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Europe's Elections Europe-wide

I. Introduction

On 11-13 June, 2004, citizens in the twenty-five member states of the European Union will vote for representatives to the next five year term of the European Parliament. For the ten new accession states, this vote will be an official statement of their commitment to democracy and western standards; for the fifteen existing states, this vote represents another marker in the experiment of Europe. Irrespective of the symbolism behind the vote, the election itself will dictate the membership of an institution that has the ability to shape the increasing range of legislation being passed at the European level, affecting all areas of Europeans' lives. Because of the power of the European Parliament, the candidates, campaigns, and elections cannot be neglected as a trivial event. Just as any national election reflects the important issues in a country and offers insight into the short-term future of the prevailing candidates, so too will this election reflect the views of citizens about Europe and the short term future of the European Parliament.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the predominant issues in the upcoming elections for the European Election. Similar to national elections, the campaigns for the European Parliament must be seen on two levels: the European level, on which the current broader issues Europe has been debating, such as the draft Constitution, will be found, and the national level (or even sub-national as MEPs are elected by regions in some countries), where elections will reflect more specifically the day to day concerns of citizens. This paper will be roughly divided into two sections to examine each of these levels in their turn.

II. Background Issues

Before delving into the issues likely to shape the upcoming election, it is necessary to make two observations concerning the form the debate is likely to take in individual countries. First, the controversial questions such as the budget, the European Constitution and further enlargement of the EU, there are differences of view between European Member States, there may well be on these issues something very like a consensus within individual countries on these issues. 'This consensus will normally be reflected by the leading political parties and the government. 'The different opinions held by majorities in each of these national populations is what leads to the official positions of countries being different and the divided EU. For example, in the recent row over voting that at least temporarily stopped progress on ratification of the draft Constitution, the division was not between national parties reflecting differing popular opinions within Poland or Germany, but between the official government positions of Poland and Germany. This important distinction means that on certain important issues, like the Constitution, there may well be discussion during the elections, but the national parties standing for election are likely to have similar positions. Thus, rather than voting on a particular position, people will be left to vote, if on one of these issues, on deciding who will be the most vocal supporter/opposition in the Parliament.

A second observation concerns the usage of certain key words, such as 'reform'. Although in many countries the same words may be used, it is likely that they have very different meanings in each election. Thus, although it may be possible to say that 'reform' of European institutions is a common theme in many elections, that each country means the same thing by that phrase should not be taken for granted.

III. European Issues

The upcoming election is being billed by many as the first truly European election. Pat Cox, the current President of the European Parliament, lists 'European issues' that he hopes will shape the election: 'the stability pact and the European economy, the draft Constitution and the future direction of Europe." (website of the President of the European Parliament) Although it is unlikely that this election will be solely about European issues, there are undoubtedly European issues that will play a role in the elections in most, if not all, countries.

A. European Constitution

If not the biggest issue currently in the EU arena, the Constitution has certainly been the most talked about. Although there is likely to be talk of the Constitution in many or most countries, the shape of the talk may vary.

First, there may be debate over whether to have a Constitution at all. Such a debate is likely to be much more prominent in the existing member states, rather than the new accession states. Within the current 15 members, the debate is not about whether to have an EU, but how far to go towards full integration. Some people see the Constitution as another step towards integration, while others see it in less dramatic terms. For those who see the document as more than a simple re-organisation of existing treaties, the issue of its existence represents more than a simple affirmation of pro-EU feeling.

Second, similar to whether to have a Constitution or not, will be the issue of referendums to approve the document. Although required in several nations already, candidates in other countries may take up the call to hold a referendum, and whether that vote should be binding. The British decision to hold a referendum on the European Constitution has given extra bite to this issue.

Third, the content of the draft Constitution may be up for debate as well. Proponents of the Constitution argue that the document is nothing more than a combination of previous treatises, already agreed to and enforced. Opponents, however, see the document as much more, pointing to new powers given to European institutions, such as the ratification of the European Commission's President by the European Parliament, and changes in procedure, notably voting in the Council of Ministers. It is important to note, though, that even if the Constitution were ratified and put into force before the election, many

parts, including the aforementioned selection procedure and issues on the budget, will not take effect until 2009, in time for the next Parliamentary elections. This will leave candidates with arguments based more on whether they should or should not have certain powers rather than how they will use them.

