



EUROPEAN VOICES UNHEARD

An analysis of German and British public debates ahead of the European elections 2014

Summary

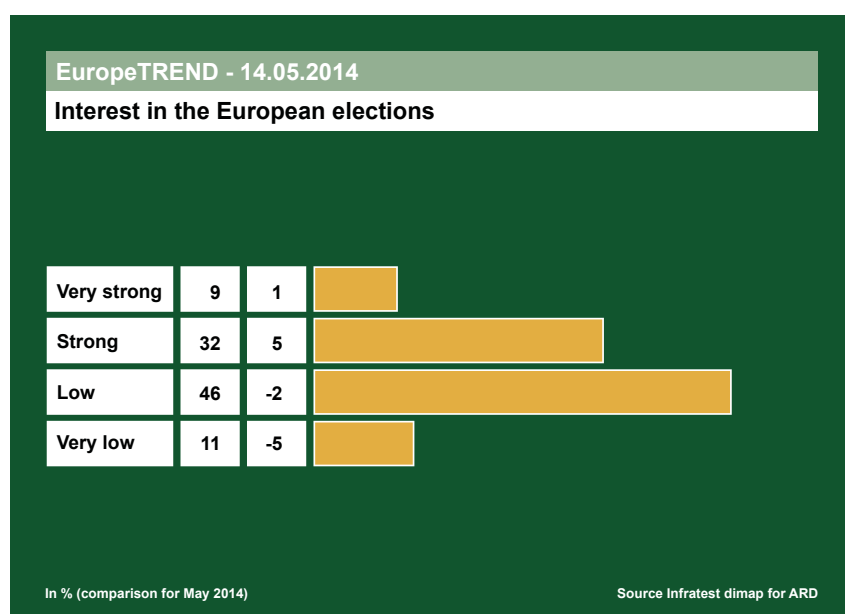
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1. EU elections in Germany and the UK

Germans general happy with the EU, but lacking interest

European elections are traditionally perceived as so-called second order elections in Germany. This means that voters tend to cast protest votes against their national governments. Many voters believe that, in European elections, rather little is at stake compared with national elections that form the government. The European Parliament (EP) elections are therefore used by voters to express their discontent with current policies at national level and their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with domestic parties.

A general lack of interest is reflected by the low turnout in EU elections compared with national elections. In the last two EU elections (2004 and 2009), turnout was 43%, whereas 71.5% participated in the 2013 federal elections. According to recent polls, the interest in the 2014 elections is rather low. However, the number of German voters in the European elections has increased during recent weeks.



The low turnout in previous elections can be explained by the democratic deficit in the EU. The European Commission has the initiative for legislation and, despite the increase in decision-making powers for the European Parliament (EP), is still perceived as the weakest body in the European decision-making process – with the Commission and the Council as the main agenda-setters. German citizens therefore tend to neglect the importance of the European elections.

German attitudes towards the EU are rather ambivalent. Trust in European institutions remains low. According to the public opinion surveys conducted as part of

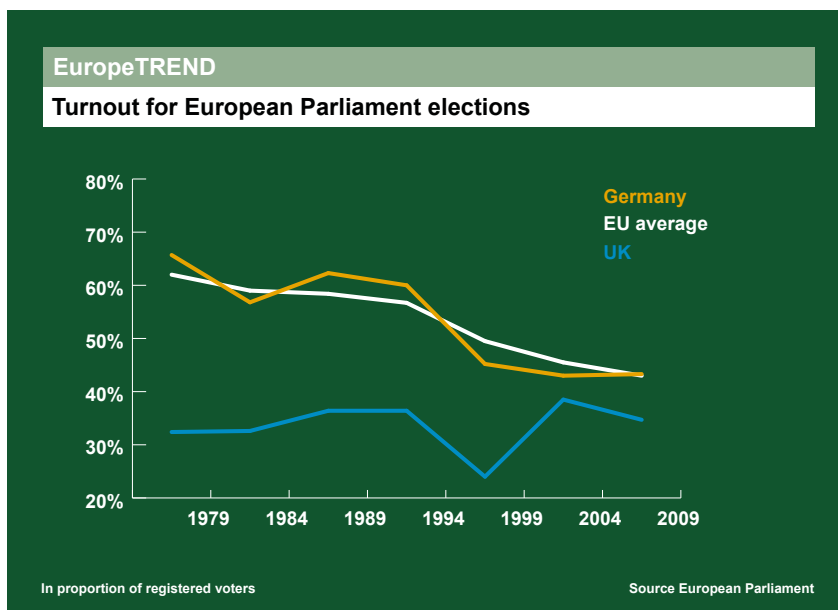
the EU Eurobarometer (November 2013), only 29% of Germans tended to trust the European Union whereas 44% trusted the federal parliament and 38% the federal government. Recent polls have also revealed that a majority of Germans admit that they do not understand the EU's political system. Nevertheless, Germans still support the EU and can identify with their European citizenship (74% in 2012).

