

„Welcome Sceptics!“

A Pro-European Argument in Favour of Eurosceptics in the European Parliament.

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Abstract

Eurosceptic parties won a clear victory in the 2009 European Parliament elections. Contrary to the negative reactions from some pro-European politicians and political scientists, this essay argues that the electoral success of Eurosceptic parties will neither endanger the process of European integration nor keep the European Parliament from working in an efficient and effective manner. Ideally, debates concerning European integration should be held during national elections. However, since they rarely are, European parliament elections offer the next best opportunity for such debates.

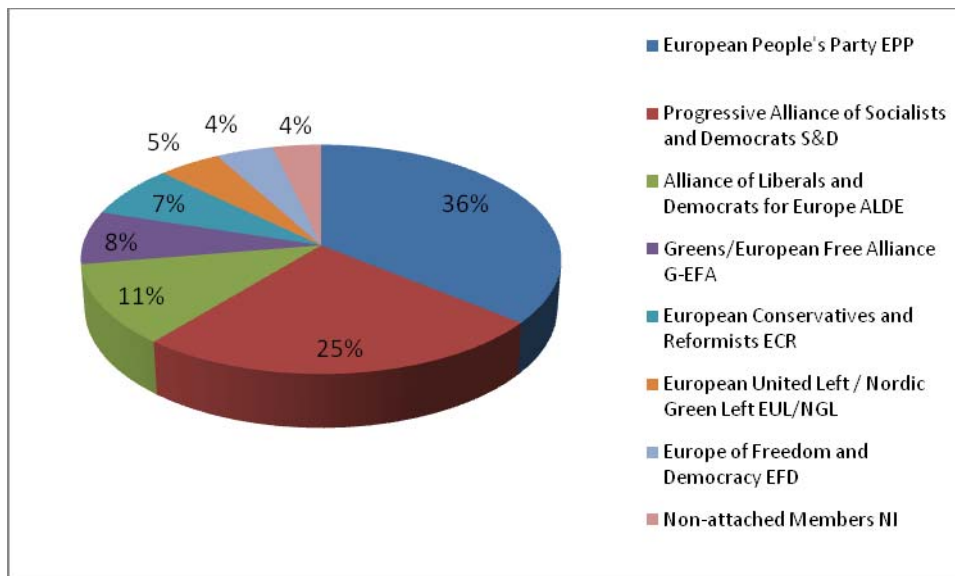
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Introduction

The European Parliament (EP) elections of June 2009 resulted in a clear victory of Eurosceptical parties. In the United Kingdom, the UK Independence Party surpassed Labour with 16,5% of the vote and the British National Party won two seats as well. In the Netherlands, Geert Wilders' PVV came in second with nearly 17% of the vote. In Austria, three Eurosceptic parties – Martin, FPÖ, and BZÖ – together gained nearly 35% of the vote. The Eurosceptics may not have won equally spectacular victories in all Member States, but the overall result is clear. Figure 1 provides an overview of the composition in party groups of the new European Parliament after the June 2009 elections. One may understand the ECR, EUL/NGL, EFD and almost all non-affiliated Members of the European Parliament to fall under the general label of 'Euroscepticism'. Together, this amounts to 20% of all MEPs.

Reactions from pro-European politicians and political scientists have been negative, as they argue this result endangers European integration and exacerbates – or at least does not alleviate – the EU's democratic deficit. This essay argues that the electoral victory of the Eurosceptics and their increased presence in the EP should be welcomed from a democratic, pro-European point of view. In light of a strong Eurosceptic attitude among many EU citizens, pro-Europeans now face a trade-off between a democratic Union that listens to the will of the people on the one hand, and continuing to pool sovereignty in an 'ever closer Union' on the other hand. I argue pro-Europeans should choose – and are in fact already pleading for – a democratic Union over a more centralised Union. That means welcoming the representation of Eurosceptic sentiments in the European Parliament.

Figure 1: Composition of the 7th European Parliament after the June 2009 Elections



Source: European Parliament

Three arguments by pro-Europeans and political scientists against Eurosceptics in the European Parliament will be discussed, and proven wrong. As I will argue, Eurosceptics in the European Parliament will not significantly hamper further integration, they will not decrease the efficiency of the EP as a legislator, nor do their campaigns of issues of formal integration during European elections mount up to voter deception.

