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# 2014 EU Elections in France

## A “Seismic” Victory<sup>1</sup>

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Traditionally European elections have failed to create an “electoral connection” between European citizens and politics in the European Parliament (EP), in particular, and in the European Union (EU), more generally. The 2014 overall voter turnout of 42,54% is the lowest ever registered. Elections after elections, the story never ends. The conclusion seems straightforward. The EU lacks popular support. Of course, Western democracies face more or less the same trend with an increasing level of abstention, be it for national, regional or European polls. However, because the EU as a non-State political system has to find its own source of legitimation, the increasing abstention is a particularly vivid issue. The stakes for the EU democracy are huge. This increasing abstention asks the very possibility of a *political* European Union that EU citizens could appropriate.

France is no exception to the rule of massive abstention. Since 1979, turnout has been decreasing from 60.7% in 1979 to 40.6% in 2009 (see below Table 1). Therefore, the 2014 voter turnout of 42,4% is not a surprise at all. However, this is not the issue of abstention which was mainly debated. The victory for the far-right and populist party *Front National* (24.86%), multiplying its result of 2009 by four (6,34%), feeds a huge debate in the political and media spectrum. The traditional right-wing party UMP followed with 20.81%, whereas the governing socialist party of President François Hollande only got 13.98%. The FN obtained then 23 deputies in the European Parliament among France’s 74 mandates taking advantage of the general economic slump, social euroscepticism and lack of interest in EU-matters. What’s more, this was the first time in French political life history that the Front National have ever won a general election.

This contribution intends to revisit the main challenges this victory stresses. To what extent may this victory weaken the influence of France in the EU institutions? What does this “day of glory” mean for the French popular attitude towards the EU? This chapter is organized in two main parts. The first one goes back to the main components of the EU elections’ campaign in France.

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier and shorter version of this paper has been published in S. Piedrafita, A. Lauenroth, (eds), *Between Apathy and Anger: Challenges to the Union from the 2014 Elections to the European Parliament*, EPIN Working Paper No. 39, 20 May 2014.

It will more particularly focus on the deep popular discontent against the French socialist government, as well as on the deferred start the EU campaign. Then, the contribution will focus on the consequences of this victory for the French representatives in the European Parliament.

## THE EU ELECTIONS RESULTS IN FRANCE

### *A “Protest Vote” against the French Government*

In 2014, 43% of French citizens went to the polls<sup>2</sup>. This is two points more than in 2009, where 41% of voters went to the polls (see below). Even if abstention remains higher than turnout, these scores may be read as a kind of stop in the increasing abstention since 1979. At least, one might see a sign of the “stabilization of abstention”<sup>3</sup>.

Table 1

Voter Turnout in EU Elections - France (in %)

1979	1984	1989	1994	1999	2004	2009	2014
60.71	56.72	48.8	52.71	46.76	42.76	40.63	42.43

Source: <http://www.results-elections2014.eu/en/turnout.html>

The main reason evoked by French citizens when it comes to explain their abstention is a misinformation in European affairs. This seems to be a strongly French particularity since for 85% of the French voters, it is crucial to be informed on Europe (4 points more than the overall EU average). Closely linked is the feeling of disinterest. In 2009, 50% of them say that the European elections “are not interesting” at all<sup>4</sup>. The crisis and the difficulties of France to face it might explain the feeling of disinterest among French voters.

Most important, when it comes to explain this rather relative stabilization, one might evoke the vivid discontent against the French government led by President François Hollande, a trend known as a “sanction vote”. 50% of French voters say they don’t go to the polls because they reject the policy of the socialist government. According to pre-election surveys, 71% intended to use the European elections to “punish” the French President and its government<sup>5</sup>,

<sup>2</sup> See IFOP pre-electoral surveys, 10 April 2014.

<sup>3</sup> A. Muxel, “Des élections européennes en manque d’électeurs, mais une relative stabilisation de la participation” *Notes du Cevipof*, no.4, Juin 2014.

