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BRIEF

THE EUROSCEPTIC SURGE AND HOW TO RESPOND TO IT

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SUMMARY

Pollsters are predicting a Eurosceptic surge at the European elections, which take place at a time when the European Union is going through the worst economic and political crisis in its history. Although the main pro-European forces want to turn this election into a left–right contest for the nomination of the next European Commission president, the real contest will be between them and the Eurosceptic forces, which are likely to become the third political force in the European Parliament. This brief examines how big the Eurosceptic surge is likely to be, what its impact may be, and how pro-European forces should deal with it.

Although the Eurosceptics will not be able to stop the integration of the eurozone, they could significantly slow it down and further undermine the legitimacy of the EU. The Eurosceptics do not need a majority in the European Parliament to impose their agenda. In fact, the real danger is the way they may influence the agenda of the mainstream parties – in particular at the national level. The Eurosceptics are shaping a public discourse that associates Europe with immigration, austerity, and loss of sovereignty, and that increases pressure for “less Europe” rather than “more Europe”. But rather than huddling together in a “Europe cartel”, pro-Europeans should try to create the space for political battles between competing visions of Europe.

Ahead of the European elections in May, Europe’s far-right parties are forging an anti-EU alliance. After the French National Front leader Marine Le Pen and the Dutch Freedom Party leader Geert Wilders met last year, the head of the Austrian Freedom Party, Heinz-Christian Strache, hosted a meeting of right-wing Eurosceptic parties including the National Front, the Belgian Vlaams Belang, the Swedish Democrats, the Italian Lega Nord, and the Slovak National Party, with Wilders publicly expressing his support.¹ The so-called European Alliance for Freedom aims to form a group in the European Parliament (which currently requires 25 members from seven EU member states). It is also reaching out to the UK Independence Party (UKIP), Finland’s Finns Party, the Danish People’s Party, and Germany’s Alternative für Deutschland (AfD).

The opposition of these far-right parties to the idea of “ever closer union” is also shared by some the bigger and more established Eurosceptic parties in the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group, such as the British Conservative Party and the Polish Law and Justice Party, and by the central and eastern European far-right parties such as Jobbik (Hungary) and Golden Dawn (Greece). The emerging anti-establishment coalition might also benefit from the support of some of the 18 left-wing parties in the United Left/Nordic Green Left group, which

¹ Georgina Prodhan, “Austria’s Freedom aims to enlarge Eurosceptic bloc”, Reuters, 14 November 2013, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/12/14/us-europe-right-austria-idUSBRE9BDD20131214>.

includes Syriza (Greece), Die Linke (Germany), and the Socialist Party (Netherlands), and other parties such as the Five Star Movement in Italy.²

This coalition of Eurosceptic parties is likely to make life difficult for the mainstream parties in the European Parliament. The world's first supranational parliament now has the power to block the appointment of the European Commission, to veto the majority of European legislation, to block the signature of international treaties and trade agreements, and even to hold up the EU's annual budget. The Eurosceptics hope to use these powers to wreck the European project from within.³ Some commentators even see the anti-EU alliance as a kind of European version of the Tea Party and predict that it might even be able to pioneer a kind of European version of the "shutdown".⁴

In some ways, the Eurosceptics could cause more damage than the emergence of the Tea Party. Although the American right wants to get the government out of people's lives and therefore wants a weaker Congress and government, it doesn't oppose the very existence of the United States. Some of the Eurosceptic parties, by contrast, do not support the existence of the EU at all and oppose the existence of the parliament to which they are seeking to be elected. If, as many polls predict, the Eurosceptics emerge as the third largest bloc after the elections, we may see the strange spectacle of a parliament with many members who ultimately want to secure its own abolition. We call this the "self-hating parliament".⁵ This will likely polarise debates in the European Parliament between "pro-Europeans" and Eurosceptics.

Even if that does not happen, however, the Eurosceptics could make the EU even more difficult to govern and in particular could limit its ability to adopt the key decisions it needs to take to solve the euro crisis and create growth. By doing this, and by exposing the disaffection of citizens with European politics, the Eurosceptics could also further weaken the EU's legitimacy. This in turn would prevent Europe from bridging the deep divisions that have emerged between creditors and debtors, north and south, euro-ins and euro-outs, and citizens and elites – and make the European Parliament increasingly irrelevant. This is exactly the opposite of what pro-Europeans had hoped to achieve with the creation of the European Parliament, which was meant to help overcome the EU's "democratic deficit".

² "The Rise of Eurosceptic Right-Wing Parties and the 2014 European Elections", MHP, available at <http://mhpcom.wpengine.netdna-cdn.com/public-affairs/files/2013/12/Eurosceptic-leaflet-V3.pdf>.

³ Ian Traynor, "Le Pen and Wilders forge plan to 'wreck' EU from within", the *Guardian*, 13 November 2013, available at <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/nov/13/le-pen-wilders-alliance-plan-wreck-eu>.

⁴ Gideon Rachman, "Watch out for the rise of a European Tea Party", *Financial Times*, 21 October 2013, available at <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/eb265a64-3a42-11e3-b234-00144feab7de.html#axzz2wbUNAYUi>; "Europe's populist insurgents: Turning right", the *Economist*, 4 January 2014, available at <http://www.economist.com/news/briefing/21592666-parties-nationalist-right-are-changing-terms-european-political-debate-does>.

