

The Left Needs a Vision for Europe - Ten thesis on the European elections

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The fight to define Europe's future is polarizing between the far right and the liberal center. But the Left can't win by taking sides in a culture war: it needs its own project to challenge the neoliberal consensus in Brussels.

Last month's European elections offered the latest evidence of fragmentation in the continent's hegemonic political order. For the first time in the history of the European Parliament the social-democratic (S&D) and Christian-Democratic (EPP) groups lost their majority of seats. Yet while the ongoing effects of austerity have been a key force in breaking up the old party blocs, this year's European elections also saw the demobilization of the radical left electorate. The vote instead saw a growing polarization of the political arena between liberal and green supporters of the European project and the far right. As Unidos Podemos MEP Miguel Urbán argues, the fragmentation in the Brussels parliament does not mean the European Union is headed for outright collapse. As he argues in his 'Ten Theses on the European elections', reproduced below, the formation of a new centrist bloc perhaps including greens and liberals may well prolong the Brussels consensus for a few more years at least. Yet as citizens become ever more alienated from the EU's institutions and the far right creeps forward, the need for the Left to provide its own alternative at the European scale becomes ever more urgent.

1. The crisis of legitimacy of the EU

It is clear today that the European Union is suffering from a growing loss of legitimacy among social sectors all across Europe. It is ever costlier to be associated with supposed European values such as democracy, progress, well-being, and human rights. We are witnessing an organic crisis in the full Gramscian sense of the term, that is both a consequence and a cause of the post-Maastricht Treaty model. This model has been nothing more than a neoliberal straitjacket, a lethal combination of austerity, free trade, predatory debt, and precarious and poorly-paid labor making up the DNA of

contemporary financialized capitalism.

Institutional Europe has tried to contain this crisis of legitimacy and governability by granting cosmetic reforms in hopes of lending a certain mantle of liberal-democratic credibility that it otherwise lacks. In this way, the framework of EU governance is renewed in five-year cycles, coinciding with European Parliamentary elections in an attempt to obscure the image of a bureaucratic apparatus structured hierarchically as a balance of powers between states aligned along the hegemonic Berlin-Paris axis.

2. Citizen dissatisfaction and the rebound of voter turnout

The EU's crisis of legitimacy has manifested itself in rising abstention rates in election after election as a sign of the growing dissatisfaction of its citizens with institutional Europe. This tendency was reversed in the most recent elections on May 26 when voter turnout reached 50.5 percent, an outcome celebrated with great fanfare by Brussels as a relegitimization of the system.

These participation rates can be seen, once we dismiss the Eurocrats' euphoria, as an effect of the coincidence of local and/or regional elections coming at the same time as the European-wide elections. The Spanish example is sufficiently paradigmatic to demonstrate how the electoral calendar boosted participation in the European elections to 64.3 percent, more than 10 points higher than the previous elections in 2014. At the other extreme, we see our Portuguese neighbor wasn't able to surpass 31.4 percent voter turnout, breaking the record for the lowest turnout for the whole EU.

3. The breakdown of bipartisan rule

Perhaps the biggest news from these past elections is the breakdown of bipartisan rule, or at least its domination of parliament. The European People's Party (EPP) and the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D) failed for the first time in the history of the European Parliament to gain an absolute majority. The EPP managed to win the elections with almost 180 seats, but it lost 41 seats and 5 percent of the vote compared to its total in 2014. For its part, S&D came in second once again, electing 145 deputies, down 45 seats and 6 percent of the vote compared to 2014.

These results seem to confirm a consistent tendency of our time, that is, the crisis of the traditional parties that have held power since World War II. Furthermore, this does not appear localized to one country, but constitutes a European-wide phenomenon. It is a symptom of the intensifying implosion of the extreme center that governed Europe as a grand coalition and, among other factors, is generating an increasing fragmentation of the electoral arena.

All this notwithstanding, it appears that we are still in the initial phase of a European-wide reconfiguration of the political, economic, and cultural spheres that has only just begun.