The exact same dynamics feared by pro-Europeans and political scientists may in fact increase the stability and legitimacy of the European Union and thus function to solidify European integration, rather than endanger it. I argue the effect of the Eurosceptics' victory is not negative for European integration, but the extent to which it is positive remains to be seen. For the Eurosceptics to really contribute to European integration, they must organise in the European Parliament and fully engage pro-Europeans both in debate and in co-legislating. Eurosceptic citizens, just like pro-Europeans, deserve equal and effective representation of their opinions.

A good Europe is a democratic Europe

In order to make an assessment to what extent the Eurosceptic victory is positive from a pro-European point of view, one has to clarify what the criteria are on which this evaluation is made. A proper evaluation can only be made with principles of democracy: government of the people, by the people, and for the people. In fact, as will be discussed below, the three arguments made against Eurosceptic presence in the EP also base themselves on these principles.

A first reason why principles of democracy are valid benchmarks is simply that authoritarianism is not very popular in Europe. Although there may be some anti-democratic pro-Europeans, their number is presumably small. Many Member States by now have a long democratic tradition which has become deeply ingrained in their national culture. An authoritarian Europe going blatantly against the will of EU citizens and willing to suppress any resistance would in all likelihood evoke massive protest to the extent that the EU would cease to exist. Most pro-Europeans and political scientists recognise this. If they argue for more integration, they advocate a more or less federal Europe with such traditional features of democracy as majority rule, protection of minority rights and separation of power.

A second reason why principles of democracy are valid is that the EU is now in such a state of development that it requires democracy in order to survive. It is generally recognised that the EU has now evolved to such an extent, that it can be seen as some kind of 'polity' or political system (Hix 2005). Decisions made within EU framework cover a wide range of policy fields and have direct and significant impact on the daily lives of EU citizens. Such far reaching powers require some form of democracy in order to be legitimate and stable (Eriksen and Fossum 2004; Føllesdal and Hix 2006; Lord and Beetham 2001; Mair 2005, 2007). Assuming that pro-Europeans care about the continued survival of the European Union and the achievements in integration it represents, a true pro-European argument must therefore not only be an argument for more centralisation, but also an argument for a more democratic EU.

But what do such principles of democracy imply in practice? The concept of democracy and its meaning in the context of the EU are hotly contested in scientific debate (Føllesdal and Hix 2006; Lord and Beetham 2001; Majone 2002; Mo-

ravcsik 2006). Without denying the importance of such a scientific debate, this essay will build on a very popular understanding of democracy, shortly summarised in a famous statement by Abraham Lincoln: government of the people, by the people, and for the people. If we consider the European Parliament a legitimate part of EU democracy, this implies the following. First, there should be an adequate representation of citizens' opinions. Thus, all opinions in society should also be represented by political parties in the European Parliament (Schmitt and Thomassen 2000). Secondly, the European Parliament should have a real say within the EU, or there wouldn't be 'government by the people'. Thirdly, the European Parliament should work effectively and efficiently to supply the people with good policies. The second principle will be left out of present discussion, since the powers of the EP are not the issue here. The first and third principle, however, are relevant and will be used to evaluate the presence of Eurosceptics in the EP and the three arguments presented against it. I will show that all three arguments presented by pro-Europeans and political scientists are based on keeping the European Parliament effective, delivering the goods and making sure citizens' opinions are heard where they matter.

Three arguments against Eurosceptics in the European Parliament

To see whether the victory of Eurosceptics presents a risk to everything pro-Europeans hold dear, we need to understand the arguments made by pro-Europeans and political scientists. They argue against Eurosceptics in the EP for three reasons. First, Eurosceptics may endanger the project of European integration. Second, they may endanger effective and efficient governance in the European Union by hindering the workings of the EP. Thirdly, in terms of representation of citizens' opinions, the right place for Eurosceptics is not in the European Parliament, but rather in the different national parliaments of EU Member States.

In pro-European eyes, past achievements and future plans for European integration are necessary for effective policy-making in the EU and 'delivering the goods'. In other words, they are necessary to provide 'government for the people', reflected in our third democratic principle. Pro-Europeans argue that the victory

of Eurosceptic parties endangers the project of European integration. It will make it harder to go through with planned steps, like closer cooperation in Justice and Home Affairs and enlargement of the EU with countries such as Turkey and the Ukraine. Even worse, some of the achievements already made may come in danger if, for example, political pressure on the Euro increases as national governments feel the heat of Eurosceptic pressure at home. In a doomsday scenario, countries might even leave the European Union altogether resulting in the possible collapse of the EU. Thus, the economic and functional benefits of cooperation between the Member States are at stake.

