

# “Something Olde, Something New, Something Borrowed, Something Blue...”. On the twenty-eight separate European elections of 2014

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Eurocrisis in the  
Press

By [Lorenzo De Sio](#), [Vincenzo Emanuele](#) and [Nicola Maggini](#)

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Together with “a sixpence in her shoe”, there are various items that are recommended as part of a bridal outfit, according to an old English rhyme. Humour might hardly be allowed as regards the recent European Parliament elections, given the success of Eurosceptic parties. However, we might comment that the 2014 EP election (expected by many commentators to be the first truly European election) was to some extent blessed by the presence of all such auspicious elements. That this has happened in times of economic crisis and rising Euroscepticism, would – again – not make it different from many weddings celebrated in difficult times, yet leading to long-lasting, successful marriages. But let’s go one step at a time.



First, why did many declare these first “truly European” elections? Before the election there were two principal reasons. First, the increasing centralization of economic policies in the Eurozone following the economic crisis, led to the reasonable expectation that citizens would better understand the importance of Brussels politics for their everyday lives. Second, the new provision (under the Lisbon Treaty) that the President of the European Commission would be selected by “taking into account” the electoral results. This has led the main EP groups to appoint official presidential candidates, resulting in higher visibility for the EP election campaign.

It is precisely in light of such expectations that, a few weeks before the elections, we decided – at

[CISE](#) (Italian Centre for Electoral Studies, jointly established between [LUISS Rome](#) and the [University of Florence](#)) – to build and coordinate a 40-strong team of researchers across Europe, who would prepare concise country reports for all the 28 EU countries, along with in-depth analyses of specific aspects of the EP vote. Such reports were first published on the CISE website several days after the election, and then collected into a unique [instant e-book](#) published by CISE. Our overarching interpretation of individual country reports and overall analyses in the book, together with the findings of more recent studies, highlights the four elements, which were hinted at in the title of this blog post.

## “Something olde” – Still second-order elections (at least in the West)

One must inevitably observe that the expectations of higher saliency for EP elections have only been marginally fulfilled. The 22-25 May results have not substantially questioned the *second-order* model, which understands EP election campaigns – and election results – as essentially driven, in each country, by *national* rather than European issues.

This interpretation is based on two observations. First, turnout has not changed compared to previous EP elections (43%), being lower everywhere than in general elections (albeit with a slight overall increase in Western Europe). This is in line with second-order election theory, as there is less at stake in EP elections since voters do not “choose” the national government. Second, in the vast majority of countries, ruling parties have lost ground. In some cases, they have experienced a real electoral collapse (as in France, United Kingdom, and Denmark). And this, again, represents a confirmation of the second-order theory, according to which governing parties are expected to lose votes compared to general elections, especially when EP elections are held towards the middle of the national electoral cycle. The exception to this pattern is the Italian Democratic Party (PD), led by Matteo Renzi, which is the only party in government that has even increased its absolute votes with respect to general elections (see an analysis [here](#)). The CDU-CSU in Germany and Fidesz in Hungary have won clearly too, but lost votes compared to general elections.

## “Something new” – Issue synchronization across different countries

However, there is something new. A birds-eye view across different countries reveals some kind of *synchronization* of salient issues in different campaigns, with emerging new importance for European issues. As shown by individual country reports in the book, in some contexts European issues have played a prominent role (especially in Greece, Czech Republic, and France). But this should not be regarded as the only evidence of issue synchronization. In particular, even issues not strictly related to EU politics appear to have become relevant in many countries at the same time. According to [an analysis](#) relying on data collected by the [euandi](#) project, the issue stances taken by parties on a small set of issues (different issues for Western vs. Central Eastern Europe) are statistically significant predictors of electoral gains and losses across many EU countries.

## “Something blue” – Euroscepticism on the rise

The previous aspect of issue synchronization would of course sound auspicious to Euro-optimists, who might finally see the dawn of a long-awaited Europeanization of EP campaigns. Well, this might be true, save for one awkward detail: synchronization is mostly happening *against* Europe, rather than *for* Europe. At least in Western Europe, if there is one common denominator to campaigns and results in different countries, it is the success of parties taking positions mostly *against* (further) European integration, with the prominent example of the striking *bleu Marine* success of the Front National.

