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Europe

Caring less

Turnout at European Parliament elections, % of registered voters



Source: European Parliament *Number of member states

The anti-European question

Anton La Guardia BRUSSELS

For once, the European elections in May will matter, to both the EU and its members

European elections are usually dull, lacking the drama of national politics or the immediacy of local ballots. Policymaking in the European Union is so complicated that the parliamentary balance makes only a marginal difference. Few people can name their MEPs, and the parliament shuttles at great expense between its twin homes of Brussels and Strasbourg with all the trappings of a travelling circus. It is hardly surprising, then, that turnout has fallen with every round since direct elections began in 1979 (see chart).

The contest in May 2014 will be different. The crisis of the euro zone matters to voters—be it in debtor states such as Greece, creditor states such as Finland or non-euro countries like Britain. Eurocrats are intruding deeply into the economies of the euro zone, raising profound questions about democracy. So the ballot will be an important test of faith in the European project.

Europhiles have two nightmares: one is that the turnout will drop further (it was just 43% at the last election); the

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—or, as some
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other is that there will be a strong backlash against the EU. Minority parties tend to do better in European elections because people feel freer to vote with the heart—or, as some put it, the boot.

Populist, anti-immigrant and extreme parties of all stripes, often united only in their hatred of the EU, will make gains. The real question is how strong they will be. A fifth of MEPs? A quarter? Maybe a third? The Freedom Party of Geert Wilders in the Netherlands, the National Front of Marine Le Pen in France and the UK Independence Party led by Nigel Farage may top the ballots in their countries. The Finns Party and the Alternative for Germany will do well, too.

In Strasbourg and Brussels, radicals will seek not only to subvert the European system from within, but national mainstream parties from without. The disparate Eurosceptics have had little influence on EU legislation but they ably use the European assembly as a megaphone. So the Eurosceptics' greatest influence will be indirect, through national politics. Insecure governments are more likely to resist EU integration, such as encouraging the free movement of workers, deepening the single market, liberalising external trade and sharing financial risk to stabilise the euro. The Schengen free-travel area is particularly vulnerable. Pressure to call a referendum on Britain's EU membership will grow.

2014 IN BRIEF

Europe marks the 200th anniversary of the first capture of Napoleon (he had to be recaptured a year later, after escaping from Elba)

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2014 IN BRIEF

Armenia and Azerbaijan mark 20 years since the shaky ceasefire in their war over Nagorno-Karabakh

All this raises the stakes in the choice for the big jobs in Brussels after the election: the presidents of the European Commission (the EU's civil service) and the European Council (representing leaders), as well as the foreign-policy chief (called the high representative). Into the mix will go the commissioner for monetary affairs and, perhaps later, the president of the Eurogroup of finance ministers. The next secretary-general of NATO will also be part of the bargain.

The Brussels name game

Europhiles want the process to be more overtly political. José Manuel Barroso, president of the commission, will put forward proposals to change the EU treaties with the aim eventually of creating a "federation of nation-states". The main European political "families"—the coalitions of national parties that dominate the parliament's work—plan to take up his call to campaign around "presidential" candidates to succeed him.

Mimicking national elections is meant to raise public interest, enhance the EU's democratic credentials and shift power from national governments to supranational bodies. But this could lead to a bitter dispute between the parliament and governments over who should choose, and control, the head of the commission (the treaty is ambiguous). And the field of candidates would narrow to Brussels insiders; sitting prime ministers may not give up their jobs for a risky European election.

Martin Schulz, the pugnacious president of the European Parliament, is the favourite to win the nomina-

tion for the centre-left umbrella, the Party of European Socialists (PES). The centre-right European People's Party (EPP) is likely to remain the biggest grouping, but is in a quandary. In 2009 it chose Mr Barroso as its champion (he was the incumbent). This time the EPP's insiders are less appealing: Viviane Reding, the self-promoting justice commissioner, and Michel Barnier, the single-market commissioner.

So the EPP-dominated European Council will doubtless seek to appoint one of its own: perhaps Donald Tusk of Poland, Enda Kenny of Ireland, Jyrki Katainen of Finland or Valdis Dombrovskis of Latvia. Among PES prime ministers they could choose Helle Thorning-Schmidt of Denmark or Enrico Letta of Italy. As with much else, the view of Germany's chancellor, Angela Merkel, will be decisive.

A prime minister might be persuaded to campaign openly, rather than behind closed doors, if he or she had the assurance of becoming president of the European Council in case of failure. The remaining jobs would then be settled through a complex, and often unedifying, game of political balance: between political families, north and south, older and newer member-states, and sex. If euro-zone figures get the two big presidencies, then the foreign-policy job could go to a non-euro easterner such as Radek Sikorski, the Polish foreign minister.

Beyond this horse-trading, governments and political parties would make a good start by selecting a better crop of commissioners and MEPs than the current bunch of mediocrities. ■

Karl v Charles

Frederick Studemann

How to celebrate Charlemagne?

"F"ather of Europe" was just one of the names given to Charles I, or Karl der Grosse or—as he is perhaps best known—Charlemagne. After centuries of chaos and fragmentation following the collapse of the western Roman empire, the king of the Franks is credited with establishing political unity, restoring stability and presiding over an intellectual and cultural renaissance. Crowned emperor by a pope, his territories encompassed much of western Europe. Today he is claimed by both France and Germany, and his name remains synonymous with a vision of a grander continental ambition.

So there is reason to mark the 1,200th anniversary of his death, on January 28th. The German city of Aachen, Charlemagne's imperial capital and last resting place, will stage a trio of exhibitions under the headings Power, Art and Treasure. Highlights include the Lorsch Gospels, an elaborate, illuminated manuscript enveloped in carved ivory. The gospels were separated into three parts—now in the Vatican, the Victoria & Albert Museum

and the Batthyaneum Library in Romania—to be reunited for the anniversary. The organisers say this is an exceptional example of the cultural expression and devotion to learning that Charlemagne promoted.

It is not the first time Charlemagne has been summoned to inspire later generations of Europeans. Every few decades brings a new opportunity to commemorate the great man and tease out lessons for the present day. Today, with Europe still wrestling with the euro crisis and enthusiasm for the "project" of continental unity flagging, Europhiles see a greater need than ever.

For Max Kerner, one of the historians behind the Aachen exhibitions, there is much to learn from the itinerant emperor's system of "ambulatory power", in which he moved around his territory much as today's leaders flit between Brussels and national capitals. Europeans can also learn from Charlemagne's promotion of a common script and currency, and a knack for incorporating different tribes



In your dreams, Brussels

and peoples in a system that also allowed them to retain some powers to create what Mr Kerner calls "unity in diversity".

Inspiring stuff: strange, then, that the Aachen events are such a German affair, with no French input. The French decided to focus on the centenary of the first world war, Mr Kerner says. When it comes to marking big historical moments, Charlemagne's children remain perhaps a bit more diverse than united. ■

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