



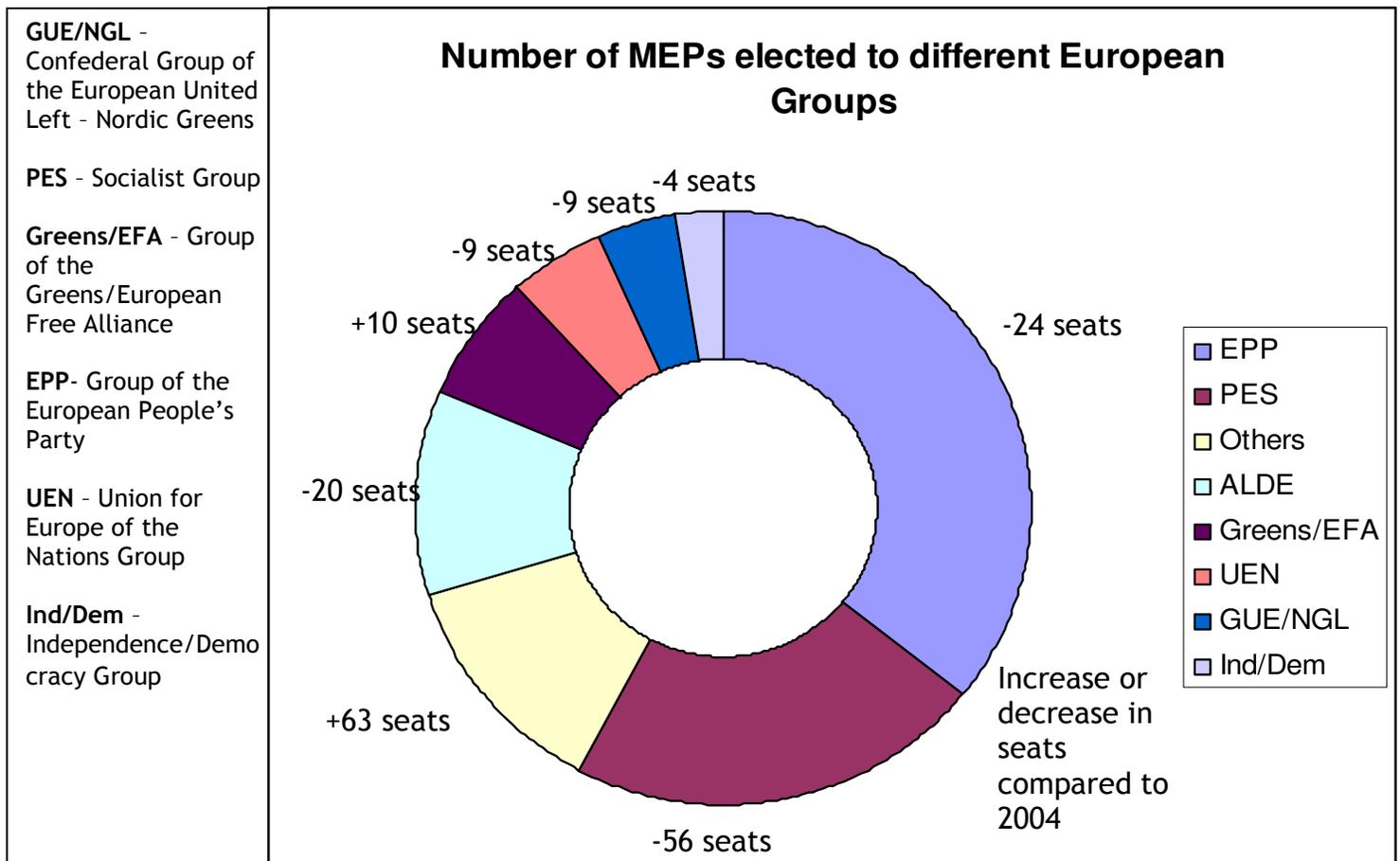
Analysis of the 2009 European Parliament Elections

The Results

The European Parliament has shifted to the right with the European People’s Party winning a simple majority of seats. This makes it more likely that EPP-backed José Manuel Barroso will win a second term as European Commission President. With 35.9% of the vote EPP now have more seats than the Socialists (PES) and Liberals (ALDE) put together and remain the largest group.

The Socialists lost the biggest number of votes across Europe falling from 27.6% to 21.9%. Liberals (ALDE) also saw their vote fall, something which will disappoint their leader Graham Watson who is a candidate for the President of the European Parliament. The Greens (Greens/EFA) increased their vote and have become the fourth largest group in the European Parliament. The French Greens won 14 seats contributing to this significantly. Fringe parties tended to do well both on the far right and the far left.