B. Budget

A newer issue to the EU arena is an increase in funding recently requested by the Commission, raising the EU budget by 25%. Half of the proposed increase would be directed at modernising the Eastern European economies joining the EU, and another third would go towards agriculture. The size of the proposed increase is not well received in the six countries that pay more into the EU budget than they receive in return: Germany, France, Britain, the Netherlands, Austria, and Sweden. For these states, any increase in the EU budget represents a loss to their own treasuries, prompting them to call for reforms in the budget and refocusing of the distribution of money before any increase is granted. The larger budget debate may be linked to the more specific debate over the compensation packages for members of the European Parliament. Within the last year, the European Parliament has been under pressure to reform how its members are paid, as well as the expense accounts they are currently entitled to. In this last session, MEPs failed to approve any legislation on this issue, setting the board for candidates to continue calling for change in MEP compensation. As was already mentioned, of course, what each person means by reform or change may not be evident in the debate.

C. Free Movement and Equal Treatment of People

As of 1 May, millions of Eastern Europeans will have the theoretical right through EU treaties to work in the richer western European nations. Fears of a mass migration by Eastern Europeans have already prompted Germany, France, Spain, and Italy to restrict workers from the accession states for up to seven years. Likewise, Sweden is forcing workers from Eastern Europe to get permits for the first few years. Ireland has just approved new rules to make immigrants from any EU country (except possibly the United Kingdom) ineligible for state benefits for two years. Britain, widely believed to have relatively lax laws towards asylum seekers and accessible social services, is the last EU country to impose restrictions on migrants.

Originally, the Labour government wanted to welcome citizens of new member states to fill the 500,000 job vacancies in Britain, granting them the right to claim benefits as well. However, under pressure from the Conservative opposition and right wing press the government has backtracked. Under the government's plan, immigrants will be forced to work for one year before being able to claim social benefits. Additionally, all immigrants will have to sign up with a special registration scheme upon their arrival in the country. Any immigrant who fails to find a job will not only be denied benefits but forced to leave the country as well.

Despite a report from the European Commission ('Migration Trends in an Enlarged Europe') that concludes fears of a mass migration are unfounded, campaigns are still likely to respond to national fears in the richer nations of a sudden influx of poor eastern Europeans. Straining national social services and the possible loss of jobs to workers who accept lower pay are both attractive political issues for candidates to exploit.

D. The First European Parties

The first pan-European political party was formed at the end of February with the uniting of 25 national Green parties from 22 EU states and seven non-EU states. In a reverse from other European issues, the Green Party wants to create common issues out of common European problems, and address them through similar campaigns in most of the EU countries. 'As a mark of its seriousness to stand as a pan-European party, the Greens initially proposed (although this commitment seems now less solid) their own candidate for the Presidency of the European Commission, a position the European Parliament must ratify. Similarly, the EPP, despite not having its own candidate for the Presidency, has stated that it will not allow a left-wing candidate to win the position. Although this is not the level of integration the Greens have achieved, it does symbolise a move towards a more unified position of the national parties that make up the EPP, and a step towards the integration of a mainstream party.

The existence of a common Green party may serve to increase awareness of the common environmental problems Europe shares (due to the trans-boundary nature of environmental issues), having the effect of increasing a common European feeling among voters. Following the lead of the Greens, the European Free Alliance, which represents nationalist, regionalist, and autonomist parties in the European Parliament, will also be standing as a pan-European party in the election. To a lesser extent but in the same vein of unity are British, French, and German socialists who are meeting to exchange views and formulate strategies for campaigning. Whether any of these supra-national parties or strategies will succeed is questionable; but if they are effective, national parties will be forced to respond to their issues, possibly uniting other European parties which sit together in the Parliament, and increasing the political integration of parties across Europe.

