

# European Parliament election results – our experts react

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*European Parliament elections were held from 22 – 25 May. We asked a number of experts to comment on the results and what the elections mean for individual countries across Europe.*

- [The Front National is now an equal player across the whole of France, and no longer merely a ‘nuisance’ to the mainstream](#) – Jocelyn Evans – University of Leeds
- [Farage’s world is an authoritarian fantasy](#) – Mary Evans – LSE Gender Institute
- [The most interesting development in Germany is the ascendancy of the Eurosceptic Alternative für Deutschland](#) – Kai Arzheimer – University of Mainz
- [Despite the headlines about Euroscepticism, the voice of those worst affected by the crisis is now louder. Could it be that a more sanguine reading of these electoral results is warranted?](#) – Iain Begg – LSE European Institute
- [Unlike the other radical right-wing parties in Europe, the Golden Dawn has managed to attract voters from across the party system in Greece](#) – Sofia Vasilopoulou, University of York, and Daphne Halikiopoulou, University of Reading
- [The EP election results will clearly have great implications for the political landscape in Europe](#) – Sara Hagemann – LSE European Institute
- [What we are witnessing is, in a sense, a reconstitution of a form of class politics](#) – Eric Shaw – University of Stirling
- [The reverberations of the Ukraine crisis in the Latvian domestic political debate certainly did not help Harmony in its bid to attract the Latvian leftist vote](#) – Licia Cianetti – University College London
- [The European election in Spain confirms the recession of two-party politics and the advancement of left Eurocriticism](#) – Juan Rodríguez-Teruel – University of Valencia
- [The elections in Hungary were a symbol of the population’s continued disappointment with the inability of the liberal-left opposition forces to unite](#) – Erin Marie Saltman

**The Front National is now an equal player across the whole of France, and no longer merely a ‘nuisance’ to the mainstream**

[Jocelyn Evans](#) is Professor of Politics at the University of Leeds

The [Front National’s](#) victory in last night’s election had been forewarned by most opinion polls, but the margin of victory over the [UMP](#) belied the commentaries that thought it would be a close race. The win builds upon the dress rehearsal of March’s municipal elections, where it was clear that the party had finally learnt how to target its resources and maximise electoral returns. Marine Le Pen and the party politburo have established the national presence that had escaped it for its previous 42 years.



With proportional election voting for MEPs in Brussels, rather than local government, an historically unpopular president, and an opposition still weakened from its post-incumbency in-fighting, the Front National’s momentum was always likely to see it exceed 20 per cent. But the critical threshold of defeating the UMP and François Hollande’s [Socialist Party](#) has finally been stepped over, demonstrating to the electorate that the party is now an equal player across the whole nation, and no longer merely a ‘nuisance’ to the mainstream with some local pockets of support.

The other parties have already portrayed this as the fault of an unpopular government, economic crisis and a 'distant' Europe. The FN, however, will argue that its support is a positive endorsement of its policies and leadership. With the size of support, as well as its consistency since Marine Le Pen's presidential performance in 2012, this will be a difficult argument to counter. Unsurprisingly, there is already talk of a Right-Far Right run-off in the 2017 presidentials. With another three years until that race, the FN's capacity to disrupt politics at home as well as in the European hemicycle is significant.

### **Farage's world is an authoritarian fantasy**

**Mary Evans** is Centennial Professor at the LSE, based at the Gender Institute



The gains made by UKIP in the recent local and European elections in the UK have been subjected to considerable attention, with an apparent consensus that those most attracted to UKIP are white, working class men of advanced years, those 'left behind' by social changes which range from deindustrialisation to gay marriage. No doubt this is true, but with it comes the problem of how to counter UKIP, how to reject emphatically its politics without demonising its supporters and without allowing Farage any of those moments of recognition and solidarity that underlie political allegiance. So whilst George Osborne says that he 'respects' Farage, the question is how to claim a space which refuses this respect for Farage and his policies without at the same time refusing respect for his supporters.

Three suggestions: the first is to assume that all voters ( and not just those opposed to Farage) are thinking people and thus repudiate and demonstrate the absurdity of all Farage's policies. Flat-rate taxation, for example, is an idea so absurd that, as the great Jane Austen of the banknotes says, the idea is barely worth rational opposition. But saying it is essential because not to do so allows Farage to be accepted as having a legitimate space in political debate.