TV debates failed to appeal to potential voters

On 8 May, a TV debate was held in Germany between the Social Democratic candidate Martin Schulz and his Conservative counterpart Jean Claude Juncker from Luxembourg. There was a clear lack of controversial issues. Although this was the first TV debate to be held between two European politicians in German history, it attracted very little public attention. Only 0.5% of the German TV audience followed the debate.

Brits and Brussels are ignoring each other once again

In the UK, the EU elections have traditionally been considered far less important than General Elections. EU election campaigns have always focused more on domestic politics rather than European issues.



However, the rise of UKIP, the on-going debate on the possible EU referendum and the start of campaigning for the 2015 General Elections have all raised the profile of these EU elections and there is much more additional debate about Europe in general taking place. Nevertheless, the 2014 European election campaigns in the UK have been almost entirely framed by domestic politics, with a strong focus on immigration and border control, and an additional side debate over Britain's future membership of the EU.

Voter turnout at EU elections has always been much lower in the UK than the EU average and was only 34.7% at the 2009 elections

(EU average 43%). However, higher turnout is expected at these elections as they coincide with local elections, which is likely to push up voter turnout for both. Some commentators have also suggested that voter turnout will be higher, as Eurosceptics who have not previously voted in European elections will come out to vote for UKIP in these elections. However, turnout is still likely to be much lower than at national general elections (the turnout at the most recent General Election in 2010 was 65.1%, an increase on the previous election but still the third lowest since 1945).

In general, there is a lack of understanding of the EU, EU policies or even the EU elections in the UK. According to the polling results of Eurobarometer (November 2013), the UK has one of the lowest levels of interest in the EU and understanding of how the EU works.

There is also a lot of misinformation and confusion about the EU and EU laws in the UK media.

2. The Commission Presidency

Lead candidates campaigning across Europe

Owing to changes to the Lisbon Treaty in 2009, this is the first time that candidates can "campaign" for the Commission presidency, since the party winning the majority in the EP elections is also most likely to head the Commission. This is clearly a step towards more visibility for the European elections, as it allows for more voter involvement and opens the way for a truly European public sphere in which EU issues are debated.

The SPD candidate Martin Schulz is considered to be the "first" candidate for the Commission Presidency. He does not have a background in national politics. Moreover, Martin Schulz is very popular and attracts considerable media coverage. In March he was the most tweeted about EU leader, even ahead of current Commission President Barroso. However, he has also been criticised for his populist comments, especially when it comes to blaming banks for the financial crisis and the poverty in southern Europe.

Despite this criticism, he is the favourite candidate for the Commission Presidency in Germany (41% of Germans would vote for him), even ahead of his immediate rival, Jean-Claude Juncker, who comes from Luxemburg and campaigns for the Conservatives (24%). This might indicate that when it comes to choosing EU politicians, Germans tend to favour nationality and origin even ahead of political preferences.

During the biggest TV debate on 15 May in Brussels, all five lead candidates, including Greek politician Alexis Tsipras, who is running for the European United Left, debated their programmes and views. The debate was transmitted on the parliamentary channel in Germany, which resulted in a low audience. Media did not feel that any of candidates could claim to have “won” the debate.

