

Disputes and dilemmas

The aftermath of the European Parliament elections

Since the striking results of the elections in May, the usual lethargic rhythm of European politics has been given a formidable jolt. As populist parties – some extremist, many right-wing, most Eurosceptic – achieved many of their strongest results to date, the elections have set in motion an interlocking, convoluted and at times downright perplexing combination of political manoeuvrings.

Some of this is a natural consequence of the institutional timetable – the elections were always going to be followed by a complex set of negotiations over the EU's top jobs, including the all-important three Presidents of the Commission, the Parliament and the European Council. And it is true that, just as the European papers were suddenly emblazoned with the beaming faces of the Front National's Marine Le Pen and UKIP's Nigel Farage on the morning after the elections, designating them the winners of their respective national contests, so they were forgotten as quickly in the aftermath.

But amid the political battles of the last few weeks, the hand of populism is clearly at work. The question is whether the sound and fury will transform into a clear plan of action of how to respond to the success of populism – or whether it will end up signifying nothing.

A populist victory?

As we have argued previously, the primary pattern of the European election results was not one of populist victory. Many populist parties – notably Geert Wilders' PVV in the Netherlands and Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement in Italy – failed to meet expectations. Some even lost representation in the Parliament altogether. The key trends were growing fragmentation and stagnating turnout. But even if these were the most consistent features of the election results, the overarching story is that populists scored big. And in many places – France, the UK, Denmark, Austria and Hungary, to name a few – they did just that. The impact this will have on the EU over the next five years is of vital importance to a range of policy areas, not least Britain's future relationship with the EU.

Before the elections, some had expected a concerted response to the results (which many had predicted for some time) from the European institutions. But the weeks since the elections have stood out for the sheer range of tactics and strategies being deployed in response to the populist surge: from trepidation to candour, indifference to co-option. Crucially, there have been divides both within and between each of the key institutions.

The European Council: the battle over Juncker

Once the election results were in, attention swiftly turned from the results to the increasingly acrimonious argument between national leaders over the future Commission President. Jean-Claude Juncker, the Spitzenkandidat (lead candidate) for the European People's Party, was, for most national leaders, the natural choice. Their reasoning was simple. In a new system promoted by key figures from the European Parliament, each European political party could nominate their own Spitzenkandidat for Commission President before the European elections

and whichever party won the most MEPs at the elections would be nominated by the European Council and have a first run at the Presidency. Most of the main parties had participated, and, given that the European People's Party group now had the most MEPs in the Parliament, Juncker, their candidate, should be put forward. In any case, national leaders thought, even if they didn't like the look of Juncker, there was little they could do about it now: the Lisbon Treaty said that for the nominee to become Commission President the European Parliament had to 'elect' him or her, and they could expect the Parliament to block anyone who wasn't Juncker.

The British Prime Minister David Cameron said, on the other hand, that this was a power grab by the European Parliament at the expense of the Council. Why, he argued, should the European Parliament have control over both the nomination of a candidate and their subsequent election? And why should Juncker – an 'arch-federalist' whom many across Europe had barely heard of before the elections – take the reins on the basis of a flimsy appeal to democratic values?

In the end, Cameron was outvoted by nearly all of his colleagues in the Council (other than Viktor Orbán from Hungary) and Juncker was nominated as Commission President. But while this episode may have seemed divorced from the explosive election in May – and indeed it could be interpreted as a customary attempt at British obstructionism – the results lay in the background of every decision. As might be expected, both camps in the debate defended their positions as an appropriate response to strength of populist parties at the elections. For ardent Juncker supporters, the elections showed that citizens were angry about the EU's 'democratic deficit' – and one remedy was a transparent and democratic process for selecting the new Commission President. For those who opposed him, it was considered frankly absurd to install an old-fashioned Brussels insider after an election where European voters had unleashed a cry of exasperation at traditional EU politics.

It would be unfair, therefore, to castigate those leaders who supported Juncker's candidacy as necessarily oblivious to the support for populism. For the most part, it's more likely that they saw electing Juncker as the most appropriate response to the election results. Some may have gone along with the ardent Juncker supporters' claim that nominating Juncker would help to close the EU's 'democratic deficit'. More likely, they chose Juncker because they thought that the alternative would be worse: the prospect of institutional deadlock in the wake of the European Parliament blocking a different candidate. This would play into the hands of numerous (Eurosceptic) populists.

The battle over Juncker can therefore be interpreted as a disagreement about the best strategy for dealing with the election results, with Cameron advocating candour and confrontation and Merkel and co. seeking caution and discretion. Both avenues have their merits and their pitfalls. Cameron's strategy seems to be born from a persistent restlessness that is vigorously responsive to the political weather – in this case the rise of UKIP – yet haphazard in pursuing long-term policy goals. Unfortunately, he risks inflaming further still the grievances that have boosted UKIP without seriously addressing them. The approach of most other members of the Council has a different kind of problem. While they were more or less boxed in by the Spitzenkandidaten process, the risk is that an overly timid approach to the challenge of populism could fall flat with voters. For all his difficulties forming alliances over Juncker, Cameron at least saw the full symbolic significance of not being seen to 'carry on as usual' in the face of the results.

But while something positive could be said individually of both the supporters and opponents of Juncker's presidency, together the European Council's actions threaten to create a serious rupture in European politics. With no consistent response to the election results, Cameron and his colleagues appear to be drifting apart. In the long-run, this could spell disaster for relations between the UK and the EU.

The European Parliament: collusion and co-option

As the European Parliament has cornered national leaders in the name of democracy, it faces its own complex set of changes. Again, what is remarkable so far is the diversity of approaches being used in response to the significant influx of populist MEPs. The line taken differs significantly depending on the political family.