Second, do not exhibit any sympathy for the idea that Farage represents 'ordinary' people or even worse the 'little man'. Rubbish: 'ordinary' people run our transport system, the NHS, our schools and much else and all these people spend their lives making a complex society work through collective engagements, based on acquired skills. It is therefore necessary to say that almost none of us except the certifiably insane wish to be anywhere near, for example, a hospital or an airline run by people who think 'rules' and 'regulation' are intrusive. Third, and finally, take this former point further and make it plain that the most humanly sympathetic and creative communities (be they institutions or towns and cities) are those accepting of difference. Make it, in short, clear that Farage's world is an authoritarian fantasy.

### **The most interesting development in Germany is the ascendancy of the Eurosceptic Alternative für Deutschland**

**Kai Arzheimer** is Professor of Politics at the University of Mainz



Following a ruling by the Federal Constitutional Court late in February, the 2014 European election was Germany's first contest without a nationwide five per cent threshold since 1949. As a consequence, seven very small parties, including Germany's oldest extreme right party, the National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD), have won a seat in the EP. While this is hardly game changing for the NPD, having a sitting MEP could provide an interesting twist if an attempted ban of the party in Germany goes ahead and they try to appeal that ruling in Strasbourg.

Otherwise, the result was broadly in line with expectations. Confirming their current marginal role, the Free Democrats (FDP), for decades the king makers in German Politics, lost roughly two thirds of their support and would not have been represented at all under the previous electoral system. The most interesting development in Germany is the ascendancy of the Eurosceptic Alternative für Deutschland (AfD). The party, which was founded only a year ago, garnered seven per cent of the vote. While this pales in comparison to the results of other Eurosceptics,

it is nonetheless the biggest national success for an outsider party since the late 1980s. Having seven freshly elected MEPs will provide a moral, political and financial boost for the party in the state elections that will be held in three of the Eastern states in August/September.

**Despite the headlines about Euroscepticism, the voice of those worst affected by the crisis is now louder. Could it be that a more sanguine reading of these electoral results is warranted?**

**Iain Begg** is Professorial Research Fellow at the LSE's European Institute



In addition to the high-profile matter of who should be appointed to its top jobs, the EU's policy agenda for the next year or two includes several very tricky issues which will test the ability of the EU's institutions to arrive at viable and satisfactory solutions. In particular, the reforms of economic governance in response to the euro crisis remain incomplete and will require difficult decisions about the underlying policy stance, burden-sharing among Member States, and the balance of power between the supranational and national levels. Many of the recent and prospective initiatives in this area, such as mutualisation of debt or the creation of additional fiscal capacities and powers to help with macroeconomic stabilisation, will deepen integration at a time when voters seems to want the opposite.

At first sight, therefore, the new European Parliament looks like a recipe for gridlock in decision-making. Not only is the traditional left-right division now overlaid by a more unpredictable division between Europhiles and Eurosceptics, but a clear message has also been sent to the elites that business as usual is no longer acceptable. Yet a more subtle interpretation could be that the procrastination and squabbling over second-order concerns cannot continue and that all the institutions need to look for more comprehensive and coherent solutions. Despite the headlines about Euroscepticism, the voice of those worst affected by the crisis is now louder. Could it be that a more sanguine reading of these electoral results is warranted?

**Unlike the other radical right-wing parties in Europe, the Golden Dawn has managed to attract voters from across the party system in Greece**

**Sofia Vasilopoulou** is Lecturer in the Department of Politics at the University of York. **Daphne Halikiopoulou** is Lecturer in Politics at the Politics and International Relations department at the University of Reading.



Radical right-wing parties have emerged as the main winners of the 2014 European Parliament elections. UKIP beat both its Labour and Conservative rivals in the UK, while in France the Front National topped the polls with 25 per cent and 25 MEPs. Radical right-wing parties came third in Austria, second in Hungary, and third in Greece, where the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn emerged as the third party with just over 9 per cent according to latest estimates.