4. New political alliances in Europe

The breakdown of bipartisan hegemony will not necessarily lead to instability at the level of EU neoliberal governance; or at least it will be contained, as has become habitual in EU institutions in recent years thanks to the liberals as well as the Greens who constitute a large bloc in Brussels. These latter two groups grew the most in the elections, dividing up the third and fourth largest

number of seats in the EU parliament. The Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) promoted French president Emmanuel Macron's European renaissance proposals, managing to double their vote and increasing their deputies from 67 in 2014 to 109 this year. For their part, support for the Greens grew by 30 percent, giving them 69 MEPs, up 19 from 2014.

The growth of the Greens and the Liberals, on top of the breakdown in bipartisan hegemony, opens up a scenario for the creation of a new coalition to govern Europe that will be reflected most palpably in the election of the new European Commission and, most important of all, its president.

5. The first woman president of the European Commission?

Traditionally, candidates from the EPP (Manfred Weber) and the S&D (Frans Timmermans) would be the favorites to assume the presidency of the Commission, but at a moment when the two chief formations have lost their absolute majority, this logic is collapsing. If Weber, a German, thought that the EPP's victory would lead to his presidency, he was wrong. Instead, a bona fide Game of Thrones has broken in the European Union.

As a result, Timmermans of S&D called for a progressive alliance to cut off the EPP, while Spanish prime minister Pedro Sánchez and Macron met in Paris, presumably to concretize a social-liberal alliance between socialists [i.e. the center-left Socialists and Democrats group], liberals, and greens. This alliance was concretized in the campaign itself and symbolized by the presence of socialists such as Portuguese prime minister Antonio Costa at a campaign rally for Macron's European renaissance in Strasbourg, bringing together all the main liberal parties in mid-May. If Macron's preferred candidate has been EU's chief Brexit negotiator Michel Barnier, publicly praised for his role in the Brexit negotiations, it seems that Magrethe Vestagar, the current EU Commission of Competition, may be able to count on more support to become the next EU Commission president. Thus, the end of the two great political families' hegemony may leave us with the appointment of a new president in the style of the Danish TV political drama Borgen in which Birgitte Nyborg, the leader of a small centrist party, rides an unruly coalition to power.

Sánchez's role in all of this is not insignificant. We must remember that the Spanish Socialists (PSOE) are the most numerous of the socialists within the European Parliament and that Spain is, perhaps, the most important country governed by socialists in all of Europe. Thus, the PSOE bloc will be decisive in any alliance gestating with the liberals, and it is from this point of view that we must understand his trip to Paris. Sánchez's visit sends a clear message for a European alliance that would stretch from Macron to Greek prime minister Alexis Tsipras. One that would not only pursue a new grand coalition without any change with respect to neoliberal austerity and the EU security imperative but would also assert Sánchez's role in dividing up the most important posts in the next European Commission. However, this European alliance would also surely be reflected in Spanish politics in the aftermath of Spain's April 28 elections and the current debate with respect to potential governing pacts. An alliance with the liberals in Europe could open a path to it being repeated in Spain in multiple regions and cities, and - who knows? - maybe even in the central government.

6. Germany always wins

Gary Lineker, one of the best center forwards for England in the 1980s, once said "Football is a simple game. Twenty-two men chase a ball for 90 minutes and at the end, the Germans always win." This can be read as a metaphor for the EU, especially the "Germany always wins" part. So the

question is: what might Germany win if Weber drops out as a candidate for the European Commission?

To make out German chancellor Angela Merkel's real game, we have to go back a year to Luis de Guindos's election to serve as vice president of the European Central Bank (ECB). Guindos' rise was one piece of a strategy far more complex and important than giving then conservative Spanish president Mariano Rajoy's friend a plumb seat on the bank's board. It formed part of a framework of mutual interests that extended beyond control of any specific institution to the effective control of the European government itself. With this appointment, Merkel opened the way to secure the election of Jens Weidmann — the current president of Germany's Bundesbank, known as a neoliberal hawk — to the presidency of the ECB: a critical component of neoliberal European governance. And as a consequence of its quantitative easing policy, the ECB has probably become the most important EU institution, whose increased power is shielded by its supposed "autonomy." This is all the more true given the potential for a recession in Germany.

