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THE LONDON SCHOOL  
OF ECONOMICS AND  
POLITICAL SCIENCE ■



LSE 'Europe in Question' Discussion Paper Series

# **The 2014 EP Elections: A Victory for European Democracy?**

## **A Report on the LEQS Annual Event 2014**

Eri Bertsou

LEQS Paper No. 78/2014

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# The 2014 EP Elections: A Victory for European Democracy?

## A Report on the LEQS Annual Event 2014

Eri Bertsou\*

### Abstract

In the run up to the 2014 European Parliament elections, the new *Spitzenkandidaten* process and European-wide party campaigns fuelled expectations of strengthening democratic processes in Europe. At the same time, the anticipated surge of support for anti-establishment and Eurosceptic parties caused concerns among political scientists. This paper summarises and critically reviews the contributions presented at the LEQS Annual Event “The 2014 EP Elections: A Victory for European Democracy?” held on the 2nd of June 2014, a week after the final European elections results were announced. The panel discussed the implications of election results for democracy in the European Union and its Member States. The panelists were Dr Sara Hagemann, Dr Mareike Kleine and Professor Iain Begg from the LSE’s European Institute and the event was chaired by Professor Maurice Fraser.

**Keywords:** European Parliament Elections, Turnout and Participation, Democratic Deficit, European Extreme Right, President of the Commission

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# The 2014 EP Elections: A Victory for European Democracy?

## A Report on the LEQS Annual Event 2014

### 1. Introduction

In May 2014 the 8<sup>th</sup> European Parliament (EP) election was held across EU Member States. The election saw novel processes being put into place; the nomination of leading candidates, the *Spitzenkandidaten*, from European political groups for the post of Commission President, which included Europe-wide campaigning and televised debates between the party nominees. At the same time, the slight increase of voter turnout was encouraging, yet failed to offer convincing evidence in favour of the creation of a truly European demos, which can hold European decision-makers into account. Notably, the election results showed an increased support for anti-establishment and fringe parties of the right, sparking a series of debates about the electoral choices of European citizens, the implications of the new EP representation results for European and National politics, as well as the most appropriate responses for European leaders. Ultimately, all these issues are underlain by a common question: does democracy operate satisfactorily at the EU level? With this in mind, the LSE Europe in Question Series organised a panel event entitled “The 2014 EP elections: a victory for European democracy?” aimed at discussing the various concerns raised by the elections and their possible implications for politics in the Union.

This LEQS report on the 2014 EP elections considers presentations by Dr Sara Hagemann, Dr Mareike Kleine, Professor Iain Begg and Professor Maurice Fraser, as well as the ensuing conversation and comments raised by the audience. Its aim is to provide a synthesis and further analysis of the main issues raised on the aftermath of the EP election and discuss their impact on European democracy. Firstly, it looks at electoral participation and the conclusions that can be drawn from this election result regarding the democratic function of the European Parliament and EU decision-making. In his opening remarks, panel Chair, Professor Maurice Fraser (LSE, European Institute) assessed the level of electoral turnout and participation as evidence in favour or against democratic legitimacy of the European Parliament. However, despite some pessimism over the low level of turnout, an overview of participation patterns across Member States in European and National contexts raises concerns about citizen participation throughout the continent. It also stresses the need for further research in citizens' electoral behaviour in order to promote citizen involvement across political levels. Nevertheless, concerns regarding the institutional legitimacy of the European Parliament, and the EU in its entirety remained at the heart of presentations by all the panellists. Some novel ways to address this came up, such as a possible new mandate of scrutiny given to the EP, through increased communication and cooperation between the institution and National legislatures. Dr Sara Hagemann (LSE, European Institute) referred to this as a positive development, which could offer new avenues for increasing accountability and legitimacy across all political levels.

Further, in her presentation, Dr Sara Hagemann also discussed the impact of the election in the composition and operation of the next European Parliament. She highlighted in particular the possible formation of a political group along a Eurosceptic or far-right political dimension, and its implication

for deliberative and legislative processes in the EP. Although these developments cannot be fully assessed at the moment, it is possible that the left-right dimension of political discussion that has prevailed at the European Parliament so far could be displaced by alternative dimensions, be it Eurosceptic versus pro-European or centre versus fringes.

In the second panel, Dr Mareike Kleine (LSE, European Institute) considered the ways in which Europe's leaders have responded to the EP election results and argued in favour of a strategy that will address the real sources of citizen frustration, instead of one that accommodates unhelpful populist narratives. Her focus on substantial issues such as high unemployment levels, lack of economic growth and increasing inequality was shared by the other panellists. Certainly, favourable conditions make it easier for European democracy to flourish, yet the increasing financial differentials across the continent pose further challenges to the design of economic policy and call for ever more legitimisation of the economic decision-making processes at the European level. Professor Iain Begg (LSE, European Institute) elaborated on this issue and outlined a number of new, real challenges to European democracy posed by swift and big changes in the balance of economic powers in the EU.

These are only some of the issues discussed during the panel presentations. The remaining parts of this report elaborate on the arguments made and the discussion topics that followed. They also offer a critical presentation of the debate surrounding Mr Juncker's bid for Commission President, the legitimisation of EU decision-making processes demanded by the euro crisis and fiscal changes, as well as the transformation of the left-right dimension of political deliberation in the new European Parliament.



## 2. Electoral participation and EU legitimacy

Professor Maurice Fraser

*Head of the European Institute, LSE*

*Professor of practice in European politics, LSE*

In his opening remarks, panel Chair Professor Maurice Fraser asked the panellist and audience what could be the answer to the EU's legitimacy problems. His question suggested that firstly, the EU still suffers from legitimacy issues, and secondly, that the latest European Parliament elections did not provide convincing evidence these problems are being addressed. Indeed, the concept of *democratic deficit* and the European project have gone hand in hand since the term was first coined in the late 1970s to describe the perceived lack of democratic legitimacy of the decisions made by the European Economic Community. The establishment of the European Parliament directly elected by citizens of Member States in 1979 was an effort to address this issue and provide direct democratic legitimacy to an increasingly integrated European system. Yet, voter turnout had been falling steadily since that first European Parliament election in 1979, from 61.99% to 43% in 2009, making it harder for proponents of the institution to claim it engages with or represents the citizens of Europe in a meaningful way. Although a great part of the EU's democratic deficit debate relates to its structure and decision-making processes as a supranational organisation, a directly elected European Parliament would allow citizens to hold at least one European institution into account.