## “Something borrowed” – Borrowing (and learning) from Lipset and Rokkan...

However, we argue that – beyond these common elements, which have already been identified by most commentators and analyses – there is more to the picture. Mainly because the rise of Euroscepticism (by which we mean any negative politicization of EU integration) appears to be emerging through a pattern that is much more complex than suggested so far.

According to conventional wisdom, anti-EU stances have been mostly championed by parties of the populist and Eurosceptic right, who have successfully politicized European issues — in a negative way and in terms of anti-system protest — taking advantage of the widespread discontent caused by austerity policies. This is typically the case of UKIP (26.6%) in the United Kingdom, of the aforementioned Front National (24.9%) in France and of the Danish People’s Party (26.6%).

However, when looking across the 28 EU countries, the picture is much more varied. In fact, the conflict over EU integration has been politicized in different (and often conflicting) ways in different countries. First and foremost, in some countries (Spain being the most prominent example), no relevant party has actually taken anti-EU stances. Secondly, while anti-EU stances have in general proved successful in many countries, this success has arrived through very different strategies. The Five-Star Movement in Italy (21.1%) has adopted clear anti-Euro positions, but less critical stances towards EU integration in general; and it has so far avoided nationalist and anti-immigration

positions. And Syriza (26.6%) in Greece is a good example of a politicization of the issue even in a *leftist* frame, focusing on EU-advocated austerity policies and on the *current direction* of the EU integration process, rather than on its very existence. Finally, in other countries, even conservative mainstream parties that have been successful in “stealing” anti-EU issues from anti-establishment parties, thus limiting their electoral success. Prominent examples are those of the Finnish conservative party (KOK) and of *Fidesz* in Hungary, which have both succeeded – by playing this strategy – in containing the electoral advance of, respectively, the Finns Party and *Jobbik*.

In short, the above findings suggest that, if some kind of Europeanization of party competition in EP elections can be claimed for 2014, it has not been taking place according to a naïve, mechanic, uniform emergence and spill-over of European issues through public opinion and party competition in all EU countries. Instead, we clearly see that important gatekeepers appear to be controlling and negotiating the entry, framing, politicization and saliency of European issues at the country level. Guess who? *Parties*, with their specific strategic choices, which are in turn conditional on the spatial structure and dynamics of the party system, as well as on the structure of electoral incentives and constraints. As a result, when comparing different countries, European issues appear with different saliencies, framed differently, politicized in different directions and by different types of parties. Succinctly, we suggest that the original “nine second-order national elections” identified by Reif and Schmitt in 1980 might end up giving way, not to a single European election, but to *28 separate European elections*.

However, this should hardly be surprising, given that – without the need for much innovation – Lipset and Rokkan’s framework (now almost fifty years old) effectively showed how the variety of party systems observed across Europe in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century emerged from the different politicization – in previous centuries – of a small number of basic, common conflicts. Thus, in a way (albeit at much accelerated speed), the developments of the last years appear to resemble historical trends that are familiar to Europe: common large-scale processes of change that invest different political systems (with their varied standing conflicts and political cultures), leading to a variety of political outcomes which are conditional on both the institutional (and cultural) context, and on the strategies employed by different parties. Returning to our initial metaphor, whether such a wedding will lead to a long-lasting and successful marriage, is a question that can hardly be addressed at present. Let us just observe that the 2014 results are not hard to interpret in terms of a new divide, adding to existing divides in EU countries, which might or might not lead to an actual cleavage (in some of them) in the future.

Finally, this not only calls for a substantive reflection, but also for the redress of a methodological challenge. Perhaps the time is ripe, in fact, for a long-awaited turn in electoral studies: to bring the role of *party strategy* fully into the picture, by integrating current explanations of voting behaviour (mostly based on individual-level, socio-psychological models) with interactive accounts of increasingly dynamic party strategies (which deliberately focus on a small number of favourable issues) linking individual, voter-level reactions to such strategies. But that’s another story for another time...

*Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of the Euro Crisis in the Press blog, nor of the London School of Economics*

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