Weber's candidacy for the European Commission on behalf of the EPP reflects the unsteady equilibrium inside the coalition between Merkel's Christian Democratic Union and Weber's Christian Social Union. Weber's candidacy for the presidency of the European Commission pacified the Christian-Democratic alliance in Germany, but cut Weber out from the presidency of the ECB. To add more fuel to the fire, Weber has not refrained from criticizing Merkel and her government. In the middle of the electoral campaign, Weber promised that, if he were elected president of the Commission, he would put the Nord Stream 2 Russo-German pipeline on hold, a controversial project supported by Merkel in the face of opposition from various EU partners. The more than possible defeat of Weber will reopen the possibilities of Germany vying for the presidency of the ECB. In short, we have before us the umpteenth example of swapping chairs and contestants behind closed doors and without any democratic control. It is yet another example of the shadow government operating in the EU.

7. Tensions in the European People's Party group

Weber's candidacy has exacerbated contradictions in the heart of the EPP parliamentary group, both its more moderate wing, which has criticized the group's xenophobic statements, and its extreme right, led by Hungarian president Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party, who has openly reiterated his support for Weber. An open conflict with Fidesz might be the single biggest concern within the EPP, and not without reason. After all, Orbán's party only trails the Germans in the number of deputies belonging to the group. In May's elections, Fidesz won 52 percent of the vote in Hungary, winning an additional seat compared to 2014.

Fidesz has been suspended from leadership positions within the EPP since last March in an electoral maneuver intended to demonstrate a hard line being taken against constant attacks against the rule of law in Hungary while keeping Orbán's party in the EPP family. And while the EPP has the difficult task of isolating Fidesz in order to lure support from the Liberals for Weber's candidacy, they run the risk of Orbán joining Italy's hard-right Northern League deputy prime minister Matteo Salvini and France's National Front leader Marine Le Pen in a new parliamentary group that aims to bring together the extreme European right, further weakening the EPP's ranks.

8. The far right fails to advance, but it continues to grow

The European far right harvested bittersweet results on May 26. On the one hand, they increased

their representation to almost 25 percent of the European Parliament, however, they fell short of the numbers needed to form a minority bloc with the weight they had hoped for in terms of EU decision-making. This failure was met with jubilation in Brussels, but a more sober reading of the far right's results leads us to believe that there is nothing to celebrate and much to concern us.

In the first place, the far right received the most votes in three out of four of the most powerful countries (for which more EU seats are reserved): France, Italy, and Great Britain, which will continue to be represented in the European Parliament until Brexit is resolved. At the same time, the far right's results show their growth throughout the continent where they gained seats for the first time in countries such as Spain, which had previously never elected a far-right delegate. At the national level, their results are ever more impressive, they have recognizable media personalities, and their organizations are gaining traction in more and more regions.

Beyond the dominant countries in Europe (Germany, France, Great Britain, and Italy) where the far right scored exceptional results, it is also important to examine the Visegrad Group of countries to the East: Poland's Law and Justice Party took seven seats and 45.3 percent of the vote, while Orbán's Fidesz party won a seat and collected more than 50 percent of the vote, tripling the vote of its closest competitor. Furthermore, we should underline the regional elections in Belgium held in parallel with the European elections where the ultra-right Flemish supporters of Vlaams Belang tripled their vote, coming second overall.

The far right's main problem is its continued dispersion into various parliamentary groups. Throughout the campaign, Salvini tried to woo the European far right, accompanying Orbán to Hungary's border fences or showing off his strength at a meeting in Milan where he gathered the majority of the leading right-wing extremists. But everything suggests that the European far right's atomization will continue, at least until the mystery of Brexit is solved and a reconfiguration can arise within the European Parliament.