Nevertheless, the growing powers granted to the European Parliament did not seem to convince more voters to come out and vote. While this year's election saw a stabilisation and marginal rise in voter turnout at 43.09%, the reading of this figure by the panel was predominantly negative. Professor

Fraser noted that at 43.09%, voter participation can hardly be considered the democratic surge many were hoping for to legitimise the increased decision-making taking place at the European level. Similarly, Dr Sara Hagemann pointed out that, given the prominence of the EU in the domestic political context of many Member States during the financial crisis and the many key economic policy decisions that took place, citizen participation in this election should have been much higher. At the same time, they both agreed that this year's European Parliament election was different, due to the *Spitzenkandidaten* nominated by the European party families for the post of Commission President, their campaigns across Europe and augmented media coverage, but that it failed to translate into increased participation.

## 2.1 The question of participation

So, how are we to interpret this modest turnout? Is it ominous for the legitimacy of the European Parliament and its efforts to play an even more active role in EU decision-making through the new selection process for the President of the Commission? Does it mean that the EU can no longer claim to rest on the passive consent of its citizens?

Professor Fraser noted in a later comment that a lot of the discussion around participation and turnout is predicated on our understanding of 'healthy democratic politics'. He argued that measuring the health of a democratic system through people's participation in processes they perceive as unlikely to have much impact on their lives, might not be a chimera. It was mentioned numerous times through the evening that the political issues dealt at the EU level have predominantly been of little interest to citizens, with the exception of Eurozone countries affected by the financial crisis. Hence, it is highly likely

that ordinary citizens are infinitely more interested in their friends, families and jobs, than in political processes that they do not entirely understand. Therefore, one could expect that unless the rights of people are not abused in a way to make them angry enough to protest, vote and participate, the choice of staying at home does not necessarily mean they are unsupportive of the electoral process. This comment by Professor Fraser raised the question of whether political scientists and analysts have set a very high standard of citizen hyperactivity in democratic politics, which may be unrealistic and even unnecessary. Yet, it did not stop evident disappointment over the level of electoral participation precisely because of the growing prominence of EU policy decisions in tackling the euro crisis.

In order to discuss about the best way to interpret voter turnout, it would be useful to look at the citizens that are engaging with the electoral process and coming out to vote. Table 1 simply shows the wide variations in turnout among Member States, from 90% in Belgium and Luxemburg to just 13% in Slovakia. Although it is clear that average turnout in EP elections is lower than in National elections in Europe, there is still a large number of European voters that validated this process with their presence. Another point showcased by turnout figures is that in certain Member States citizen participation also remains very low in National elections. Although suppressed turnout is rarely offered as evidence against the legitimacy of institutions or the electoral processes in these cases, it does raise other concerns for participation patterns and functioning democracies. A member of the audience raised this question to the panellists in a later discussion, pointing out that low turnout in Congressional mid-term elections in the US hardly ever leads to the questioning of its institutional legitimacy. Closer to the European context, participation in Romanian National elections is below EP election figures, with 39.2% in 2008 and 41.7% in 2012, and National

elections in Switzerland have been attracting 40-50% of voters regularly in the past 25 years, without causing debates about the health of its democratic system.

**Table 1: Electoral Turnout**

	<b>Turnout at European Parliament 2014 Election (%)</b>	<b>Turnout at last National Election (%)</b>	<b>National-European Difference in Turnout (%)</b>
<i>EU Average</i>	<i>43.09</i>	<i>69.7</i>	<i>26.61</i>
Belgium	90.0	89.2	-0.8
Luxembourg	90.0	91.1	1.1
Malta	74.8	93.0	18.2
Italy	60.0	75.2	15.2
Greece	58.2	62.5	4.3
Denmark	56.4	87.7	31.3
Ireland	51.6	70.0	18.4
Sweden	48.8	84.6	35.8
Germany	47.9	71.5	23.6
Spain	45.9	68.9	23.0
Austria	45.7	74.9	29.2
Lithuania	44.9	52.9	8.0
Cyprus	44	78.7	34.7
France	43.5	80.4	36.9
Finland	40.9	67.4	26.5
Netherlands	37.0	74.6	37.6
Estonia	36.4	63.5	27.1
United Kingdom	36	65.8	29.8
Bulgaria	35.5	52.5	17.0
Portugal	34.5	58.0	23.5
Romania	32.2	41.8	9.6
Latvia	30.0	59.5	29.5
Hungary	28.9	64.4	35.5
Croatia	25.1	54.2	29.1
Poland	22.7	48.9	26.2
Slovenia	21.0	65.5	44.5
Czech Republic	19.5	59.5	40.0
Slovakia	13.0	59.1	46.1

Source: Eurostat and results-elections2014.eu

With this observation in mind, it seems that the underlying reason for questioning the legitimacy of the European Parliament does not really rest on the level of turnout itself, but on the transnational nature of the EU and institution in question. As mentioned earlier, there are many structural and

institutional complexities that add to the perceived democratic deficit of the EU. Yet, in the question of turnout, we are looking at falling voter turnout across many elections and a change in democratic participation across most western democracies. Hence, it might be more appropriate to focus on addressing this issue through further research and policy that aims at promoting citizen engagement. In fact, studies of institutional and behavioural factors can provide insights and constructive ideas for remedial action. For example, work by Sara Hagemann and Simon Hix on the effects that different electoral laws for European Parliament elections have on participation shows that, for example, electoral laws with open lists and smaller districts can help citizens identify with a candidate and increase interest in the election (Hagemann and Hix, 2009). Country specific electoral laws could also help explain some of the low turnout in countries like Slovenia, and other underlying differences, such as the growing divide in participation between urban and rural areas, which often do not attract enough attention.