Secondly, a large Eurosceptic presence in the European Parliament risks efficient governance in the EU. As the European Parliament has an important say in many EU policy fields, it is important that it functions efficiently and constructively as a co-legislator. Again, this argument appeals to the third principle of democracy: government for the people. If the only thing Eurosceptical parties do is block decision-making, the entire legislative process within the EU may grind to a halt. It seems realistic to assume that many of the new Eurosceptical Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) will take such a role. For instance, Geert Wilders has already promised that his party's MEPs will not join any European party group. The efficient working of the EP is dependent on such party groups for efficient governance as they facilitate reaching majorities in parliament for legislative proposals and amendments. There is thus a risk that the Eurosceptic MEPs will not contribute to legislation, making the burden on the pro-European MEPs heavier and making it more difficult to find necessary majorities.

Thirdly, the European parliament is not the right place for Eurosceptics. This is an argument made primarily by political scientists from a representative point of view (Kriesi 2007; Mair 2001). Peter Mair argues that the elections for the European Parliament should be about traditional left-right economic issues. After all, the European Parliament has significant influence in policy areas of distribution and redistribution in the EU. On questions of formal integration – whether the EU should have more or less powers, competencies in certain fields, enlargement questions, and power distribution between the EU and the Member States – the European Parliament has very little say. These questions are all dealt with in intergovernmental fashion, by the national governments. From the point of view of representation, citizens' opinions should be represented at the level of govern-

ment where decisions about these issues are made. Otherwise, 'government by the people' would be a mere farce. Since Eurosceptical parties represent citizens' opinion on formal European integration, they should represent these citizens at the national level in national parliaments in order to influence what national governments decide in EU framework. In other words, Eurosceptics in the European Parliament are in the wrong place. By campaigning on issues of formal integration during European elections, these Eurosceptical parties are conveying the message that citizens with negative opinions on formal integration should send them to Brussels and Strasbourg to block further integration. This is in fact, unrealistic given the lack of powers the EP has in such issues. Therefore, campaigning on issues of formal integration during European elections amounts to voter deception.

Eurosceptics do not harm the project of integration

If one understands the aim of integration to be as much centralisation or pooling of sovereignty as possible, then the Eurosceptics' victory may indeed be seen as negative. Yet, since the European Parliament does not decide about the competencies of the European Union and the Eurosceptics only have a minority in the European Parliament, we should not overstate that danger. If, however, the pro-Europeans want a functioning, stable and legitimate European Union, then the victory of Eurosceptics should be welcomed as furthering the project of integration.

Firstly, let's keep in mind that only a small part of all Eurosceptics are completely opposed to any form of integration or cooperation between European countries whatsoever. Most Eurosceptics are actually in favour of quite advanced forms of integration. Some of them, like the Dutch Socialist Party, may even combine calls for 'less Brussels' with being in favour of close cooperation on policy fields such as environmental policy and immigration policy (Van Kessel and Crum 2009: 6). The wide diversity in 'Euroscepticisms' has led political scientists to try and codify these forms into 'soft' and 'hard' Euroscepticism (Szczerbiak and Taggart 2008) or 'Eurosceptics', 'Europragmatists' and 'Eurorejects' (Kopecký and Mudde 2002). Even if the wide variety of what we generally refer to as 'Eu-

rosceptics' would gain a majority of seats in the European Parliament and national parliaments, it would be unlikely to see the complete end of European integration. As such, there isn't so much to fear from a pro-European point of view as is often made out to be.

