

EUROPEAN ELECTIONS: LESS ABSTENTION, MORE “POPULISM” ?

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The European elections of May 2014 are already arousing concern in connection with low voter turnout and the good results of “populist” parties. Yves Bertoncini puts in perspective these two political challenges while urging to face them, in a Tribune directly inspired from his speech at a conference organised on the 15th of October in Paris by the “Young Europeans” of Sciences Po¹.

The European elections, which are scheduled to take place from 22 to 25 May 2014, will result in the election of 751 European members of parliament representing close to 507 million people, of whom roughly 380 million voters² from 28 European Union (EU) member states. This great democratic appointment, the like of which is to be found nowhere else in the world in terms of the number of citizens and countries involved, is going to be taking place in an acutely critical context. It is then already arousing concern in connection with the two challenges that traditionally face the “European elections”, namely low voter turnout and the often considerable results chalked up by the protest vote personified, in this instance, by “populist” parties.

Abstention is a perfectly normal challenge for elections held at a “federal” level, in other words at a level less close to the man in the street than the national or local levels. But constantly rising absentee figures since the first election in 1979, despite regular upswings seen in one or the other EU member state, foster concern that the symbolic threshold of 60% may be surpassed in May 2014 (the absentee rate rose to 57% in 2009).

The advances made by the so-called “populist” parties are, for their part, a challenge of unprecedented magnitude for the EU, whose image and popularity have waned over the past few years. Mistrust of the EU, however, continues to be less strong than the mistrust that virtually all Europeans nurture towards their own national governments; yet despite that, it looks set to find considerable political expression in the upcoming European elections, also by firming up around both national and Community issues. While the notion of “populism” is often applied to very disparate kinds of parties, the point they share in this instance is more or less overt opposition to their country’s membership of the EU or of the euro area and/or of the way in which the Community’s political system functions³.

Abstention and populism must of course be taken seriously in view of the fact that they can contribute to

a weakening of the European Parliament’s image. In order for us to take them seriously, however, we have to put them into proper perspective, including by initially highlighting the fact that the verdict returned by the upcoming European elections on these two issues will largely be due to the results recorded in the EU’s seven most heavily-populated member states. It will of course be enlightening to note those countries where abstention and/or “populism” have or have not progressed in the ballot box, in order to discover whether or not they constitute a majority sentiment in the EU as a whole. But we should look more closely at the results of the vote in Germany, Spain, France, Italy, Poland, Romania and the United Kingdom, because these seven countries together account for approximately two-thirds of the electorate and for 60% of the seats in parliament. Thus it is what happens in those seven countries that will allow us to draw the main conclusions and consequences of the elections in May 2014, even though it is of course necessary for observers and for the players in these elections to consider the EU as a whole.

1. Subsidiary and mid-term European elections: what is an acceptable level of abstention?

With the benefit of hindsight, it is fascinating to note that 62% of the electorate mobilised in 1979 for the first election of Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) with what were only extremely limited powers at the time, and in the context of an “European economic community” (EEC) with only modest areas of authority and intervention. By the same token, it is ironic that turnout rates for European elections have regularly dropped since then while the European Parliament’s powers and the EU’s areas of authority and intervention have been beefed up by every subsequent treaty. Yet is the current turnout level so surprising, in view of the European elections’ subsidiary nature? And can it start climbing again in May 2014, in view of the fact that this time the elections are going to be so “different”, as the European Parliament has pointed out?

1.1. A logically high absentee rate for «subsidiary» elections

The election of European MEPs being doubly “subsidiary” for the EU’s citizens, is it not logical, in part at least, that they should be in no haste to sprint to the ballot booth?

These elections are subsidiary first and foremost on the political level, given that most of the decisions impacting the European man in the street’s daily life are taken at the national or even local level, in particular with regard to education and training, housing, social protection, taxation and security. Of course, the EU can “change the life » of farmers and fishermen (and indeed farmers and fishermen are fully aware of that fact); it can take decisions with a major impact on European citizens’ lives, for instance in the fields of enlargement, trade agreements, deepening the single market, consumer and environmental protection, the framing of national budget or industrial policy or the funding of networks and projects with a transnational character. It is those kinds of decision that need to be highlighted and debated if we are to kindle voter interest in May 2014. But the EU is not responsible for 80% of the laws in force in member states, as a legend fuelled by its opponents and even by some of its more zealous supporters claims⁴; its spending accounts for just over a mere 2% of overall public expenditure in Europe; thus it is pointless, not to say downright counterproductive, to “oversell” the EU’s importance to its citizens who, when all is said and done, are clear-headed enough about what to expect from the EU in the normal course of events.