Reaching out for voters – except in the UK

There is very little discussion about electing the EU Commission President in the UK. Most people are unaware that there has been any major change in the EU election process or selection process of the EU Commission President. The recent Eurovision debate between the main EU Commission candidates was only streamed on the UK Parliament Live website and attracted very little attention in UK press.

The European Conservatives and Reformist Group (ECR), which includes the Conservative Party, decided not to put forward a candidate for the post and has not openly supported the European People’s Party (EPP) Group’s candidate, Jean-Claude Juncker. However, Juncker has said that renegotiating the UK’s EU membership would be one of his priorities if he wins the job so he may be privately supported by the Conservative Party.

Labour has publically refused to endorse Martin Schulz, the S&D candidate (on the grounds that Labour is against his federalist vision of Europe), who has also publically said that he will not go to the UK to campaign.

The Liberal candidate Guy Verhofstadt (ALDE Group), who is loosely supported by the Liberal Democrats, visited the UK in March – to deliver the annual Manchester Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence lecture. However, he didn’t have any public meetings with any of the Liberal Democrat party leadership.

UKIP meanwhile positions itself against all candidates and goes as far as saying that there shouldn’t be an EU President. Nigel Farage publically attacked President Barroso has on several occasions for the Commission’s lack of transparency in choosing its President and the Commissioners.

In general, there has been very little public scrutiny of any of the official candidates for the post, who remain largely unknown in the UK. That is unlikely to change, although commentators have highlighted the fact that whoever is chosen as the new EU Commissioner will be in charge if and when David Cameron has to re-negotiate the UK’s relationship with the UK.

3. Political parties and campaigns

Germany: More of the same?



“A Europe of opportunities. Not unemployment” © SPD



“So that Europe brings opportunities for all” © CDU

The current polls findings could also be due to the relatively quiet campaign. Both the Social Democrats and Conservatives use slogans referring to solidarity as means to ensure the EU’s ability to provide stability, peace and wealth for all their citizens in the future. This lack voter turnout in these elections.

The Social Democratic Party (SPD) which is a member of the Socialists & Democrats (S&D) group in the European Parliament focuses mainly on fighting unemployment. Their lead candidate Martin Schulz uses traditional Social Democratic issues such as redistribution policies and social inequalities. In addition, finance sector regulation in Europe was also a highlighted field. Martin Schulz reiterated the importance of introducing a financial transaction tax – a proposal the British government clearly rejected. He also declared that he was against the “race to the bottom” in terms of corporate tax. S&D also supports the creation of an independent European rating agency, and argues that climate change and pollution should also be tackled more seriously.

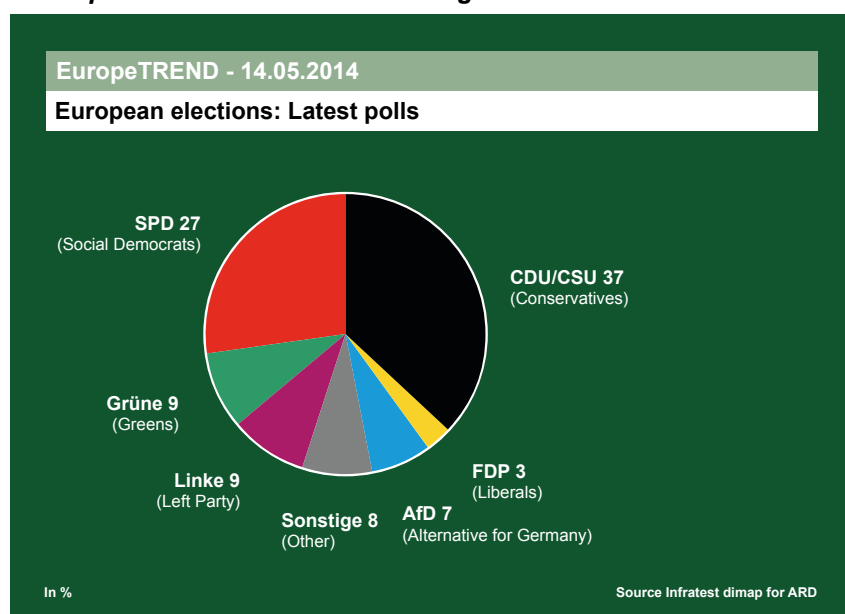
Conservatives likely to win the elections

