

# Excluding the growing camp of Eurosceptics from the EU's corridors of power could prove fatal in the long run

[blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2014/08/04/excluding-the-growing-camp-of-eurosceptics-from-the-eus-corridors-of-power-could-prove-fatal-in-the-long-run/](http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2014/08/04/excluding-the-growing-camp-of-eurosceptics-from-the-eus-corridors-of-power-could-prove-fatal-in-the-long-run/)

04/08/2014

*The 2014 European Parliament elections saw an unprecedented level of support for Eurosceptic parties.*

**Oliver Treib** writes that the Eurosceptic vote cannot be dismissed as a short-term protest against unpopular governments. Instead, he argues that fundamental worries about the effects of EU policies and general dissatisfaction with mainstream politics lie at the heart of the Eurosceptic success. The selection of Jean-Claude Juncker as President of the Commission suggests that Eurosceptics, despite their considerable electoral support, will continue to be excluded from the EU's corridors of power. This provides the ideal breeding ground for an even stronger Eurosceptic backlash in five years' time.



In the recent European Parliament elections, more voters than ever cast their votes for political parties that advocated radical reforms of the EU, campaigned for an exit of their countries from the EU, or even pushed for scrapping the whole project of European integration altogether. Eurosceptic parties won seats in 23 out of 28 member states. The French [Front national](#), the [UK Independence Party \(UKIP\)](#), the [Danish People's Party](#) and the Greek party [Syriza](#) even topped the polls in their respective countries. Taken together, more than 28 per cent of all Members of the European Parliament belong to a Eurosceptic party. This is a significant increase compared to the previous European Parliament, where Eurosceptics had taken less than 20 per cent of the seats.

## More than just a protest vote

How can the surge of votes for Eurosceptic parties be explained? Available survey data from France and the UK lends some support to the second-order election theory, which argues that voters use European elections as an opportunity to express their dissatisfaction with the government of the day. More important than short-term protest, however, was fundamental discontent with the EU and disenchantment with mainstream politics.

In France, a survey taken immediately after the election found that [63 per cent](#) of *Front national* voters wanted to express their opposition to the Socialist president François Hollande and his government. At the same time, most *Front national* voters shared [hard Eurosceptic attitudes](#), agreeing that French membership in the European Union is a bad thing, that France should exit the Eurozone, and that the project of European integration should be scrapped altogether. And an overwhelming majority of [75 per cent](#) of *Front national* voters said that their vote was an expression of dissatisfaction with the way the EU is currently run.

In the UK, the main reason for UKIP's success was clearly opposition to the EU. In a post-election survey, [79 per cent](#) of UKIP voters said that their party's stance on the EU played a major part in their decision to opt for UKIP. In a survey taken shortly before the election, [a majority](#) of UKIP supporters pointed to EU-related issues as the most important reason underlying their party choice: 39 per cent of them said that they planned on voting for UKIP since they were unhappy with the UK's membership in the EU, and 22 per cent argued that they favoured UKIP since they were worried about immigration. This data corresponds to the two main issues in UKIP's election campaign: putting an end to 'uncontrolled' immigration from Eastern European member states and regaining national sovereignty by ending the UK's membership of the EU.

Support for Eurosceptic parties was also driven by public dissatisfaction with mainstream politics. Both the *Front national* and UKIP traditionally run on populist, anti-establishment platforms, pinpointing the will of 'the people' against the egoistic motives of a corrupt political elite and advocating quick, direct forms of democratic decision-making as an alternative to the long and complex decision modes of representative democracy. These programmatic

stances, combined with the straight-talking, down-to-earth appearances of their leaders, Marine Le Pen and Nigel Farage, appeal to voters who feel disenchanting with mainstream politics.