European elections are also subsidiary from an institutional viewpoint: they do not lead directly to any profound change in the balance of forces at the Community level the way general elections (or a presidential election in France) do at the national level. The European elections are not going to change the overall composition or political inclination of the European Council or of the Council, which exercise crucial authority in “Brussels”. They are not going to have any visible impact on the functioning of the ECB, which has played a crucial role in recent months and is likely to continue to do so. They certainly do have a direct impact, on the other hand, on the appointment of the President of the Commission and his team, a fact which deserves to be highlighted more effectively. And they result in the election of MEPs whose powers are now very substantial after they were beefed up again under the

Lisbon Treaty. All in all, however, the outcome of these elections is not going to lead to changes in all of the political balances in the Community’s “institutional trapezium” comprising the Commission, the European Council, the Council and the European Parliament, so the European man in the street will quite rightly see them as less structuring than his national elections.

Given the European elections’ doubly subsidiary nature, what kind of turnout rate would it be reasonable to expect? The turnout rate recorded in other federal elections can provide us with a useful yardstick in this connection. For instance, we might look at the rate recorded in federal elections in the United States, because both the general perception and political reality in “Washington” share certain similarities with those of “Brussels”. The US rate oscillated between 53% and 55% at the last congressional election and settled at less than 40% for the mid-term elections - while the turnout rate for the three last presidential elections hovered around the 55% mark. Similarly, turnout rates in Swiss federal elections oscillated between 42% and 49% between 1979 and 2011. Those turnout rates rather, than the rates observed in national or local elections, are unquestionably a more advisable yardstick to adopt when comparing past and future European elections, even for people militating in favour of boosting that turnout. In any event, it would more useful to do that than to moan in advance about mass abstention, while arguing that that abstention will undermine the future MEPs’ legitimacy, when no one really disputes the principle of US or Swiss parliamentarians’ legitimacy on that basis.

The turnout rate in European elections can also be impacted by circumstantial factors of an institutional nature, which it is important to take into consideration ahead of the vote in May 2014.

First of all, we should point out that these elections are going to be held for the first in May rather than in June. While the chief intention underlying this change is to give MEPs more time to prepare for the investiture of the President of the Commission and of his team, its primary effect will in fact be that the vote will be held at a time when no country is on vacation due either to Whitsun or to the early end of the academic year (which has been the case hitherto in certain European countries).

It is also worth pointing out that the turnout rate in European elections has been determined in part by changes in the number of voters subject to... compulsory voting. One-third of the nine members of the EEC had compulsory voting in 1979, including Italy (until 1993) which accounted for 26% of the overall electorate at the time (with a turnout rate close to 80%). When Greece joined, four of the EEC's ten member states had compulsory voting in 1984 (in other words, 29% of the electorate involved), and that became four out of twelve in 1989. Today there are only three countries out of the twenty-eight member states (Belgium, Greece and Luxembourg, in other words some 16 million potential voters) that still have compulsory voting, and they account for only 4% of the overall electorate. This drop - both relative and absolute - in the number of "compulsory voters" has probably played a major role in the decline in the overall turnout rate in European elections.

Lastly, the evolution of this turnout rate can be linked to the holding of national or local elections on the same day as the European elections, an event which has occurred with a certain frequency in the past. In May 2014, Belgium, Ireland, Greece and Lithuania are due to hold other elections between 22 and 25 May, a fact which should help to prompt voters to turn out for the European elections as well - although of course that selfsame fact could overshadow the terms of the debate on the EU. Germany is also going to be holding elections on 25 May in ten of its Länders (which has turnout rates that customarily top the 50% mark), as opposed to seven in 2009, involving almost two-thirds of the country's electorate, given that Rheinland-Westphalia is concerned. The same will be true of another "major" EU member state, namely the United Kingdom, which will be holding broader local elections on 22 May 2014 than it held in 2009 (and in which the turnout rate is frequently below the 40% mark). The turnout rate at the EU level could also be negatively impacted if it was to remain under 30% in big countries such as Poland and Romania. But all in all, we should not underestimate the potentially positive impact of all of these parallel elections on an overall rise in the turnout rate in the European elections in 2014.