The Christian Democratic Union (CDU), which belongs to the European People’s Party (EPP), is pursuing a different strategy with chancellor Merkel at the fore and European lead candidate David McAllister in her shadows. The campaign maintains the formula for success deployed in the federal elections with Merkel as guarantor of stability and continuity. The slogan for the CDU campaign might just as well be “keep calm and vote CDU”.

In this context, the Conservative campaign draws on the economic competence associated with the chancellor. Stable state finances and economic growth are highlighted as the means to overcoming the financial crisis in Europe.

The CDU is very likely to win the elections in Germany, with polls showing that the CDU will gain 37% of all votes, whereas the Social Democrats gain 27% of votes. The Conservatives are therefore still benefiting from their major success in the federal elections last year – the CDU won 42% of the votes at that time thanks to the widespread popularity of chancellor Merkel.

Small parties in the shadow of the grand coalition



With the current grand coalition governing Germany, Conservatives and Social Democrats largely dominate the political discourse. This makes it difficult for smaller traditional parties to put forward their views.

The German Greens have not differentiated between national and European campaigning. They tried to give the European idea new democratic impetus by holding an online primary election in order to find their lead candidate. However, the German media poured scorn on them when the idea backfired with only 20,000 out of 380,000,000 eligible voters participating (0.005 %). The

young German migration specialist Ska Keller and the French anti-GMO activist, José Bové, will now both act as heads for the European Greens in this election.

Meanwhile the Liberals (FDP) are trying to recover from their crushing defeat in the last parliamentary elections. The polls show, however, that the Liberals still have reasons to worry. In 2009 they managed to gain 11% of the votes. In 2014, polls indicate that they will win between just 3 and 4% of the vote. It thus seems that they are likely to face their worst defeat ever. Lead candidate Alexander Lambsdorff has kept a low profile during the campaign, with the party having concentrated on local and regional elections rather than the European ones in order to rebuild the party from the ground.

UK: Anti-European voices likely to be successful

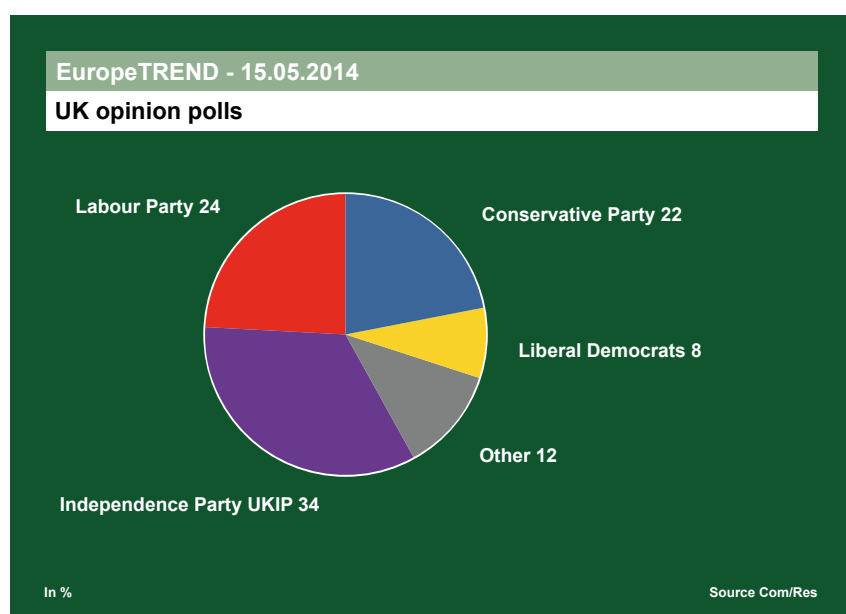
The EU and local elections will by many be considered as a test for the General Elections in 2015 and each of the main political parties is already focusing their 'European' campaign on the 2015 elections. The rise of UKIP threatens to change political balances. The main parties hope that the expected UKIP votes at the EU (and local) elections be will protest votes and will not be repeated in the General Election.



