

Elections without purpose: understanding the European Parliament elections of 2009

Written by Mark N. Franklin

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MARK N. FRANKLIN, JUN 18 2009

The elections are over, and again the pundits are lamenting the low turnout of European citizens at their parliament's elections. These elections have again provided Eurosceptics with apparent evidence of lack of public support for Europe – no matter that European Parliament (EP) elections provide, if anything, greater opportunities for Eurosceptic votes than for supportive votes, for reasons I will explain.

To my mind the greatest surprise at any EP election is not how many people stay at home but how many people vote. A turnout rate of over 40 percent is amazing at an election with no discernable purpose. At elections to the European Parliament, Europeans are essentially asked to vote 'because it is there.' The parties they are exhorted to vote for are national parties that make virtually no effort to take a stand on any European issue. Do any of them suggest that a vote for them is a vote for a more inclusive Europe? A more compassionate Europe? A Europe with a more coherent foreign policy? Or anything else about Europe? They do not. These elections are fought by parties who treat them as opportunities to show their vote-getting powers as though that was the be-all and end-all of the whole exercise: more votes grow more hair on your chest; fewer votes are humiliating. Nothing to do with Europe at all.

But voters are not fools. They can tell that these are elections without purpose. At such elections there are three reasons that might lead someone to vote. One is compulsion. A law that makes absenteeism illegal, even if penalties are seldom or never applied, brings people to the polls. A second is party loyalty. "Don't let us be humiliated" is a plea that resonates with some. A third is the opportunity to make a statement or send a message by voting differently than one would do in an election at which real power was at stake. So voters can vent their frustration with government parties or support untried extremists (including eurosceptic parties) who would never receive so much support in an election with real consequences. Or, as at this election, they can show their support for parties of the right that, they apparently think, have been unfairly pilloried for the world's economic woes.

This swing to the right is a surprising outcome of these elections that will be consequential for the European Parliament and perhaps for the commission that it invests, but voters did not know this when they voted since this was not the platform on which any party campaigned for votes. So it was not their intention to bring about this outcome.

And what about the low and apparently declining turnout? Declining turnout would be hardly surprising as Europeans slowly come to realize the supreme pointlessness of these elections. However, the second surprise of these elections is that turnout, in countries that were members of the EU in 2004, is no lower. It is just the same. The supposedly lower turnout comes from the incorporation into the EU of two additional low turnout countries (Bulgaria and Roumania) which, like other post-communist countries, have not been democracies for long enough for voters to have developed the sorts of loyalties to parties that would produce a response when party leaders call for support.

Previous turnout declines can similarly be accounted for by changes in the composition of the EU rather than by changes in the behaviour of EU voters. The behaviour of voters themselves has hardly changed over the thirty years of European Parliament elections. Today, as at the first EP elections in 1979, they are not given the chance to direct the course of public policy in Europe, and so they vote on other grounds – grounds vary from voter to voter. This

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makes it possible for pundits with an axe to grind to read their own interpretations into the results, as we have seen this past week.

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