

Euro Elections 2019, Hard Times for the left

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Smiles from the Greens, triumph for Salvini and Farage, possible resignation from German Social Democratic leader and forced elections for Tsiprias in Greece - these reactions sum up the main features of the recent European Elections. Ten per cent more people voted that in the previous elections reflecting somewhat of an increased credibility for the European parliament although nearly 50% still do not bother to turn out. Overall results reflect the continuing rightward shift in politics globally.

The ongoing fallout from the 2008 capitalist crisis has caused huge disruption in 'normal' political management as both centre right and centre left parties have far less room for manoeuvre in keeping societies stable. For loyal managers of capital, austerity has to be managed and with fewer crumbs to distribute, voters become very disgruntled. So forces outside the mainstream have emerged and have sometimes posed existential threats to longstanding political parties.

Unfortunately, the consequence has not been an uprising of the left. Only around 30% of the votes were cast for broad left or radical left parties in these elections. Dissatisfaction was shown in a consolidation but not a spectacular breakthrough of hard right parties and a real leap forward for the Green parties.

Traditional centre right and centre left parties continue decline

For the first time, the combined total of the two mainstream centre right and centre left groupings do not have a majority in the European parliament. They will have to negotiate with the Macron dominated Liberal grouping to sort out the key leadership bodies..

In France, the Macron /Le Pen showdown sidelined the traditional parties like the Socialist Party which got less votes (6.19) than Mélenchon's France Insoumise while LR (Republicans) got only 8%. These parties formed a two party system for decades. In Italy, an 82-year-old Berlusconi with a criminal record got elected again but his Forza Italia party got only 8.7%. At the same time the centre left PD (Democrat Party, ex communists) were relieved to do two points better than in last year's general elections with 20% but this was half the score they made in the previous European elections. In Greece Tsiprias's Syriza did so badly that he is likely to have to call new elections this year. The Spanish centre right People's Party continued its corruption-fuelled crisis with 20%, losing votes to the new hard right Vox party and the centrist Citizens party.

Social Democratic parties held up in a few places. In Portugal they benefited from a mildly non-austerity government and in the Spanish state Sanchez's PSOE continued its recovery with 32% winning back votes from the more radical Podemos and winning voters worried about the rise of the new hard Francoist Vox party. However it is still trying to form a government without an overall majority.

Apart from the way the economic crisis has devastated these traditional parties, the rise of social media does make it easier and a lot cheaper to set up new parties and win support. We saw this first with the Five Star movement in Italy but other new forces like Macron's En Marche movement or

Farage's Brexit party use these methods. Paradoxically, this so called digital democracy is normally combined with a traditional private company party model where supporters are not organised into any democratic structures but are allowed to voice opinions in a plebiscitary way on questions decided by the owner/manager.

At the same time, the destruction and reconstruction of workplace organisation as part of the deindustrialisation of European societies has meant social democratic and more radical left parties have suffered. The traditional mass workplaces with trade union organisation exist less and less and this has made political organisation more difficult too. The ideological effects of the individual contract gig economy also works against some of the key ideas of social democratic ideology.

In some countries the erosion of traditional parties has even seen bizarre new parties or political actors like the Die Partei in Germany, Pirates elsewhere or comedians in Italy and Ukraine emerge.

Far right continues to advance but no predicted breakthrough

Before the poll some pundits predicted a big surge for the far right but results for the AfD in Germany and similar forces in Austria, Holland, Slovakia, Finland and in Poland showed this not to be the case. Even the demise of UKIP in Britain reflected this as Farage distanced himself from the more extreme elements of his base.

Marine Le Pen maintained rather than increased the 25% or so that she usually scores in Euro and Presidential elections. Macron was only a point or so behind her and this was considered a decent result given the decline in his popularity related to the Gilets Jaune (Yellow Jackets) protests. So this movement did not generate a significant political expressions as the various Gilets Jaune candidates got derisory votes. If anything, its supporters went towards Le Pen, maintaining her electoral bloc.

Italy was the exception; where Salvini did better than pre-vote polls suggested with 34%, nearly doubling his general election score of a year ago. Like Orban in Hungary who also did very well, he has been in government which has given him massive media coverage and he has taken populist anti-migrant /anti-crime measures that have been popular. Voters in this honeymoon period do not blame him for austerity and the sluggish economic growth. Salvini benefits from the parlous state of both the divided social democratic and radical left and his coalition partner's, the Five Star Movement, weaker government expertise. Salvini's success means there is a new relationship of forces within the coalition since M5 went down from 30% in the general election to 1% now. At the same time Meloni's Brothers of Italy, a hard-right group closer to its fascist roots got over 6 % and MEPs elected.

Salvini dreams of a new hard right European wide grouping but differences, particularly over Russia with ex- East European colleagues less enamoured of Putin as he is, means that it is difficult to see a coherent right nationalist group easily formed.