The first sign of a new approach was during the so-called 'mating season', where newly elected MEP band together in political groups. The ECR – home to the British Conservatives and the Polish Law and Justice party, among others – had in previous years shunned most parties considered populist or extreme. But this time round it underwent a substantial expansion programme, taking in a range of controversial members. The Danish People's Party – previously ruled out as having 'unacceptable' views – was now deemed to have changed its ways. The Finns Party – including the MEP Jussi Halla-aho, convicted in 2012 for inciting hatred against an ethnic group – was welcomed in too. Even the Alternative for Germany (AfD) was admitted in a close vote by ECR MEPs, precisely against Cameron's wishes.

On the face of it, this appears to be a shocking and potentially dangerous move. But if done correctly, bringing populists into mainstream politics can undermine their outsider status and remove their 'sharp edges', as Yvonne Zonderop argued in her pamphlet for Counterpoint on populism in the Netherlands. Yet this will only work if the group's other members make a concerted effort to foster values of tolerance and openness in their counterparts. The corresponding risk is therefore that the xenophobia of the Danish People's Party and Halla-aho is legitimised rather than subdued. While in principle working with moderate populists can have beneficial consequences, there is a danger that, as with Cameron's battle over Juncker, the manoeuvrings of the ECR are dictated by short-term interests (a larger group means more funds and more influence). The worst case scenario is that the group ends up legitimising intolerance as a by-product of their political dealings.

The two largest political groups (the S&D and EPP groups) face a very different kind of problem. Along with the smaller liberal ALDE group, they have announced a kind of grand coalition to ensure the Parliament maintains its pro-European programme. Given that around 70% of legislation in the last Parliament received the support of both the Socialists and the European People's Party, this is not a radical change and is a more or less inevitable consequence of the increase in MEPs on the radical left and right. Some MEPs have complained that this shuts them out. But the response has been tant pis – this is what happens in the rough and tumble of European politics.

In this case the big groups have a point – they are not obliged to help populist politicians or to give them special treatment. But unfortunately the S&D, the EPP and ALDE groups have in some instances taken this commitment to a pro-European centrist coalition too far. Earlier this month, they systematically blocked MEPs from the populist EFDD group (primarily made up of UKIP and Five Star Movement politicians) from taking Chairs and Vice Chairs on the

Parliament's committees. This went directly against the d'Hondt system normally used to calculate the distribution of positions, which allocated one Chair and six Vice Chairs to the EFDD. In this case the groups made a big mistake. By arbitrarily changing the procedures to block populist MEPs, they gave the MEPs a golden opportunity to flaunt their outsider credentials and accuse the Parliament of breaching the very democratic principles it had so fiercely upheld throughout the Spitzenkandidaten process. Moreover, many of the MEPs they blocked were members of the Five Star Movement, who have so far displayed little evidence of being outright obstructionists. By ostracising these MEPs, the S&D, the EPP and ALDE may well have turned potential allies into bitter opponents. The Greens in the Parliament rightly condemned this decision.

In the Parliament as in the Council, then, there is a range of coexisting and conflicting strategies, none of which seem entirely convincing. The ECR's co-option of moderate populists has the potential to be an act of strategic genius but for now looks like one of political expedience; while the S&D, the EPP and ALDE risk alienating potential allies with their hardball tactics. The saving grace is that the European Parliament is still mostly ignored by the press, resulting in many of these manoeuvrings taking place under the radar of the public's attention.

The Commission: surprising signs?

And what about the Commission itself – what signs are there from this pivotal institution of an effective response to the populist surge? The irony is that, despite the pillorying in the British press and the (at best) lukewarm reception from national leaders, Juncker, the now President-elect of the European Commission, has suggested he is very open to EU reforms – many of which, including the establishment of the digital single market and the EU-US trade agreement, Cameron would agree with. Juncker has consistently stressed that during his presidency he wants to prioritise resolving the relationship between the UK and the EU. And, even though he has clearly emphasised that he will not compromise on fundamental European values, his attitude to the populist EFDD group at a recent meeting was respectful and courteous. The civility emanating from both sides at the meeting was a refreshing change and suggests that Juncker's Commission may be more promising than many have assumed.

Confidence is key

It is worth reflecting on the differing stances taken in response to the strong support given to populist parties at the European elections: following the Spitzenkandidaten procedure in the name of democracy versus condemning it as a power grab by the European Parliament; remonstrating with populists versus courting them; welcoming populist MEPs as valued partners versus shunning them as outcasts.

As of yet, there is no concerted effort on the part of the institutions to deal with the election results, and each of the approaches taken has its own flaws. But if there is a starting point to a balanced and intelligent way of responding to the populist surge then there is no need to look further than the polite, jovial and fundamentally good-humoured discussion between Juncker and the EFDD group.

Graciousness, of course, is not enough on its own: it needs to be married with a sophisticated interpretation of the election results, with a balanced understanding of the needs of different

member states, and with a long-term view of how Europe's big challenges can be met without succumbing to political paralysis or xenophobia.

But perceptions matter – and if politicians ostracise populists rather than engage with them the over-arching impression will be, if nothing else, one of weakness. Regardless of the hyperbole of some commentators, there has been no European 'revolution' but instead a more subtle and evolving process of electoral fragmentation. At the same time, the EU institutions function by the combined effort of 28 states, built and refined over decades: they are more than capable of withstanding a certain level of political pressure. Yet if politicians react too violently to this trend of fragmentation and the concomitant rise of populism, the perception will be that the European mainstream fears its populist opponents. The qualities that many EU policymakers advocate for Europe's societies and economies – confidence, flexibility, and openness – need to be upheld with renewed vigour with respect to the institutions themselves.