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.fondapol.org/fileadmin/upload/pdf/documents/Enquete\\_Elections\\_Europeennes\\_Resultats\\_Complets.pdf](http://www.fondapol.org/fileadmin/upload/pdf/documents/Enquete_Elections_Europeennes_Resultats_Complets.pdf) (last access: 1 May 2014).

<sup>5</sup> See TNS Sofres-Sopra pour RTL et *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 8 April 2014.

which is 20 points higher than in 2009. It is to be reminded indeed that the popularity of President Hollande is the worst ever registered in the Fifth Republic, with less than 15% of French citizens supporting its agenda. This exceptionally strong anger may explain why French voters went to the polls.

This dissatisfaction explains why French citizens went to the polls in more or less the same proportion than in 2009 and did not stay at home. But it also explains to some extent the victory of the Front National. Indeed, French voters did not use EP elections to express their preferences about European issues, but rather to have a say on national politics. National parties and voters treat EU elections as “second-order” competitions in the national electoral cycles<sup>6</sup>. This “sanction vote” is not only addressed to the French President and his government. As shown by recent polls, 59% of French citizens used the 2014 EU polls to criticize the way the European Union is led, which is 8 points higher than in 2009. Among the main critics addressed to the EU political leaders is the inability to solve the Eurozone crisis and its social consequences (rise of unemployment, loss of purchasing power)<sup>7</sup>.

In detail, the pre-electoral polls anticipated this increasing popularity of the extreme right wing party. According to the main pre-electoral polls, the Front National would receive 23% of the votes. It would then become the first political force in the country. The UMP, the moderate right-wing party, follows close behind with 22.5% of the votes. In the third place comes the Socialist Party, the party of the President and its government, with 19.5%. Far behind come the centrist party UDI/Modem with 10% and finally the Green party and the extreme left wing party Front de Gauche, both with 8% of the votes. The definitive results were close to this prediction, since the *Front National* won with 24.86%. The traditional right-wing party UMP followed with 20.81%, whereas the governing socialist party of President François Hollande only got 13.98%. In detail, two main „Front National“ areas were clearly identified<sup>8</sup>: the first one is located around Ile-de-France and covers regions such as Haute-Normandie, Nord Pas de Calais, Champagne Ardenne. In this regions, between 13 and 18% of the French voters voted for the Front National. The highest scores are to be found in Oise and Somme (around 19%). The second main area is located in the South-East of France and covers a huge part of regions Provence-Alpes-Côte d’Azur. More particularly, the Vaucluse and the Var are the most favorable to the Front National, which was also the case for former elections. On the contrary, some regions seem less receptive to the political offer proposed by the Front National. These are Bretagne, Pays-de la Loire and Paris. In these areas, less than 6% of the voters selected the Front National.

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<sup>6</sup> K. Reif, H. Schmitt, “Nine Second-Order Elections – A Conceptual Framework for the Analysis of European Election Results“, *European Journal of Political Research*, vol. 8, no. 1, 1980, pp. 3-44.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>8</sup> See J.F. Leger, „Elections européennes 2014 en France. Le décryptage géographique“, *Population & Avenir*, vol. 4, no. 719, 2014, pp. 4-8.

These EU 2014 elections and their results clearly ask the coherence of the electoral and political French territory, split into two distinct areas.

### *An EU Campaign Delayed by Key Municipal Elections for the French Government*

The European election campaign started particularly late. Three main reasons explain this delay: First, municipal elections were held in March 2014. As the first electoral consultation after the presidential and legislative ones in 2012, these elections were particularly important for the current Government: the first “test” for in a difficult economic and social environment. These municipal elections raised widespread attention of media and parties. European issues traditionally debated in France such as the weak role played by citizens in the EU, the European Parliament incapacity to oppose the EU Commission’s initiatives, the EU Commission contested role in domestic budgetary affairs, or the competition between France and Germany for EU leadership were disregarded because of this heavy national electoral calendar. Second, national parties (especially the UMP and the Socialist Party) took their time in selecting the candidates. Intra-partisan controversies about lists composition and order slowed down the process. For example, the leaders of the *Front de Gauche*, engaged in a competition for the “best constituencies”. The Socialist Party amended its list at the very last moment, as a result of the harsh defeat in the March 2014 municipal elections: the former First Secretary Harlem Désir withdrew from the head of list in Ile de France and it took a while to replace him.