⁵ See Mark Leonard, "Europe's self-hating parliament", Reuters, 19 November 2013, available at <http://blogs.reuters.com/mark-leonard/2013/11/19/europes-self-hating-parliament/>.

Pro-Europeans hope that an institutional innovation – the possibility of voting for a candidate for European Commission president along the left–right dimension – might change this dynamic by creating an ideological debate between different visions of "more Europe" and offering citizens differentiated policy options. But this brief argues that, while this is a laudable idea in theory, the way it has been implemented in practice is unlikely to suffice either to counter Euroscepticism or raise the low levels of turnout at European elections. It looks as if the hoped-for politicisation has finally come about and citizens may finally turn out to vote, but in a different way and with different results from those for which pro-Europeans expected and hoped.

In Europe we mistrust

At the end of May, approximately 390 million European citizens will go to the polls. They will do so at a time when the EU is going through the worst crisis in its history and its image is at a historic low (see figure 1 below). In 2007 – in other words, before the crisis began – 52 percent of citizens had a positive image of the EU; now only 31 percent do. Conversely, in 2007 only 15 percent of citizens had a negative view of the EU; now almost 28 percent do. Thus, if before the crisis, positive views outweighed negative ones, that is no longer the case. However, the largest group remains those who are undecided, which raises interesting questions about what they would need in order to view the EU positively again – or to take a definitive negative view.

Similarly, only 31 percent of Europeans now trust the EU, compared to 58 percent of Europeans who do not trust it (see figure 2 below). At the time of the last European elections, in 2009, 48 percent trusted the European Parliament and only 36 percent did not. Today the trend has reversed: 39 percent trust it and 48 percent do not. In short, the EU now suffers from an unprecedented negative approval rate.

What makes this loss of trust in the EU so worrying is that it has taken place in all member states: where trust was high, now it is low; and where it was already low, now it is even lower (see figure 3 below). In 2007, the UK was by far the most Eurosceptic country in Europe – the only EU member state in which levels of mistrust of the EU were greater than levels of trust. Now, however, mistrust rates are at over –50 in countries such as Spain or Greece that were traditionally among the most pro-European of EU member states. Trust in the EU has also collapsed in both creditor and debtor countries: citizens in creditor countries feel as if they are being asked to show too much "solidarity"; citizens in debtor countries feel as if they have received too little "solidarity".

One of the dangers of this collapse in trust in the EU is that it will affect the turnout in the European elections. Levels of participation in European elections have fallen steadily from 62 percent in 1979 to only 43 percent in 2009. The European Parliament is a distant institution and elections for it do not produce governments or punish incumbents.

