

# WebMemo



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## European Elections 2009: Rising Disillusionment with the EU

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This weekend's EU-wide elections for the 736-seat European Parliament generated the lowest turnout in the legislative body's 30-year electoral history.<sup>1</sup> Less than 43 percent of approximately 375 million eligible voters went to the polls.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the low turnout, center-right parties across Europe—especially in France, Germany, Spain, Italy, and Britain—were the biggest winners. The rise of fringe parties, including several extremist parties, was another notable trend. Overall, the European electorate sent a clear message of dissatisfaction with the European project and opposition to further European integration.

**Results.** Center-right parties in four of the EU's largest member states—France, Germany, Italy, and Spain—either maintained course or improved their electoral performances. These parties will form the largest parliamentary grouping, the European People's Party (EPP), with total membership projected at 264 MEPs.<sup>3</sup> Incumbent parties at the national level in President Sarkozy's France, Chancellor Merkel's Germany, and Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's Italy outperformed their main rivals by a large margin.

- In France, the EPP gained 13 additional MEPs from Sarkozy's UMP party to return 29 members in total, while the Socialist grouping in the European Parliament lost 14 French members to return just 14 MEPs in total.
- In Germany, 42 CDU-CSU MEPs will take their seats with the EPP, compared to 23 German SPD MEPs joining the Socialists.

- In Italy, the EPP will have 35 members, and it remains unclear whether any Italian MEPs will join the Socialists in the 2009–2014 Parliament.
- In Spain, the ruling Spanish Socialist Workers' Party of Prime Minister Zapatero garnered a lower share of the national vote (39 percent) compared to the Popular Party (42 percent) and will return 21 MEPs to the Socialist Grouping, compared to 23 Spanish MEPs joining the EPP.<sup>4</sup>

The results in Germany bode especially well for Angela Merkel, who will face off against her Social Democratic Foreign Minister and Vice Chancellor, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, in federal elections this September. She enjoyed 31 percent of the national vote in comparison to the SPD's 21 percent, their worst national electoral showing since 1945.<sup>5</sup>

**A Repudiation of European Integration.** Despite contradictory statements from his vice president, European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso described the European Parliament elections as a “victory for [the] European project.”<sup>6</sup> This astonishing statement demonstrates that EU leaders are out of touch with the general mood among European electorates. In fact, the three most notable trends of these elections were:

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1. The lowest turnout for European elections since their inception;
2. The election of parties committed to bucking the federalist status quo and forming a new parliamentary grouping dedicated to an EU of nation-states; and
3. The election of fringe and extremist parties.

**1. Disinterest and Disenchantment.** The European public was, on the whole, hugely disinterested in these Europe-wide elections. Since 1979, participation in European Parliamentary elections has gradually decreased from 62 percent in 1979, to 57 percent in 1994 to less than 43 percent in 2009. This number is also inflated by countries where voting is legally compulsory such as Belgium. In Slovakia, participation fell below 20 percent (to 19.64 percent). In other recently acceded member states—including the Czech Republic, Lithuania, Slovenia, Romania, and Poland—turnout did not even reach 30 percent.<sup>7</sup>

Where voters did participate, there was widespread disillusionment. Pre-election indicators showed that EU issues were of very little concern to voters, and even where these issues were important, voters have become more hostile to further European integration.

For example, when asked what the electoral theme of the campaign should be, just 10 percent said “European Values and Identity,” compared to 57 percent of respondents who were concerned

with unemployment. Only 12 percent of respondents were interested in the “powers and competences of European institutions,” compared to 45 percent of respondents who were worried about economic growth. Fifty-nine percent did not believe that the European Parliament deals with their problems, and 61 percent did not believe that their vote would change anything. Of the 25 EU member states surveyed, more than half had a neutral or negative image of the EU.<sup>8</sup>

Eighteen percent of respondents said that they would not vote because they were hostile to the construction of a European superstate.<sup>9</sup> However, many millions did vote specifically against the European project. For example, the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), whose main election platform advocates Britain’s withdrawal from the European Union, beat the governing Labour Party into third place to secure 13 MEPs with 16 percentage of the national vote.