Third, in France no other election, be it national or local, can be held jointly with the European elections. Although parallel elections could theoretically distract the debates from European issues to purely local or national ones, there are voices claiming that holding two or even three elections on the same day could perhaps lead to a more energetic campaign and could help increase voter turnout<sup>9</sup>.

### *A “Domestic” Campaign as Regards the Selection of Candidates*

French political leaders discussed EU issues through the lens of French policy problems. Several criteria reflect this domestic bias. First, the selection of

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<sup>9</sup> C. Belot, F. Greffet., “Une Europe en quête d’électeurs. Retour sur différentes lectures de l’abstention aux élections européennes à l’occasion du scrutin de juin 2004”, in Pascal Delwit, Philippe Poirier (eds.), *Parlement puissant, électeurs absents?*, Editions de l’ULB, Bruxelles, 2005, pp. 179-203.

candidates show that appointments complied to criteria of domestic politics rather than European ones. The UMP for instance gave a “second try” to candidates who were defeated in 2012 national legislative elections. Only 4 EPP-ED incumbents were heads of lists for the EU elections. In three (South-West, East and South-East) out of the eight French electoral districts, former Ministers opened the lists and EPP-ED incumbents ranked second. The UMP chose candidates with experience in national politics, well known to French citizens, but lacking any direct experience in EU politics and EU institutions.

Two out of eight heads of the Front National lists – Marine and Jean Marie Le Pen – have already been MEPs, whereas the other candidates were picked up according to their performance in the last municipal elections. Moreover, inner party struggles had a powerful say in the selection of candidates. Inside UMP, Henri Guaino, former political advisor of President Nicolas Sarkozy, backed by Laurent Wauquiez, former Minister, and by other 40 MPs, officially declared that he was not going to support his colleague A. Lamassoure, head of list in Ile-de-France and MEP since 1999. The “ideological war” on EU issues inside the Socialist Party opposing an extreme and a moderate pro-European wing reached its climax in the East district. Here, the former unionist Edouard Martin, leader of the movement that opposed the closure of ArcelorMittal plant in Florange in 2009, opened the list, ahead Catherine Trautmann, MEP since 2004.

Second, the campaigns covered mainly domestic topics. This is especially obvious for the opposition parties, which took the EU elections as an opportunity to criticize the government. UMP President Jean-François Copé gave the kick-off on 24 April by announcing that “the European elections are the second opportunity to push François Hollande to change his policy”. Jean-Luc Mélenchon, head of the “Front de Gauche” list in South-West, called French voters to punish François Hollande and its government. Olivier Besancenot, head of the extreme left-wing party NPA, claimed that these European elections pave the way for a popular opposition to President Hollande and Prime Minister Manuel Valls. Confronted with a massive popular discontent, the Socialist Party in power had to focus more on the national economic and social difficulties than on European issues such as the role of the EU in Ukraine or the competition for the EU Commission President following the Treaty of Lisbon. Obviously, there is a clear European dimension of the current economic debate: the French responsibility pact is indeed supposed to meet the requirements of the EU Stability and Growth Pact. The EU is not absent of the debate. However, French topics like the civil service reform or the Social Security reform were prevalent.

Striving to build a parliamentary majority, the newly designated government of Manuel Valls was compelled to manage intra-partisan dissent and to find compromises. In this context, Europe was not the priority.