Therefore, if we wish to better understand European election results, it is important to study voting behaviour and underlying citizen attitudes. There are many questions that remain pressing, not least of which is the generational divide in participation or the aforementioned divide between capital and big cities and the rest of the country areas. Dr Hagemann noted that she is particularly worried about the level of engagement among the younger generation, which is particularly low given they have been socialised in and benefited mostly from European integration. For the last European Parliament election in 2009, the [post-electoral survey](#) showed participation among the 18-25 year old group was only 29.1%, the lowest among all age groups. Finding new models for engagement, especially for the younger generation, is therefore a priority if we want to see increased turnout and a change in the pattern of representation the EP elections gave rise to. All speakers agreed on

the fact that, despite having a more lively EP election campaign and the nomination of leading candidates for the post of Commission President, the parties that emerged from the electoral contest could challenge the way politics at the European Parliament has worked so far.

### 3. The implications of election results for European politics

Dr Sara Hagemann

*Assistant professor, European Institute, LSE*

*Head of VoteWatch.eu*

In her address, Dr Sara Hagemann focused precisely on the impact of EP election results on European and National political processes. The first point she highlighted was the strong showing of fringe parties, especially on the right of the political spectrum, and went on to outline the possible implications of 102 MEPs sitting on the right fringe of the Parliament. Dr Hagemann argued that, firstly, the dominant party families of the centre are expected to be squeezed by this larger presence of fringe parties and may resort to forming large majorities across the middle in order to pass legislation. This means that the left-right dynamic is likely to be less dominant in negotiations and policy agreements, compared to previous parliaments. Legislative outputs must also be less bold or more watered-down, if they are to attract broad consensus from all centre groups.

Apart from the effect of the squeezed middle, Dr Hagemann believes that the presence of this considerable number of MEPs in the far right fringe is expected to shift the political dynamics from a left-right dimension to a more explicit discourse of 'insiders' versus 'outsiders'. Despite the campaigning

attempts of European party families and the *Spitzenkandidaten* to debate along a left-right political dimension, election results have given rise to a Parliament where the question of the EU itself is likely to be a main point of debate. Professor Iain Begg later agreed on that point, stating that he expected to see at least a two-dimensional matrix, where the pro-European and Eurosceptic dimension will be as – or even more – visible as the traditional left-right political spectrum. However, the degree of its visibility will depend on two key points. Dr Hagemann notes that the important questions surrounding fringe parties following the EP election is whether they will form a political group in the European Parliament and whether they will participate or boycott legislative procedures.

The first point relates to the institutional requirements for forming a [political group](#) in the Parliament, which demands the presence of 25 MEPs from at least one-quarter of Member States. The numerical requirement of MEPs can be easily satisfied, although at the moment it is uncertain whether parties from 7 Member States will manage to come together and agree on a common political platform. If fringe parties do organise themselves in a political group, they are expected to receive important material and procedural [benefits](#), from financial funds for support staff and office space to committee leadership appointments and speaking time. Dr Hagemann noted that these two points, which are yet to fully play out, are extremely important for democratic representation in the European Parliament, its deliberative process and legislative output. She pointed out that although the European Parliament is meant to be a forum for ideas and debate, inactivity or intense disharmony among its members could be damaging for its legislative mandate and its efforts to engage in negotiations with the governments of Member States and other EU institutions.

Finally, Dr Hagemann also commented on a more optimistic development for European democracy, which is the changing relationship among legislative institutions and the increasing relevance of the European Parliament. She argued that with the shifting balance of competences in favour of the European level in many policy areas, National Parliamentarians are seen to increasingly reach out to MEPs and EP committees in an effort to affect legislation. She views this as a very positive change for democratic processes, as it promotes additional accountability mechanisms for decision-making at the European level. With National Parliaments reaching out to the European Parliament more and more and MPs creating alliances on issues such as environmental regulation, she finds that National leaders are actually scrutinised more intensely for their decisions at the transnational level. Potentially, an additional layer of checks and balances could be created, benefiting National and European political processes. Therefore, in her conclusion, Dr Hagemann was optimistic about the increasing visibility and importance of the European Parliament as an institution, but worried about the implications that fringe parties will have for its developing role and its legislative processes.

### **3.1 Discussion**

The increased communication between members of national legislatures with members and committees of the European Parliament could be seen as an encouraging development for political accountability. It could potentially also provide a missing level of scrutiny of the decisions taken by National leaders at the European level, which currently adds to the democratic deficit of the EU system. The need for additional scrutiny and accountability was highlighted by Professor Begg in his presentation of the increasing democratic



challenges for the EU and will be elaborated further in the discussion part of this paper.

Another important point to take from Dr Hagemann's address is that this positive development for increased cooperation among the two political levels could be adversely affected by the changes in political representation in the new European Parliament. Dr Hagemann described the change in political dynamics to one of 'insiders' versus 'outsiders', while Professor Begg opted for the terms pro-European and Eurosceptic and Professor Fraser for the 'centre' versus 'fringes'. However, despite the obvious surge in representation at the right fringe of the political spectrum, it is difficult to see how such different parties, ascribing to different values and different goals, could come together to form a coherent political group. In his speech, Professor Begg mentioned some of the many differences between Eurosceptic parties, ranging from UKIP's stance against immigration and anti-Brussels sentiments, to anti-globalisation rhetoric in France and euro-currency scepticism in Germany. Apart from some form of criticism of the EU, there is limited common ground among such parties. In fact, Professor Begg noted that political parties on the right fringe appear rather suspicious of each other and initial contact between party leaders in an effort to form a European political group has frequently lead to impasses. It has been reported, for example, that the Front National is keen to communicate with UKIP, but would not accept to be on the same platform as Jobick from Hungary or the Golden Dawn from Greece. UKIP on the other hand, is so far unwilling to stand side by side with the Front National, but would be keen to connect with the Beppe Grillo's M5S in Italy, which represents a protest anti-establishment party. Therefore, it remains to be seen how this Eurosceptic end of a new political dimension will be played out, or if in fact it will be played out as such at all. The evident discord among the parties represented shows it

would not be easy to agree on a common platform and create a European political group that will vote cohesively or block legislation.