1.2. The European election: less of a «mid-term» election than usual?

As well as regional elections in non-federal countries, the European elections are often perceived as "mid-term" elections by comparison with national electoral deadlines. Could the elections in May 2014 be a little less "mid-term" than usual, in view of the new political context created by the Lisbon Treaty and, above all, by the crisis in the euro area?

The European Parliament is right to highlight the fact that the elections in May 2014 are going to have a more direct impact than previous elections on the European Council's nomination of the Commission President, because the measures in the Treaty on European Union (Article 17.7 and déclaration n°11), which have been in force since the approval of the Lisbon Treaty, state explicitly that the heads of state and government leaders have to propose a candidate for the post, who will then require a vote of investiture from the new MEPs, "taking into account the elections to the European Parliament". What that means in concrete terms is that they are going to have to choose a candidate to the presidency who looks likely to garner the support of whatever coalition holds a majority in the Strasbourg assembly (for example European People's Party (EPP) - Party of European Socialists (PES), or EPP - Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) - conservatives, or PES - ALDE - Greens) while they will continue to have a free hand in their choice of candidates reflecting the majority in office at the national level, to send to Brussels for posts on the Commission.

This link between the outcome of the European elections and the leadership of the team in Brussels will be all the stronger if the European political parties nominate their candidate to the presidency of the Commission ahead of time and overtly back that candidacy during the election campaign. And indeed this is precisely what they are committed to doing: Martin Schulz has been nominated for the ESP and Alexis Tsipras should soon be formally nominated for the radical left; while Guy Verhofstadt or Olli Rehn may become the ALDE candidate, and a double act comprising José Bové, Rebecca Harms or another woman may be nominated by the European Greens... although there is still some uncertainty regarding the EPP, which could nominate a candidate in early 2014. The designation of these nominees will make a positive contribution to personalising the European election campaigns, thus reflecting current political custom at the national and local levels. It will also help to put "faces to the divides" at work at the Community level, as long as the parties make an effort to effectively underscore

that which distinguishes them over and above merely being for or against the EU.

The European Council, however, is under no legal obligation to appoint one or other of the aforesaid nominees; its primary obligation is to conform to the new European Parliament's majority political inclination and to propose a candidate reflecting that inclination, whether or not he or she was a candidate in the first place. But it is highly likely that the new MEPs will be anxious to establish a balance of forces that will be all the more favourable if the campaign fosters in-depth debates on the designated candidates. That is probably the price to pay for the European elections to come across as being slightly less "mid-term" and more as the only election with any direct bearing on the renewal of an important section of the Community's "political personnel". With the appointment of the future European Council President also being included in negotiations on the major renewal in the offing, there may then be an increase in the European man in the street's interest in the elections next spring.

The main reason why the people of Europe may mobilise more than usual in May 2014, however, is political in nature. This, because it is customary to qualify the European elections as "subsidiary national elections", and thus their outcome is determined first and foremost by debates on national issues. But the crisis in the euro area having recently prompted national public debates and political agendas to focus on, or even to be shaped around, European issues, might that crisis not spawn an unprecedented form of political crystallisation and mobilisation next spring?

Debating on the EU has been far more intense than usual in a fair number of European countries in recent years. It has focused, in particular: on the aid plans for countries in difficulty and on the implementation of the "memoranda of understanding" signed by those countries as an offset; on the strengthening of EU monitoring over national economic and social policies (the reform of the Stability Pact and the adoption of the "Fiscal compact"); on the EU's contribution to support for growth (ECB intervention, internal and external deregulation, the adoption of the multiannual financial framework and so forth); and more recently, on EU ties with the southern countries, with Russia and with the United States... A number of these debates have regularly been settled by national parliamentary elections and have sometimes been at the heart of general elections, particularly in countries benefiting from aid programmes, but also in such diverse countries as Italy and Finland. The turnout rate at the elections in May 2014 may show an increase due to this political context.

A comparison with the context of the European elections in June 1994 appears to bear out that possibility. Back then the EU was experiencing a major economic crisis and the memory of the lively debates in parliament and ahead of referenda occasioned by the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty was still fresh, while the external situation was marked by the collapse of the former Yugoslavia. All of this resulted in an increase in the turnout in several EU member states, including Denmark and France where the debating had been especially intense: the turnout was indeed 4 percentage points higher in France (with 52% of the electorate going to vote in 1994 as opposed to only 48% in 1989).