David Cameron (Conservative) has promised to re-negotiate the UK's relationship with the EU and is focusing his campaign on the pledge to hold an in/out referendum in 2017. Currently the Conservatives have 25 MEPs elected, and predict to get 20-28% of the votes (27.7% in 2009).

Ed Miliband (Labour) has been at times ambivalent about his stance on the UK-EU relationship and a possible referendum but says Labour MEPs will put "jobs and growth" at the heart of the EU. Currently Labour has 13 MEPs elected, and predict to get 23-38% of the votes (15.7% in 2009).

Nick Clegg (Liberal Democrats) promotes his party as one of "optimism and openness" fighting against the "fears and falsehoods" of "isolationists" and as the only true pro-European/IN Party, fighting for British jobs ("IN Europe, IN Work"). Recent public EU debates with Nigel Farage did not boost support for the Liberal Democrats, although many argued that they did help to expose and question some UKIP claims and policies. According to some polls, the Liberal Democrats could be wiped out completely at the EU level. Currently the Liberal Democrats have 11 MEPs elected, and hope to get 8-11% of the votes (13.7% in 2009).



Nigel Farage (UK Independence Party, UKIP) has predicted „an earthquake“ in politics for these elections. The party wants an in/out referendum as soon as possible and is campaigning for the UK to leave the EU and is focusing on the impact of being in the European Union on control of the UK's borders and immigration. According to several recent polls, UKIP will get their best result yet at these EU elections and could possibly even get the most votes out of all the UK parties.

Much of this will depend on the degree to which the party is affected by its occasional scandals.

UKIP has polled well at previous European elections, but very poorly at subsequent general elections. Currently UKIP have 13 MEPs elected, predicted to get 20-31% of the votes (16.5% in 2009). There are 24 other parties fielding candidates in the EU elections (including Greens, SNP, BNP and Plaid Cymru who all currently have at least 1 MEP). Five of them are anti-EU parties and two are pro-European. The BNP is expected to be wiped out and the SNP is likely to take an extra seat in Scotland.

4. Anti-European rhetoric: A potential danger for the EU?



What does the fat Korean kid and the EU have in common? Their understanding of democracy. Courage to stand up for Germany – Vote AfD, © AfD

Populists slowly gaining a foothold in Germany...

The AfD was created in 2011 as a response to the heated debates about financing the Greek debts in Germany. The party is riding on a wave of populism and is trying to revive anti-European feelings by positioning itself as the “German Tea Party”. But despite a programme based on fears and common sense arguments, the leader of the party Bernd Lucke is an economics professor, who also appeals to a middle-class “bourgeois” electorate. The party opposes the Euro as the common currency as well as excessive EU centralism, bureaucracy and dirigisme. The AfD supports a selective integration, and campaigns with the slogan “Courage to stand up for Germany”. Their probably most controversial campaign slogan, which compares the EU’s democratic system to North Korea, has been harshly criticized by the media, and is possibly undermining their credibility as a serious party.

In 2013, the AfD participated in its first election and managed to gain 4.8% of the votes, which was a clear record for a new party. The 5% threshold applicable to federal elections means, that the AfD failed to gain any seats in the Bundestag. However, according to the latest poll, they could gain as much as 7% of the votes on 25 May. This means that the party will be represented in Brussels, supporting the large number of right-wing, populist parties from other member states.

Last week the secretary general of the Conservative, Peter Tauber, explained that “it does not help to talk about the AfD”, as the party is seen as a threat for the CDU. The European elections are largely used as a protest vote and those voters which are unhappy with Merkel’s policies could easily change their minds. Moreover, the AfD is likely to gain parliamentary seats in regional elections later this year.