#### 4. The response of European political leaders to EP results

Dr Mareike Kleine

*Associate professor in EU and international politics*

*European Institute, LSE*

In her address, Dr Mareike Kleine focused on the possible course of action for European leaders following citizens' voting in the May election. The interpretation of election results as an alarm bell for European leaders, who should "wake up" and "listen to citizens' wishes" has been popular among the press, especially in the UK. However Dr Kleine remains unconvinced that this is the best approach and offers an alternative that involves addressing the issues that underlie citizen's frustration.

Going back to the traditional political science understanding of voters as 'rationally ignorant', Dr Kleine firstly highlighted the considerable weariness with which most citizens approach European Politics. With the exception of Eurozone countries being affected by the financial crisis, she argued that for most citizens the EU hardly ever deals with policy that is relevant and accessible to them, such as health, education or social services. In fact, she finds that the consensual basis of European political processes is – for lack of a better term – quite boring for most European citizens, who are more familiar with the antagonistic political discourse found at the National levels. In addition, most European citizens have limited knowledge and interest in EU institutions. Hence, Dr Kleine argues that it would be wiser to interpret results based on the 'rationally ignorant voter' model, where citizens perceive

the cost of informing themselves fully and accurately about European Parliament election choices to outweigh the potential benefits that knowledge would provide (Downs, 1957). It follows that in an election with limited apprehension and interest, voters who have no strong preferences will tend to stay home, while those who care significantly about certain issues will cast their vote. This helps boost the performance of single-issue parties or, for that matter, fringe parties. In this framework, Dr. Kleine's finds election results as not very surprising and assumes a large number of centrist voters failed to turnout.

Considering aggrieved citizens, Dr. Kleine argues that they are more likely to use their vote as a protest for their current situation. Unemployment and inflation remain very important issues for most Member States and voters in countries hit by the crisis are still extremely frustrated and pessimistic about their national economic situation. She pointed out that according to a [Pew survey poll](#), respondents saying that their national economic situation was 'very or somewhat positive' added up to 2% in Greece, 3% in Italy and 8% in Spain. In addition, these frustrated citizens have lost trust in their national parliaments and national governments and are, therefore, more likely to seek cues from anti-establishment groups. Across all European citizens, 72% report they do not trust their National government and 69% do not trust their National Parliament, according to the latest [Eurobarometer report](#). In this backdrop, Dr. Kleine pointed out that potentially, anti-establishment parties could have had an even wider electoral appeal than they did this May.

Having presented citizens' rationale in their voting for European Parliament and agreeing with Dr. Hagemann in that EP elections matter, not only for European but also national politics, Dr. Klein returned to the initial question of how leaders should respond to these results. The first response proposed has

been particularly popular in the UK and urges politicians to “listen to the citizens”. Both Labour and the Conservatives have indicated that they have “received the message sent out by citizens” and are determined to listen to the wishes of the country’s voters. She argued however, that this cannot be a serious proposal for future policy direction. For example, in the UK, it is possible that some UKIP voters hold sincere xenophobic feelings and intolerant attitudes toward Central and Eastern European migrants, yet at the same time, UKIP is the [strongest disliked](#) party in the UK. Dr Kleine claims that frustration with governing and established parties may easily lead citizens to follow anti-establishment politicians and become more open to simplistic and often misguided proposals for the future of their country.

In fact, this election has seen some misguided narratives propagated throughout Europe, based mainly on invalid causal inferences and lack of rigorous analysis. Dr Kleine again used the UK as an example and pointed to UKIP’s mantra that Britain’s economy would benefit if the country left the EU or that society would be fairer if immigrants were no longer allowed to steal British jobs and abuse the welfare system. Yet, there is no compelling scientific evidence that a British exit would benefit the economy or that the net economic effect of immigration in the UK is negative. With this in mind, Dr. Kleine is adamant that European leaders should not interpret the latest election results as a clear statement of citizens’ political preferences shifting to the right. Accommodating such political views could easily backfire, as it did in the case of the Bavarian CSU (the sister party of Angela Merkel’s Christian Democrats CDU), which caved into some soft-Eurosceptic and anti-immigration rhetoric during the campaign and was penalised by voters.

The second proposal for political leaders is to make the EU even more visible and politicised, in order to allow citizens to understand it and hold it

accountable. The *Spitzenkandidaten* campaign for the Election of Commission President represented a step towards this direction; it involved competition between European political groups and some politicisation of the Commission President post, which could attract more attention and lead to bolder policy proposals. However, Dr Kleine claimed she is not entirely convinced of the merits of this development. She highlighted that the post of Commission President carries a responsibility to ensure consensus is reached among all commissioners and to achieve supermajorities in the Council. This automatically limits policy proposals that are likely to create conflict, and in fact, bold proposals at the EU level are likely to do so. In addition, politicising the leading post of a transnational institution could easily raise concerns about political conflict along national lines. Dr Kleine asked whether partisan conflict at the European level could ever be possible without conflict of national interests. In European level policy it is easy to see how a decision that may benefit workers in one part of the EU might have a negative impact for workers in another part of the Union. Hence, any politicisation of EU steering level posts needs to bear in mind this additional complexity.

Finally, Dr Kleine proposed a third course of action for European leaders: to actively focus on addressing the reasons for citizen frustration by promoting policy programs aimed at sustainable economic growth, economic stability, employment and less social and wealth inequality. In the case of southern European countries in austerity programs, the EU should revise the requirements, loosen budgetary constraints and give some breathing space to these countries, in order to alleviate the social and economic effects of the crisis. Her proposal implies that there is not a single common lesson that can be drawn from the latest European Election and hence no prescribed course of action that is common for all political leaders. Dr Kleine notes that each national context differs considerably, both in its financial indicators, economic

performance and primary concerns of its citizens. Even in Member States restricted by memoranda attached to bail out packages, reasons for citizen frustration and effective responses to underlying problems still vary. She argues that every country should take its own lesson from the EP election results and focus on ways that will truly address its citizen's problems.

