



Democracy after the European Parliament elections

Richard Youngs

As the dust settles from last month's European elections and the new Parliament begins its work, it is important to stand back from immediate political battles and assess the longer-term implications for European democracy.

The main election outcomes have now been comprehensively assessed. The EPP and S&D lost seats to far-rights populists, the Liberals and the Greens. For the first time, the two biggest party blocs will not together command a majority. Rightist populist parties made gains overall, but not as much as many feared. Turnout increased to 50.5%, the highest since 1994.

With very different directions of change across different European countries, the results do not lend themselves to any single reading and were not entirely decisive. In some countries the far-right gained, in others it lost ground. In some the left rose, in others it fell. In some the mainstream parties collapsed, while in others they retained their predominance. For some observers, the headline is that far-right populists made gains; for others, it is the apparent cresting of the populist wave.

Naturally, most commentary has focused on who is up and who is down; on the shifting balances between and within party blocs; and especially on what the results mean for the divvying up of EU leadership posts. But what do the elections mean in a deeper sense for the quality of European democracy? What do the changes they usher in mean for democracy in a more structural sense?

This is ultimately a more important question than immediate shifts in parliamentary arithmetic or who gets which top job – yet it is, of course, not an issue that lends itself to much media attention. Indeed, the question of the new Parliament's democratic impact is complex and difficult to determine. It could be either negative or positive – and either significant or



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negligible. The overall impact on democratic quality is likely to be *conditional*. That is, it will depend on how a number of factors evolve over time.

Reactions to fragmentation

Three issues are likely to be important. A first factor will be the impact of fragmentation – as the centre-right and centre-left will not hold the majority of seats in the next European Parliament, building sufficient support for particular policy proposals and positions will require agreement among a larger number of parties and blocs.

Some commentators paint this fragmentation as damaging, while others see it as more benign.¹ In fact, fragmentation is intrinsically neither good nor bad for democracy. Rather, its impact on democracy depends on how parties react to the wider dispersal of influence amongst party blocs.

The rise of the rightist bloc raises fears of many kinds – beyond the scope of this article. But solely in terms of democratic process, it might add some vitality and pluralism to EU debates. It could shake up the overly cosy dynamics of relations between the mainstream party blocs and even increase public interest in EU-level politics. Under certain circumstances, it could be a positive catalyst for democratic debate.

An end to the longstanding quasi-monopoly of the dominant party blocs might be seen as rather a good thing for democratic variety and renewal – after all, these blocs have hardly performed well in building strong democratic legitimacy among Europe's citizens. A wider range of citizen preferences might gain a more effective voice. An uncomfortable reality might be that the new Parliament could be good for democratic pluralism even if it is problematic for European integration.

However, this benign outcome of so-called fragmentation is not guaranteed. There is likely to be many a slip between fragmentation and healthy pluralism. Much will depend on how mainstream or what commentators usually label pro-European parties react to this fragmentation. If these parties react by pulling together even more tightly in a de facto 'pro-European' coalition, they will risk fuelling the very concerns that drive the illiberal-nationalist surge.

There are signs already that this is exactly what they are likely to do. With the EPP and Social Democrats no longer commanding a majority together, many are seeking a big-tent mainstream coalition among all the pro-EU parties extending from the EPP and S&D to both

¹ <https://www.economist.com/europe/2019/05/23/as-europe-votes-for-its-new-parliament-expect-more-fragmentation>; <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/may/26/a-fractured-european-parliament-may-be-just-what-the-eu-needs>

Liberals and, in particular, the Greens.² The parties have been intimating at a ‘pro-European hyper-coalition’³.

To some extent this is an understandable response, as a significant number of newly-elected MEPs now question some of the core liberal tenets of EU cooperation. But to many it will simply look like a widening of a prevailing elite consensus and continuation of status quo politics. While many feared that the elections could entirely upend EU politics, paradoxically the long-term problem may be that they do not shake up political patterns very much at all.

To avert this emerging situation would require a step change in the way EU politics is framed, around a more diverse set of policy deliberations rather than the polarised, pro- and anti-European rhetoric. Most recent debate has revolved around the one question of how many seats far-right populist parties would win, with substantive policy deliberation remaining scarce and perfunctory.⁴

The incentives for mainstream parties to contemplate such far-reaching change may now be relatively weak. Having framed the elections as a two-way fight over the soul of European integration between pro- and anti-European forces, the former have been minded in effect to declare victory and essentially carry on as before with what they see as clear vindication. But this reflects a low threshold for success. The risk of a far-right takeover was a straw man: for pro-Europeans to declare victory against something that was always unlikely to happen is a fairly shallow win.