... While UKIP finds great support in the UK

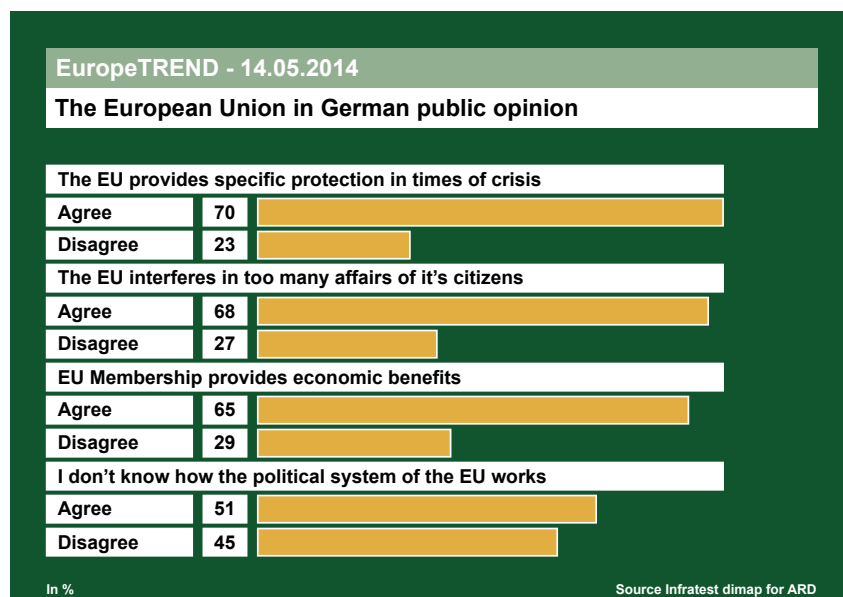
UKIP has focused its campaign mainly on the effect of EU immigration and EU laws on the UK. It campaigns for the right to an in/out referendum and argues that it is the only party which will fight to take the UK out



© UKIP

of the EU. In April UKIP launched a major public anti-EU election campaign with controversial billboards being posted across England. Although they have been ridiculed and spoofed by many, according to commentators they are also successfully scaremongering and helping to raise fears about immigration (e.g. EU immigrants are after your job!).

5. Issues and public opinion



Germany: The Constitutional Court's slashing of the 3% threshold

In February this year, the German Constitutional Court slashed the 3% threshold in the German voting system for the EP elections. This means that smaller parties will be able to send their parliamentarians to Brussels. The court argued that this decision would increase democratic legitimacy and enable every voice to be heard. However, this decision was harshly criticized by many pro-European voices, as it might hinder the decision-making process in the EP by enabling smaller and often far-right parties to enter parliament.

The debates about unemployment and sound public finances dominated the campaigns. But despite the sovereign debt crisis and the “bailing out” of the Greek economy, a majority of Germans believe that the EU provides more benefits than disadvantages. This can be put down to excellent economic situation and low unemployment rate in Germany itself.

The campaigns also focused on the following issues:

Ukraine and Russia: The EU's foreign policy on trial

A recent poll shows that Germans have regained trust in the EU's ability to secure peace in view of the crisis in Ukraine. Although the invasion of Crimea, the possibility of impending gas cuts and the involvement of Russia in separatist movements in eastern Ukraine have led to the rekindling of people's perception of Russia as a threat. It has also encouraged the population to refocus on the main task of the EU, which is to secure peace rather than blame the EU for overregulation and economic wrongdoings. Nowadays, most Germans think that Europe guarantees political stability.

After Lampedusa: What kind of asylum policies does Europe want?

The Lampedusa tragedy last year led to a major debate about asylum policies in the EU, as southern European countries struggle to take in the masses of refugees, but clearly can't let them die on the shores of Europe. Despite the willingness to act, most candidates and parties remain particularly vague and have failed to propose concrete measures on how to tackle immigration – this has also encouraged right-wing parties to exploit this issue to polarise public opinion.