Unlike the other radical right-wing parties in Europe, the Golden Dawn has managed to attract voters from across the party system in Greece. While the male, unskilled voters with low education opt for the party, support also derives from women, people of all ages, people of all educational backgrounds and those residing in more affluent constituencies. It is clear that in Greece it is not absolute deprivation, but expectation of deprivation, a deprivation caused by 'the enemies of Greece', that drives Golden Dawn's support. Despite the second order character of these elections, this may prove a destabilising longer-term trend.



**The EP election results will clearly have great implications for the political landscape in Europe**

**Sara Hagemann** is Assistant Professor at the LSE's European Institute

The EP election results will clearly have great implications for the political landscape in Europe – not just for the European Parliament, but also for politics at domestic level and for governments' EU positions going forward.



**What we are witnessing is, in a sense, a reconstitution of a form of class politics**

**Eric Shaw** is Senior Lecturer in Politics at the University of Stirling

The big news from the UK is, of course, UKIP's triumph. For some Labour commentators the rise of UKIP has been a ray of light in a rather sombre sky as it promises to splinter the right-wing vote. This was always a myth and it has now been nailed. UKIP is clearly pulling large numbers of voters from Labour as well as the Conservatives (we don't know yet in what proportions). But this is not surprising because it is part of a broader Europe-wide pattern. In countries such as France, Denmark, Austria and others too the radical right have been penetrating deeply into strata of society which have traditionally voted for the left. There is a deep rumble from the right.



Why is this occurring? Let's take, as a point of departure, Cas Mudde's [analysis](#). He has identified three major strands in mass attitudes which predispose people to vote for the radical right: nativism – that is, a belief that holds that only indigenous inhabitants should have full civic and social rights – authoritarianism, and populism which counterposes the ordinary people against the 'elite', the political class, the liberal intelligentsia. This, combined, constitutes what the cultural theorist Stuart Hall called 'authoritarian populism.'

In his theory of 'pathological normalcy' Mudde contends that authoritarian populism, far from being confined to the margins, is deeply embedded within the mainstream. Two factors, one can argue, have propelled it into the forefront of political consciousness. The first is the rising salience, and emotional voltage of anti-immigrant feeling, that is to say mounting antipathy, resentment and apprehension towards those – whether they be recent immigrants, asylum-seekers or established ethnic minorities – who constitute 'the other'.

The second is, of course, the impact of the financial crash and the economic recession. The effect of this has not been (in the UK or in a majority of other European countries) a tilt to the left. Left-wing diagnoses, at least in the UK, have had little purchase: there is only a muted sense that the gyrations of the financial system are in any way responsible for what went wrong. Most people, one suspects, are left baffled by talk of sub-prime mortgages, derivatives and credit default swaps. They are looking for something more tangible to blame: if not Gordon Brown then welfare recipients and, of course, immigrants.

The implication of all this is disturbing for left-of-centre parties, not least Labour. Research for some while has indicated that authoritarian populism appeals in particular to the more poorly-educated, to manual workers and to routine clerical workers: the natural constituency of the left. What we are witnessing is, in a sense, a reconstitution of a form of class politics. Labour, during the Blair/Brown years, was at pains to insist that it had ceased to be a (working) class party, that it was a party of 'Middle England.' Many working class voters, one could say, got the message: Labour was not for them, it was not part of 'them' not 'us'. Now Miliband has to demonstrate otherwise.

**The reverberations of the Ukraine crisis in the Latvian domestic political debate certainly did not help Harmony in its bid to attract the Latvian leftist vote**

**Licia Cianetti** is a PhD candidate at University College London

The **decisive victory** for the governing party **Unity** surprised Latvian political commentators. Unity gathered 46 per cent of the vote and four out of eight seats, leaving the nationalist **National Alliance** (NA) a distant second with 14 per cent. Crucially, the moderate Russophone party **Harmony** – widely indicated as the expected winner of these elections – came only third with 13 per cent. While the one seat (8 per cent) gained by the **Union of Greens and Farmers** is in line with pre-electoral expectations, the fact that **Tatjana Ždanoka** from the **Latvian Russian Union** (LRU, formerly For Human Rights in a United Russia) managed to retain her MEP seat was more unexpected.