9. Brexit again

Brexit continues to cast a shadow over the present and future politics of the EU. Great Britain participated in the European elections at the last minute after a new extension, but stalemated negotiations have struck down Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May and, to a certain extent, the most stable political system of the continent. The European elections were seen as a referendum on the possibility of convening a second Brexit referendum. Unsurprisingly, the winner was Nigel Farage and his two-month-old Brexit Party, which won the elections with 32 percent of the vote, five more seats than UKIP won in 2014. The Conservatives only managed 8.9 percent and were surpassed by the Greens (11 percent) and the Liberal Democrats (19 percent), while Labour came in at 13 percent; all in all, yet another example of the traditional political camps' decomposition in the United Kingdom. These results, compounding Britain's institutional and governmental crisis, suggests that far from seeing the light at the end of the Brexit tunnel, we are entering a labyrinth that may remain a permanent source of tension in the EU.

10. Fridays for Future and the Greens' electoral impulse

The Friday before the European elections, the Fridays for Future movement called a new student strike in 1,600 cities all across Europe in an attempt to insert its climate emergency message into the election campaign. This movement – started by sixteen-year-old Greta Thunberg who began protesting outside the Swedish parliament every Friday by herself – has become over the course of a

few months one of the ecological movement's main mobilizing actions. In countries such as Sweden, Germany, Austria, Belgium, France, and Switzerland, strikes and protests every Friday have continued on a massive scale for months winning unprecedented gains in several places.

The analysis of the electoral results allows us to see that in the central countries of the EU, precisely where the Fridays for Future mobilizations take place, a significant part of the citizenship, principally the youth, wanted climate change to be a prominent part of the political agenda in place of other issues that, supposedly, were going to be the big mobilizers, such as migration and security. This spurred spectacular results for the Greens, lifting them from 50 to more than 70 seats in the European Parliament. In Germany, with 20.5 percent, they placed second, finishing ahead of the Social Democrats. In France, they came third with 12 seats, seven more than five years ago. In Belgium they won 3 representatives and 15 percent of the vote.

In view of these results, and if the Fridays for Future mobilizations do not decline after the summer break, the struggle against climate change and for a new energy model may, once and for all, become the big issue for this new parliament.

So where is the Left going?

Unidos Podemos's poor results in the Spanish State were not, unfortunately, an exception across Europe, but the norm in elections where left suffered a big defeat, losing 14 deputies. The reality is that the Left is, in its majority, unable to articulate a strategy differentiated from social-liberalism and, on occasions, even falls into the trap of rapidly rising anti-immigrant rhetoric. The only exception was the Left Bloc in Portugal, thanks in large measure to its clear position in relation to the Portuguese socialist government, and a campaign which highlighted the urgency of climate change and social rights threatened by Brussels.

The opening of a new institutional cycle in the European Union should lead us to draw up a thoroughgoing balance sheet of the situation facing the Left, we must reorganize ourselves and open an essential strategic debate. The new EU alliances must be understood as a recomposition of a social-liberal bloc with the greens, liberals, and socialists, one that reaffirms the relentless domination of the Brussels consensus. The response to this new EU governing bloc will pose the primary legislative challenge for a left that must quickly abandon chasing after votes. Perhaps the second challenge the European left must confront is how to conduct itself politically while we are the smallest bloc in European parliament. This means orienting ourselves not so much to parliamentary politics, but to reconnecting with newly emerging social movements and popular classes.

When austerity becomes the only politico-economic option for institutions alienated from the interests of the citizenry, then the really-existing EU will become a problem in the eyes of the social majority. Building a different Europe will emerge as the only solution to the aimlessness in which we are living. The integration of neoliberal Europe, including areas outside the euro zone, has come to the point where it is not possible to reverse course without a substantial change in the balance of forces at the European-wide level, a change which is, for the moment, beyond the visible horizon. Defining the Left's role must include reimagining itself on a European scale.

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P.S.

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