Figure 1
Image of the EU

Source: Authors' elaboration from Eurobarometer data

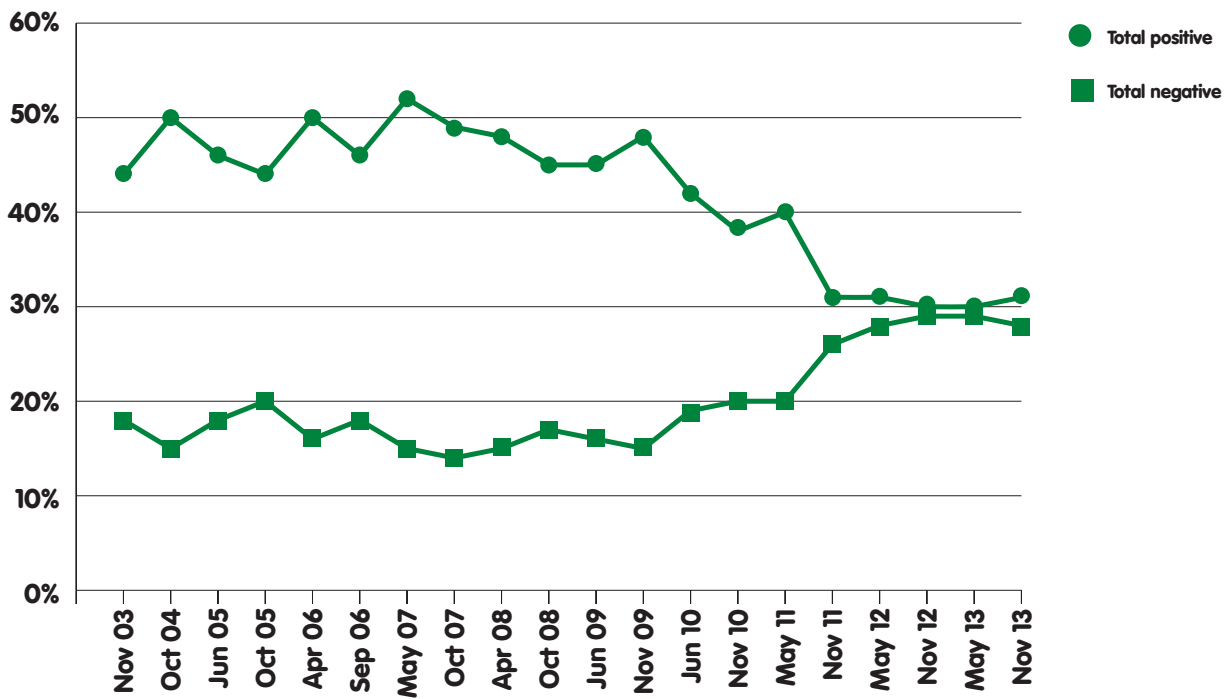


Figure 2
Trust in the EU

Source: Authors' elaboration from Eurobarometer data

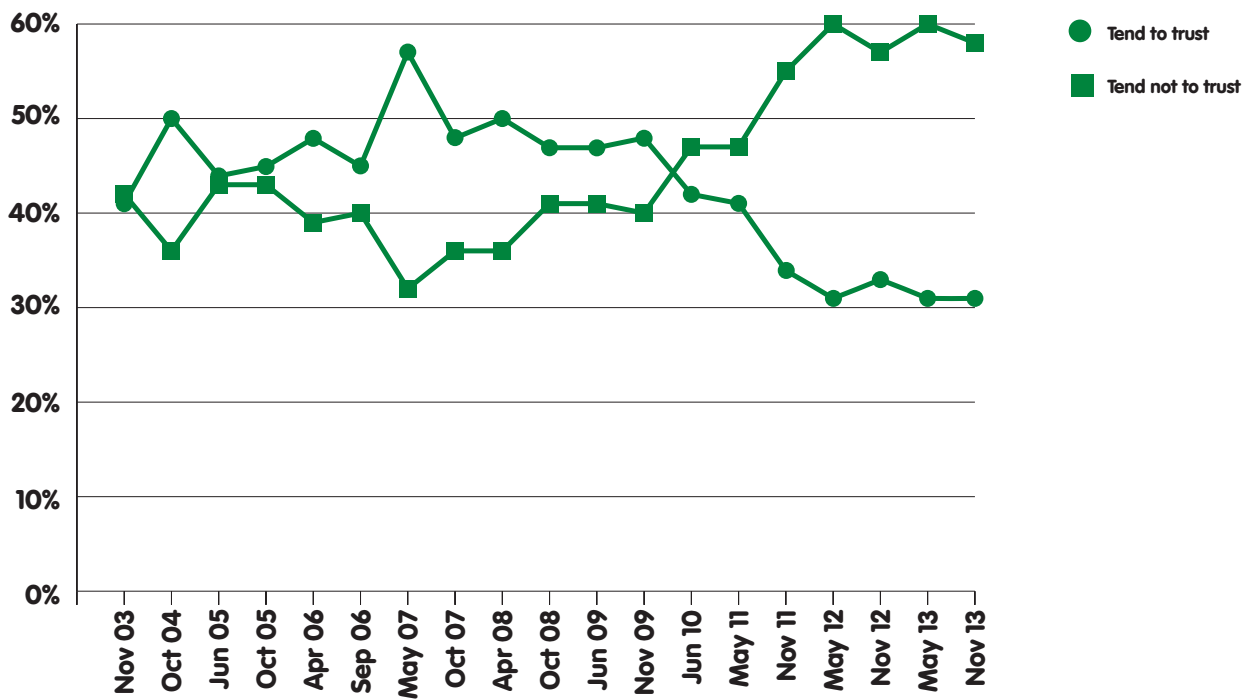
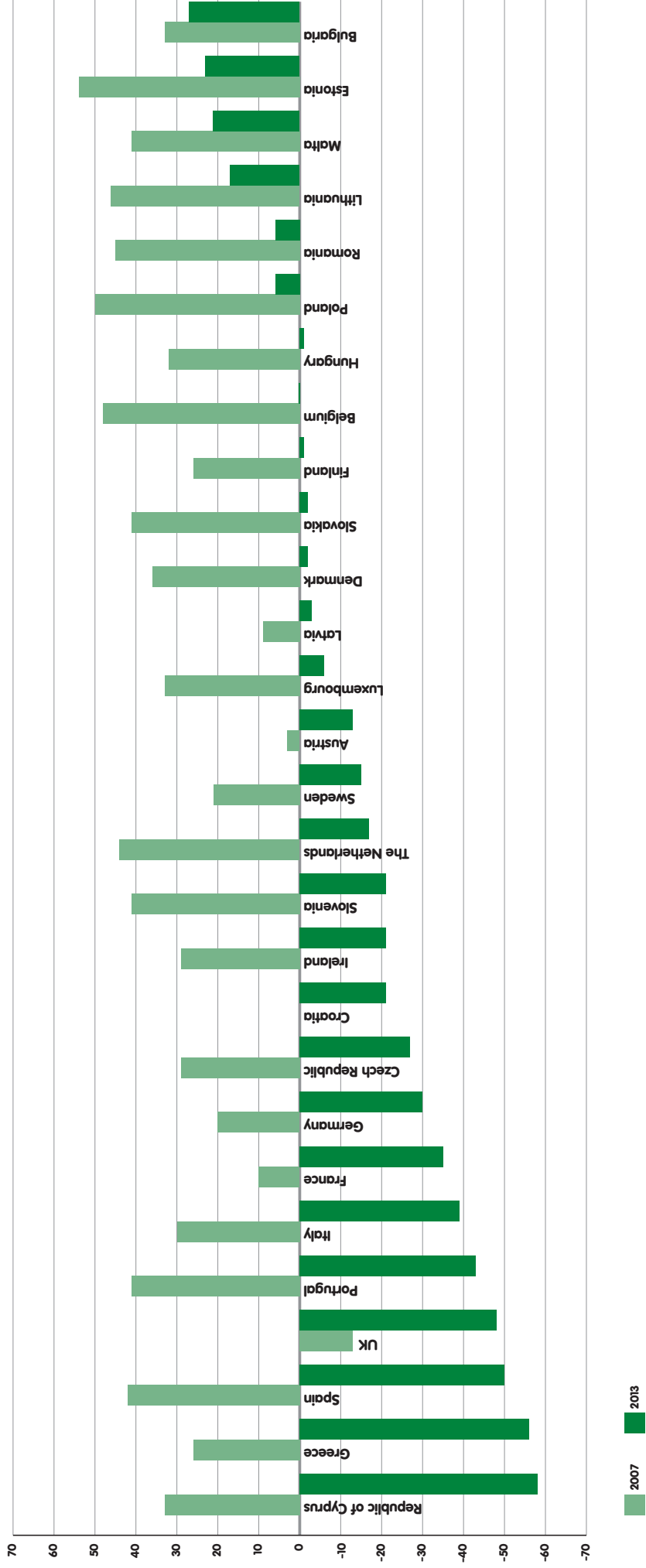