By the same token, might the unprecedented increase in the intensity of the public debate on the EU not result in an upswing in overall voter turnout at the European elections? Bearing in mind the deterioration of the EU's image, the answer to that question would be negative, of course, if we were to consider abstention to be primarily an expression of mistrust. But if we consider that the level of abstention in the European elections also betrays a certain indifference, then we may well see it drop in May 2014 (although we should remember, of course, any additional votes may just as easily be critical towards the European construction as in favour of it).

In this context, one of the crucial issues in the election is to discover whether the competing political forces as a whole are going to prove capable of offering their voters credible alternatives above and beyond the mere simplistic pro/anti-EU divide. The leftwing parties (in the broadest sense of the term) have a huge responsibility in this connection, because they have generally been in a minority both at the European and at the national levels in recent years, and thus they need to be able to criticise the record of the last European "legislative term" while, at the same time, offering new prospects for the next one.

It is necessary to make one final point in order to wind up this discussion of turnout rates and predictable abstention in the European elections in May 2014. Even if only 43% of the electorate were to vote, as was the case in 2009, that figure would still represent over 160 million citizens mobilising in the context of national and European campaigns, who will provide as many opportunities for fuelling a public debate of unparalleled breadth on the EU's functioning and on its future. Thus rather than moaning in advance and almost without thinking about a turnout rate that is going to be limited by its very nature, it is necessary both to fuel that public debate and to play an energetic role in it, especially in view of the fact that it may well be marked by an upswing on the part of the so-called "populist" parties.

2. What impact will the «populist» upswing in May 2014 have on the European Parliament?

The challenge of abstention and the challenge of “populism” are partly connected. It is because those citizens who are more or less in favour of the European construction process may simply not bother to show up at the polling station that that process’s opponents may improve their relative result in an election which has traditionally benefited non-government and protest parties. Above and beyond their style of expression, the very different forces branded as “populist” indeed share more or less overt opposition to their country’s membership of the EU or of the euro area and/or of the way in which the Community’s political system functions⁵.

Where the elections in May 2014 are concerned, most current forecasts suggest that the so-called “populist” parties are likely to chalk up impressive scores, resulting in an electoral upswing which is the logical consequence of economic, social and political crises that both extend beyond the EU and are beyond its ability to remedy. The pessimistic scenario occasionally depicted sees these parties winning if not a majority, then certainly a very large number of seats in the European Parliament, to the point where they will be able to have a serious impact on its ability to reach decisions, and possibly even to disrupt both its functioning and the functioning of the EU as a whole

This scenario is more than merely hypothetical if we apply it to the EU as a whole, in view of the fact that the European Council, the Council, the Commission and the ECB will be sheltered against any potential “populist” upswing. In that connection, it would far more destabilising for a populist party to take power in a major EU country (not just in Hungary) and to thus have a direct bearing on negotiations among member states while, at the same time, appointing a member from its own ranks to the Commission.

As we shall see below, it is in fact questionable whether the populist thrust next spring will impact the functioning of the European Parliament, where political forces’ influence should be gauged on the basis of three main criteria, as “VoteWatch Europe’s” reports⁶ inform us: on the number of seats won, of course, but also on the internal cohesion shown by the political forces in question and on their ability to forge majority coalitions with other parties. Thanks to the fact that populist parties tend to be structurally weak in relation to the two latter criteria, their numerical upswing is unlikely to disrupt the functioning of the European Parliament, aside from the more numerous presence of discordant voices in the Strasbourg assembly.

2.1. Political cohesion is weak among populist forces

As Yves Surel points out, MEPs who can be grouped together under the “populist” label share a more or less vigorous rejection of the Community’s political system which firms up around three main themes⁷: on the one hand, they denounce a “system of government characterised by weak election mechanisms and by the weight carried by Community law and by judicial institutions characteristic of a rule-of-law state, in other words by a ‘democracy deficit’”; on the other, they strongly defend national, or even European, identities, pegging that defense “to the occasionally violent rejection of immigrants in general and of Islam in particular”; and finally, “basing their stance on the same initial contention that democratic legitimacy has been waylaid”, they “tend to insist on the links between European integration and the free-market rationale”, faulting “the EU’s “liberalism” or even its “free-market-teering approach”.