E. European Economy, and the Future of Europe

Almost any political election in any country, or continent, will have the themes of the economy and the future. These issues take on a new twist at the European level, because in addition to the more usual use of the words 'economy' and 'future' to pertain to a nation, they also mean the economy and future of Europe. With Ireland as a notable exception, many countries are in an economically slow period. As the free market is expanded into ten new nations, how will each country's own economy fare? Will people be afraid of losing their jobs to lower paid Eastern Europeans? The future of Europe is more than a choice between the more usual conservative or liberal parties; it is a question of further integration among all the members, maintaining the status quo, or introducing a 'third way', perhaps of a core group of countries moving ahead in certain areas without the rest of Europe. How people will take these issues varies greatly on the country they are in as well as current events at the time of the election. As demonstrated in the second part of the paper, it is likely that people will still value national issues first, whether they be concerns over immigration and maintaining social services or increasing its influence in the EU and world stage, before thinking about the EU and continental issues.

F. The Relationship with the United States

As President of the United States, George W. Bush has had an undeniable effect on the world as a whole. His foreign policy, in trade and military affairs, has been harsh to other nations. Europe was divided over the American call to war in Iraq, and is still struggling to determine what its relationship should be to the United States. Some states, such as Poland, may be torn between continuing a positive and close relationship with the United States in the hopes of economic benefit or following the EU cornerstones France and Germany in opposing American unilateral hegemony. Britain, which has long seen itself as a bridge between the United States and the rest of Europe, is still walking the very fine line of trying to be friends with everyone without alienating anyone. Furthermore, after the Madrid bombings of 11 March, people may come to see a strong relationship with the United States as a security threat to their own country. People's views of where their country should go in the row between America and the EU will be conveyed through their votes for European Parliament. Because of the link between national parties and European Parliamentary candidates (explained below), people will be able to vote for or against the stance of their current national government in the dispute, and thus convey their own

opinion on the proper role of their country and Europe with America.

A second consideration for people to take into account is the American Presidential election, currently in its campaign phase. Although the European Parliament elections will be taking place before either the Republican or Democratic National Conventions (where the candidate will be officially anointed by their party), the likelihood that Bush will be in power for another four years, or will be replaced with a Democrat, may figure into how each country sees their own position in the world. If Bush seems likely to win at election time, the French may choose to vote for candidates who want to build a Europe to act as a counter-weight to American hegemony, while the Poles, who benefited from the American administration's division of Europe into old and new, may choose candidates who do not want the EU to rival the United States for power in order to show solidarity with the Americans rather than Europe.

IV. National Issues

Although the election is for the European Parliament, it is still a national election, or even sub-national (France), in each of the 25 member states. In order to demonstrate the types of national issues that will be featured in each election, a series of case studies will be offered below.

A. Germany

As an existing member state, and one of the largest and most powerful nations in the EU, Germany makes a significant contribution to the Union. The German election is likely to exemplify the importance of large ethnic minorities in the European elections. In Germany, there are 500,000 Germans of Turkish origin qualified to vote in the 14 local, regional, national, and European elections this year. The ruling Social Democrat Party is clinging to power, and counting on its pro-immigration policies to attract the Turkish minority. However, a large part of the German population is hostile to Turkish accession into the EU, a view that is being exploited by the opposition Christian Democrats. To that end, the key issues in the election will be decided by the people involved, especially key minority groups such as the Turks. In other nations with large minority groups with ethnic ties to potential candidate countries such as Russia a similar influence on the election might be found.

A second point exemplified by the German case is the use of the European Parliament election as a referendum on the national government. Germany is far from the only country where the ruling party is currently losing popularity and struggling to stay in power - Ireland, Britain, Italy, France, Hungary, and Poland are all likely to have elections influenced by the (un)popularity of their national governments. Because the European Parliament's party system is comprised of national political parties, most of the parties that will be standing for election to the European Parliament will be the same as those that run for national elections and/or are currently in power. Due to this link, the vote for the European Parliament in many countries is likely to be taken by the people as a referendum on the ruling party in the national government. If the vote is not an overall for-or-against the national party, it may be on certain policies being proposed by the government in the run-up to election time. In Italy, the European election is likely to be taken as a midterm test of the Berlusconi centre-right coalition government, which has been opposing reforms in welfare and education, and is losing support to the centre-left opposition in polls. Likewise in France, people are more generally losing faith with all of the mainstream political parties and are expected to vote further to the ideological extremes. Although there is some irrationality in using an election at a different level of government as a referendum, the direct links between governments, parties, and candidates provides at least a somewhat logical explanation for why people will see the European election as a vote for or against the ruling national government.