Figure 3
 Trust in the EU by member state
 EU-28 Trust in the EU (2007–2013) Net Support
 Source: Authors' elaboration from Eurobarometer data (Croatia included only for 2013 data.)



This has turned them into secondary or mid-term elections by citizens, who can stay at home at little cost or use their vote tactically to signal their discontent with their national government.⁶ A disproportionate number of those that do show up vote for Eurosceptic parties that promise to dissolve the parliament to which they want to be elected.

Who are the Eurosceptics?

Despite the attempts of pro-Europeans to make the 2014 European election different from previous ones by linking it to the selection of the next European Commission president, the big story beyond Brussels will be how strong Eurosceptics are and how much they will be able to shape European politics after May. The backdrop is that many of the mainstream parties that have driven European integration are struggling to enthrone their voters. Since the beginning of the crisis, only 8 out of 28 governments in the EU have managed to be re-elected. Like Angela Merkel in Germany, all were centre-right and had pursued responsible fiscal policies.⁷

Well-to-do northern European countries such as Austria, the Netherlands, and Finland where there was once a cosy elite consensus have become cauldrons of discontent in which the traditional centre-left and centre-right parties are being squeezed by Eurosceptics. “We are scared shitless,” a Finnish cabinet minister said. “The only way we can deal with the Finns Party is to clone them.”⁸ Mainstream parties now often partially adopt the agenda of the Eurosceptic parties. The only alternative is often to form a grand coalition – as has happened in Austria, Finland, the Netherlands, Germany, and Italy. But this merely increases the perception that there is a “Europe cartel” – one of the key arguments of the Eurosceptics.

At the turn of the century, the political scientist Peter Mair pointed to a void that had opened where traditional politics used to be.⁹ While citizens have retreated from the political sphere into their private lives, the parties that used to be embedded in civic life have become mere appendages of the state (a “governing class” that seeks office rather than a chance to represent ideas or groups in society). It is this void that the new parties are trying to fill and – so far at least – they are succeeding. They are recasting politics as a dispute between elites and the people, and are rediscovering the forgotten roles of opposition and expression (in fact, some parties such as the Dutch People’s Party, Syriza, and the Five Star Movement have gone to great lengths to avoid going into government).

We can divide the new Eurosceptic forces into four main clusters.¹⁰ First, of course, there are the far-right parties. They are not a homogenous group: Western European far-right parties, such as the National Front in France, Lega Nord in Italy, the Dutch Freedom Party, and the Freedom Party of Austria are trying to detoxify themselves, not always successfully; central, eastern, and south-eastern European far-right parties such as Golden Dawn in Greece, Jobbik in Hungary, Dawn of Direct Democracy in the Czech Republic, and ATAKA in Bulgaria still have overtly xenophobic and anti-Semitic platforms and, in some cases, a scepticism towards representative democracy. While the two groups share an anti-immigration and anti-euro agenda, they do not usually mix, and when they do, struggle to maintain their cohesion.¹¹

Second, there are right-wing parties such as UKIP in Britain, AfD in Germany, Vlaams Belang in Belgium, the Slovak National Party, the Danish People’s Party, the Swedish Democrats, and the Finns Party in Finland. These parties do not question either representative democracy or basic political and civil rights, though they may seek to exclude certain ethnic or religious groups such as Muslims whom they perceive not to integrate, and they generally keep away from violence. They do not consider democracy as a threat or as a problem; rather they think the EU is a threat to national democracy and sovereignty. They want a return to national currency (if they are in the eurozone), border controls (if they are in Schengen), the end of freedom of establishment and movement, and even withdrawal from the EU if it failed to meet their demands.

Third, there are the conservative parties that are members of the ECR group in the European Parliament. The group currently includes the British Conservative Party, the Polish Law and Justice Party, the Civic Democratic Party in the Czech Republic, the Dutch ChristenUnie, and the Latvian National Alliance, and it may eventually include parties such as the Czech ANO (“Yes”). Though they are close to the centre-right European People’s Party (EPP) on many issues, these conservative parties seldom vote with it when it votes for “more Europe”.¹² They may be internally split on the euro and immigration, and since they are or have been in government, they are more likely to find compromises with mainstream pro-European forces than with one or two.