Yet the fact that these parties share an abhorrence of the EU and of its policies has not prompted them to form a homogeneous political family, as Jean Quatremer points out, for instance: “The problem with this categorisation is that it lumps populism, the far right, the radical left and conservatives, all of whom evince varying degrees of euroscepticism and, above all, have little else in common, in the same boat. There is a world of difference between the UKIP, an overtly europhobic but democratic party, and the Hungarian Jobbik, which is equally europhobic but fascist. Just as there is a huge difference between the British Conservative Party or the Polish PiS, both of which are eurosceptic, and the French National Front”⁸.

As a matter of fact, we can already see today that the “populist” MEPs currently belong to four different political groups in the European Parliament -if we do not count the MEPs in Victor Orban’s Hungarian Fidesz party who are in the EPP group. First of all, there is the group called “Europe of Freedom and Democracy” (EFD) which one might describe as containing those MEPs from the “autonomistic right” such as the UKIP, the Northern League, the Danish Peoples’ Party and the True Finns. Then there is the group of “Non-Attached” Members, comprising far right MEPs mainly from the French National Front, the Austrian FPÖ, Geert Wilders’ “Party for Freedom” and the Hungarian Jobbik party. Third, we have the parties of the radical left roped together in the Confederal Group of the “European United Left/

Nordic Green Left”, which includes in its ranks the MEPs from Die Linke, the Czech Communist Party, the French Front de Gauche, Syriza, Izquierda Unida and Sinn Fein. And lastly, there is the “European Conservatives and Reformists” group, comprising eurosceptic, or downright europhobic, rightwing parties including the British Conservative Party, Vaclav Klaus’ ODS from the Czech Republic, the Polish PiS and PjN, and so forth.

Might the MEPs in these four political groups forge greater unity amongst themselves after the elections in May 2014? Or are they not more likely to sit in four distinct political groupings reflecting their real political differences towards the EU? The latter hypothesis is in fact the more likely, so that the only noticeable change which might occur might be the formation of a political grouping coalescing the far right MEPs, who would thus abandon their present non-attached status⁹. Thus we should not hide the difficulty that these MEPs have traditionally encountered when attempting to unite outside their national borders. As Pascal Perrineau points out, while a “Socialist International” has existed for decades (although it has not always been free of tensions), it is difficult to envisage the construction of a “Nationalist International”.

A group of far right MEPs known as the “Group of the European Right” certainly did exist in the European Parliament from 1985 to 1989. From 1989 to 1994 it was symbolically rechristened the “Technical Group of the European Right” but it was to meet with dissent and defection, particularly on the part of its German members. A fresh attempt was made in 2007 (under the name “Identity, Tradition, Sovereignty”), but the experiment was abandoned after only a few months on account of internal divergences, particularly between its Italian and Romanian members. This latter episode reveals another structural weakness on the part of populist MEPs, namely the difficulty they have in acting in a collective and pro-active manner.

As VoteWatch Europe’s reports suggest, populist MEP’s degree of internal cohesion and participation in debates and voting in the European Parliament is lower than those shown by other political groups, which reduces their effective influence. The cohesion rate of the EPP, S&D, ALDE and Greens stands at around 90% (meaning that on average some 90% of the group’s members vote the same way). That is a remarkable rate if we consider that the groups are not subject to the kind of majority discipline that a

government would demand, thus it rests solely on genuine ideological convergence. The effect of such a high a cohesion rate is that it boosts the relative influence of these united groups. Thus the influence wielded by the EPP, which has 35% of the overall number of seats in Strasbourg, has recently resulted in weighting around 40% of the voting. The European United Left and the European Conservatives and Reformists, for their part, have an internal cohesion rate of over 80%, which allows them to wield decision-making influence equal to their relative clout in terms of the number of seats they have. Yet the same cannot be said of the two other political groups comprising the populist MEPs : these groups’ internal cohesion rate is considerably lower, which means that their relative influence is far lower than their numerical importance would suggest¹⁰.

All in all, therefore, we may surmise that the “populist” parties’ influence on the European Parliament is likely to be structurally limited by their difficulty in uniting and by their groups’ weak cohesion, however many additional MEPs these parties may succeed in returning to parliament after the elections in May 2014.

