

Pro-EU politicians have so far failed to match the level of vision and imagination shown by Eurosceptics in the EP election campaign

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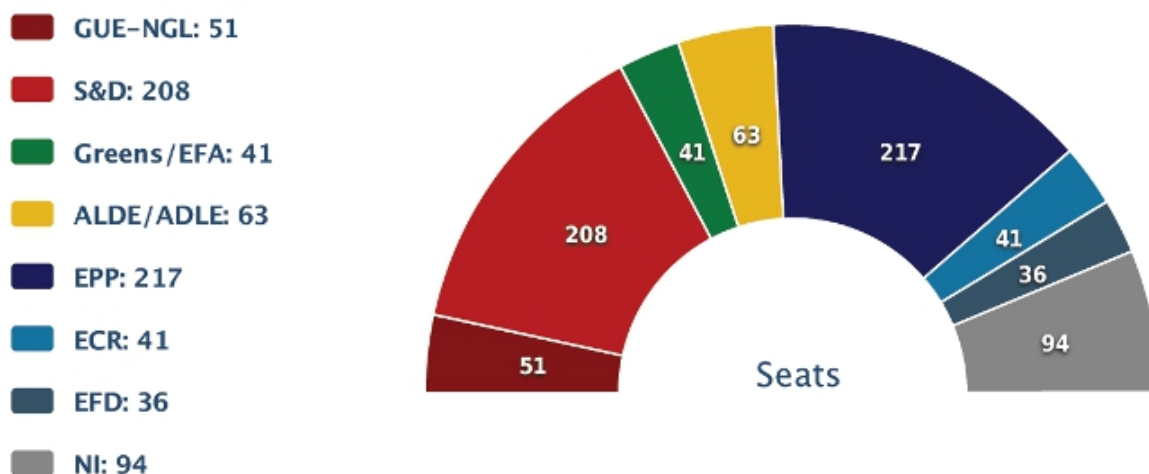
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The European Parliament elections on 22-25 May are expected to see a significant increase in support for Eurosceptic parties. **Inez von Weitershausen** writes that while this has been regarded by some commentators as a negative development, pro-EU politicians could also learn from the approach adopted by Eurosceptic leaders such as Nigel Farage. She argues that the one thing Eurosceptic parties have offered is a clear vision of the future of Europe and pro-EU politicians have an obligation to present the other side of the debate.



Most elections are about the question of who wins. A first look at the upcoming European Parliament elections also seems to suggest that the vital issue is whether the conservatives (European People's Party – EPP) or the social-democrats (Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats – S&D) will “make the race” and who will thus be most likely to present the new President of the European Commission. The latest [Pollwatch](#) predictions, shown in the Figure below, indeed suggest a close race, with the EPP currently holding a small advantage of nine seats.

Figure: Pollwatch seat prediction for the 2014 European Parliament elections



Note: Pollwatch prediction from 23 April. European Parliament groups are: [European United Left–Nordic Green Left \(GUE-NGL\)](#); [Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats \(S&D\)](#); [The Greens–European Free Alliance \(Greens/EFA\)](#); [Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe \(ALDE\)](#); [European People's Party \(EPP\)](#); [European Conservatives and Reformists \(ECR\)](#); [Europe of Freedom and Democracy \(EFD\)](#). NI refers to MEPs which are not attached to any group. Visit the [Pollwatch](#) website for full predictions.

Yet the arguably much more interesting question is not whether the group of Jean-Claude Juncker (EPP) or that of his competitor Martin Schulz (S&D) receives most votes. Both are middle-aged, male, well-known and EU insiders. Rather, it will be interesting to see whether the right-wing and Eurosceptic parties, which have recently gained

increasing importance at the national level, will be able to translate their influence to the European arena. In the context of the still on-going Eurozone crisis and increased doubts regarding the added value of Europe if it does not guarantee economic well-being, the vital question of the upcoming elections is hence not “who wins” but “who – and how many people – will care to vote at all?”

Parties such as UKIP, the Front National, Italy’s Lega Nord, the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), or Flemish Interest in the Netherlands are certainly not identical with regard to their traditions, objectives, or the extent to which they reject the idea of Europe. Nevertheless, they share an important feature: they are all able to attract a growing number of supporters with clear, simple messages, passionate rhetoric, charismatic leaders and professional organisation.

Against this background, the established and pro-European parties have to increasingly ask themselves how they can win back support for their cause. Some measures have already been taken. Juncker and Schulz have engaged in what could be identified as the humble beginnings of political campaigns. The parties have attempted to create more distinct images and positions for themselves, to develop an identity which crosses national boundaries and that can be communicated via campaign videos.

Yet the problem is that these steps have come late and half-heartedly, as political leaders still try to cater to two audiences at the same time: those who believe that Europe should be first and foremost a technical project, limited by national sovereignty and domestic politics, and those who believe that there is a bigger role for the EU to play. This inner conflict is not new. The ‘founding fathers’ of European integration also disagreed over how and to which objective the union should develop.

Yet the truth is that even though the Commission is not directly elected, there is no formal constitution and national interest groups remain vital actors in many policy fields, the EU is already a political reality, and its citizens form and express their opinions as they would in other elections. They react to domestic crises by punishing those who they consider responsible and by voting for those who promise them a better future. They are attracted by charismatic political leaders such as Nigel Farage, Marine Le Pen or Geert Wilders, who demonstrate passion for their cause and try to win support by mobilising all of the forces available to them. And they are no longer willing to cope with political leaders who do not sufficiently explain the added value of their project for today’s world. This is not to say that the arguments of peace and international understanding are less important today than they were nearly six decades ago, but they have to be combined with very clear messages about the costs and benefits for the European project in the 21st century.

Europe’s anti-EU parties are aware of this and have understood how to play their game: they address those topics which are relevant to their respective citizens, strategise about possible coalitions and provide voters with a clear idea of what Europe could (not) look like under their leadership: more national autonomy, fewer immigrants and a better economic position. It is time for the pro-European parties to do the same and demonstrate the other side of the coin, namely what the individual states would be left with if they gave up Europe: less global leadership in vital issues, restricted inter-cultural exchange and economies which will have to sustain themselves independently in an increasingly competitive international environment.

Juncker, Schulz and the EU’s other mainstream actors must outline, clearly and in no uncertain terms, what Europe is about, and they must listen and respond to citizens’ demands. Importantly, however, they also have to step up competition against each other in order to become more attractive for the voters who – despite widespread Euroscepticism – are willing to take part in political elections. For what is at stake is more than the question of who will win. These elections are about the future of Europe from 2014 onwards.

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