Aside from the dominant left-right dimension of politics structuring EP party organisation, there is also a clear pro-anti European dimension relevant to understanding party politics and voting behaviour in the European Parliament (Hix and Lord 1997). Even though the European Parliament does not decide on further integration, it does not hesitate to ventilate its collective opinion on such matters. Also in areas in which it has little formal competencies like foreign policy or enlargement, the EP often adopts resolutions. Furthermore, it actively campaigns for increases in its own powers in informal dealings with Member State governments. It would be welcome from a democratic point of view, and good for the legitimacy of the European Parliament, if such opinions and dealings with Member States reflect public opinion. If a more prominent presence of Eurosceptics in the EP brings it closer to the average position of EU citizens on a relevant dimension of conflict, this presence would make it a more representative body. If this would make opinions adopted by the EP and its stance towards Member State governments more in line with citizens' wishes concerning further integration, this would increase the legitimacy of the EP and, by proxy, of the European Union as a whole. As a result, Eurosceptics in the EP might put a brake on further integration in the short run, but at the same time increase the legitimacy of the European Union and thereby its stability as a political system. In the long run, that might create the basis for a more settled and durable European Union and perhaps even for further steps in integration, if the collective will of its citizens allows it.

The European Parliament will still be effective

Fears that the Eurosceptics in the European Parliament will harm the EP as an efficient lawmaker are not that well grounded. First of all, although Eurosceptics won a clear victory, there is still a large pro-European majority in the EP, located in the traditional party federations. Even if Eurosceptic parties are unwilling to

contribute positively, there are still plenty of majorities possible to pass legislation. In the past, there have often been supermajorities in EP voting. It is not necessarily a problem if these majorities become smaller. With the loss of the social-democrats, the European People's Party (centre right) now has clear initiative. They might shift coalitions, taking on board the social-democrats, the liberals, the greens and/or other conservative parties depending on the particular piece of legislation in question.

These traditional party federations have proven in the past to be relatively cohesive, effective party federations (Hix et al. 2003; Hix et al. 2005; Thomassen et al. 2004) and there is no reason to believe that they will not continue to be so facing an increasingly Eurosceptic presence. In fact, the presence of Eurosceptic parties and accompanying difficulties of forming majorities may even stimulate these traditional parties to become even more cohesive.

Finally, the argument that the Eurosceptics harm the efficiency of the European parliament is largely based on the presumption that they will not be able to effectively organise themselves. This still remains to be seen, of course. Before the last election, there hasn't been very effective cooperation among Eurosceptics outside of the far left. The Independence and Democracy Group was a very loosely organised group of Eurosceptical parties. There is not much that brought these parties together other than their shared Euroscepticism. For instance, this group contained both the fiercely Catholic Polish League of Families, as well as the combined Dutch orthodox Protestant Parties SGP and Christian Union. As a result of the lack of common ideology, it hasn't been a very cohesive party group.

Two new groups have been formed after the June 2009 elections. A conservative Eurosceptic group called European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) and the even more Eurosceptical Europe of Freedom and Democracy (EFD). It is to be regretted that many of the Eurosceptics are not part of either of these groups and remain non-attached. It will be interesting to see whether the ECR and EFD are willing and able to present coherent views and work together with each other and non-affiliated MEPs to present a collective Eurosceptic opinion. Although the past doesn't provide much hope, effective party groups would give the Eurosceptics more positions as chair persons for committees and rapporteurs for legislative proposals, as well as a vehicle to coordinate voting behaviour. As the number of Eurosceptic MEPs increases, their potential collective influence also grows.

Thus, the potential benefits for them of working together increase as they could collectively have a real say. Inversely, the relative price for not working together also increases. If they manage to organise, their voters' preferences would be better transmitted towards actual policy-formulation. With an eye on effective government by the people – including Eurosceptic people - these parties should find a way to combine forces, despite the large internal differences of opinion they would have to bridge.

Debate about Europe must happen (somewhere)

As Peter Mair (2001) argues, citizens' opinions should be heard and represented at the level of government where decisions on these issues are made. We would thus need campaigns on 'Europe' during national elections and Eurosceptical political parties represented in national parliaments. In national parliaments, they can then overlook their national government's behaviour in intergovernmental negotiations on the future of European integration. The European elections, on the contrary, should be about left-right issues. Debating Europe in European elections is in fact a form of voter deception. It appears as if citizens' opinions are represented, whereas in fact they are not because they are not translated towards actual policy making. I present here two arguments why debating Europe during European elections is not as bad as Mair makes it out to be.

First, as stated above, the European Parliament may not have formal powers on integration issues, but still adopts resolutions about it and actively campaigns for an increase of its own powers. This may still have impact on decisions made by the European Council in informal ways. These resolutions and activities should therefore reflect citizens' opinions and a Eurosceptic presence in the European Parliament is needed as many citizens are sceptical on these issues. As a logical consequence, raising issues of formal integration in European elections is also legitimate.