The question is whether, over time and with deeper reflection, the pro-European parties might move towards a more nuanced – and arguably, more accurate – reading of the election results. They could conclude that voters seek a wider array of what they perceive to be real alternatives in EU debates about crucial policy challenges. This would involve the mainstream pro-EU parties working harder to improve their policy ideas and even incorporating the genuine concerns underlying populists’ support – like citizens’ feeling of estrangement from EU decision-making, for example.

Some observed⁵ the tentative emergence of a more pan-European style of democratic debate in the campaign – to the extent that debates in one member state informed discussions and coverage of the elections in other countries to a greater degree than in previous elections. A key question will be whether this develops further and serves to shape qualitative change. The mainstream bloc might function in a slightly more transnational way, but the question remains over whether the pro-EU parties will simply dig in to reinforce their very basic core positions or

² Manfred Weber calls for broad coalition: <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-eu-election-weber/centre-right-lead-eu-candidate-calls-for-broad-coalition-idUKKCN1SW0YW>

³ https://elpais.com/internacional/2019/06/07/actualidad/1559922677_522957.html

⁴ <https://www.politico.eu/2019-european-elections/>

⁵ <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2018/06/27/europe-up-for-grabs-looming-battle-lines-of-2019-european-parliament-elections-pub-76691>

be open to more nuanced debate about different kinds of EU reform that may not fit neatly into the 'more' versus 'less' Europe categories.

Populist evolution

Leading on from this, a second and counter-intuitive question is whether the new Parliament might force populists in directions that are actually healthy for democratic process.

At first glance, of course, the increased presence of populist parties can only seem bad news for democracy. A greater number of seats is now held by parties that are at least ambivalent towards many core values of political liberalism. Not all the parties that commentators routinely label as nativist or populist unequivocally threaten democratic values; but most do hold positions that sit uneasily with many of the liberal elements of European democracy. These parties are likely to find more traction in the new Parliament for their efforts to forward positions that could undermine the quality of liberal democracy across the continent.

The key issue then is whether the new Parliament subjects these parties to dynamics that are any more nuanced and benign than this. This might appear a remote possibility, but the outcome might just be more varied than assumed.

The point has been made many times that these parties now say they are not against the EU as such but want to reform the way the union works. Many think this position is disingenuous and that their nationalism will ultimately destroy the EU and break apart the fragile alliances of so-called patriot parties. With a more prominent position in the Parliament, the nationalist-populists may now be tested on this point. They will need to demonstrate that they have genuinely constructive and workable alternative visions for European cooperation that are not simply about the primacy of national interests.

One may disagree with these positions, but the populists could in fact foster deeper debate about the EU's future. Whether one agrees with it or not, their apparent preference for a more intergovernmental EU is a perfectly legitimate position to hold – even if other elements of their political agendas infringe what should be core, non-negotiable liberal values. After all, the EU has already been heading in an intergovernmental direction in recent years, at the behest of mainstream, non-populist parties and leaders.

One pre-election YouGov poll revealed that the supposed pro-European versus anti-European divisions around the EP elections were less defining than divisions between those satisfied with democratic systems and those not.⁶ If this is true, the Parliament's new configuration might best be interpreted as reflecting citizens' desire to see improvements in democratic process rather than as a cry to roll back European integration as such. And it is difficult to see how this

⁶ Summarised in I. Krastev, S. Dennison and M. Leonard, 'What Europeans really wanted: five myths debunked', ECFR, 2019, <https://www.ecfr.eu/europeanpower/unlock>

can be achieved without a more plural, inclusive and open-ended process of democratic debate.

The risk is that all populists' talk of alternative visions is simply a mask for their wanting simply to undermine European cooperation. A crucial question is whether a more plural and open-ended set of parliamentary debates could force clarity here. Populist parties will, for example, need to be pushed to show that they are genuine when they call for more direct democracy and that this is not simply a means to undercut core liberal rights.

In short, the new Parliament could coalesce into two blocs and a simplified pro-versus-anti EU debate, or it could spur a more plural and sophisticated debate on different integration models. Each side of the divide could take on board elements from the other or simply harden their own positions into a calcified inflexibility. The new party-bloc configurations could well lead to paralysis and to an overly simple binary debate, or, just perhaps, unleash more fluid debate over time – that would denote a better quality democratic process.

The broader democratic landscape

The third factor that will influence the democratic impact of the new Parliament relates to a broader set of political dynamics: how the European assembly relates or links up to other changes in democratic politics across Europe.

