on perspectives of democratisation of the European Union.

Learning Lessons For Europe’s Democracy

Generally speaking, the turnout of far less than 50 per cent and the fact that it has been decreasing ever since the first direct elections in 1979 constitutes a problem for European democracy. Whether this lack of interest in elections is a European problem or also applies to national and subnational elections is another question. That democracy means more than just holding free and fair elections every five years is yet another one.

The democratisation of the European Union can indeed take effect on many levels: For example, by establishing the European Parliament as a truly second chamber with equal rights to the Council of Ministers in European legislation (which will pretty much happen with the provisions of the Treaty of Lisbon), by giving more rights to national parliaments in the European legislative process, by giving the European Parliament the right

to vote the President of the European Commission into office instead of leaving it to Europe’s governments (which is unlikely to happen), by a growing European debate and the emergence of a European public sphere, by creating new instruments of participation (such as the European Citizens’ Initiative in the Treaty of Lisbon) – or by increasing the number of people that make use of their right to vote in the elections, ideally motivated by European rather than national topics. None of these suggestions are new to the European debate.

We have not learned the lessons from previous European elections.

One remembers vividly the discussion after the last European elections in 2004 that pretty much went along the same lines. However, it seems that we have not learned the lessons from previous European elections. Or maybe emerging trends have been overlooked so far because they are difficult to detect.

The European Electorate: The Big Unknown?

One of the major reasons for this is that we do not know enough about the European electorate yet. Or maybe statisticians actually DO know a lot about the European electorate, but their findings have not been filtered through sufficiently to European campaigners, media and strategists. The European electorate is complex. European citizens have different layers of (political) identity. From a methodological point of view, it is very challenging to set up a toolbox for analysing and assessing the outcome of a pan-European election involving 27 member states and some 375 million eligible voters. But have ana-

lysts tried hard enough? Have they asked the right questions? Have they managed to bring together the existing findings from the 27 member states in a systematic way?

Some very basic examples: The topics discussed in the aftermath of the elections so far (see above). Some of them are merely European common places, crisis rhetoric or extremist exceptions and do not reflect the majority of votes. But who are the voters that cast their vote and that constitute the majority of the 43 per cent? The ones that did not vote for anti-European or extremist parties? What or who made them go to the ballots? To what extent did they vote “national” – or “European”? Are they generally better informed about Europe? Do they express a general support of the European project when voting? Do they vote because they feel it is important not to waste an opportunity to use their democratic right to vote? Do they tend to vote because of specific interests, because of a particular topic or a face?

Apart from the always bored, the anti-Europeans and the xenophobic exceptions, what about the majority of the voters?

Rather than hearing about the always bored, the anti-Europeans and the xenophobic exceptions, what about the majority of voters in the European elections? Who are these people? Are they merely voting “national” as it is being suggested? To what extent are they also voting along European lines of discourse? To what extent are they voting because they are hoping to make a difference in European policies? It might sound naïve, but do

businesspeople, companies, traders, arguably those parts of European societies that have benefited the most from the European project with its liberalized markets so far, started to vote more than others because they have understood the power of the European Parliament in the common market legislation? Did the farmers across Europe go out to vote to find a lobby for their interests when the next European budget cycle is negotiated in 2012? Do Europeans living on borders with other countries think more "European" and therefore are more likely to go voting? Does the extent to which a country has benefited from EU membership have an impact? Are there any pan-European patterns at all, or is the picture diverse, incomprehensible, like a patchwork, and differs from country to country? How are the findings in each member state being linked with each other? Is a pan-European election dissection a mission impossible? Where is it happening and how can it be brought to the forefront?

**Statisticians, Analysts, Media:
Do Your Jobs Properly!**

As the new Parliament is convening in Brussels these are the kind of questions and linkages that should be looked at more closely. Many of these questions can perhaps be answered easily in a broad brushed manner without any further statistical evidence. But it would give new insight to know it more precisely. To find out little surprises and emerging trends. These questions should be raised more, and go beyond the small circle of European researchers working on election statistics or the emergence of a European public sphere.

Analysts and journalists should beef up their analyses with this statistical evidence to trigger a debate that goes beyond the common stereotypes that one seems to have accepted as sufficient. The lukewarm reception of the European election results in the media, a certain lack of motivation to really penetrate the

outcome of this year's European election by analysts, the quick return to business as usual – they are all problematic. One should not blame the majority of voters who, because of a lack of orientation or a general lack of interest in politics, stayed at home.

One should rather be critical toward the ways that these and previous election results have been dealt with so far. It can pay off to look more closely at the election results in the weeks and months to come and try to dissect them. New territory is waiting to be discovered and this process has only just started.

Therefore:

- ★ To statisticians, polling stations and analysts across Europe: Leaving aside the "national", the "anti" and the extremist votes, what do the "European" (or partially European) votes tell us? Did you find evidence for emerging European topics and public spheres in the 2009 elections?
- ★ To spin doctors, PR people and campaigning professionals: How do you take stock of the 2009 campaign? What have you learned for future European campaigning? How will you build up candidates that are able to address an audience beyond their national borders? How do you deal with the silent majority of non-voters?
- ★ To the media: Will there be more European reporting on television, radio and in the newspapers? Have your headquarters taken the structural decisions already and is it only a question of time until we feel more of the impact? How will you organize your team of European correspondents for the next round of this giant cross-border event, the second biggest democratic elections in the world (after India)? How do you train your journalists to be able to identify and research trans-national topics related to complicated European legislation and explain them to the public?

★ To Europe's strategists: Do you see that the remaining structural weaknesses of the European Parliament will be addressed? Above all, will European governments ever decide to give the European Parliament the right to vote the President of the European Commission into office? (In many ways that would be a remedy against the lack of drama of the European elections) If this is not to be expected, what does it mean for European democracy? Do we put up with low election results in the future? Do we go back to a stronger representation of national members of parliaments and give the idea of a European Senate a try, as recently being brought up again by the London-based Centre for European Reform?

★ To Europe's citizens: Why did you go voting, or decided to stay at home? If you are dissatisfied with the ways you can make your voice heard in the elections, where are your initiatives for Europe? Why not make use of the instrument of a European Citizens' Initiative, as foreseen by the Treaty of Lisbon? It can't be that difficult to mobilize a cross-border number of one million Europeans to draft a legislative initiative.

Analysts and journalists should beef up their analyses with statistical evidence to trigger a debate beyond stereotypes.

These are some of the questions that should be discussed in the aftermath of the 2009 elections. Generally speaking, the debate on the European Union since the turn of the millennium has been poor. Contrary to the dynamic that is surround-



ing the European continent in many parts of the world, Europeans seem to stand still.

After the disappointing outcome of the 2009 elections one might now come to the conclusion that Europeans have been too ambitious, that they are not ready for a European democracy yet, or that they will never get there. But proper answers can only be given once we know more about the voters' motivations and behaviour. Therefore, it is time to take stock now: Have the right questions about the European elections and European democracy really been asked yet? And have they been discussed sufficiently? Here, the European elections 2009 are yet another wake up call.

Almut Möller is an Associate Fellow at the AIES.

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Schlossgasse 6
A-2344 Maria Enzersdorf
ph. +43 (0)2236 411 96
fax +43 (0)2236 411 96-9
e-mail: office@aies.at
www.aies.at

Layout and Printing:
Magoo Events & Marketing
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