

European Parliament Turns to the Right

Written by Terri E. Givens

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TERRI E. GIVENS, JUN 15 2009

The dramatic success of Right parties, particularly Radical Right parties, in the recent European Parliament election indicates that voters are responding to insecurity related to the global economic crisis and immigration. European Parliament elections often act as a referendum on domestic politics, but they are also indicative of trends across Europe. With the exception of the French *Front National* (National Front) and the Belgian *Vlams Belang* (Flemish Interest) who saw their vote percentages decline, many anti-immigrant and racist radical right parties saw their vote totals and seats increase. In the UK, the election was a clear blow to the sitting Labour government, which has been rocked recently by scandal. The Euro-skeptic United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) won 13 seats (slightly outpolling Labour), the British National Party won its first 2 seats, while Labour saw its lowest percentage since the beginning of the European polls. Overall, Left parties saw some of their worst vote totals in European Parliament elections. Conservative parties were the clear winners across Europe, indicating the Left's inability to capitalize on the current recession.

The question is, what do these results indicate in terms of voters' feelings about the global economic downturn, immigration, the European Union, and Turkish accession to the EU? An important factor in examining these issues is the percentage of abstentions. With a turnout of only 43 percent, the majority of European voters chose to abstain. These voters are basically acquiescing to a European Parliament which will be dominated by a Right agenda. This will mean a focus on immigration control, rather than the integration of immigrants already in Europe, a more hostile position on Turkish accession to the EU and a more Euro-skeptic approach by parties like the Tories that already had an anti-EU orientation.

Immigration continues to be a contentious issue in Europe. Governments struggle with issues related to immigrant integration. The impact of 9/11 and subsequent terrorist attacks in London and Madrid still reverberate across Europe. Insecurities surrounding immigration are enhanced by the current economic crisis. Unemployment is increasing, particularly in countries like Spain, Greece and Italy, and low-skilled immigrant workers are hurt disproportionately. It is clear that an anti-immigrant and/or anti-Muslim message was hitting home with many voters. In the Netherlands, Geert Wilders' anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim Freedom Party won 17 percent of the vote and 4 seats in the European Parliament. In Italy the anti-immigrant Northern League won 10 percent of the vote and 8 seats, while Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi was trying to attract voters by publicly expressing his concerns that the immigrants in Italy make him feel like he is in Africa and not in Europe.[1] The Austrian Freedom Party still managed to win 13 percent of the vote and 2 seats even in the aftermath of the death of the party's former leader Joerg Haider.

In my 2005 book *Voting Radical Right in Western Europe*, I argue that radical right parties are more likely to get votes in European Parliament elections because voters are less likely to vote strategically in these proportional representation elections vs. national parliament elections in which parties can coordinate to keep radical right parties from winning seats. This would indicate that voters actually have a preference for these parties and the positions they have taken on immigration and the European Union. However, it is clear that there was more going on in this election. It has been shown in my own research and others that radical right parties are drawing on "modernization losers" – working class voters who have suffered in the globalization process, and who formerly voted for left parties (Betz 1994, Kitschelt 1997, Mayer 2002). My research has shown that these voters tend to be less educated, male, blue-collar, and young. It is difficult to determine the profile of radical right voters in these elections, since they are only getting anywhere from 6 to 15 percent of the vote. However, the fact that the left performed so poorly is an

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indicator that former left voters may continue to be moving to the right. This is likely a response to economic insecurity.

It is not surprising that these election results would have as much to do with the global economic downturn as immigration. The history of immigration politics shows that electorates may be more likely to respond to xenophobic messages during a time of economic difficulty. However, the success of mainstream conservative parties indicates that there is also a preference for the policies of the mainstream right during this recession. The relative success of the radical right should not be overstated. The fact that the French UMP, under Nicolas Sarkozy, performed well, while there was a decline for Le Pen's National Front indicates that many voters may prefer a mainstream right party that takes a hard line on immigration over a more extreme party.

The clear lesson from these elections, however, is that most voters simply don't care to take the time to vote. A commentator in the *Financial Times* noted that mainstream parties don't necessarily take these elections seriously, either.[2] He argues that they do so at their own peril. European institutions are only increasing in importance and with a weakened Left, conservatives will control the agenda. With a strong radical right contingent in the European Parliament, it is clear that issues of immigrant integration, which had been a priority, will give way to a focus on immigration control and restriction. Relations with Turkey may also become more difficult as anti-Turkish MEPs are given a platform at the EU level. This may well be the outcome that the voters who abstained wanted, but it remains to be seen how new policies will impact economic development in a Europe that is dependent upon immigrant labor for economic growth and productivity.

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[1] Stoyadinova, M. "Europe Swings Sharply to the Right" http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/postglobal/sais/nexteurope/2009/06/europe_swings_sharply_to_the_r.html

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