Fourth, there are left-wing Eurosceptic parties such as Syriza in Greece, Die Linke in Germany, and the Socialist Party in

6 Simon Hix and Michael Marsh, “Punishment or Protest? Understanding European Parliament Elections”, *Journal of Politics*, Volume 69, Issue 2, May 2007, pp. 495–510.

7 Anders Aslund, “Europe’s Voters Wisely Stick With Frugal Leaders”, *Bloomberg View*, 29 September 2013, available at <http://www.bloombergview.com/articles/2013-09-29/europe-s-voters-wisely-stick-with-frugal-leaders>.

8 Author conversation with Finnish cabinet minister.

9 Peter Mair, “Ruling the Void? The Hollowing of Western Democracy”, *New Left Review*, 42, November–December 2006.

10 Classifying these parties is a difficult and risky task due to their variety, lack of transparency, or lack of record. This classification is thus our own and reflects our preferences. As such it can be criticised.

11 In January 2007, on the occasion of the accession of Bulgaria and Romania to the EU, some of these parties formed a political group in the European Parliament. The group, called “Identity, Tradition and Sovereignty” included the French National Front, the Greater Romania Party, the Belgian Vlaams Belang, the Austrian Freedom Party, the Bulgarian ATAKA, and two far-right Italian MEPs, including Alessandra Mussolini. The alliance dissolved in November 2007 due to internal tensions.

12 Hungary’s Fidesz, the right-wing populist party currently in power is formally part of the EPP Group in the European Parliament, though its ideology and policies places it somewhat in between the traditional conservatives of ECR and the right-wing populists.

the Netherlands that are part of the European United Left/Nordic Green Left group in the European Parliament. These parties are not Eurosceptic in a traditional sense and do not share the right-wing Eurosceptics' anti-immigration agenda, but they are deeply critical of the current EU. Although they do not want to abolish the euro, they regularly vote against the pro-European consensus on issues such as eurozone governance, trade, or the single market. The Greens, co-headed by anti-globalisation activist José Bové, may also occasionally join this coalition, especially on trade-related and social issues. Although Beppo Grillo's Five Star Movement lacks a voting record in the parliament, it is also likely to be more comfortable voting against traditional mainstream parties than with them.

How big will the Eurosceptic surge be?

According to some estimates, there could be between 200 and 220 Eurosceptic MEPs in the European Parliament after May. Other estimates put the number at between 150 and 160.¹³ Our own calculations suggest that there could be almost 200 Eurosceptics MEPs. Far-right and right-wing Eurosceptic parties (the first two clusters discussed above) might get up to 77 seats and the parties currently in the ECR group (the third cluster) are expected to get up to 46 seats – in other words, a total of 123 right-wing Eurosceptic MEPs.¹⁴ Polls suggest the European United Left/Nordic Green Left group (the fourth cluster) will get around 55 seats. This puts the number of anti-mainstream MEPs at 178. If we also include Grillo's Five Star Movement, which is expected to win 20 seats, there could be a total of 198 anti-mainstream MEPs in the European Parliament after May.

Of course, with as many as 175 political parties likely to win a seat in the May elections, it is difficult to make reliable predictions about the number of Eurosceptic MEPs there may be in the new parliament. Turnout could be decisive. In 2009, turnout was low in France (40 percent) and the UK (34 percent), which suggests that pro-European forces would paradoxically benefit from low participation if Eurosceptics stay at home (in Italy, however, turnout was 65 percent in 2009). On the other hand, Eurosceptics may be able to motivate their supporters to vote to punish national governments for their bad economic performance or to mobilise them on anti-immigration or anti-EU issues.

Nevertheless, it is possible to draw some conclusions about how the Eurosceptic surge is likely to change the way the European Parliament works. The figures suggest that the anti-EU alliance created by Geert Wilders and Marine Le Pen lacks the numbers to realise their ambitions to turn the European Parliament into a "self-hating parliament", bring down the euro, go back to national currencies, and put an end to the free movement of people. But if the polls and our calculations turn out to be accurate, mainstream traditional political forces will have to confront an anti-federalist populist coalition on some key issues which might almost be the size of any of the current two largest groups, the EPP and the Socialists and Democrats (S&D), which are predicted to have 212 MEPs each.

The current majority of 553 MEPs (or 72 percent of the seats) that mainstream pro-European parties have in the European Parliament may therefore drop to 486 seats (65 percent of the seats). The loss of these 67 seats could be enough to make a significant difference to how the parliament works. In the European Parliament, the fragmentation of the parties, the low attendance, and the absolute majority criteria for passing legislation mean that crafting a majority usually requires a large number of MEPs. The Eurosceptic surge could therefore complicate life for pro-European parties – especially when they split alongside national lines – as they often do on issues of eurozone economic governance – or on ideological (in other words, left–right) lines.¹⁵

This in turn might force the pro-European parties to join forces against the Eurosceptics. If the polls are right, it may be politically impossible to pass a piece of legislation unless the centre-left and centre-right vote together. If the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) and ECR vote with the EPP, this coalition will have only 320 votes (or 43 percent of the seats); if only the Greens and European United Left/Nordic Green Left group vote with the S&D group, this centre-left coalition will have only 305 votes (or 41 percent of the seats). The most feasible coalition will therefore be one incorporating the S&D group, ALDE, and the EPP: with 486 votes it will have a comfortable two-thirds majority and be able to pass key legislation on the single market, trade, and eurozone governance issues.