B. Hungary and Sweden

More common than large groups of ethnic minorities but equally significant as part of the national populations are the Euro-sceptics, represented in every country except Spain and Bulgaria. In accession states, such as Hungary, the Euro-sceptics are the same or similar groups that fought against accession in the first place. The Hungarian Justice and Life Party, a right wing party, argues that EU accession will destroy Hungarian society and agriculture, and is standing in the election to represent those who voted against accession. Furthermore, with the recent implementations of restrictions on immigration by Western European countries, the Euro-sceptic parties may be able to exploit some anti-EU feelings among Eastern Europeans fostered by the decisions of the member states to impose immigration restrictions on them. Finally, the parties might be reacting to fears of joining another centralised political entity, such as the Soviet Union.

The Hungarian example is typical of accession state Euro-sceptic parties that generally stand on the ideological right. In comparison, one of the newest Euro-sceptic groups is the Junilistan in Sweden, formed by a group of economists who were part of the previous anti-Euro campaign in the country. The group is not ideologically extreme or completely anti-EU, rather it is simply against anything more than a common market. The moderate position of the Junilistan group represents the wider ideological variety of Euro-sceptic parties in member states and lack of concentration of them on one side of the spectrum. There are two reasons for the differences in the ideological spread of Euro-sceptic parties in member states and accession states. First, the left-wing parties that exist in western Europe are typically newer groups representing trends in major parliamentary groups, rather than independent forces. This type of group does not exist in the Eastern European states. Second, there is little popular support for far left or communist parties in the former Soviet Bloc nations. Most of the parties that once represented the far left have since transformed themselves into pro-Western democratic parties, where an anti-EU position would be antithetical to their reformed image.

In Sweden, Poland, and Denmark Euro-sceptic parties have significant levels of support. Because the arguments of the Euro-sceptic parties will be different from the mainstream parties, the level of support the sceptics receive may be regarded as a useful barometer of the general population's underlying sentiments. However, whether those sentiments concern the national government the mainstream parties are linked to or the EU itself will be harder to determine. In general, Euro-sceptic parties have historically played a more significant role, albeit still low, in accession states, where they have also enjoyed higher levels of popular support. Because of this history (perhaps tied to the nation's history, perhaps to the population's true feelings), it will again be difficult to determine whether there is a greater feeling of Euro-scepticism in member states or accession states. However, given a recent Eurobarometer poll, people in both old and new member states are satisfied with the broader status quo and existence of the EU, indicating that the Euro-sceptic parties will receive a low level of support similar to the 1999 election.

C. Finland

Finland represents a good case study for what many of old member states with strong welfare states, especially the larger countries, might feature in their elections. A poll commissioned by a Finnish newspaper in February found that although supporters of the two main parties differed in their desired platforms, they both shared a concern for Finnish national interest and the future of Finnish public services in the welfare state. This concern about national interest is also found in the United Kingdom, where the Conservatives have claimed the 'national interest' position in their campaigns in Scotland, and every country that has imposed restrictions on immigration from the accession states.

E. The Netherlands

Smaller states may be more concerned over the long-standing power struggle between large states and small states. With the tripartite meeting in February between Britain, France, and Germany, voters in small nations may be concerned about the larger states moving ahead without the rest of Europe, decreasing the leverage the small states have achieved through the European Union's institutions. Furthermore, Turkey is likely to reappear in the Netherlands' election due to the threat its accession is to voting power of smaller states. If populous Turkey were to enter the EU, there would be one more large nation that could greatly influence the EU with a voting procedure based on population. Given the possibility that the Constitution will not be ratified, and the further possibility that a smaller group of nations may emerge to form a separate group within the EU to move faster towards integration, the small states will want to ensure their position within an institutional framework that will prevent their loss of leverage. These concerns are no different from the national interest expressed in Finland and Britain, conveying that despite the hopes of the many in the pro-EU camp, the elections are still going to be primarily national in scope.

