



Political Studies Association

The European Elections: France

Media Briefing

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European Elections France

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74 seats, 7/8 electoral constituencies (8 including one overseas), 15 seats in Ile de France/Paris, approximately 190 lists in all, i.e. an average of 24 lists in each region/constituency (31 in Paris). 60% of the lists are not the main parties (e.g. Nouvelle donne (divers gauche), Féministes pour une Europe Solidaire, Parti Pirate (for transparency), Europe Citoyenne (C. Lepage), Force Vie (c. Boutin), Esperanto)...Most of them are unknown. And of the ‘main parties’ only the Greens and Alternative (the Centre) show true enthusiasm for Europe. All these sceptical, anti- or schizophrenic partisan attitudes to Europe, expressed as political parties or electoral alliances, suggest that as far as France is concerned, Europe is ‘in crisis’. In the recent presidential elections, Europe hardly figured at all, apart from a few ‘raise the drawbridge’ comments/threats from Nicholas Sarkozy; and the almost complete silence was not because Europe didn’t matter but because it was so unpopular/divisive. Apart from the above parties - Greens and Centrists – the main parties are themselves divided, and therefore offer very little ‘narrative’ in favour of Europe. Rather like the ‘No’ campaign on the Scottish referendum, the PS/UMP governing parties have no ‘vision’ of/for Europe anymore, and just argue in the ‘foothills’ of the European debate about the costs and benefits of belonging to the European Union. Recently (8 May), the President, François Hollande, spoke in favour of Europe but in a very old, post-war register (‘To leave Europe is to leave history’), underlining, in fact, the lack of reflection of the mainstream parties on the current problems and growing disaffection.

Hostility to Europe has been growing in inverse proportion to electoral abstention. In 1979, voting in France was at 61% - itself quite a low turn-out for a French election – in 2007 it was 41% (declining in every election – with a slight +3% upward blip in 1989). Predictions for 2014 are as low as 35%. In 2005, there was the ‘No’ victory in the referendum on the constitutional treaty. This profoundly shocked the mainstream political class (it ended all President Chirac’s political influence; and cf. the leader of the pro-constitution French Socialist Party at the time was François Hollande).

In fact, today, the only people bringing debate and colour to the European elections are indeed the anti-Europeans, although none is as colourful or as entertaining as UKIP’s Nigel Farage. The mainstream right and the Front National are leading in the polls (they change first and second places regularly, around the 20%+ figure – which for the FN is a dramatic four-fold increase on 2009, and a possible 5-fold increase in MEPs, with the Front National hoping to lead a federation of extreme-right parties and create a 100-strong party group in the EP).

The backdrop to the European elections is the unprecedented unpopularity of the President, François Hollande, and the aftermath of the European elections will feed into that process. For some time now the very legitimacy of President Hollande has been at stake, and it is not beyond the bounds of possibility that the regime itself may undergo some major shocks in the immediate future.

In this, and this in truly extreme form, the European elections of 2014 are a reflection, as ever, of domestic politics. Perhaps more than any French Euro election to date, however, these elections are also about Europe. A (slight) majority of the French (56%) do not want to leave the Euro. 51% are very ‘inquiéts’ about Europe – with another 10% very hostile. 64% say they are not interested in these elections. All of these poll results are confusing if not

contradictory, but they all point to a sense of national disarray that is reflected in the European election campaign.

The main parties (and their – very variable – expected vote):

EELV (Greens) 8%

Left Front 6%

Socialist Party 18%

Alternative (Centrists) 10%

UMP (Centre-Right) 20+%

National Front 20+%

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