

Brexit and the 2019 European Elections

Written by Patrick Bijsmans

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PATRICK BIJSMANS, NOV 9 2018

Although the 2019 European elections are still over half a year away, we have seen a flurry of activity across Europe and regular media coverage of these activities. This ranges from the potential new alignment of parties in European Parliament, to the floating of names for top EU positions.

Brexit plays a role in this in two ways.

First, 73 British members will soon be leaving the European Parliament. There already has been a decision on what to do with these vacant seats. More interesting is what this will mean for different party groups. The European Conservatives and Reformists, in particular, will lose a large chunk of its membership. But other groups will see quite a few members leaving too.

Second, Brexit has given Eurosceptics across Europe the feeling that the tide is on their side – even though their results in recent national elections have been mixed (to say the least). This feeling of euphoria is not limited to the likes of Marine Le Pen and Geert Wilders. Viktor Orbán has gradually become even more vocal in terms of his criticism on ‘Brussels’, as is the case for parties such as the 5 Star Movement in Italy.

What could this mean in light of the 2019 European elections?

The European elections have long been characterised by a strange paradox: while its powers have gradually increased with the aim of strengthening its democratic standing, voter turnout has been going down since the first direct elections in 1979. In 2014 the European Parliament coined the phrase “this time it’s different”, implying that there really was something at stake in the elections (think *Spitzenkandidaten*, Euro crisis, etc.), but to no avail.

Yet, the 2019 elections may really become quite different. Not because of the *Spitzenkandidaten* (who knows Martin Weber or even Alexander Stubb, really?), but rather because of the realignment of political groups. There has been movement on several fronts. Italy’s 5 Star Movement is expected to launch a new pro-European, anti-establishment group after Christmas. Also, European movement Volt is aiming to disrupt traditional politics with a very pro-European message.

Despite such developments, at the moment we see two main camps emerging: a progressive, pro-European movement and conservative, Eurosceptic movement. This actually may increase the chances of these elections actually tying in with what’s really on voters’ minds. Namely, are you for or against the EU and further integration? While this, arguably, is not what these elections should be about (why not discuss different policy options, as the main groups have always argued for?), this is how they have been framed in mediated public debates.

On the one hand, although still within the christian democratic group himself, Victor Orbán’s flirt with ‘illiberal democracy’ may be attractive to other parties, in particular those who are part of the European Conservatives and Reformists group and are in danger of losing their ‘home’ (and, hence, funding, speaking time, and other resources). The Polish Law and Justice Party could be tempted into joining forces with Orbán, but perhaps even some of the other Eurosceptic parties in parliament may be willing to join. Together they may form a force for less integration and more sovereignty for the member states.

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On the other hand, French president Emmanuel Macron is making steps towards setting up a progressive, pro-European movement. This may be an attractive option for the Liberals – see Verhofstadt’s wheeling and dealing – but also for Green parties across Europe – with Daniel Cohn-Bendit already a prominent campaigner in Macron’s camp. It is within these two groups that, today, we find some of the more pro-European politicians, not in the social democratic and Christian democratic groups. In fact, during several recent national elections the Greens have emerged as a progressive alternative to populist parties.

In other words, the 2019 European elections may finally get to see the polarised debate between pro-European and Eurosceptic politicians that is normally mostly only framed as such in the mediated public debate. And while this may not be the politicisation that some would like to see, it may be exactly this debate that is needed in times of Brexit, Italian budget rows, and Trump’s seeming willingness to break down the international order. The time for muddling through seems to have come to an end and a democratic vote is the right way to decide what to do next. Are we going to combat these challenges together? Or do we want national governments to do the work on their own, in ‘splendid isolation’?

About the author:

Dr. Patrick Bijsmans is Assistant Professor in European Studies at Maastricht University. His research interests include Euroscepticism, media coverage of EU affairs and the European public sphere, as well as issues related to teaching and learning in European Studies. Patrick teaches BA and MA courses in European Studies, covering topics such as EU politics and academic research and writing skills. He also coordinates the teacher training trajectory of the university’s Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences.