

The European elections 2014: Earthquake in the UK, stability in Germany

UNITED KINGDOM

The most significant development in the UK is the rise of Nigel Farage's anti-European UKIP party. With 27%, UKIP is the clear winner – the Tories and Labour both suffered major defeats. Farage is a real threat for Cameron, who is trying to appease Eurosceptic voters with his promise for an in/out referendum in 2017. What does the election therefore mean for the UK's European future?

Elin Twigge, Deputy Managing Director of PLMR, answers our questions. Elin has given expert commentary in print and broadcast media and is currently Vice Chair of the PRCA Public Affairs Group.



The success of UKIP in both local and European elections has been described as an “earthquake”. Was this success merely a protest vote against the British government, a vote against the EU or a vote of political convictions for UKIP policies? What impact will this result have on British politics?

To an extent it was all three. UKIP has undeniably replaced the Liberal Democrats as the party of protest and is likely to remain so, as long as the Lib Dems remain part of the coalition government. Despite the surge in UKIP support, more than one poll has shown that almost half of UKIP voters don't intend to vote for UKIP in the General Election, suggesting that voting for UKIP is about making a statement rather than wanting to give the party a political mandate.

UKIP voters wanted to send a strong signal to the political elite that they are not happy. UKIP for a long time was a 'single issue' party – campaigning for the UK to leave the EU. However, recent debates have been focused more on immigration, and the UK's alleged inability to 'control its borders'. UKIP managed to link problems related to immigration to the UK's EU membership. UKIP voters may not all be anti-immigration but they want the government to recognise what they

see as the negative impacts of immigration, such as housing shortages, overcrowded schools and stretched public services. The government will need to develop a more effective narrative on these issues if it wants to curb support for UKIP policies.

Lib Dems suffered their worst elections results in the last 25 years. How do you explain this defeat despite the traditional affinities for liberal ideas in the UK?

The Liberal Democrats have been almost entirely wiped out in Europe, losing all but one of its MEPs. They lost their traditional support base in large part because of their role in the coalition but Nick Clegg has also admitted that the decision on take on UKIP by fighting the election as the pro-European 'the party of in' did not work. Liberal Democrat colleagues who were out on the doorstep on election day heard time and again that candidates further down the party chain are paying the price for Nick Clegg's unpopularity.

However, this is not necessarily a reflection of a move away from 'liberal ideas', more that the UK population do not trust the Liberal Democrats to deliver on their liberal narrative. UK voters are becoming more volatile and less loyal. Increasingly people are focusing more on policies, rather than parties. UKIP has proven that it can attract 'life-long voters' from other parties by a few, core policy stances. Personalities also matter more - Nigel Farage has successfully portrayed himself as the 'common man', with an anti-politics narrative, whilst the main stream parties are perceived to be increasingly detached from the electorate.

Will the success of UKIP change Cameron's approach towards the EU in the light of the 2015 general elections? Is the proposed In/Out-Referendum in 2017 more likely to happen?

UKIP in the General Election will have a destabilising impact on all the parties, but Cameron in particular does not want to lose the Conservative grass roots to Farage. Therefore he will no doubt continue to focus on his promise of a referendum, but also of re-negotiating the UK's relationship with the EU. This is politically advantageous for him as it creates a clear dividing line between Labour and the Conservatives.

However, people also understand that the EU will not let the UK simply 'cherry pick' policies. Cameron will have to convince voters that he has found like-minded allies in Europe who will back his reform agenda.

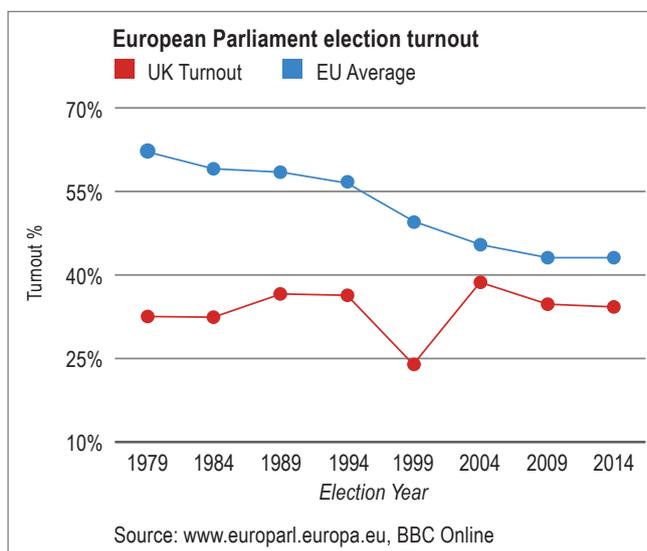
The European Conservatives are the strongest political group in the EP, and Jean Claude Juncker already claimed to be the next President of the European Commission. But the UK did not support him or any of the lead candidates. What role will the UK play in the EU in the future?

Although the centre-right European People's Party group is closer politically to the Conservatives, David Cameron decided to leave the group because it would not adopt a strong enough position on EU reform. Cameron is now trying to gather support in opposition of Jean Claude Juncker, arguing that choosing a 'veteran insider' and a supporter of European integration, would represent "business as usual", which is not what he electorate wants given May's result.