More importantly, debate about European integration must happen somewhere. Only if we see the European and national channels of representation as completely isolated, does Mair's argument fly. In reality, however, both elections are contested by the same parties in the same public spheres. These parties and

public spheres provide linkages between the two formal channels of representation, ensuring that citizens' opinions expressed in one of these channels are also transmitted to the other.

The vast majority of political parties in Europe contest both national and European elections. They attempt to represent the same set of policy preferences and ideas at both levels. Thus, the manifesto and slogans they campaign on at national level and the ones they campaign on at European level might not be exactly the same, but they are at least compatible. Clear contradictions would be exploited by competing political parties, creating the image of a confused, ambiguous, or even deceiving party. Positions adopted during European election campaigns are therefore structured by parties' national manifestoes and in turn may lead to changes therein. Positions on European integration advanced during European elections may thus find their way to the national parliaments too. If these campaigns result in victory, parties will likely defend these positions in the national parliament as well. If they result in defeat, parties may reconsider their general attitude towards European integration and their actions in national politics.

Aside from political parties, a second link between the European and national channels of representation in the European Union is provided by the public sphere(s). Through public debate – particularly in mass media – opinions on European integration are not just uploaded and downloaded between citizens and parties, they are also formed and changed as a result of the arguments brought to bear (Eder 2007; Fossum and Schlesinger 2007; Trenz and Eder 2004). Since public spheres in Europe are still largely national in scope, national debates about European integration are clearly distinct (Diez Medrano 2003; Harmsen 2008; Larsen 1999). These debates are held and shaped during peaks of political contestation surrounding events concerning European integration, since this is how the attention of mass media functions (Galtung and Ruge 1965). Through the discussion they evoke, these events shape the way Europe is debated and understood by establishing common themes and reference points. These themes and reference points find their way both to public opinion and to political parties in national and European parliaments.

If Europe cannot be debated during national elections because these are dominated by other issues, than alternative 'events' are needed. Through party politi-

cal dynamics and the public sphere, events such as European elections function to shape national politics. Debating Europe in European elections is therefore a second best option, rather than voter deception.

Conclusion

If, as democratic pro-Europeans, we think a legitimate, stable Union in line with the will of its citizens is more desirable than an authoritarian super state, the presence of Eurosceptics in the EP should be welcomed. It is a victory of democracy and a step towards closing the gap between Europe's elites and its citizens. Fears of pro-Europeans and political scientists are unwarranted. First, the Eurosceptics' victory in the June 2009 European elections will not harm European integration. The general label 'Eurosceptics' in fact covers a wide variety of political parties, most of which are in favour of some form of cooperation among European countries. Even if they were radically against any form of cooperation, they are still only a minority and in the wrong place to affect integration considerably. Secondly, it will not endanger the EP as an efficient legislator since well organised pro-European parties still have a majority and may be inclined to work even more efficiently now that their majority has become smaller. Finally, although representation of citizens' opinions about integration should ideally happen at national level, having European elections about issues of formal integration is still a second best option, not voter deception. Through the interlinkages provided by political parties and the public sphere, these campaigns will also influence national politicians and national parliaments, thus increasing the extent to which citizens' preferences are represented towards the European Union. As these three negative arguments about the victory of the Eurosceptics have been refuted, we can conclude that this Eurosceptic victory is not to be mourned or feared from a democratic pro-European point of view.

In order for the election results to really work out positively, however, Eurosceptic parties in the EP should organise and engage the pro-Europeans collectively. They could give a European face to Euroscepticism if they manage to form a coherent party group with more internal cohesion than the old Independence and Democracy Group. Combined in such a new group, the Eurosceptics could active-

ly engage in the activities of the European Parliament, claim committee chair positions, questioning time and rapporteurships. Most importantly, they could publicly challenge the dealings of pro-Europeans in the European Parliament. Through more public political conflict in the European Parliament, the boundaries, meanings and reference points of European integration may be debated at a European level. The victory of the Eurosceptics might hamper further integration in the short run, but it could create a more stable and legitimate Union in the long run. Something a true democratic pro-European should find hard to reject.

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