

The European Parliament elections may be a landmark for Eurosceptics, but the EU's future direction will be decided elsewhere

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*The European Parliament elections on 22-25 May are expected to see a large increase in seats for Eurosceptic parties across a number of EU countries. **Seamus Nevin** writes that while a result of this nature would prompt a wide debate about the quality of EU democracy, the key decisions shaping Europe's future will nevertheless be made elsewhere. The real power in the EU is still invested in national governments and the importance of any Eurosceptic breakthrough for Europe's future trajectory should therefore not be overplayed.*



In just over a week's time, elections for the European Parliament take place, following which, a new European Commission will be elected in the Autumn. Conjoining these two elections is the fact that Europe's four main political parties have each designated their respective lead-candidates for Commission President meaning that this year, for the first time ever, voters in the parliamentary elections will not just be electing a new parliament but will also have a say in choosing the leader of the next EU executive.

For many observers, these events represent a landmark for the European project. Italian President Giorgio Napolitano recently [described](#) them as "a moment of truth for the unity and future of Europe". Squeezed by the Council and the Commission, the European Parliament has had little say over the running of Brussels since the Parliament's inception in 1979. Next week's elections will mark the moment the Commission finally becomes a political, rather than a bureaucratic, institution.

This year's elections are also different from previous polls because they come at a time when social tensions within, and political frictions between, countries have increased dramatically. In September, Scotland will vote on whether to leave the UK. In November, Catalonia will vote on whether to leave Spain. The UK may even vote to leave the EU soon too. The project that binds Europe together has never been more unpopular. EU citizens are angry with Brussels for a variety of contrasting reasons. Many no longer trust mainstream politicians. Some have even [lost faith in democracy itself](#).



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If current polls are correct then the next European Parliament could be the most Eurosceptic yet, with radical and anti-EU parties possibly taking up a third of the 751 seats on offer. The far-left may come first in Greece, the far-right in France. UKIP leader Nigel Farage has predicted an "earthquake" in Britain. In Italy, an anti-establishment movement led by a clown (Beppe Grillo) is running a close second. Meanwhile opinion polls put nationalist and xenophobic parties including the Dutch and Austrian Freedom Parties, Vlaams Belang in Belgium, Italy's Lega Nord, the Slovak National Party, and the Sweden Democrats on course to form a far-Right parliamentary bloc with a minimum 38 MEPs from at least seven countries. Indeed, the [Guardian](#), the [New York Times](#), and the [Economist](#)

have all recently run op-eds on how nationalism and extremism appear to be on the march across Europe once again.

Such an outcome would certainly trigger a fresh round of debate on the widening gap between the “bureaucrats in Brussels” and large swathes of the EU’s 507 million citizens. The ‘presidentialisation’ of the European Parliament elections is thus an attempt to redress that balance by introducing a supranational dimension to election campaigns that have historically been preoccupied with national issues. Herein lies the key point: European Parliament elections have rarely been about the future of Europe. Since the EU’s democratisation process began with the first parliamentary elections in 1979, they have typically proved more a barometer of an incumbent national government’s popularity than a contest to lead the EU.

In that sense, as [Cas Mudde](#) argues, the fear of a populist takeover has been largely overplayed. Even if the Eurosceptics do achieve the 218 seat total some predict, the next European Parliament will still be inhabited by a strong majority of pro-EU members. More importantly, as Jean Pisani-Ferry has [explained](#), despite the European Parliament’s growing power, it is still not the central actor in EU decision making. The real power remains largely at the national government level. Thus, regardless of the election outcome, the European project will face much bigger questions this year.

Despite the growing sense of optimism over economic recovery, Europe is still far from out of the woods. Its crisis is gradually improving (rather than being over), but the prospect of a Japanese-style ‘lost decade’ has not been removed. While it is true that the decisive announcement by the European Central Bank in July 2012 that it would do “whatever it takes” to preserve the euro, and the subsequently agreed reforms to Eurozone financial supervision have reduced the spectre of further financial and economic collapse, the two major decisions with regard to the EU’s future have yet to be addressed: The first concerns the future of the economic union; the second, the future of the political union.

First, on the economic front, there remain significant imbalances within the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU). Debt mutualisation has been ruled out and the reluctance of policymakers to contemplate stimulus packages, write-downs or debt forgiveness means that debtor adjustments must be carried out through a combination of spending cuts, structural adjustments and price deflation. The EMU was originally established, at least in part, to facilitate convergence between member states, but since the advent of the Eurozone crisis the opposite has been the case. The Union has been transformed from an association of equal states into a creditor-debtor relationship in which member states are no longer equal. The framework of the Eurozone remains flawed. It must be corrected.

On the political front, the EU’s second big decision concerns how it will deal with growing demands from member-states and citizens for reform and renegotiation. UK Prime Minister David Cameron has committed his party to an in/out referendum on his country’s membership of the EU should the party win the General Election in 2015. Similarly, the Swiss government will have to renegotiate its bilateral treaties with the EU after a majority of its citizens voted ‘Yes’ in a referendum last February on whether to impose immigration quotas on all foreign nationals, in contravention of the agreed terms of the country’s membership of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA). Other countries such as Germany and the Netherlands are also seeking to claim back control over things like immigration and social welfare policies. Across Europe the popular and hence political mood points to a change of relationship between Brussels and many other national capitals. The result of these reforms and renegotiations will set an important precedent for the future direction of the European project and may go a long way to defining the future shape of the European Union itself.

The significance of the forthcoming elections should not therefore be overplayed because while a Eurosceptic breakthrough may grab the headlines, the EU’s future direction will be decided elsewhere. Next week’s elections ought instead to be used to kick-start an important debate about what citizens want from the EU and what they want it to be. In that sense the elections are the beginning of a process rather than a one-off solution. At some point in the near future the big questions discussed above will have to be answered, and the ramifications of the decisions taken will significantly shape the future course of the European project.

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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.

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About the author

Seamus Nevin – *Policy Network*

Seamus Nevin is commissioning editor at Policy Network. He tweets [@SNevin1](#)

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