In France, [survey evidence](#) shows that individuals who were dissatisfied with their personal situation in society and who were convinced that society needs to change radically were highly overrepresented among *Front national* supporters. At the same time, the typical *Front national* voter neither trusted the political left nor the traditional parties of the political right to guide the country. In the UK, a significant proportion of UKIP voters showed deep disaffection with mainstream parties as well. In a post-election poll, [62 per cent](#) of UKIP voters said that unhappiness with all established political parties played a large part in their electoral choice.

There are good reasons to believe that a combination of anti-EU and anti-establishment sentiments also underlay the success of Eurosceptic parties in other countries. It seems plausible to assume that part of the support for other right-wing Eurosceptic parties in the affluent Northern countries also had its roots in anxieties related to immigration from poorer Eastern European member states.

Given the high salience of the Eurozone crisis in many countries, we can also expect that an important part of the Eurosceptic vote across Europe was motivated by opposition to the crisis-related policy decisions many voters associated with the EU. On the one hand, public discontent with the austerity policies implemented in the crisis countries is likely to have spurred the surge of support for left-wing or centrist Eurosceptic parties in Greece, Spain, Portugal, and Italy. On the other hand, fears of high financial risks associated with credit guarantees for the struggling South are likely to be among the main driving force behind the success of moderate-right Eurosceptic parties in Germany or Finland.

Likewise, not only UKIP and the *Front national* will have profited from populist and anti-establishment sentiments. Leaders like Alexis Tsirpas in Greece, Beppe Grillo in Italy, or Geert Wilders in the Netherlands all seem to attract part of their support from people who are fed up with the 'all talk, no action' style of conventional politicians, and they all bolster their populist appeal by favouring direct, plebiscitary forms of political participation over the procedures of representative democracy.

### **The perils of excluding Eurosceptics from power**

All of this suggests that Eurosceptic parties are here to stay. Yet, they are likely to be excluded from the corridors of power in the EU. Although they have won 28 per cent of the seats in the European Parliament, they are unlikely to play a major role in EU policy-making over the next five years. The European Parliament is still dominated by a wide majority of pro-integrationist parties, and it is likely that most decisions in the parliament will continue to be taken with the support of an informal grand coalition of Socialists and Christian Democrats, sometimes joined by either the Liberals or the Greens.

The vast majority of Eurosceptic parties do not play a role in the formation of the European Commission. After overwhelming majorities in the European Council and the European Parliament have selected Jean-Claude Juncker as the next Commission President, the stage is set for a politician to take control of the EU's executive who many Eurosceptics consider the incarnation of federalist pro-integrationism and traditional 'behind-closed-doors' decision-making. Since only one (soft) Eurosceptic party, the British Conservative Party, holds a prime minister position in a domestic government, moreover, almost all Commissioners are likely to come from mainstream pro-EU parties.

Eurosceptic voters across Europe will thus have to learn that their votes left no imprint on the formation of the Commission and that the parties they voted for will be side-lined in everyday decision-making over the next five years. This scenario would be a most fertile breeding ground for an even stronger Eurosceptic, anti-establishment backlash in future elections. In light of this, it would have been wiser to select a Commission President who is less of a pro-integrationist figurehead than Juncker.

Even with Juncker at the helm, some Eurosceptic figures could be integrated into the College of Commissioners,

and the Commission could present a work programme for the next five years that signals to Eurosceptic voters that their concerns and fears are taken seriously at the European level. Judging from how political debates have evolved since the European elections, however, it is rather unlikely that the leaders of Europe's mainstream parties will go down the road of integrating, rather than excluding, Eurosceptic forces.

*This article draws on the author's recent paper in the [Journal of European Public Policy](#)*

*Please read our [comments policy](#) before commenting.*

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics. Feature image credit: © European Union 2014 – European Parliament (CC-BY-SA-ND-NC-3.0)*

Shortened URL for this post: <http://bit.ly/1qLZGAn>

---

### About the author

**Oliver Treib** – *University of Münster*

Oliver Treib is Professor of Comparative Public Policy Analysis and Research Methods at the University of Münster.

- 