Moreover, Europe was always a controversial topic for the Socialists, as showed by the referendum on the Constitutional Treaty in 2005. Therefore, if Socialist French leaders were unable or unwilling to talk about Europe, it is also because they didn't want to risk sharpening their internal disagreements. On the contrary, the Green/EELV Party and the centrist UDI/Modem list appeared a bit more EU-oriented. For instance, the Green Party's announced the heads of the lists since 14 December 2013 and focused its campaign on EU topics such as the TTIP. Similarly, since the launching of its campaign in August 2013, the UDI/Modem called for a more federal EU.

Third, despite a slightly stronger presence of the EU in the media, intra-partisan and, national issues have been largely covered by the media, both written and televised. Since the Eurozone crisis' starting point in 2008, the EU is a bit more present in the French political and media space- as a scapegoat for the current crisis. The current economic predicaments brought the EU in the heart of the public debate. Since 2008, the TV coverage has raised. Indeed, whereas in 2006-2007, European topics counted for only 2% of the media offer, since 2008 they form around 13% of the total TV coverage<sup>10</sup>. However, intra-partisan and national issues remained the favorite topics of the media. For instance, the French Green/EELV was more controversial for their unwillingness to be part of the new Government than for their position on EU issues. This decision taken by the Executive Board of the party was highly contested by many Green MPs, and affected the priority accorded to EU topics. The former president of the UDI, Jean Louis Borloo, decision to withdraw from politics had also a strong impact on the EU campaign of the centrist party. More generally, the topics covered were truly domestic: the highly criticized "responsability pact" of President Hollande, contested even inside the socialist parliamentary majority; the rise of unemployment; the successive French companies' buyouts (Alstom; Fagor...); Sunday working; the special minimum wage for young people. In the TV debates devoted to the EU campaign, candidates chose to set forth domestic issues. For instance, a debate between Martin Schulz and Marine Le Pen was cancelled, because the President of the Front National, Marine Le Pen, claimed the EU campaign was above all a "French one" and that she did not have "to discuss with a foreigner"<sup>11</sup>.

More generally, debates on the EU focused on those issues relevant from a national point of view: the controversial implementation of austerity packages the EU Commission would impose, as claimed by the Minister of Economy A. Montebourg<sup>12</sup>; Roma people. Highly illustrative, the key debate of the EU

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<sup>10</sup> Inattheque: <http://inattheque.ina.fr/> (last access: 1 June 2014)

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.atlantico.fr/pepites/europeennes-2014-marine-pen-refuse-debat-avec-martin-schulz-france-2-cede-1038186.html> (last access: 1 May 2014).

<sup>12</sup> [http://www.liberation.fr/economie/2013/11/13/l-austerite-responsable-de-la-crise-en-europe-pour-montebourg\\_946563](http://www.liberation.fr/economie/2013/11/13/l-austerite-responsable-de-la-crise-en-europe-pour-montebourg_946563) (last access: 1 May 2014).

campaign between the candidates for the EU Commission Presidency (Martin Schulz, Jean Claude Juncker, Guy Verhofstadt, Alexis Tsipras and José Bové/Ska Keller) on 15 May 2014, broadcasted in 20 member states, wasn't aired by the French public television<sup>13</sup>.

Finally, most of the French parties used EU elections to meet domestic goals. This was most obvious for the Front National. The extreme right wing party intended to follow up on its successful municipal election. The president Marine Le Pen claimed that in the event of success in EU elections, she would request the dissolution of the National Assembly. Regarding the Socialist Party, a success in EU elections seems necessary to restore confidence. Having left the governmental majority last March, the EELV/Greens wished to use EU elections to rebuild their identity and their presence in the national political sphere.

### *A Contrasted Partisan Involvement*

Lastly, the French EU campaign has been characterized by a very low partisan involvement. First, as seen above, the cognitive resources and time that political elites from different parties devoted to the European election campaigns were limited, except for the UDI/Modem and the Greens/EELV. The Greens/EELV held a common meeting with the other European Greens' heads of lists to launch the campaign last December. The UDI/Modem also set up a workshop devoted to EU issues last summer.