F. The United Kingdom

A final trait to the elections that is important to note is that many people do not see them as important. According to a poll commissioned by the UK Office of the European Parliament, only 18% of people in Britain say they expect to vote in the election, a decline from the already low 30% that voted in the last European Parliament election in 1999. In order to raise awareness and concern for the election, £1.5 million is being spent on an advertising campaign. Some parties are willing to sacrifice serious politicians for media ploys in order to get votes - included in the candidates for the election is an American professional hockey player, former cosmonaut, and even a porn star. The use of media gimmicks by the national parties shows that, assuming they win, they do not mind filling seats with celebrities rather than serious professionals. If the European Parliament held any significance in their minds, it is likely they would not do this. And if the European Parliament held significance in the minds of voters, the parties would not have to engage in such stunts. In Portugal it is believed that no matter who runs, voter turnout will still be very low because of the championship football match scheduled for the day of the vote. Few things in Portugal rival football in importance, but the European Parliament is clearly not one of them.

Similar to media ploys being used by parties in many countries is the evolution of the election into a clash of specific political heavy weights, such as Italy where the election is a show down between Prime Minister Berlusconi and Commission President Romano Prodi. The need to link well known politicians to the election demonstrates the lack of general interest or knowledge of greater European issues and the Parliamentary election. Again, if people were well informed about the election and thought it to be important, major political leaders would not feel the need to stand for election themselves.

Possible Make-up of the European Parliament Post-Election

Given that many of the elections for the European Parliament will be used by people as a referendum on their national government, and that many national governments are currently losing support among their populations, opposition parties are likely to do well in the election throughout the continent. However, because of the mixture of liberal and conservative governments currently in power, the referendum effect may well be a wash for the most part, leaving the overall composition of the Parliament—much the same as it is now.

A good example of this washout is Germany and France, where both national governments are expected to lose badly in the elections. Germany's ruling SDP, which currently sits with the PSE group, is expected to lose to the opposition Christian Democrats, who sit with the PPE-ED group. Conversely, in France, Chirac's ruling coalition that sits with the PPE-ED group is expected to lose to the Socialists who sit with the PSE group. There are some countries, such as Spain, where it is still too early to make a prediction as–to the likely winner in the election. The new Spanish government has not been in office long enough for people to decide how they feel about it. Rather, it is likely that the fate of the party will be decided just before the election, when the new Prime Minister will have to make good on his promise to remove Spanish troops from Iraq. —Still, as the recent Spanish national election demonstrated, predictions made even a day before the election can be horribly inaccurate.

Like the current member states, the accession states are likely to have most of their members sit with the PPE-ED and PSE groups. The only exception to this is Poland, where Eurosceptic parties that will sit with the UEN and EDD groups are expected to do well. Such a result would be reminiscent of the current make-up of the states' observers in the Parliament. It will also have the effect of reinforcing the current complexion of the Parliament, with a dominant conservative majority in the PPE-ED, a substantial liberal minority in the PSE, and several smaller groups of similar size.

V. Conclusion

This paper set out to explore the many issues likely to affect the upcoming elections to the European Parliament. The two fundamental questions to this election are first, which issues end up playing the key role, and second, what lessons can be drawn from the elections. As the analysis has shown, there are clearly European issues that will be featured in–many or all of the 25 member states, as well as national issues that, although likely to be debated in more than one country, stem from uniquely national circumstances. It is likely that the most significant European point addressed within this paper is not the Constitution or even any of the larger policy stances, but the emergence of truly pan-European parties. All of the other issues addressed can be linked directly to national interest and circumstances, and will not be greatly affected by the election of a new European Parliament. Should the pan-European parties be successful in their campaigns, however unlikely, the political structure of the EU would begin to move away from a system made of similar national parties and towards the open door of one with its own political parties and culture. Furthermore, a successful election—for a party with its own candidate for President of the Commission would add to the symbolism of these elections as the first truly European elections. Whether this is a positive or—negative development is open for debate, but that is will be significant in the evolution of the EU is not.

Still, it is likely that the European parties will not be highly successful because they are not representative of the mainstream in European politics. Thus, it will certainly continue to be the national issues that will end up being the key points in these elections. Three broad divisions can be made, although many states may fit into more than one. In some western European states voters will symbolically vote to protect their social systems (although if this actually translates into anything at the EU level is questionable). Voters in small states will vote for those they think are most likely to protect their political power and influence in the Union. Accession states will probably reflect the majority of the European Union in the use of the elections as a referendum on national governments. At the end of the election, the most probable outcome is that people will vote however they see their self-interest, a view likely to be influenced far more by national and local circumstances than the larger European issues.

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