

European elections - far right surge but centre holds on

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Dave Kellaway examines the outcome of last weekend's European elections.

European elections are unique. Voters do not elect a government but a consultative parliament that proposes policies to the European Commission, composed of ministers from each state who make all the decisions. Unsurprisingly, turnout is much lower than for national parliamentary elections. Yesterday, the European average was around 50%, ranging from the low thirties in Spain to over sixty in Hungary.

EU votes can seem tangential to national politics. When Britain was still in the EU, Farage's virulently anti-EU party won 28% of the vote and dozens of seats in 2014, yet never won a national MP standing as UKIP. The Greens also won more seats than their solitary Westminster MP. A democratic, proportional representation system in European elections can magnify differences between national first-past-the-post or two-round systems and European votes. While European votes are more like opinion surveys, they can indicate discontent or crisis in national governments. UKIP's victory in 2014 possibly influenced Cameron's decision to call the EU membership referendum.

Today, the press is full of French President Macron's decision to dissolve the National Assembly and call elections in three weeks. The largest party in the assembly, the post-fascist Rassemblement Nationale (RN) with 33%, doubled Macron's Renaissance party's score. Including Eric Zemmour's far-right Reconquete party, the far right reaches nearly 40%. Why has Macron made this dramatic move?

It is less of a gamble than it seems. Without a working majority in Parliament, Macron has used a presidential mechanism to push legislation through. He sees nothing to lose in trying to develop a new majority through a new election. In France, if no majority is achieved in a seat, a second round of voting occurs a week later, usually depending on support from eliminated candidates. Le Pen's RN lacks allies, unlike Meloni in Italy, and Macron assumes another 'Republican front' against the far right will help him, as it did in his two presidential victories.

The weakness of the left means there is little risk of a strong left opposition majority in parliament. Yesterday's results show the social liberal Socialist Party re-establishing itself as the biggest party on the left, with 14% compared to 9% for Melenchon's La France Insoumise (LFI). The NUPES left coalition, successful in the last parliamentary elections, is defunct, with both the SP and the Communists breaking from Melenchon. There are divisions over Gaza, Ukraine, and Europe. To its credit, the LFI raised the Palestinian banner during the campaign and increased its European vote.

Macron may calculate that even if the RN won a majority, he could manage (cohabitation) for the remaining three years of his presidency. An RN government might lose support for the far right if it had to manage capital's crises, making a Le Pen presidential victory less likely. This dangerous game

could, however, propel Le Pen to the presidency next time. Sectors of French capital might even start to consider a Le Pen alternative if Macron is no longer viable.

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The far right advanced in Europe but did not displace the right-of-centre majority in the European parliament. The latter benefits from support on many issues from the left-of-centre group. The hard right is divided over European powers and other issues; Meloni and Le Pen MEPs sit in different groups. Having more MEPs helps the far right develop its forces, providing money, resources, and institutional access. Revolutionary MEPs like Miguel Urban from the Spanish Anti-capitalists show the advantage of a European seat. The far right’s international coordination, demonstrated by a recent well-publicised conference in Madrid, often surpasses the left’s, with larger groups helping

Despite negative publicity about the Nazi sympathies of some leaders and plans to deport all migrants, Germany’s AfD (Alternative for Germany) progressed by three points. Austria’s far-right Freedom Party topped the polls with 25.7%. Meloni’s Fratelli d’Italia improved by two points to 28% but missed the 30% target, a worrying sign given her two years in power and the ongoing cost of living crisis. Salvini’s Lega, her main competitor in the right-wing coalition, performed poorly, strengthening her position. Elsewhere, Spain’s neo-fascist Vox (Voice) group rose by 3.5 points to nearly 10%, winning two more seats. The anti-corruption, conspiracy-focused group Se acaba la Fiesta (The party’s over) got three seats and nearly 5%. Low turnout in Spain may explain the success of extremist right parties. In Portugal, Chega (Enough) advanced to nearly 10% and two seats. In Holland, the far-right Freedom Party took 17%, but the left-of-centre current beat them.

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Green parties suffered setbacks in these elections. The right-wing offensive, seen with the Tories on net zero costs amid the cost of living crisis, is taking a toll. Germany’s Greens slumped nine points, possibly due to their coalition with Scholz’s social liberal SPD. France’s Greens also lost nine points. In Italy, the alliance with Sinistra e Verdi (Left and Green) reached nearly 7%, surpassing the threshold for seats. The alliance’s lead candidate, Italian anti-fascist Ilaria Sallis, currently detained under house arrest in Budapest following a protest against Orban, caused a political furore in Italy. Overall, the Green group lost 20 seats in the EU parliament.

The left-of-social-liberal, ex-social-democrat parties held up, losing one seat. Melenchon's LFI increased its share from 6% in 2019 to over 9%, still below its presidential and parliamentary election scores. Portugal's Left Bloc and CP held their seats with around 4.5%. In Italy, an anti-war left slate led by journalist Michele Santoro failed to reach the threshold. Germany's Die Linke (the Left) won three seats, losing two, falling to 2.7%. The red/brown split of Sahra Wagenknecht's party, which won six seats and 6% on its first electoral outing, has hurt it. This party, similar to Galloway's Workers Party, combines traditional left economic policies, 'campist' foreign policy, workerist anti-identity politics, and anti-migrant adaptations. We must reflect on why parties to the left of traditional reformist parties failed to make a bigger impact amid economic, social, and ecological crises.

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Overall, European politics is still dominated by right-of-centre parties adapting to the reactionary, racist positions of a growing post-fascist far right. Labour will join Sanchez's PSOE government next month as one of the few left-of-centre governments. It is unlikely to provide a way forward out of the continent's crises. The caution and moderation of a Starmer government could lead to an opposition increasingly dominated by far-right, racist forces, as seen in these EU elections.

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P.S.

- Anti*Capitalist Resistance. 10 June 2024:
<https://anticapitalistresistance.org/european-elections-far-right-surge-but-centre-holds-on/>
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