2.2. A probable rise in the number of populist MEPs

In strictly numerical terms, on the other hand, the populist MEPs’ influence on the European Parliament is highly likely to increase after the elections in May 2014, which of course would be only logical in view of the mistrust which - rightly or wrongly - surrounds the EU today.

Following the elections in June 2009, the various parties grouped together under the “populist” label currently account for approximately one hundred and forty MEPs : roughly thirty of whom are in the EFD group and another thirty or so are “Non-Attached Members”, which makes about sixty MEPs for the “far right” and “autonomistic right” ; the other current MEPs labelled “populist” are divided into roughly thirty in the European United Left group and just over fifty in the European Conservatives and Reformists. Thus this populist galaxy today holds just under 20% of seats in the European Parliament as a whole.

Two key factors need to be taken into account if we are to accurately assess the magnitude of the populist upswing in the spring of 2014. On the one hand, there is the fact that certain populist parties already scored good results in 2009 (for instance the PiS and

the UKIP) and thus repeating those results will not give them any more seats in Strasbourg. And on the other hand, there is the fact that an increase in votes for the populist parties will have a numerically important impact if it occurs in countries that account for a large number of seats in the European Parliament, thus basically in the seven EU countries with the largest populations.

If we look at the voting intention polls currently available, but which of course we need to handle with caution given that there are still seven months to go before the election, what do we see? First, we see that no populist upswing is likely to be registered in Spain or in Poland. Similarly, the UKIP and the Greater Romania Party are unlikely to win a great deal more seats than they did in the election in 2009. And lastly, the major populist thrusts in numerical terms are likely to be seen in three countries: in France, where the National Front could treble its 2009 result (6.4%) and garner from ten to fifteen additional seats (it only has three today); in Italy, where Beppe Grillo's new Five Star Movement, despite its current slow-down, could well garner from fifteen to twenty seats, also to the detriment of the Northern League; and in Germany, where the Alternative für Deutschland party is set to enter the European Parliament, given that it will need to garner only 3% of the overall vote to win seats. Over and above these "heavyweights", a few additional seats may be won by the radical left in Greece, or even in Germany and in France, while the far right may make progress in The Netherlands, in Finland and in Austria, and possibly in Greece.

Consequently, the so-called "populist" parties in the broadest sense of the term are unlikely to garner more than two hundred seats in the European Parliament, in other words about a quarter of the overall number (as opposed to just under 20% today), if we include in their number the British Conservatives (who are likely to continue to hover around the twenty to thirty seat mark). This numerical increase is basically likely to be seen on the far right (possibly twenty to thirty seats, as opposed to the current number of thirty) but also in the ranks of populist forces which are difficult to categorise in this phase, namely the Five Star Movement and Alternative für Deutschland. In other words, it is not because the far right is currently in the lead in voting intention polls in France and in a handful of other countries that we need to conclude from that that the same balance of forces is going to be repeated in the European Parliament as a whole.

2.3. Populist MEPs are often excluded from majority dynamics

The presence of more "populist" MEPs in the European Parliament is naturally going to result in their voicing of greater criticism in debates in the parliamentary in Brussels and in Strasbourg. But does that mean that it is necessarily going to have a negative impact on the European Parliament's functioning and decision-making capacity? In actual fact, that is far from a foregone conclusion, because we need to base our assessment of political groups' real influence not only on their internal cohesion but also on their ability to form part of majority-forging coalitions when it comes to voting.

What does the current legislative term tell us in that connection? Almost all of the European Parliament's decisions are adopted on the basis of votes from two or three political groups. Roughly 70% of these decisions rests on the convergence of votes from MEPs in the EPP and S&D groups, with additional support from the ALDE according to the issue on the table; while some 15% of the decisions are adopted by a majority coalition comprising MEPs from the left and centre of the political spectrum (S&D, ALDE and Greens - yet they are insufficient to form a majority...) often in relation to "societal" issues; and the remaining 15% or so of the decisions are adopted by a majority coalition comprising MEPs from the right and centre of the political spectrum (EPP and ALDE, but also the British Conservatives...), often in relation to economic issues. It is worth pointing out in passing that the "populist" MEPs can also play a role in the adoption of the European Parliament's decisions in a far from negligible share of the votes when they concern such relatively uncontroversial issues as consumer protection.