The Transatlantic Free Trade Agreement (TTIP): A niche for the Greens

While most issues such as economic or asylum policies are equally addressed by parties in the run-up to the elections, the currently negotiated TTIP between the EU and the US has only found resonance with the Greens, wanting to differentiate themselves from the more traditional programmes. In particular issues concerning consumer protection, environmental standards and the effects of globalization have been the subject of political discussions.

Bureaucracy & Eurocrats

Finally, attempts by the EU to reduce bureaucracy in its institutions are also being debated in the run-up to the election. About 56% of the population in Germany still sees the EU as overly bureaucratic. In order to win voters on the right, right-wing parties such as the Bavarian CSU and AfD, and to a certain extent the CDU are seizing the opportunity to criticize the EU's means of functioning and are urging Member States to reclaim their sovereign powers and/or ascertain the importance of the subsidiarity principle.

UK: Immigration and the upcoming in-out referendum dominating the public debate

Immigration and its impact on the UK (services, jobs, social security benefits) is dominating the EU debate. Most anti-EU arguments are linked to immigration and the lack of control of the UK's borders. EU bureaucracy and loss of sovereignty (imposition of EU laws and regulations) is also often a hot topic, although it is sometimes not very well informed.

There is very little discussion about the EU's foreign policy or any other specific policies. Most public debates have been focused on domestic politics and 'what is best for 'Britain'.

The Scottish independence referendum is often linked to the UK's future in the EU, although the EU elections results are more likely to have an impact on the referendum than the other way around. Scotland is much more pro-European. The Eurosceptic voices dominating election results in England may push Scotland further towards independence.

Despite Eurosceptic election campaigns in the UK, a , the most recent YouGov polls show that support for staying in the EU is actually slightly increasing (42% of people would vote to stay in the European Union, 36% would vote to leave). UKIP also owes some of its popularity to the lack of public trust in the main parties and many people's disappointment with the government coalition, rather than disaffection with Europe. Just 22 per cent of respondents said they trusted Westminster politicians, compared to 72 per cent who said they didn't, a trend that is reflected throughout Europe.

6. Conclusion

The run-up to the elections has revealed attempts to increase the EU's visibility, mostly as a result of the Lisbon Treaty and the designation of "lead candidates". However, issues covered by this rather uninspiring campaign remain largely national – the competition is still focusing on the differences between states rather than on political programmes and ideas. Participation in 2014 is expected to remain low in Germany and the UK

The outcome of the elections is quite clear in Germany, with similar results to the last federal elections. The growing popularity of the AfD as a far-right, Eurosceptic party AfD is particularly noticeable in Germany, as well as the predominance of Commission candidate Martin Schulz.

As in Germany, the EU elections debate has been largely dominated by domestic politics and its focus has been on next year's General Election. In the UK, the latest polls by ComRes show that UKIP could well take first place as they hover at around 30%, which is a big rise on their 2009 figures. However, they have recently dropped in ratings, which could be linked to the regular scandals relating to the party and accusations of racism as well as several resignations. Labour has been predicted to come out in second place with around 24% followed by the Tories who are predicted to get around 22%. The outcome of the EU elections could also influence the subsequent General Election campaigning and debates – and even party policies related to the future of the UK's relationship with Europe.

Authors



Christian Simon - navos

Head of International Communications
christian.simon@navos.eu

Hasenheide 54
10967 Berlin/Germany

Phone: +49 (0) 30 / 467 24 25-0
Fax: +49 (0) 30 / 467 24 25-90

www.navos.eu



Sophie Pornschlegel - navos

Account Executive
sophie.pornschlegel@navos.eu

Hasenheide 54
10967 Berlin/Germany

Phone: +49 (0) 30 / 467 24 25-0
Fax: +49 (0) 30 / 467 24 25-90

www.navos.eu



Natalia Marczevska - PLMR

Digital Executive PLMR
natalia.marczevska@plmr.co.uk

Church House
29 Great Smith Street
Westminster
SW1P 3BL

Phone: +44 (0) 207 622 9529
Fax: +44 (0) 845 130 5822

www.plmr.co.uk