1



¹European Parliament, *Results of the 2009 European Election*, available at: http://www.elections2009-results.eu/en/index_en.html , 22/06/09

What the election results will mean for the new Parliament

The relative success of smaller parties means that 40% of the Parliament's MEPs will not sit in either of the two largest groups. This means that broad agreement among a small number of large groups will be less likely to gain enough votes to pass decisions, making it more likely that larger groups will need to negotiate with smaller groups, increasing the influence of fringe parties. It will be interesting to see if this results in more debate. Despite this, it is unlikely that there will be a substantial shift in power. Simon Hix, Professor at the London School of Economics notes that the allocation of committee chairs, which are an important measure of political influence within the Parliament, will remain virtually the same with the EPP group continuing to chair the most important committees while the PES are likely to lose the chairmanship of one important committee.

The failure by the Socialists can be attributed to a combination of factors including the detrimental effect of infighting, especially in France. The Socialists' difficulty in forming a response to the economic crisis that is significantly different to the centre-right's position may also have contributed to their failure. In several countries, including the UK, Liberals struggled to successfully communicate their pro-European message; a contributing factor in their decline.

A running theme throughout Europe seems to have been that parties campaigned mainly or exclusively on national issues and not on the issues most relevant to the European Parliament. The Labour and Conservative parties in the UK, for example, barely mentioned Europe in any of their party political broadcasts, focusing solely on national issues.

The Greens can no longer be seen as a fringe movement. Their continued success at European level has left them as the fourth largest group, and their representation within national and local government in many European countries means they have to be taken seriously as a political movement. Their success may well indicate that the Greens are no longer seen as a single issue party, but also that climate change is being recognised as a central concern. Voters may also recognise that their policies have an important European dimension despite the continued wary attitude towards Europe by some Greens.

The disastrous failure of Libertas, an anti-EU party led by Declan Ganley who successfully campaigned for the Irish no-vote to the Lisbon treaty, seems to imply that pan-European euroscepticism is not as successful as the home-grown variety. Ganley himself failed to become an Irish MEP and has said he will not campaign against the Lisbon treaty in the next Irish referendum. Julian Priestly, the former Secretary-General of the European Parliament claims that parties supporting the Lisbon treaty got 80% of the vote across Europe, making it more likely that the Lisbon treaty will be ratified soon.

The increase in MEPs elected who currently fall under no European Group is largely due to British Conservatives and the Czech Civic Democrats who recently left the centre-right European People's Party group. Along with the Polish Law and Justice Party, these two parties aim to form a new anti-federalist group. To do this they need parties from at least seven member states to join them which could mean alliances with far-right parties, something that might compromise the British Conservative Party leader, David Cameron's attempt to create a progressive image. The inclusion of far-right parties might also make the European People's Party Group less willing to form coalitions with the new group, undermining their influence.

Voter Turnout

Voter turnout remained low, at 43.2%. This is lower than the elections in 2004 which had 45.5% turnout. Despite the claims that this drop is misleading as the 2004 elections did not include some of the newest member states, it is evident that the figure is still very low. The lowest turnout rate was in Slovakia with 19.6% whilst the highest was in Luxembourg with 91%, unsurprising as it is one of the few countries in the EU with compulsory voting. The newer member states also maintained their track record of low voter turnout despite the high popularity the EU enjoys in these countries. In Poland, for example the voter turnout was 24.5% despite 80% of the population claiming to be satisfied with EU membership². If those who are pro the EU still believe that voting in the European Parliament is pointless it raises serious concerns about the European Parliament's legitimacy.

A voter turnout of 43.2% does not give the European Parliament a strong mandate. This is particularly worrying given that if the Lisbon treaty is ratified the European Parliament will significantly increase its influence through the extension of co-decision. Interest in the European Parliament seems to be decreasing at the same time as its power and influence is increasing. Whether the low turnout is a result of euroscepticism, a lack of understanding of European issues or voters feeling that their votes won't make a difference, it raises important questions for the European Parliament. MEPs' need to address these questions if their claim to be the only part of the EU directly elected by its citizens is to hold weight.

BBC World correspondent, Shirin Wheeler, believes that both the media and European citizens need clear messages and personalities to engage with. The President of the Commission represents the EU and could provide voters with an opportunity to identify with a personality and their policies. The candidates for commission presidency are not announced until after the elections. The voters, therefore, have no way of influencing the outcome of this post by asking their MEP candidates who they will back and voting accordingly. A similar argument can be made about the President of the European Parliament. Voters may also find it difficult to understand what the European Parliament does and therefore struggle to engage in debating key issues. The complicated three pillar structure makes it very hard to know what influence the Parliament has over different policies, making it unclear how an individual's votes will tangibly change EU policy.

The European Parliament now faces a new term with many challenges. Over the next few weeks and months we will see deals for key positions taking place and it will become clearer who the real movers and shakers in the new Parliament will be. Climate change coupled with economic downturn will be key issues that are hardly likely to yield simple answers. The question of institutional reform and the ratification of the Lisbon treaty are likely to continue to lurk in the background. It remains to be seen how the new European Parliament will fare with thrashing out responses to the multiple and complex issues facing Europe over the next five years.

² European Policy Centre, *Post-Election Analysis, Between apathy and anger – but no earthquake*, available at: <http://www.epc.eu/en/pb.asp?TYP=TEWN&LV=187&see=y&t=&PG=TEWN/EN/detailpub&l=12&AI=982>, 22/06/09