**2. A New Conservative Parliamentary Grouping.** The British Conservative Party, led by David Cameron, secured a crushing defeat of Gordon Brown’s governing Labour Party. In fact, Labour suffered their worst election results since 1918, being forced into third place behind the Conservatives and UKIP. The commitment of the Conservative Party to holding a referendum on the discredited Lisbon Treaty—the only mainstream national party to do so in the U.K.—gained traction with the British electorate, who have grown

1. The outgoing European Parliament had 785 seats. The incoming Parliament was reduced to 736 seats.
2. European Parliament, “Election Results: Towards the New Parliament,” June 8, 2009, at [http://www.elections2009-results.eu/en/index\\_en.html](http://www.elections2009-results.eu/en/index_en.html) (June 9, 2009).
3. BBC News, “European Elections 2009: EU Results,” at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/bsp/hi/elections/euro/09/flash/html/eu.stm> (June 9, 2009).
4. European Parliament, “Results of the 2009 European Elections,” at [http://www.elections2009-results.eu/en/new\\_parliament\\_en.html](http://www.elections2009-results.eu/en/new_parliament_en.html) (June 9, 2009).
5. *Ibid.*
6. Clive Leviev-Sawyer, “European Parliament Elections ‘Victory for European Project,’” *Sofia Echo*, June 8, 2009, at [http://www.sofiaecho.com/2009/06/08/732475\\_european-parliament-elections-victory-for-european-project-barroso](http://www.sofiaecho.com/2009/06/08/732475_european-parliament-elections-victory-for-european-project-barroso) (June 9, 2009).
7. European Parliament, “Turnout at the European Elections (1979–2009),” at [http://www.elections2009-results.eu/en/turnout\\_en.html](http://www.elections2009-results.eu/en/turnout_en.html) (June 9, 2009).
8. European Parliament, “Results of the 2009 European Elections: Pre-Election Survey,” at [http://www.elections2009-results.eu/en/surveys\\_en.html](http://www.elections2009-results.eu/en/surveys_en.html) (June 9, 2009).
9. *Ibid.*

increasingly hostile to the centralization of power in Brussels.

In July 2006, Cameron also committed to forming a new parliamentary grouping after the 2009 European elections, one dedicated to free markets and a model of European governance that protects national sovereignty. Under previous arrangements, the Conservative Party was a member of the EPP-ED, a committed Euro-federalist party that is supportive of a supranational EU. In coalition with the Czech ODS Party (with nine MEPs) and the Poland's Law and Justice Party (with 15 seats), the Conservative Party will now seek partners from additional countries to form the new "European Conservatives" grouping.<sup>10</sup>

### 3. Fringe Parties and Extremists Gain Ground.

The election of two MEPs from the UK's British National Party (BNP) sent shockwaves throughout Europe. The neo-fascist BNP, whose constitution restricts membership on ethnic grounds,<sup>11</sup> is widely regarded as an extremist party that opposes immigration into the United Kingdom.<sup>12</sup> Jobbik, a Hungarian party with its own paramilitary wing and closely allied with the BNP, also won three seats.<sup>13</sup> Other parties classified as "far-right" made gains in Austria, Italy, and Romania, leading to speculation

of an extremist grouping in the European Parliament that will have access to increased parliamentary allowances.

Green parties increased their total number of MEPs from 43 to 53, as well as their Europe-wide share of the vote from 5.5 percent to 7.1 percent.<sup>14</sup> France was of particular note, where 14 MEPs will sit in the Green's European Free Alliance.

**The EU Needs to Listen.** The disenchantment of the electorate with the European project was demonstrated through non-participation in the 2009 European elections and the elevation of parties opposed to further European integration. The Lisbon Treaty, which proposes to significantly centralize power in Brussels, was rejected in Ireland by popular referendum, having already been rejected in its prior constitutional form in France and Holland. European leaders must now heed the growing momentum in favor of an EU of sovereign nation-states.

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10. Under Parliamentary rules, 25 MEPs from seven member states can form a bloc within the European Parliament and access increased funds as a collective group.
  11. Constitution of the British National Party, Ninth Edition, September 2005, at <http://bnp.org.uk/Constitution%209th%20Ed%20Sep%202005.pdf> (June 9, 2009).
  12. Fiona Hamilton and Russell Jenkins, "Elections—BNP Wins Its First Seats in European Parliament," *The Times*, June 8, 2009, at <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/politics/elections/article6452563.ece> (June 9, 2009).
  13. Jerome Taylor, "Griffin Tries to Build Extremist Bloc in Europe," *The Independent*, June 9, 2009, at <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/griffin-tries-to-build-extremist-bloc-in-europe-1700174.html> (June 9, 2009).
  14. *Ibid.*