## 4.1 Discussion

Dr Kleine's proposal for European political leaders to focus on the underlying issues that have fuelled citizens' frustration is refreshing and simple in theory (although it might prove to be much more complex to implement). By tackling the genuine problems expressed through the electoral process, political leaders can show they are truly "listening to voters". Anti-establishment or extreme right parties most often do not offer any political proposals that are constructive in nature. For example, the M5S in Italy has been criticised for its lack of action in the Italian legislature and its inability to contribute to the political changes the country needs. Parties of the extreme right, such as Golden Dawn in Greece, espouse values that irreconcilable with cooperation, democracy and inclusion, and hence, cannot make proposals to promote democratic politics. Finally, parties such as UKIP in the UK referred to by Dr Kleine, have resorted to populist statements that are not based on rigorous analysis and could have adverse effects for the country. In fact, in the case of the UK, recent studies show that the net effect of immigration on GDP is negligible, while both optimistic and pessimistic financial scenarios following a British exit from the EU would lead to a drop in GDP.<sup>1</sup> Yet

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<sup>1</sup> For a financial analysis of a British exit from the EU, you can read the report from the Centre for Economic Performance (LSE) <http://cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/pa016.pdf> or a study from the Centre for European Reform Reform [http://www.cer.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/attachments/pdf/2014/pb\\_britishtrade\\_16jan14-8285.pdf](http://www.cer.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/attachments/pdf/2014/pb_britishtrade_16jan14-8285.pdf). For the analyses on the economic and labour market effects of immigration,

attempts to have a well-informed political discussion on those issues in the public domain have often been unsuccessful.

Therefore, Europe's political leaders have a responsibility to address the underlying issues that lead to citizen indignation. At the same time, it would be possible to consider the second proposal Dr Kleine offered, the 'more politics in Europe' approach, which is also popular among some European academics. It is possible to find merits in this proposal, and despite the mild nature of the first *Spitzenkandidaten* campaign, future elections based on the track record of the Commissioner's work are likely to give rise to more interesting debates. However, Dr Kleine's concerns about the possible implications of politicising the position of Commission President should be noted. It is worth considering whether 'more politics', further politicisation of the European Parliament and other institutions could simultaneously open the door to more politics along national lines, and whether such a development is warranted. Dr Kleine claimed that the EU must operate on a consensus system, if it is to operate at all. Since every member state and every citizen is affected by its decisions and policy outputs, it is essential to have widespread agreement among Member States. Following this line of argument, political leaders are presented with a dilemma: on the one hand, they can maintain the consensus based nature of EU politics that requires all conflict to be resolved during the decision making process, but is also what constitutes EU politics unexciting and uninteresting. On the other hand, they can facilitate a more adversarial political system, closer to the one operating at the National level of many Member States, which could potentially make EU politics more interesting and lead to increased citizen engagement, but could

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you can read the briefing paper from Migration Watch

<http://www.migrationwatchuk.org/briefingPaper/document/235>, and the Home Office report [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/287287/occ109.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/287287/occ109.pdf).

also challenge the fundamental principles of inclusiveness and consensus, on which the EU has so far been based. This may turn out to be a true dilemma for the future of European politics. Certainly, increased politicisation of EU institutions does not necessarily constitute politicisation along national lines, but this is a conceivable outcome that both Europe's leaders and political scientists need to consider. The current discussion on Mr Juncker's candidacy for Commission President and the stern position of certain European leaders against this already involves traces of arguments along national lines.

## 5. The *new* and *real* challenges for European democracy

Professor Iain Begg

*Professorial Research Fellow, European Institute, LSE*

In the third and final address of the evening, Professor Iain Begg tackled the panel question on the 2014 EP elections "A victory for European democracy?" by elaborating on a number of new democratic challenges emerging in Europe. He located these challenges not necessarily in the institutional foundations of the transnational system, but in the continuously shifting balance of powers between institutions and the actions necessitated by global events, especially the euro crisis.

The first challenge for Professor Begg lies in the unprecedented shifting power of economic governance from Member States to Brussels, which took place during the financial crisis. The new fiscal rules introduced over the past years through the Six Pack, Two Pack and Treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance, have granted increasing enforcement and monitoring powers to EU institutions. Professor Begg cited the requirement of Members of the Eurozone to submit their national budgets for review in Brussels every



October, as an example to showcase the enormous change in the way economic power operates in the multilevel political system. In addition, Troika committees, representing the European Commission, European Central Bank (ECB) and International Monetary Fund (IMF), brought with them a series of conditions and obligations that need to be met by Member States receiving bailout packages. These requirements, he argued, have circumscribed National Parliaments and National deliberative and legislative processes, effectively reducing National institutions to mere approval mechanisms of imposed regulation. Professor Begg finds this to be another great change in economic, as well as political power. Finally, he pointed to new terms that are entering the political lexicon, such as the Reverse Majority Vote rule. This new rule, established in 2011 allows financial sanctions for excessive deficit levels to be activated immediately by the Council and requires a qualified majority of Member States votes against sanctions being implemented, if the decision is to be reversed. Professor Begg stresses that a real democratic challenge lies in the fact that despite its profound political and symbolic significance, rules like this remain obscure for most European citizens and possibly national politicians.

Further, a second challenge to European democracy identified by Professor Begg, lies in the way the mandate of the European Central Bank (ECB) is changing. The ECB has been transformed from a monetary policy institution to a supervisory and enforcement body through the Troika committees and the new fiscal rules granted to it by the aforementioned packs and treaties. His main concern is that the extension of the ECB's mandate is proceeding without much notice and informed debate regarding the possible implications and its future role. Similarly, he finds that talks about a Genuine Economic and Monetary Union (GEMU) that surfaced in 2012 present a vision for Europe that is unclear, and miss concrete details and discussion. With a lack

of information and the absence of a common agreement on what GEMU should try to achieve, these developments represent a real challenge to the way democracy operates at the EU level. Finally, he agreed with Dr Mereike Kleine that the core problem facing Europe today remains its high unemployment, lack of economic growth and growth disparities. He argued that although the democracy question is tangential in the way these problems have arisen, efforts to tackle them through institutional and policy changes will entail fundamental democratic choices and challenges, given the current level of economic integration in the EU.

