INSTITUTIONAL CHALLENGES

European citizens vote change

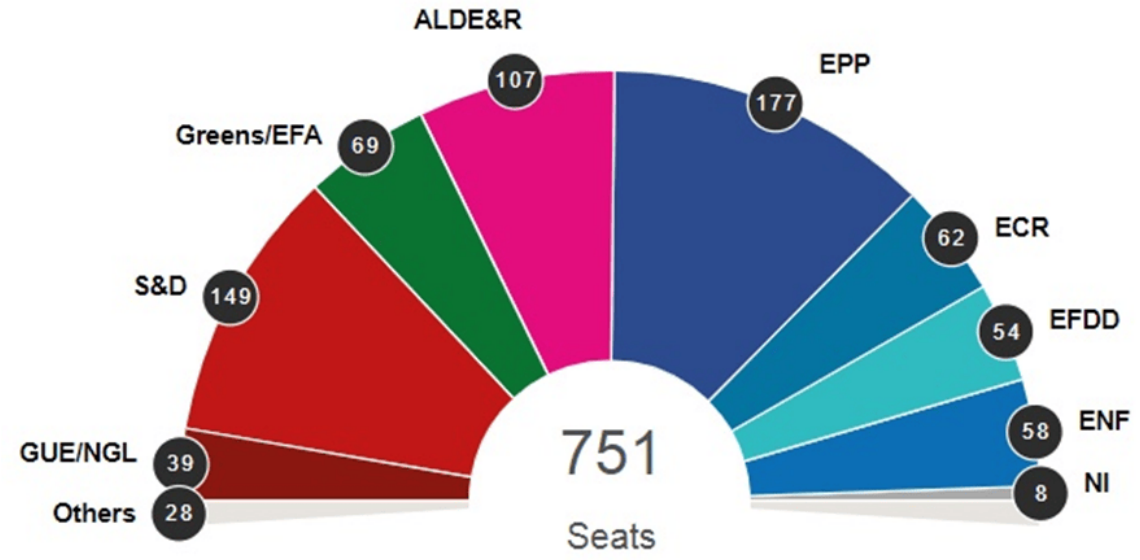
Anàlisi dels resultats de les eleccions al Parlament europeu



Vista del Parlament europeu

European citizens want a change. The rise in turnout and growing support for non-traditional parties delivers a clear message: 'business as usual' is not an option. Two thirds of voters chose pro-European parties, but the grand coalition of European People's Party and social democrats suffered losses (-77 seats). The desire for change is expressed in different ways: firstly, by a larger vote for liberals and greens (+57 seats), decidedly pro-European options; secondly, by the Eurosceptic vote (+55 seats) channeled through national populism and the far right.

The new community arithmetic in the European Parliament confirms the end of the two-party system as a general trend. Conservatives and social democrats no longer have a majority and both blocks lost the same number of MEPs; the two blocks with the biggest increases were ALDE and the Salvini/Le Pen group. The so-called grand coalition will have to find support from the greens or liberals to unblock official appointments and approve budgets and new laws. In short, the EU, its institutions and particularly the Commission and Parliament will have to do more political manoeuvring during this legislature.



Results of the 2018 European Parliament elections

Increase in turnout

Despite bleak predictions, the European electorate turned out in large numbers, reversing a downward trend stretching back to the 1979 elections. Two thirds of voters chose pro-European options. An initial assessment of the increased turnout, except in Portugal, seems to suggest it is due to four factors:

1. European politics is increasingly prominent on Member States' public agendas; for better or for worse, national political discourse is gaining importance and has a clear impact on citizens' daily lives.
2. A second possible factor is that part of the electorate believes Europe should become a stronger global political actor, with the capacity to influence such an internationally significant issue as combatting climate change. Thus, there may be a perception, especially amongst young people, that Member States cannot do anything on their own and the fight needs to be global, requiring a strong European Union.
3. A third explanatory factor is the effect of support for or rejection of the potential rise in national populism and the far right around Europe, which has mobilised more ideologically motived voters.
4. Fourthly, it should be borne in mind that several elections were held at the same time, not only in Spain (municipal and regional elections) but also in other European Union countries. Germany, Ireland and Italy all simultaneously held regional or local elections, while Lithuania held the second round of its presidential elections. Romania also used 26 May to hold a referendum. This brought various political arenas into play, leading to greater voter turnout.

Euroscepticism: minimising Europe from within

After the problems arising from Brexit, Eurosceptic options have been strengthened thanks to their increased influence in the European Parliament to 'minimize Europe from within'.

Populist parties have exploited fears amongst European citizens (migration, refugees, austerity and the terrorist threat) to push their regressive agenda with regard to the federal integration process. Despite their notable rise, this was not enough for far-right and populist parties to obtain a large enough minority to exercise the power of veto or block the European Parliament. Furthermore, they are split into three different groups.

Salvini and the Flemish Vlaams Belang are the biggest winners in the populist camp; in Belgium, their rise could see the country once again go without a federal government for a good few months. In France, despite Le Pen's victory, it should be remembered that the European elections always serve as a protest vote against the government, as there are no mid-term legislative, municipal or regional elections. Therefore, the result should be viewed in relative terms (indeed, it is a little below that of five years ago). A curious point: Portugal is the only relevant Member State with no extreme-right or nationalist-populist parties. Robert Fishman provides an interesting discussion of this in his latest book, *Democratic Practice: Origins of the Iberian Divide in Political Inclusion* (2019), in which he compares the political culture in Portugal with that of Spain.

In conclusion, the electoral results of 26 May suggest it would be better not to see the European crisis as over. Apart from the rise in Eurosceptic options, the diversification of the vote indicates a desire for change amongst EU citizens. The current European pact is showing signs of running out of steam and it would be wise to use the renewed pro-European boost to rethink the structures of governance. This is the theme tackled in the issue #46 of IDEES magazine.