Greens surge

Green parties did well and their group is up 19 MEPs to 69 and is likely to become the fourth largest grouping in the European parliament which gives it more leverage in raising issues and participating in debates. Undoubtedly the recent school strike and extinction rebellion movements have had a real impact. It is encouraging to see that mass mobilisations can have a positive political effect including inside parliamentary institutions.

Germany was their stand out result with 20.5%, beating the Social democrats by five points and coming second. A staggering 33% of under-30 year olds voted green. In France the EELV greens scored 13.4% surprising many since they have usually piggy-backed the SP vote by having electoral

fronts with them. They do not have a very organised or substantial base and have often been in governments with pro-austerity policies. But the Greens did consistently well throughout the western and northern parts of Europe but significantly less well in Eastern and Central Europe, Italy and Greece. They advanced with new MEPs in Finland, Ireland, Holland and Portugal.

Greens did well whether they have historically been more on the left and anti-austerity, like in Britain or if they have participated in moderate governments such as in France or Germany. These European elections are the best terrain for the Greens for several reasons. Proportional representation clearly helps since the pressure for a useful vote to get your party into government is a lot less. People can vote for their principles without risking letting in a pro-austerity or a climate change denier government. Also effective green policies are necessarily cross border and international so the European arena is a logical and useful one for green politics to be more upfront.

The fact that, compared to say the United States, the EU has taken more positive ecological measure also counts. If you think the EU can make a difference on green issues you may be more motivated to vote green in Euro elections. Finally the continued weakness and division of the radical left in most of Europe creates a real space for the Green parties, particularly when they are anchored to the left.

What about the Radical left?

The overall numbers in the European left group of MEPs has gone from 52 to 38, just over half the Greens grouping whereas before they had the same numbers. Despite the discontent shown by voters abandoning the traditional parties the radical left generally has not been able to pick up more support.

One bright spot is Portugal where the Left Bloc doubled its score to nearly 10% and got 2 MEPs and overtook the CP too who have 1. This neatly reverses their scores last time when the CP was double the Bloc's score. Both parties have been externally supporting, on a policy to policy basis, the SD government which has taken a moderately anti-austerity line, implementing some policies protecting working class living standards. The Red Green alliance also gained a seat in Denmark with 5.5% of the vote.

In Italy yet another electoral mash up of forces more or less alternative to the PD, La Sinistra got 1.5% and no MEPs. The radical left used to regularly have Euro MPs. The Mélenchon movement, La France Insoumise (LFI) won a 6.5% share and MEPs but this was way down on his presidential score. It reflects a failure to build unity on the left, the days of a strategic alliance with CP are long gone and a very poor internal democracy. If you support LFI a lot of voting is done online and the movement is built entirely around the charismatic leader. Recent expulsions have been controversial. Given the yellow jacket movement and the continued decline of the PS you would have expected a growth in their support. His nationalist approach often accusing Germany of trying to dominate Europe seems to fail to attract the voters, particularly the young. Forces to the left of Mélenchonlike Lutte Ouvrière did even worse, scoring less than one percent.

Unidos Podemos in the Spanish state is back to just under 10% which is the same score as when it first started out in 2014, but a decline from its general election score this year. The split with Errejón who argued for an even more moderate line and a confused position on an alliance with the PSOE who are now the government has not helped. Iglesias, the UP leader, has been reduced to downsizing his request for ministerial posts in the Socialist government. More worrying has been the loss of Podemos's radical mayors and positions in regional governments. Both Madrid and Barcelona have been lost. Ironically the one radical mayor who survived was Kiki in Cadiz who supports the left opposition inside Podemos and criticised Iglesias's buying of a big house in the mountains. Podemos

still has distinct positions to the PSOE on issues like the right of Catalonia to vote on independence but if it accepts a subaltern role to the PSOE in government it risks losing even more of its voters returning to the social democratic party.

Die Linke in Germany lost two points on his previous Euro election score and is at 5% and in Greece the radical left votes of Antarsya and Unidad Popular both failed to produce MEPs but the Varoufakis group did get an MEP.

The Jacobin magazine, commenting on the failure of the radical left, tended to take a Lexit reading of the debacle. It suggests the left have not worked out a strategy that understands the capitalist nature of the EU, that it was too federalist and not attentive enough to national concerns, that it exaggerated the hard-right threat and that it conceded too much to the Green arguments. This meant potential voters shifted to the 'softer' green parties.

Although there may be some truth in the strategic issue this approach would result in more of the Mélenchon line which has not done particularly well. On the green question it is a case of the radical left getting more involved, not standing outside criticising abstractly their lack of anti-capitalist purity. There is a failure to recognise anything positive in people, particularly the young, grasping confusedly at international, global solutions. No the left needs to be more green, more internationalist, more feminist and be better at developing parties that are useful to the needs of working people like the Bloco in Portugal.

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