

Why the 2014 European Parliament elections will be about more than protest votes

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European Parliamentary elections are due to be held in May 2014. [Simon Hix](#) and [Christophe Crombez](#) look ahead to the campaign, noting that the elections will not only provide an opportunity for Europe's citizens to express their opinions over the handling of the Eurozone crisis, but will also allow them to take an active role in the selection of the next President of the European Commission. For the first time we could have genuine 'European' elections, with the potential to have a real impact in shaping European politics over the next five years.



Just under a year from now, on 22-25 May 2014, EU citizens will vote in the most important European Parliament elections to date. They will be an opportunity for European citizens to express their views about how Europe's leaders have addressed the crisis in the Eurozone. Furthermore, the elections will provide a mandate for, or a break against, the plans for further political and economic integration in Europe. They will produce a new political majority in the European Parliament, which will influence how the EU and the single market will be governed for the next five years. And, above all, with rival candidates for the Commission President before the elections, this will be the first time we, as European citizens, will be able to choose who holds the most powerful executive office in the EU.



The issue that has dominated politics in Europe in recent years has been the Eurozone crisis, and the merits of following an austerity policy to combat it. Cuts in public spending in Eurozone member states have largely been imposed by the EU, by the European Commission as well as by the EU governments. Nearly every national election since the onset of the crisis in early 2010 has been fought on the issue of austerity and the consequent relations with the EU. Far from European elections being national elections these days, national elections have started to become European elections.



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National elections are, however, not the best way to bring about changes in EU policies. A vote against austerity in one member state merely affects the policy positions of one of the 27 players in the Council. Such a vote may make it somewhat harder for the Commission to get the Council to sign off on its policies, but that is about all the impact such a vote may have. Even an unexpected victory of the left in the German elections in September will not lead to

drastic changes in EU policies.

Voters can change EU policies though, through their votes in European Parliament elections rather than national elections. European Parliament elections matter, and not only because the majority in the next European Parliament will play a key role setting the rules in the single market and the Eurozone. The next European Parliament will also “elect” the next Commission President. For the first time, the main European parties are planning to propose candidates for this job, and the candidate from the largest party in the new Parliament is likely to then be elected as the next Commission President.

The hot favourite to be the candidate of the centre-left Party of European Socialists (PES) is Martin Schulz, the German Social Democrat who is currently President of the European Parliament. Other names on the centre-left are also in the frame, including Helle Thorning-Schmidt, the Danish Prime Minister, José Luis Zapatero, the former Spanish Prime Minister, and Pascal Lamy, the Director-General of the WTO. Meanwhile, names being mentioned as the possible candidate of the centre-right European People’s Party (EPP) are Donald Tusk, the Polish Prime Minister, Viviane Reding, the Commission Vice-President, Fredrik Reinfeldt, the Swedish Prime Minister, Dalia Grybauskaitė, the Lithuanian President, and Christine Lagarde, the Managing Director of the IMF. From the other Euro parties, the Liberals could propose Guy Verhofstadt, the former Belgian PM and current leader of the Liberal group in the European Parliament, while the European Greens are planning an on-line ‘open primary’ to decide their candidate.

With rival candidates from rival parties, the elections will become a vote for the Commission President and his or her manifesto for the future of the EU, as much as a vote for the European Parliament. But, what is particularly significant in this regard is that the two parties that have the most chance of capturing this post, the EPP and PES, have taken vastly different positions on how to tackle the Eurozone crisis. The EPP is in favour of maintaining austerity policies, whereas the PES strongly opposes this. Hence, European citizens will have a clear choice in May next year. They can limit austerity, by casting their votes for MEPs from national parties in the PES, or they can vote in favour of the continuation of current austerity policies by voting for MEPs from national parties in the EPP.

There will of course be another option altogether: to reject both the centre-right and centre-left’s agendas for the EU by voting for a Eurosceptic party or movement. Although there is likely to be either a PES or EPP Commission President from 2015, there could be a significant bloc of Eurosceptic MEPs after the 2014 elections. These anti-European MEPs would then be able to influence the direction of the EU policy agenda. And, a large vote for Eurosceptic parties would force the next Commission President as well as the EU governments to address citizens’ concerns about further economic and political integration.

So, in next year’s European Parliament elections voters will be presented with several distinct options for the future direction of the EU. The political majority that emerges from the elections will not only determine the policies pursued by the European Parliament, but also the person who will hold the most powerful executive office in the EU machinery – the Commission President. For the first time these could be genuine ‘European’ elections, the outcome of which will shape European politics for at least the next five years.

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Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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