The mobilisation around these elections is encouraging and was much needed. The increased turnout will undoubtedly enhance the Parliament's democratic legitimacy. However, it is important to remember that this remains one relatively modest element in the overall state of play in European democracy.

Despite all the expectations around these elections, on its own the European Parliament can at best play a relatively modest role in shoring up and rejuvenating European democracy. For decades, analysts have stressed that its democratic role cannot be compared to that played by national parliaments in ensuring democratic accountability and responsiveness:⁷ European elections are regularly described as second- rather than first-order.

Despite all the press attention on the shifts in seats among party blocs, these changes are of relatively minor significance alongside the underlying structural features of the Parliament's democratic role. On this matter, commentary this time around may have swung from one extreme to another: previous elections elicited little interest because they were assumed not to matter much; but this year they have attracted extremely high levels of interest because so many politicians and commentators have framed them as a binary and existential battle for Europe's political soul.

⁷ <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1465116515588965>;
https://www.cer.eu/sites/default/files/publications/attachments/pdf/2011/wp491_eu_parliament-2253.pdf

But that battle still sits within an institutional structure in which the Parliament struggles to play a democracy-enhancing role to the full. The level of interest in the parties' respective rises and falls is a good sign for the gestation of a European public space. But now the danger may be of attaching rather too weighty an importance to such shifts. The increase in turnout is extremely positive, but the 50.5% figure remains well below average participation rates in national elections.

The key metric for assessing the Parliament's democratic value is whether these elections do anything to make EU policies more responsive to citizens' preferences. This has of course, long been the Achilles heel of the EU institutional set up, as the elections do not lead to an EU government clearly in the hands of the winning political ideology. Rather, European elections habitually lead into a well-worn path of coalition forming and a division of top jobs on the grounds of national, geographical, gender and party balance – that all ends up disconnecting inter- and intra-institutional politics from voter preferences. Some on the progressive side have made this point in the elections' aftermath, calling for more focus on policy substance – yet in practice, a very familiar pattern of horse-trading between states for senior jobs is already dominating proceedings.

Despite all the positives to emerge from these elections, the encouraging trends will only have a significant impact on the state of European democracy if they function as one element in a broader recasting of EU political processes.

The crucial factor is whether the new Parliament breeds a genuine push to develop a comprehensive plan for reforming European democracy. For this to take shape, it would need to work in tighter unison with efforts to strengthen national parliaments – and yet efforts to do so have withered in recent years⁸. It would also need to link up systematically with the battery of citizen assemblies that are proliferating across Europe.

For years, analysts have repeated the mantra that representative, direct, participative and deliberative democratic dynamics need to be more effectively combined – and for this to happen at the European, national and subnational levels – in order for European democracy to function more effectively and with greater popular legitimacy. Yet, although many politicians would agree in principle with such reasoning, in practice European elections have never fed into such reforms in any tangible fashion – as a truly comprehensive, joined-up and multi-level EU democratic reform agenda remains absent.

It must be asked whether the dynamism that surrounded these elections will lead to a more meaningful outcome this time. The crucial question then is whether the elections encourage qualitative change in the nature of EU democratic debate and a more holistic approach to political rejuvenation. Of course, these kinds of issues are complex and not dramatic, and they attract little media and political attention compared to the jockeying for EU leadership

⁸ See *Representative Democracy in the EU: Recovering Legitimacy* <https://www.ceps.eu/ceps-publications/representative-democracy-in-the-eu/>

positions. But ultimately they are far more consequential for the long-term future of European integration.

Conclusion

The question is whether the positive features of these elections develop into changes that signify a meaningfully positive impact on the quality of European democracy. Despite the consensus that these were the most consequential European elections ever, they might end up having little impact on democracy – far from being a disruptive game-changer. Increased coverage of the elections, including across borders, is encouraging but does not in itself lead into a gain in democratic quality if debates in the Parliament are framed as they have been in recent times. The quality of democracy is essentially about the qualitative features of EU debates and whether the Parliament better links itself to citizens, civil society and sources of national democratic channels.

The new Parliament brings with it a curious mix of democratic implications: a potential for healthy and even overdue democratic pluralism and turnover, but with more illiberal politics present as well. Pro-European parties can themselves be ambiguous on liberal democracy, while some EU-critical parties might have genuinely democratic ideas to offer. The balance of its impact on democracy will depend on factors that go well beyond the dividing out of senior posts or the precise shape of new coalitions in the Parliament. The overarching question is whether these elections force a ‘return to politics’, obliging nominally pro-EU mainstream parties to take into greater consideration the concerns driving populists and the populists to prove they are genuine when they claim to support a deepening of democracy and a benign reform of the EU.



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