## 5.1 Discussion

Professor Begg's talk on the new democratic challenges that have emerged due to the increased powers given to EU institutions, especially the ECB, during the financial crisis highlights the need for further discussion about the ways these changes can be legitimised democratically or reversed. It has been argued that the euro crisis exposed the limitations of the previous economic and political system, which lacked enforcement and comprehensive supervision of Member States' finances. It seems that Professor Begg's fears concern more the lack of debate and analysis of the democratic implications of these developments, than the specific measures taken to combat the crisis per se. In fact, the Troika committees have profoundly changed the way democracy operates in the Member States that received bailout packages, with the marginalisation of National legislative processes and their substitution by an approval mechanism. The creation of protest parties or political groups and the power imbalances in national party systems in Italy, Spain and Greece are also partly related to the ways in which democracy has been transformed in these countries. The assessment of the particular

methods the European Commission, the ECB and IMF employed to combat the crisis certainly requires lengthy analysis and is likely to preoccupy political scientists for years to come. Yet apart from this assessment, it is also very important that enforcement of these decisions, as well as their immediate and potential implications for democracy, is transparent and visible to all European citizens.

## 6. Discussion

The speakers touched upon a number of issues concerning the state of European democracy and their addresses triggered a range of comments and lively discussion amongst the panel and members of the audience. The discussion part of the evening focused mainly on three key issues: the candidacy of Jean-Claude Juncker for Commission President, the additional legitimacy requirements imposed by the euro crisis together with the economic regional differentials throughout Europe, and finally, the challenges to the left-right political dimension in the European Parliament following the EP election.

### 6.1 The *Spitzenkandidaten* experiment and Jean-Claude Juncker's case for European democracy

Panel Chair, Professor Maurice Fraser, addressed a question to the audience asking whether they believed Jean-Claude Juncker should be nominated as the next Commission President. Earlier in his address, Professor Iain Begg had drawn attention to the fact that only one in eight voters in Europe voted for parties that are members of the European People's Party (EPP) group, and that in the UK, after the Conservative Party's withdrawal from the EPP group

in 2009, voters did not have the option of voting for a party that supported Jean-Claude Juncker. Professor Fraser's concerns were more focused on the lack of support, or at least approval, that Mr Juncker has received from the political leaders of certain Member States and questioned whether it would be democratically prudent to offer such an important mandate for the future of Europe to a figure that elicited limited support from Heads of State. Addressing this question requires picking on a number of issues. Firstly, whether, on the basis of the Lisbon Treaty changes, Mr Juncker has a legitimate democratic claim to be nominated as the next Commission President. Following this, it is important to discuss whether low citizen support through the EP election provides enough evidence against Mr Juncker's case or whether National leaders' disapproval of his nomination does. Finally, one needs to consider the implications of nominating an alternative figure for future European Parliament Elections, European democracy, and also for the relations between Member States.

Clarifying the Lisbon Treaty clause that led the European party families to propose their leading candidates ahead of the election requires a certain degree of interpretation. The actual [Clause 7 from Article 17](#) reads as follows: "Taking into account the elections to the European Parliament and after having held the appropriate consultations, the European Council, acting by a qualified majority, shall propose to the European Parliament a candidate for President of the Commission. This candidate shall be elected by the European Parliament by a majority of its component members." Dr Hagemann pointed out that the treaty specifies the process of candidate approval and election, and requires that if Mr Juncker is nominated as Commission President from the European Council, the European Parliament needs to elect him by a majority. However, it is less clear whether the Lisbon Treaty entitles the European Parliament to propose candidates ahead of the elections and regard

the candidate of the winning political group as the frontrunner for the post of Commission President. Essentially, this is a difference in interpretation given by people who believe that granting more powers to the European Parliament will make the EU more democratic and bring the Commission closer to the citizens, and those who disagree and believe leaders of Member States should have the ultimate say. Leading European academics, who find themselves in the first camp, have publicly [called for](#) the Council to support the nomination of Mr Juncker as Commission President. UK Prime Minister David Cameron, and the majority of the British press insist that the decision remains with the heads of Member States and, in a different line of argument, are opposed to Mr Juncker's nomination in light of the European politics he represents (Kleine, 2014). Yet, whether Mr Juncker is the 'right man' for the job, a label that will inevitably vary in different parts of Europe and among different voters, should be separated from the question of the legitimacy of his candidacy.

While the panel loosely agreed that the Lisbon Treaty changes have given some legitimate claim for the leading candidate of the winning political group to be nominated, Professor Fraser questioned whether the low level of participation and the fact that voters in certain parts of the EU did not have the opportunity to vote for a party in support of Mr Juncker delegitimises this selection process. Returning to the earlier discussion on the implications of suppressed turnout on the democratic claim of European institutions, again it seems that delegitimising the electoral process is not the most productive approach to the problem of low participation. It would be better to focus on attempts to increase mobilization and bring out centrist voters (that is, assuming centre voters fail to turn out) than to question the legitimacy of the electoral result. In regards to the second argument, it is important to note that consultation did take place in the candidate selection process within political

groups at the level of the European Parliament. The European Conservatives and Reformists group (ECR), which was formed by the Conservative party, being against the *Spitzenkandidaten* process from the outset chose not to propose a candidate and this was the choice made available to voters at home. Therefore, it doesn't seem that there are strong grounds to question the democratic legitimacy of the *Spitzenkandidaten* result.