As a result of the requirement for an absolute majority on some legislation, pro-Europeans always needed to work together to some extent in the European Parliament. But the Eurosceptic surge could lead them to huddle together even more – thereby losing the ability to articulate the real differences between them about the future direction of Europe. This would reinforce a sense that the main political cleavages in Europe are between pro-European elites and Eurosceptic populists rather than between left-wing and right-wing visions of Europe. It would strengthen the claim

¹³ Simon Hix estimates the number of far-right MEPs at 100, which alongside the radical left might bring anti-mainstream forces to 200–220 MEPs (PollWatch2014, available at <http://www.pollwatch2014.eu/>); *Le Monde* columnist Arnaud Leparmentier estimates their force at 150–160 MEPs (see Arnaud Leparmentier, "Le pire n'aura pas lieu", 11 December 2013, available at http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2013/12/11/le-pire-n-aura-pas-lieu_3529209_3232.html); and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation goes up to 190 MEPs (see Karsten Grabow and Florian Hartleb, "Europa – Nein Danke?", 2013, available at http://www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas_36200-544-1-30.pdf?131202091119).

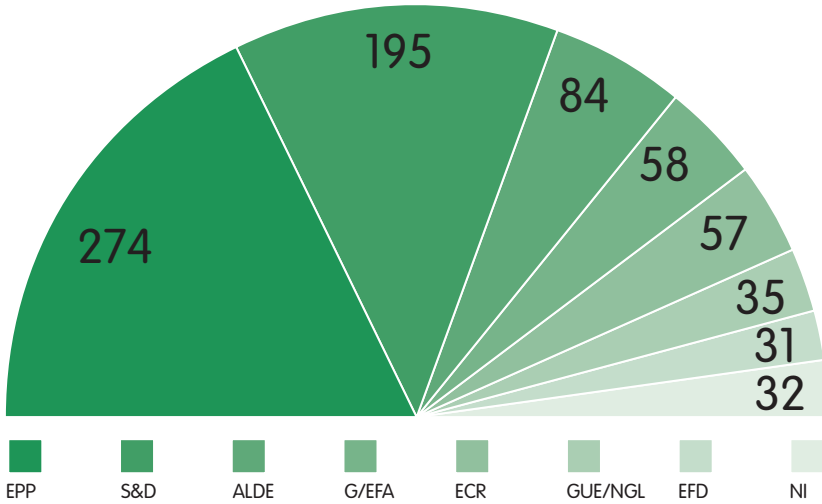
¹⁴ The estimate of 77 far-right and right-wing MEPs includes 11 western European far-right parties (the French National Front, the Italian Lega Nord, the Dutch Freedom Party, the Austrian Freedom Party, UKIP, AfD, the Belgian Vlaams Belang, the Slovak National Party, the Danish People's Party, the Swedish Democrats, and the Finns Party) which we estimate will get up to 70 MEPs, and the central, eastern, and south-eastern European far-right parties, which we estimate will get up to seven MEPs.

¹⁵ According to polls, Hungary's Fidesz, which formally belongs to the EPP, may get as much as 9 MEPs. However, its populist-rightist agenda is likely to make it difficult to follow the group's discipline.

Figure 4
Eurosceptics in the European Parliament (MEPs)

Source: Authors' elaboration from European Parliament data and PollWatch data. The number of seats for 2009–2014 are based on European Parliament data available at <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meps/en/crosstable.html>. Estimations for 2014–2019 are available at <http://www.pollwatch2014.eu/>.

2009–2014 European Parliament

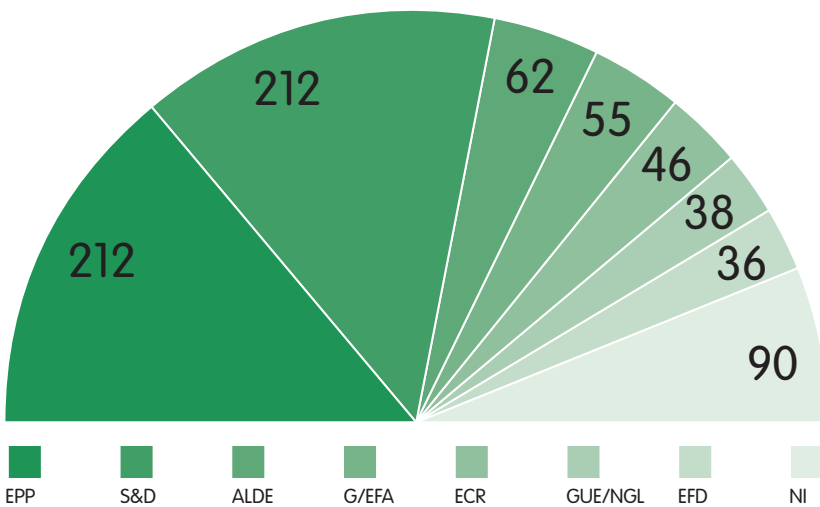


Abbreviations:

- EPP European People's Party
- S&D Socialists & Democrats
- ALDE Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe
- G/EFA Greens
- ECR European Conservative and Reformists
- GUE/NGL European United Left/Nordic Green Left
- EFD Europe of Freedom and Democracy
- NI Non-attached MEPs

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of the Eurosceptics that the EU is a project pursued by elites who are remote from the real concerns of the citizens and that, when push comes to shove, establishment parties gang up and suspend competition among themselves to set up a *cordon sanitaire* against newcomers – in short, that there is a “Europe cartel”.