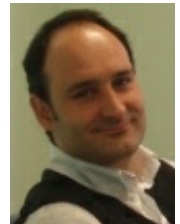
The dismal turnout and the absolute numbers behind the percentages offer an explanation. Turnout was only 30 per cent, down from 53 per cent in 2009. This means about 350,000 votes less, which – with 445,225 people actually voting – are hardly negligible. If we look at absolute numbers, compared to its constituent parties' 2009 results, Unity kept most of its votes, decreasing only slightly. So these elections can hardly be interpreted as a sensational surge for Unity as the percentage would suggest. NA marginally increased its votes, while LRU actually more than halved its support. The big loser remains Harmony: in 2009, the Harmony Centre coalition with the Socialist Party received over 150,000 votes, but in these elections (when they ran separately) they lost almost 100,000. The reverberations of the Ukraine crisis in the Latvian domestic political debate certainly did not help Harmony in its bid to attract the Latvian leftist vote. However, the main question the party will have to answer is why it failed so spectacularly to mobilise its electorate.

### **The European election confirms the recession of two-party politics and the advancement of left Eurocriticism**

**Juan Rodríguez-Teruel** is Lecturer of Politics in the University of Valencia

While the European elections in Spain did not back right parties or Europhobic politics, compared to the main European trend, the results will bring Spanish politics to a new political scenario.

After months of negative prospects for the two main Spanish political parties (PP and PSOE), the European Elections not only confirmed the expectations of a strong decrease for them, but led to quick dramatic internal changes. The Socialist leader Alfredo Pérez Rubalcaba resigned the day after the election, calling for a new party leadership contest and maybe a tight primary election in the autumn to select the party candidate for 2015. His opponent, Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy, will have some more time to think about the PP's loss of almost 40 per cent of the support received in 2009. Both PSOE and PP have lost together more than 5 million votes and now represent only 48 per cent of the total vote. As with the overall European participation, turnout remained around the same level of 2009 (45.6 per cent).



In contrast, several political parties benefited from this situation. Amongst them, the Communist party, Catalan and Basque non-state wide parties and several new organisations from the centre and left. Amongst them, the new left party 'Podemos' ('We Can') delivered a strong performance after being created just some weeks before the election. Similarly, most of these new parties (which will join liberal and left groups in the chamber) support left 'Eurocriticism' and reject the austerity policies led by Europe.

This election also allowed for a test of the evolution of Catalan politics and the support for Catalan independence. The left secessionist party (ERC) defeated Catalan socialists and the ruling moderate Catalan nationalist party, and became the first party in Catalonia. Its performance will fuel new tensions in the Spanish territorial debate over the coming months.

### **The elections in Hungary were a symbol of the population's continued disappointment with the inability of the liberal-left opposition forces to unite**

**Erin Marie Saltman** is a research project officer at the counter-extremism think tank Quilliam

The Hungarian European Parliamentary election [results](#) are an accurate reflection of the majority population's continued support of right wing and radical right parties on the one hand, and disappointment and disillusionment with liberal and left wing party options on the other.



On Sunday, Hungary witnessed a record low turnout for the European Parliamentary elections at a mere 28 per cent, just one month after the country's national elections. Ruling party [Fidesz](#), who currently hold a supermajority in government, became the only party in Europe to gain an absolute majority in this year's EP elections with 51.49 per cent (12 seats).

However, equal attention was given to radical right party, [Jobbik](#) who gained 14.68 per cent (3 seats) making them the strongest opposition party in Hungary. Jobbik's electoral victory came despite recent allegations against Jobbik EP candidate Bela Kovacs, who was accused in the national conservative paper, Magyar Nemzet, of spying for Russia against the European Union – allegations denied by Kovacs. The strongly Eurosceptic radical nationalist party sends Kovacs along with Zoltán Balczó and Krisztina Morvai (who has caused frequent controversy over her openly anti-Semitic remarks) to the European Parliament, with the aim of changing the EU into a 'looser coalition'. Jobbik Chairman, Gábor Vona, commented on the success of Eurosceptic parties EU-wide saying that they proved 'all of us would like to have a common Europe but something totally different from what is offered to us now'.

Meanwhile, the disunity of liberal and left wing parties continued. The [Hungarian Socialist Party](#) (MSZP), who led the Hungarian government between 2002 and 2010, faced a crushing defeat, gaining only 10.92 per cent (2 seats). Other opposition parties shared equally poor results, a symbol of the population's continued disappointment with the inability of the liberal-left opposition forces to unite.

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