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Update to Chapter 6: The European Parliament

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The elections to the European Parliament – held in June 2014 – was a shock to the system, with many established party groupings encountering significant losses (see Table 6.2) The center-right grouping of the EPP lost 50 seats, with their colleagues from the Liberal ALDE group down by 15 seats. The center-left group of the social democratic parties maintained their spot at number 2 and only lost one MEP, but Eurosceptic and anti-EU parties in return made substantial gains. The other center-right (but Eurosceptic) ECR came in third, increasing its number of MEPs from 33 to 70. The anti-EU EFD made equal gains; from 33 MEPs to 48. Even non-attached parties (usually consisting of extremist politicians who do not want to or cannot establish alliances with MEPs from at least four member states; the requirement to form a party group) saw their contingent rise from 30 to a staggering 52 MEPs. No wonder, commentators were quick to point out that this electoral outcome reflected the growing sense of unease about, and outright anger against EU integration in the wake of the continued economic downturn prompted by the Eurozone’s sovereign debt crises.

Table 6.1 Allocation of Seats in the European Parliament

Number of Seats	Country
96	Germany
74	France
73	Italy, UK
54	Spain,
51	Poland
33	Romania
26	Netherlands
22	Greece, Portugal, Czech Republic, Hungary, Belgium
20	Sweden
19	Austria
18	Bulgaria
13	Denmark, Finland, Slovakia
12	Ireland, Lithuania
9	Latvia
8	Slovenia
6	Luxembourg, Cyprus, Estonia, Malta
751	Total

This analysis carries some weight, when looking more specifically at individual countries. In Britain, UKIP (or the United Kingdom Independence Party), a right-wing populist outfit that argues for an EU exit and highly controlled immigration became the country's most popular party, by securing 24 of the UK's 73 MEPs and 27 per cent of the votes. Across the channel in France, the leader of the neo-fascist Front National, Marine Le Pen received an equally astonishing 25 per cent of the popular vote. The Swedish Democrats - a mirror image of UKIP with its social conservatism and anti-immigration rhetoric secured just below 10 per cent. In the Netherlands, Geert Wilders' anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant Freedom Party received 13 per cent. Even in largely pro-EU Germany, the newly formed Alternative for Germany (which argues for the abolition of the Euro) received 7 per cent. In Hungary, the neo-fascist Jobbik Party saw its share of EP votes drop from 18 to 15 per cent but it continues to be the country's second most popular party. In Greece, the neo-fascist Golden Dawn attracted nine per cent of voters.

While these anti-EU (and occasionally anti-democratic) votes caused much concern, one also has to acknowledge that pro-EU MEPs still represent the vast majority. It is true that those three party groupings of the EU that had been stalwarts of integration for many decades have lost votes. On the other hand, pro European conservatives, social democrats and liberals still have 479 out of 751 MEPs. which represents a very comfortable majority of 64 per cent. Given the severity of the economic crisis in the majority of Eurozone countries, some electoral backlash was to be expected. But it is also true that the majority of MEPs continue to back pro EU politicians. This became evident in the appointment of Jean Claude Juncker as the EP's candidate for the post of Commission President (see update on Chapter 3). As the representative of the biggest party grouping – the right of center EPP – he was backed by 422 MEPs (with 250 MEPs voting against his appointment).

Table 6.2 Party Groupings in the European Parliament 2014

Name of Party Grouping	Seats	Percent of Votes
European People's Party – European Democrats (EPP)	221	29.43
Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D)	191	25.43
European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR)	70	9.32
Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE)	67	8.92
European United Left – Nordic Green Left (GUE-NGL)	52	6.92
The Greens European Free Alliance (Greens – EFA)	50	6.66
Europe of Freedom and Democracy (EFD)	48	6.39
Non Attached	52	6.92
Total	751	

See: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/elections2014-results/en/election-results-2014.html>

Low election turnouts undermine the legitimacy of any democratic polity. It therefore remains worrying, that elections to the European Parliament simply seem to matter much less to EU citizens than national or even local elections. The turnout for the EP elections of 2014 reached yet another low since only 42.54 per cent of the electorate bothered to cast their votes. In some countries such as the UK local elections were held on the same day, while in others (such as Belgium and Luxembourg) it remains legally mandatory to

vote. Otherwise the results would have been even worse. Still, in some countries, the turnout was truly shocking: Slovakia ranked at the foot of the table with a turnout of merely 13 per cent. The Czech Republic fared little better with 18 per cent, while the newest member state Croatia was only able to galvanise 25 per cent of its voters to fulfil their democratic duties. Clearly, the European Parliament continues to struggle to be of relevance to its electorate, and the notion that the EU is lacking a ‘demos’ were once again widespread. *Plus ça change*; a French turn of phrase which the dictionary explains as being used to ‘express resigned acknowledgement of the fundamental immutability of human nature and institutions’ describes the situation in a rather poignant manner.

Table 6.3. Turnout in EP elections

Year of Election	Turnout (%)
1979	63.0
1984	61.0
1989	58.5
1994	56.8
1999	49.8
2004	45.7
2009	42.9
2014	42.5