What will the Eurosceptics do?

Of course, the impact that the Eurosceptics have in the new European Parliament will depend not just on their overall numbers but also on their cohesiveness as a group – and there are some reasons to think that they will struggle to achieve this cohesiveness. In the past, Eurosceptic parties have seldom been effective.¹⁶ As Doru Frantescu of VoteWatch, an organisation that records all votes taken in the European Parliament, has shown, radical groups tend to participate less and usually have lower cohesion rates in the European Parliament compared to mainstream groups, resulting in their impact on the final legislation being reduced.¹⁷ Wilders and Le Pen may talk about uniting Eurosceptics, but parties such as UKIP, the Finns Party, and AfD have succeeded in building their support by painstakingly breaking the link between themselves and the movements of the far right.

In addition, even right-wing Eurosceptics share an anti-immigration agenda. For example, they are unlikely to agree to take measures that would strengthen EU immigration policies such as increasing common border controls or giving more money to Frontex. Eurosceptics want to bring borders back at home, not improve them abroad, and are therefore unlikely to try to work together with mainstream European forces in order to try to better regulate the free movement of people within the EU.

However, none of this rules out the possibility of tactical co-operation among Eurosceptics. In particular, the Eurosceptics could do three things. First, they could try to spoil, block, slow down, or delegitimise the selection process for the European Commission president. UKIP leader Nigel Farage sees the “the big prize” as the rejection of the European Commission. “If the parliament said: ‘We reject this commission because it believes in ever closer union, it would be huge,’” he said. “Given the way the EU is constructed, the parliament could effectively bring the whole project into chaos if it wanted to.”¹⁸ Although the Eurosceptics are unlikely to succeed in this, they may be able to block individual commissioners and thus weaken the new Commission.

¹⁶ Marley Morris, “Conflicted Politicians: The populist radical right in the European Parliament”, Counterpoint Report, 2013, available at <http://counterpoint.uk.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/Conflicted-politicians-the-populist-radical-right-in-the-European-Parliament.pdf>.

¹⁷ Doru Frantescu, “The balance of power in the current European Parliament is crucial for understanding the issues at stake in the 2014 European elections”, LSE Blog, 24 October 2013, available at <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2013/10/24/the-balance-of-power-in-the-current-european-parliament-is-crucial-for-understanding-the-issues-at-stake-in-the-2014-european-elections/>.

¹⁸ Author interview with Nigel Farage.

Second, the Eurosceptics may seek to damage the European Parliament’s reputation on a day-to-day basis. They are well aware of the fact that their strident speeches are immediately picked up by the media, and will likely attempt to capture the attention of the public and damage the image of the European Parliament. The danger is that, precisely when the European Parliament needs to be seen to be as efficient as possible in order to regain legitimacy, it will be portrayed in the media as a house of fools in which mainstream European forces are under popular siege.

Third, the Eurosceptics will make it harder for mainstream parties to argue for free movement within the EU and for fiscal transfers and solidarity within the eurozone.¹⁹ If they are weak at home, mainstream pro-European parties and governments may be tempted to appease the Eurosceptics on key issues. This might, for example, make it harder to pass free trade agreements. Some members of the parties in the S&D group, for example the French Socialists, may also find it difficult to swallow the disciplinary elements of eurozone governance that have been approved in the last legislature or to support austerity measures. Equally, the EPP is likely to break ranks when it comes to defending the free establishment and movement of workers, thus undermining the single market and strengthening the Eurosceptics.

The real danger

However, the populist parties do not need to command a majority in the parliament to impose their agenda. Rather, the real danger of the Eurosceptics is the way that they may influence the agenda of the mainstream parties, both in Europe and at home. According to polls, Eurosceptics are likely to be the strongest political party in four countries: Poland (Law and Justice, 32 percent of votes); Greece (Syriza, 25 percent); Czech Republic (ANO, 25 percent); and the Netherlands (Freedom Party, 17 percent). Eurosceptics are also likely to be as strong as the traditional mainstream parties in the UK (UKIP, 25 percent); Denmark (Danish People’s Party, 24 percent); Italy (Five Star Movement, 21 percent); Austria (Freedom Party, 21 percent); France (National Front, 21 percent); Lithuania (Order and Justice, 20 percent); Hungary (Jobbik, 19 percent); and Finland (Finns Party, 18 percent).