Second, party elites didn't actively support their candidates. For instance, the President of the UMP Jean François Copé, focusing his energies on the municipal elections, expressed very late his support for the EU candidates collectively, on 24 April at a press conference. On the other hand, the PS head of list in South East, Vincent Peillon, was dismissed from its ministerial portfolio after the defeat of the Socialist party in the municipal elections. This "punishment" may have weakened the position of the former Minister of Education in his constituency.

The attitude of French parties regarding the competition for the presidency of the EU Commission was more complex. The UMP President Jean François Copé, who actively supported the candidature of Michel Barnier, found it hard to endorse Jean Claude Juncker, supported rather reluctantly by Angela Merkel. French UMP members got the feeling that their vote was driven primarily by Germany<sup>14</sup>. Left wing parties took a more active part. For instance,

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<sup>13</sup> [http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2014/04/30/france-televisions-ou-le-deni-de-democratie-europeenne\\_4409502\\_3232.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2014/04/30/france-televisions-ou-le-deni-de-democratie-europeenne_4409502_3232.html). (last access: 1 May 2014).

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.la-croix.com/Actualite/Monde/Jean-Claude-Juncker-sera-le-chef-de-file-de-la-droite-europeenne-2014-03-08-1117023> (last access: 1 May 2014).



Martin Schulz launched his campaign with many Socialist Party's figures in Paris and many French leaders such as the Minister of Justice Christiane Taubira or the former MEP Pierre Moscovici attended the meeting. However, one should recall that there were still strong disagreements between Martin Schulz on the one hand and Jean Christophe Cambadélis and many other French Socialists on the other hand on the necessity to reform the Maastricht criteria<sup>15</sup>. Hence strong internal cleavages persisted and Martin Schulz' support became highly controversial.

Third, EU parties' manifestos received unequal consideration from French parties. For instance, no link toward the EPP-ED manifesto could be found on the UMP webpage. Obviously, this was also the case for the Front National, whose members sat as Non-attached MEPs. Interestingly, Marine le Pen expressed her wish in November 2013 to build up a "Eurosceptic group", with the Dutch support of Geert Wilders. However, following the refusal of UKIP members to join, this project was abandoned. On the contrary, the left-wing parties exhibited their EU affiliations on their websites. The extreme left-wing "Front de Gauche" dedicated entirely its homepage to EU elections in French constituencies. The issues commonly defended by all the EU extreme left-wing parties, such as the rejection of the austerity packages, the rise of unemployment in the EU, or the need for a more substantial citizens' participation in the EU decision-making process, were also prominent. However, this apparent consensus could not hide strong internal disagreements. One of the founding members of the French Front de gauche and former leaders of the Communist Revolutionary League (LCR) Christian Picquet resigned on 1 May 2014, claiming that the selection of EU candidates did not make enough room for the anti-EU line inside the party<sup>16</sup>.

How explaining this low involvement? First, parties feared the inner conflicts that the debates on the EU could have occasioned. Indeed, since the EU is a contentious matter for many parties, it could have offered a good opportunity for challengers and critics inside parties<sup>17</sup>. The Front de Gauche internal crisis is illustrative in this respect. Second, most of the time, EU elections weaken the ruling parties. Therefore, parties were not encouraged to mobilize their voters. This was especially the case for the parties in government. On the contrary, the opposition parties tended to nationalize EU elections, seeing the benefits of a defeat of the majority. Moreover, fearing that a focus on

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<sup>15</sup> <http://www.euractiv.fr/sections/elections-2014/martin-schulz-lance-sa-campagne-paris-301651> (last access: 1 May 2014).