In the event populist MEPs as a whole succeed in winning some two hundred seats in the European Parliament, it will be necessary for the other 550 MEPs to prove capable of forming majorities amongst themselves. That will require the converging majorities traditionally formed in the European Parliament to continue to function as they have done in the past, without basically changing the political picture. Depending on the balance of forces that comes into being within the non-populist forces, it may be necessary to expand those coalitions to include an additional political group - most probably the ALDE, the Greens, or even the British Conservatives - on a case-by-case basis : that may well require the dominant groups to make somewhat more substantial concessions.

Thus the ironic result of a “populist” upswing will be to bolster the influence of MEPs in the mainstream political groupings, especially in the EPP, the S&D, the ALDE or even the Greens, because that upswing will give them a stronger incentive than ever before to thrash out agreements in order to achieve the majority required in any given vote. Indeed, that may be one of the negative collateral effects of this populist thrust, because from a democratic standpoint it would be preferable for the dominant political groups in the European Parliament to be in position to debate with each other on the basis of clear alternatives, left versus right, rather than having to tailor their positions a priori to the simplistic pro- or anti-EU divide.

Getting the political challenges into proper perspective

This summary analysis of the challenges of abstention and of populism suggests that we need to put the most frequent observations and forecasts currently being formulated in a broader perspective.

Where abstention is concerned, a reversal of the constant downward trend observed since 1979 cannot be ruled out on account of the institutional and, above all, political context in which the elections in May 2014 are likely to be held. And in any case, it is worth highlighting the fact that we will be only seeing the same kind of relatively low turnout rate that we see in similar federal elections elsewhere – and that it is not because US congressmen are regularly elected by turnouts

hovering between the 40% to 50% mark that anyone seriously questions their legitimacy.

Where populism is concerned, it is not only highly likely but, when all is said and done, also fairly logical that parties grouped together under the “populist” label should make fairly substantive numerical gains, cashing in on a part of the European man in the street’s current ill will towards the EU. Thus the “populist” MEPs will doubtless play a useful “tribune’s” role both in Strasbourg and in Europe, but their numerical increase will do greater harm to their own country’s real influence at the Community level than to the functioning of the European Parliament

In the shorter term, the “populist” upswing discerned in this autumn of 2013 could have two other political consequences. The first, and unquestionably negative, consequence would be that the more mainstream parties might embrace the sweeping and superficial analyses and recommendations formulated by the populist forces, thus basically reneging on their commitment to Europe – that is probably the most serious political threat for the EU. The second, somewhat healthier, consequence would be the sparking of widespread and enlightened mobilisation on the part of all players, whether political or otherwise, prompting them to engage in the vigorous defence and promotion of the cornerstones of the European construction process in a crisis context, while simultaneously formulating properly substantiated and alternative proposals for the EU to function and to act better in the next legislative term.

1. This Op-Ed is based directly on my address to the conference entitled “The European Elections Between Abstention and Populism: organised by the Jeunes Européens de Sciences Po in Paris on Tuesday 15 October 2013. My gratitude goes to them, as it does also to the two other speakers, Pascal Perrineau and Fabien Cazenave. I would also like to thank Valentin Kreiling for his useful comments on this text.
2. The figure of 382 million voters corresponds to the number of voters registered to participate in the latest national elections in their EU countries (according to the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance data) – the voting age population in the EU is even higher (around 412 millions).
3. For more detailed information in this connection see Yves Surel, “The European Union and the Challenges of Populism”, *Policy Brief, Notre Europe*, June 2011.
4. In this connection see, for example, Yves Bertoncini, “National Legislation of Community Origin: dispelling the 80% Myth”, *Policy Brief, Notre Europe*, May 2009
5. See Yves Surel, *op. ed.*
6. See *Votewatch* and the work done by the LSE under the guidance of Simon Hix – for example Doru Frantescu (2013), “The balance of power in the current European Parliament is crucial for understanding the issues at stake in the 2014 European elections”, EUROPP, London: London School of Economics, 2013.
7. See Yves Surel, *op. ed.*
8. See « Elections européennes : vague ou clapotis euroseptique? », *Libération*, 12 October 2013
9. To form a political group in the European Parliament requires the participation of 25 MEPS elected in at least a quarter of the EU member states (thus seven countries)
10. For more precisions see Doru Frantescu (2013), *op. ed.*

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