This set of political earthquakes at home will have a profound impact on European policies. The policy positions of previously “mainstream” parties on the European issue have already hardened as a response to the rise of Euroscepticism. For example, it is now often hard to distinguish the positions of the British Conservative Party from those of UKIP. In fact, Farage says his goal is as much to change the position of

¹⁹ A recent IFOP poll shows that 55 percent of French and 56 percent of Germans question the Schengen agreements and the free circulation of people within the EU and that as many as 44 percent of the Germans will like to leave the euro. IFOP, “Regards sur l’Europe”, March 2014.

mainstream parties as to win power himself – and he seems so far to be succeeding.²⁰

The Eurosceptic surge in the European elections could reduce even further the appetite for “more Europe” of some key member state governments. This is a particular problem on the crucial issue of eurozone governance. Plans to complete Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) require strengthening EU powers and even a new treaty, but the strength of the populists at home may deter policymakers from ceding more sovereignty or from embarking on treaty change, which in many EU member states will require a referendum. The more progress is made in completing EMU, the more we are likely to find governments succumbing to the temptation of compensation for more European integration with stronger measures to restrict freedom of movement.

Thus the biggest impact of the European elections could be on the national politics of member states. In the past, Eurosceptic forces have successfully managed to have quite an impact on legislation at home, either entering into coalition governments, supporting governments from parliament in exchange for anti-immigration policies, or threatening weak or coalition governments which do not have sufficient majorities in parliament. This is the game they know well and they want to play. After May, the European Parliament could be used to enhance their power at home. This could also change the role of the European Parliament in European policymaking.

The European Parliament has steadily increased its powers since 1979. But if the community method becomes more difficult, pro-Europeans are likely to focus ever more on delivering highly sensitive political integration through emergency powers and intergovernmental treaties, thereby excluding the European Commission and the European Parliament even further. In other words, integration will be by stealth – that is, through the back door provided by the European Council – rather than in the open. This could fragment the EU, erode the *acquis communautaire*, and create tensions between the institutions and between euro-ins and euro-out countries.²¹

While the European Parliament and the European Commission expect to be the winners of these elections, the truth is that national governments might use the results of the elections to strengthen their grip over both of them by increasingly resorting to the European Council and turning it into the de facto government of the EU. They may seek alternative sources of legitimacy at home, especially by further strengthening the role of national parliaments in overseeing the European Parliament and the European Commission. The next phase of European integration will

involve even more transfers of sovereignty from national capitals. But although the European Parliament could help legitimate these steps, the combination of falling turnout, increasing Euroscepticism, the cartelisation of political competition, and a loss of appetite for further integration could make it less rather than more relevant.

Beyond “more Europe”

The EU is used to having a European Parliament in favour of the Brussels-based system that campaigned for “more Europe” – as well as more power for itself. Over the last 35 years, it has gradually acquired more and more power and has acted as a force for European integration alongside the European Commission (which is increasingly afraid of the parliament) and the European Court of Justice. But this period may now be coming to an end. The European elections are likely to see a large number of Eurosceptic MEPs elected with the ambition of trying to put the European project into reverse: not “more Europe” but “less Europe”.

The new Eurosceptics have been strengthened by the euro crisis and austerity. Many of their criticisms of the status quo in Europe have a basis in fact: the euro does suffer from major design flaws; the eurozone is split into debtors and creditors; there is a crisis of growth and employment; the memoranda for programme countries written by the Troika have created a real democratic deficit; the EU’s migration policies are unpopular; and the EU often seems to be a vehicle for globalisation rather than a way to protect citizens from it. But for Eurosceptics, Europe is the problem and the nation state is the solution. In reality, many of these problems require European solutions and European reform rather than a return to national politics.

Pro-Europeans hoped that an institutional innovation – the possibility of voting for a candidate for European Commission president – might change the dynamic of a debate between “more” and “less” Europe by creating an ideological debate between different visions of “more Europe”. But though the aim to introduce more politics goes in the right direction, this particular way of doing so seems likely to strengthen the Eurosceptic surge rather than countering it.

The danger is that the response of the mainstream parties will be to retreat into technocratic co-operation and seek to continue business as usual. Instead, rather than forming a pro-European bloc, they should try to create the space for political battles between competing visions of Europe and thereby try to preserve left–right competition at both national and European levels. That will mean developing a new agenda for social Europe and responsible capitalism, more imaginative ideas on migration, solidarity and responsibility, and a policy agenda that shows how the EU is part of the solution to the problems of the twenty-first century – from dealing with big data to the rise of China.

²⁰ Author interview with Nigel Farage.

²¹ Piotr Buras, “The EU’s Silent Revolution”, European Council on Foreign Relations, September 2013, available at http://ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR87_EU_SILENT_REVOLUTION_AW.pdf.

The challenge is to drive wedges between the Eurosceptics rather than encouraging them to form an anti-elite bloc. In order to do this, the mainstream centre-left and centre-right parties will need to do much more to acknowledge the Eurosceptic critique of Europe while rejecting the solutions the Eurosceptics propose. Whether they blame it for austerity or uncontrolled immigration, a significant number of Europeans are angry at the EU because it has not worked as they expected. The euro has been saved, but at a great cost in growth, jobs, and divisions between citizens and elites, debtors and creditors, and euro-ins and euro-outs.

If Europe is to defeat the Eurosceptics, it has to confront them at home, where they will be stronger, and not only in Brussels, where they will be weaker. They will also need to pay attention to the new cleavages that have emerged throughout the crisis, such as the one dividing debtors and creditors and euro-ins and euro-outs. In short, Europe needs more politics and more disagreements. Rather than huddling together, mainstream parties need to give people real choices and address the issues that really concern people.

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