<sup>16</sup> [http://www.lemonde.fr/europeennes-2014/article/2014/04/30/le-front-de-gauche-fragilise-par-des-tensions-internes\\_4409536\\_4350146.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/europeennes-2014/article/2014/04/30/le-front-de-gauche-fragilise-par-des-tensions-internes_4409536_4350146.html) (last access: 1 May 2014),

<sup>17</sup> C. Parsons C., mentioned in O. Rozenberg, (2009), "L'influence du Parlement européen et l'indifférence de ses électeurs: une corrélation fallacieuse ?", *Politique européenne*, no. 28, 2009, pp. 7-36.

the EU could be interpreted as a sign of political weakness at home, French parties chose to consider all EU issues through the lens of France politics or simply dismiss them on the whole<sup>18</sup>. Last, the complicated EU-France relation could have played a role: ever since De Gaulle, the EU was often miscast as a threat to national sovereignty. In May 2013, President Hollande claimed that the EU Commission must not dictate what France has to do<sup>19</sup>.

## WHAT HAPPENS NOW?

What are the main consequences of the FN victory? Can it threaten the influence and weight of France in the EU? To what extent may it be relevant for national politics? Are we allowed to speculate on the future balance of power between the Front National and mainstream parties in elections with a higher voter turnout? Do the electoral results announce a turning point in the balance of power between parties and between parties and their constituencies? Let's address these questions one by one.

The victory for the Front National in the 2014 EU elections illustrates many important facts. First, the legitimacy of the mainstream parties is exceptionally weak. Second, the victory of the Front National questioned the legitimacy of the French members of the European Parliament knowing that more than 50% of the French population did not go to the polls<sup>20</sup>. Obviously, *per se* legitimacy doesn't depend on voters' turnout. However, the EU elections confirmed the increasing distrust of French citizens in their political elites. A recent poll showed that 78% of the French citizens do not trust the politicians, which is 4 points more than two years ago. Third, the FN victory showed how unimportant EU is for French politics. According to the polls, the majority of French voters (58%) claimed to be mostly concerned by national issues and only 20% acknowledge their concern for European issues. Fourth, the EU elections result stress out that, in times of harsh economic crisis, the political battle is not between left-wing and right-wing parties (which more or less support the same policies in Brussels), but rather between the populist parties which challenge the EU policies, and the "realist" ones, the conservatives, the liberals and the social democrats. How the Front National victory can influence France's position in the EU? On the background of a wide success of Eurosceptic parties all over Europe, the FN victory was one of the most noticeable. However, this will not considerably affect the actual work of the

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.lefigaro.fr/flash-eco/2013/05/29/97002-20130529FILWWW00563-la-commission-n-a-pas-a-nous-dicter-ce-que-nous-avons-a-faire-hollande.php> (last access: 1 May 2014).

<sup>20</sup> See J.F. Leger, „Elections européennes 2014 en France...cit.”.

European Parliament. Despite its impressive representation of 23 members in the EP and its connections with other Eurosceptic allies, the FN is not able to set up a viable blocking majority and to assess its influence at the EU level.

Furthermore, because of the EP internal rules, the FN political influence remains marginal. For small groups in particular, group discipline is the main tool to gain leverage on the decision making processes and institutional logics of the EP. However, the EP groups have a particular inner economy. Elected representatives join supranational party groups that do not mirror domestic political parties. Or, the EP groups' leaders do not have the tools to sanction disobedient members who owe their election to their national affiliation. No one can unilaterally determine the fate of a member<sup>21</sup>. This is especially true for the FN as there are strong differences among extreme-right national delegations. Moreover, the influence of FN's deputies remains low as they are registered as non-affiliated MEPs. In opposition to other French MEPs, they are independent from any parliamentary group, which limits the influence of the Front National. They have, for instance, no financial support from the EP, they enjoy less speaking time and, above all, they have no responsibilities in parliamentary commissions<sup>22</sup>. Considering the general attitude of other groups in their respect, setting up a EP group could hardly change this situation.