In fact, as one member of the audience noted, even attempting to infer which voters chose Mr Juncker, directly or indirectly, or how many of the voters who stayed at home would implicitly support Juncker by virtue of being centrist voters, is not a straightforward exercise. A more candid approach would be to consider the message that will be sent to the 43.09% of European voters who participated in the election, and hence must believe there is some value in the European electoral process. In addition, disregarding the *Spitzenkandidaten* process, the European Parliament election results and the Lisbon Treaty changes, would have important implications for democracy at the European Union level. Another member of the audience pointed out that having allowed the European Parliament to propose its candidates and millions of voters to cast their votes, consciously or unconsciously, in support of one political group and its *Spitzenkandidat*, ignoring the results will certainly damage the reputation of EU political processes. Therefore, European leaders are currently presented with a difficult choice: to validate the *Spitzenkandidaten* process and nominate the leading candidate of the winning party group as Commission President, which for some may create domestic issues, or to disregard the whole process and nominate an external candidate who does not elicit objections from any Heads of State. However, the latter option will irrevocably cancel out the process of leading candidates, risk alienating a considerable amount of European citizens who invested part of their time and attention to the election and most likely play to the hands of

Eurosceptic critics who will proclaim that democracy in the EU is an illusion. Dr Hagemann interpreted Angela Merkel's backing of Mr Juncker as a realisation that European leaders need to validate the electoral process and showcase their commitment to listen to Europe's voters.

Finally, two important points to bear in mind in this debate have to do with future implications of Mr. Juncker's bid and the *Spitzenkandidaten* experiment. Firstly, disregarding the result of this election will effectively terminate the leading candidate process for all future EP elections. Calling the *Spitzenkandidaten* process a [failure](#) is hasty, given that it was the first ever attempt to implement this new element of democratic choice in the European institutional structure. Dr Kleine reminded the audience that the real test for this process will be in the next European Parliament election of 2019, when citizens will be able to use the election to evaluate the work of the President of the Commission, among others, and hold him to account. The next election would allow for a factual debate on the performance of the Commission President, something which leading candidates were unable to offer in this campaign. This is likely to lead to more controversial discussions and make the process much more interesting to voters. The second point to bear in mind has to do with the implications of politicising the position of Commission President. The dilemma that came out from Dr. Kleine's address regarding the type of politics that are best fitted for the European level involves a choice between a more adversarial or a more consensus-based approach. According to the Lisbon Treaty the Council can nominate a Commission President by qualified majority. Yet, given that this decision has been reached by unified agreement in the past, there could be unexplored consequences for the leaders who object to that nomination, in terms of their relations with other European leaders and the lines of deliberation in subsequent European debates.

## 6.2 Legitimacy at the EU level is needed more than ever before

With the increasing politicisation of EU institutions and changes necessitated by the economic crisis, the question of how to address sluggish growth and high unemployment that both Professor Begg and Dr Kleine identified in their speeches is pressing. Referring to the issue of economic differentials among Member States, a member of the audience accurately pointed out that there is no political system that can generate uninterrupted growth, and that even in long periods of sustained growth there will always be regional and sectorial differences. In other words, every political system needs to make policy choices that will have varied implications for different areas. What does that mean for European democracy? Essentially, it means that given increased economic integration there are now much greater legitimacy requirements on the EU system to justify such differentials. Professor Begg added that although every type of policy has some distributive outcome, fiscal policy is fundamentally distributive and cannot be assigned to technocratic deliberation as easily as, for example, environmental policy. Further, the European Parliament is an irregular type of Parliament, which is actually not required to justify to its electorate what it wants to achieve and where it channels public funds. Since the European Parliament does not raise taxes and is not fully liable to the citizens in the way National legislatures are, Professor Begg argued that it cannot provide the legitimacy demands of such economic differentials. It is undeniable that the European Parliament cannot be equated with National Parliaments and the level of accountability among the two institutions differs considerably. Nevertheless, many of the important decisions on fiscal and economic issues which affect citizens across Europe are not being taken at the institutional level of the European Parliament. Hence, the level of accountability afforded to the legislative outputs of the



European Parliament via European elections is shorter of what is needed to legitimise these decisions.

Especially for members of the Euro area, additional legitimacy demands are necessitated by the common currency. In her address, Dr Kleine suggested that in the eyes of most voters the EU political level deals with issues that are not perceived as interesting or influential for their lives. However, this is not the case for citizens of the Euro area, for whom the common currency along with the financial crisis has changed the very nature of their economic and political decision-making. The euro has transformed the EU and following the many shifts of economic and political power balance outlined in Professor Begg's speech, it now necessitates an unprecedented level of legitimacy at the European level. Again, neither the European Parliament election nor the *Spitzenkandidaten* process can be considered as an adequate democratic response to these requirements.

What could be a possible response to these challenges? In the case of fiscal and monetary policy, Dr Kleine suggested that it will be extremely hard for the European Parliament to ever compensate for the amount of economic powers and legitimacy transferred from the National level to Brussels. Hence, she is in favour of a decentralisation and devolution of economic competence as the best way to remedy this deficit. However, it is difficult to draw a line on the optimal level of integration or decentralisation of economic competencies, as was exposed by the euro crisis. Maintaining the common currency and at the same time protecting the monetary system from future crises and financial problems of contagion between members would necessitate more coordination.

Another possible response can be traced back to Dr Hagemann's comments on the role of National Parliaments and the growing communication between National and European Parliamentarians. Some initial reports coming out of Brussels have shown that, when national parliamentarians liaise with EP committees and MEPs they are able to better hold into account the Council and their National governments, where a lot of the decision-making takes place. For Dr Hagemann, part of the legitimacy deficit of the EU lies within the lack of scrutiny of National leaders and their decisions on the most important issues of European integration and the main policy areas, which go on without being subjected to proper accountability mechanisms neither at the European nor at the National level. In this sense, both National Parliaments and the European Parliament have an important role to play in scrutinising European political leaders. The recent EP elections that involved additional political powers can be seen as a step towards the right direction for European democracy.

Although it is still difficult to outline with precision the type of cooperation needed between National and European Parliament committees, it is evident that National Parliaments cannot oversee decision-making processes at the European levels as well as at the National one. The speed and breadth of European integration requires true parliamentary scrutiny at both levels. Dr Hagemann's current research is looking at the way in which different National parliamentary setups promote involvement and coordination at the EU level, in an effort to identify best practices across borders. Devising a blueprint for National Parliaments' role in an effort to enhance popular legitimacy of decision-making would be an important step for European democracy.