However, by opposing Juncker, the lead candidate of the 'winning' political group, Cameron is also arguing that heads of national governments should decide who takes the EU's top posts, and not the European Parliament. If Cameron loses his appeal for a more pro-reform candidate, he might see the UK's Commission portfolio downgraded and he may find it harder to lead any re-negotiation of the UK relationship with the EU.

The turnout in the UK was just 33.8%, 0.9% lower than in 2009. How do you explain this lack of interest for these elections?

Voter turnout in EU elections has always been lower than in the General Election and always in the 30% range (apart from a big drop to 24% in the 1999 elections). The slight decrease in voter turnout in these elections is part of a bigger, national, trend of voter disengagement. There is an increasing perception that all major parties are the same and none of them have the inclination or ability to really change anything. UKIP, if anything, has helped to sustain engagement at this level. Reportedly, many UKIP voters were either first time voters, or hadn't voted for any party for a long time. However, in short, whatever the statistics say, the UK population is generally apathetic when it comes to the EU.



GERMANY

In contrast to the “political earthquakes” provoked by the elections in France or in the UK, Germany remains an “anchor of stability”. The elections have had no significant impact on the political majorities – Merkel has retained her position of power even though the German Conservatives (CDU/CSU) were unable to repeat their victory from the federal elections in 2013.



In assessing the German results, **Christian Simon**, Senior Public Affairs Consultant, states that, despite losses for Germany’s Conservatives, Chancellor Merkel’s power has been consolidated.

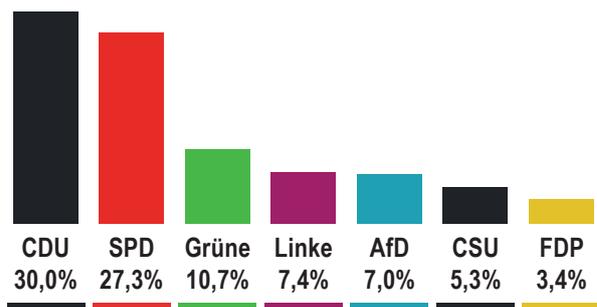
Merkel is the clear winner of the European election. Nevertheless, the Alternative for Germany party (AfD) gained 7% of the votes. This means that Eurosceptic parties are gaining seats even in an economically stable and wealthy country like Germany. Will these results change the CDU’s policies?

Merkel still profits from a large majority with 30% of the votes. Although the AfD is not particularly dangerous for Merkel, the result is nevertheless impressive for a newly created party and in the future the party could become problematic for the CDU. The biggest challenge Merkel currently faces are the results in the rest of Europe. The Front National (FN) in France and UKIP in the UK are going to make their voices heard in Brussels and try to influence their respective national governments. David Cameron’s response is a clear indication of the domestic pressure he is facing. As one of the key figures in European politics, keeping the European Union united will perhaps be the largest and most important task for Merkel in the years to come.

The liberal Free Democratic Party in Germany (FDP), has suffered yet another defeat with 3.5% of the votes, compared with 11% in 2009. What has happened to the Liberals in Germany?

The FDP suffered a massive defeat in the last federal elections, losing all their seats in the Bundestag. Despite a change in the leadership, the results of the European elections were still extremely poor. The party will need to focus on new policies and strategies in order to rebuild the party from the ground. The FDP electorate is highly volatile and seems to have partly voted for the CDU instead. The party’s crisis of legitimacy might also be caused by its failure to deliver on election promises such as tax cuts.

Germany – election results



Source: Stat. Bundesamt

A court ruling by the German Constitutional Court, which scrapped the minimum threshold of 3%, means that small parties will be able to send MEPs to Brussels. What consequences will this have on the work of the European Parliament?

Although populist voices will be louder in the European Parliament in the years ahead, the extreme right will not be able to block EU legislation. This would require an alliance of all Eurosceptic and far right parties. The eurosceptic German party (AfD) has also already ruled out joining a group with UKIP. We can therefore assume that there will not be a significant threat to the European Parliament from the extreme right. Nev-

ertheless, the success of the Eurosceptics and right wingers means that larger parties will have to rethink their European politics if they don't want to lose more seats in the future.

Although hesitant at the beginning, Chancellor Merkel is now backing Juncker to become the next Commission President – despite Prime Minister Cameron threatening a “Brixit”.

The European Union has always been driven by the national governments. Although Chancellor Merkel is undoubtedly a defender of the European Union, domestic politics also shape the German government's European agenda, which is why Merkel has been reluctant to support Juncker. The reason why she backs him now is that David Cameron tried to “blackmail” the European Union. The German public increased pressure on Merkel, saying that she has to respect the outcome of the vote and – what is perhaps more significant in this case – should refuse to be blackmailed. Cameron was wrong about his “strategic asset”, a potential exit of the UK.

In Germany turnout was slightly higher than in 2009, with a participation rate of 47.7%. Is there renewed interest in the EU in Germany?

That is difficult to say. Polls prior to the elections indicated increased interest in the elections among German citizens. Most of the Germans indeed support the idea of the European Union but remain highly sceptical when it comes to the question of the European Union's democratic legitimisation. The “permissive consensus” has increasingly been replaced by a polarisation of attitudes. In this context, the higher turnout is a good signal. But it is too early to speak of a renewed interest, let alone German euphoria for the EU. The next few years will show if trust in the EU has substantially grown.