Furthermore, the institutional structure of the EU restrains the FN MEPs' ability to promote their views. The institutional design of the EU is indeed characterized by the necessity of an inter-institutional balance of power between the institutional branches. Agreement between all three institutional actors is required for policy proposals to be successful. Taking into account the political and ideological identities of the other EU institutions, namely the Council and the Commission, it seems quite unlikely that the FN could very much influence the EU routines. Therefore, the effect on the political balance of power should be mainly symbolic, which is not to be underestimated yet. Undoubtedly, the FN gained credibility and visibility. Besides these legal considerations, some FN members in the EP refuse to participate actively in the legislative process since active engagement is considered a way to legitimize political decisions at the European level. FN members hardly play as rapporteurs of the EP with the Commission and the Council, nor do they prepare amendments regularly, and sometimes do not sit in any committee. They often act as "public orators" who

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<sup>21</sup> A. Kreppel "The Environmental Determinants of Legislative Structure. A Comparison of the US House of Representatives and the European Parliament", in T. Power, N. Rae, *Exporting Congress? The Influence of U.S. Congress on World Legislatures*, University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh, 2006, pp.137-154.

<sup>22</sup> See: [www.touteleurope.eu/actualite/revue-de-presse-groupe-politique-au-parlement-europeen-le-fn-perd-une-bataille-mais-pas-la-guer.html](http://www.touteleurope.eu/actualite/revue-de-presse-groupe-politique-au-parlement-europeen-le-fn-perd-une-bataille-mais-pas-la-guer.html) (last access: 27.09.2014).

“give priority to their public addresses and to spreading information, but do not take an active part in parliamentary debates. Their objective is to publicize and defend their positions by all means. The second fundamental aspect of the Orators’ role concerns the national arena. They think their duty is to inform the local population of the decisions made by the EU and of their negative consequences”<sup>23</sup>.

Furthermore, the tendency of a grand coalition between conservatives and social-democrats exercises indirectly an exclusive effect on the Front National. One striking aspect of the functioning of the EP is indeed the frequency of the voting grand coalition. From 1980 to 2009, open opposition between Socialists and Christian Democrats didn’t exceed an average of 40% of the time<sup>24</sup>. Since the smaller parties on the left and right tend also to follow this pattern, the refusal of some Front National’s MEPs to play this compromise game leads them to isolation in the Assembly.

To conclude, the 2014 EU elections in France did not really challenged the strong second- order nature of the competition. French national parties treated EU elections as plebiscites on the performance of national governments, as they did in the former EU elections. Parties’ campaigns and the selection of candidates followed obeyed to intra-partisan considerations. The media themselves, both written and televised, privileged intra-partisan and national issues. Finally, the turnout was as low as it was in the previous EU elections, but relatively stabilized.

This having been said, a reform of the electoral system could have a significant effect on turnout. The closed-list system gives parties the monopoly on candidate selection. Opening the ballot could have a significant effect on the relationship between candidates and citizens by forcing the candidates to reach out to the citizens, and by enabling citizens to use EU elections to reward (or punish) the candidates<sup>25</sup>. Besides, the choice of eight big constituencies implemented in 2004 was not able to create a close link between citizens and candidates. Building smaller constituencies is worth trying.

In 2014 EU elections, the FN obtained a studding success. However, this result will probably not influence France’s European policy, in the Council of Ministers or in the EP. The EU institutional design gives no room for other attitudes than negotiation and the search for compromise. On the contrary, true

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<sup>23</sup> N. Brack, O. Costa, “What Role for the Eurosceptic MEPs”, in Dieter Fuch, Raul Magni-Berton, Antoine Roger (eds.), *Euroscepticism. Images of Europe among Mass Publics and Political Elites*, Barbara Budrich Publishers, Opladen and Farmington Hills, MI, 2009, pp. 253-272.

<sup>24</sup> S. Hix et al., *Democratic Politics in the EP*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007.

<sup>25</sup> S. Hix, S. Hagemann, “Could Changing the Electoral Rules Fix European Parliament Elections?”, *Politique européenne*, vol. 28, 2009, pp. 37-52.

to their “second-order” nature, the political consequences of the EU elections are to be heard primarily by the Socialist government.