### 6.3 The end of Left-Right politics in the European Parliament?

The third issue raised in the discussion part of the evening returned to the comments about the interpretation of European Parliament election results and their implications for democratic politics. All speakers devoted time and attention to reflect upon the unprecedented numbers of elected fringe, anti-establishment or Eurosceptic parties in this European Parliament. However, it is important to exercise caution when grouping anti-establishment parties together, as well as when assigning the Eurosceptic label. As Professor Begg mentioned, there are many different demands placed by various anti-establishment parties on the EU. Greek Syriza's criticism of the EU for not demonstrating enough solidarity and assisting Member States in financial difficulties has hardly anything in common with France's Front National. Similarly, grouping all professed Eurosceptic parties together gives rise to a considerably incoherent group, which is difficult to analyse. A [visual matrix](#) compiled by Think Tank Counterpoint prior to the election to capture the democratic challenges posed by populist parties on the European level highlights the various different profiles of fringe parties (see Table 2 below). With these differences in mind, agreement on a common platform and formation of a political group among fringe parties should remain a challenge. Even if a loose block is formed based on Eurosceptic principles, it is still possible that voting cohesiveness among its MEPs will be low, as in the case of the anti-integration European Freedom and Democracy (EFD) political group during the previous EP sitting (Morris, 2013). At present it is difficult to see along what dimension these political parties will choose to operate, whether it will be pro-European versus Eurosceptic, centre versus extreme right, insiders versus outsiders, or simply along individual party lines and key national concerns.

**Table 2: Visual Tool for European Populist Parties**

Party	Country	Violent?	Hostile to representative democracy?	Extremist past?	Racist?	Xenophobic?	Islamophobic?	Anti-Semitic?	Homophobic?	Sexist?	Democratic contribution?	Direction?
Chrysi Avgi (Golden Dawn)	Greece											
Jobbik	Hungary											
Ataka (Attack)	Bulgaria											
British National Party	UK											
Freiheitlichen Partei Österreichs (Austrian Freedom Party)	Austria											
Slovenská Národná Strana (Slovak National Party)	Slovakia											
Vlaams Belang (Flemish Interest)	Belgium											
Front National (National Front)	France <sup>1</sup>											
Partij Voor de Vrijheid (Party for Freedom)	The Netherlands											
Lega Nord (Northern League)	Italy											
Sverigedemokraterna (Sweden Democrats)	Sweden											
Dansk Folkeparti (Danish People's Party)	Denmark											
United Kingdom Independence Party	UK											
Perussuomalaiset (Finns Party)	Finland											
Fremskrittspartiet (Progress Party)	Norway											
Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany)	Germany											
Movimento 5 Stelle (5 Star Movement)	Italy											

■ : high danger 
 ■ : medium danger 
 ■ : low danger

Source: Counterpoint, [www.counterpoint.co.uk](http://www.counterpoint.co.uk)

Nevertheless, political processes in the European Parliament are expected to be affected by the presence of such fringe parties. As discussed by Dr Hagemann, if fringe parties do attempt to vote as a block, this may result in watered-down legislation that will require support by all the 'centre' or 'insider' parties. This, in itself, is a significant implication for European democracy. Furthermore, this is a challenge that also applies for democratic processes at the National level. In most Member States the difference between the centre-left and the centre-right is diminishing, whether due to globalisation forces or due to imposed policy programs from the Troika committees, which has led to strong pressures on the mainstream parties of the centre. The rise of some anti-systemic and extreme right parties of European Member States has occurred as much on the local and National level, as on the European one. As Professor Fraser pointed out in a later

comment, the overall implication of a broad consensus among the right and left parties across the political centre is that left-right politics will be played out between the far left and the far right, or the centre and the fringes.

Finally, it was argued that EU politics would never truly operate on a left-right dimension due to the distinct political traditions among different national political parties. Professor Fraser suggested that this European election highlighted the shortcomings of uploading the left-right paradigm on the European level and believing that party labels would correlate to the different national contexts in any meaningful way. Certainly, there are many differences in the way left-right politics have developed in different Member States and each national party system entails distinct party profiles. However, previous research into MEPs' voting patterns has shown that most political groups in the European Parliament tend to vote cohesively, suggesting that MEPs have managed to find common ground on the basis of this traditional political dimension (Hix, Noury and Roland, 2005). It remains to be seen whether the new composition of the European Parliament will challenge this. Further research considering Parliamentary roll calls following the financial crisis and especially in the new European Parliament will need to address this question.

## 7. Conclusion

The LSE Europe in Question Series event on the aftermath of the 2014 European Parliament election touched on a variety of topics linked to the state of European democracy. Some of the issues discussed are ongoing, such as the *Spitzenkandidaten* case and the election of the President for the European Commission. Others, such as the presence of a larger number of right fringe

parties in the new Parliament and the liaison between National Parliaments and the European Parliament, are yet to fully unravel. As outlined throughout this report, their implications will certainly be important for democracy at the European and even National level and hence, further study and discussion of these developments is called for. In addition, while political scientists analyse the election results and focus on the operations of the European Parliament, it is also essential to monitor and assess the changes taking place on other institutional levels of the EU. The question of EU legitimacy cannot rest solely with the European Parliament, given the extensive shift in economic powers that took place during the euro crisis. The quest for a democratic victory at the European level will be a continuous endeavour, as EU transformations necessitate ever more accountability mechanisms and an increased understanding of citizen engagement with Europe.

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## Appendix: Event details

### **LEQS Annual Lecture 2014:**

**'The 2014 EP elections: a victory for European democracy?'**

#### **Speakers:**

**Dr Sara Hagemann**, Assistant Professor, European Institute, LSE and Head of VoteWatch.eu

**Dr Mareike Kleine**, Associate Professor in EU and International Politics, European Institute, LSE

**Prof Iain Begg**, Professorial Research Fellow, European Institute, LSE

**Chair: Prof Maurice Fraser**, Head of the European Institute, Professor of Practice in European Politics

**Date:** Monday 2 June 2014, Time: 18.30-20.00

**Venue:** Wolfson Theatre, NAB

To watch or listen to the panel debate, click [here](#).

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