

# The paradox of how the EU destroys traditional major political parties

Numerous commentators are interested in so called populist parties. These are challenger parties of the right and left ranging from Syriza to the Austrian Freedom party, including Podemos and Ciudadanos in Spain, and Five Star in Italy. No-one apart from me seems very interested in why the traditional Centre right main party in each country, often Christian Democrat, and the traditional centre left party, often Social democrat, have collapsed or shrunk badly in so many places.

Just look at what has happened. Two main parties used to alternate in government in continental countries like Labour and Conservative in the UK, depending on how well they did with their domestic economic policy primarily. Today few of them are left in power and none has a majority. In Spain the PP leads a minority coalition which can scarcely govern. In Germany and the Netherlands no majority coalition has formed. In Greece the two main parties were swept away by Syriza. New Democracy (centre right) has recovered to second place whilst Pasok (centre left) remains on 6.3% of the vote. In France both main parties were demolished by Macron's new movement in Parliamentary elections. Mr Macron beat the National Front to take the Presidency. Neither former main party had a candidate in the second round.

It is true many of these places have systems of proportional representation making it more difficult for a main party to get a majority. It is also true that Greece and Italy have systems with offsets that give extra blocs of seats to first placed parties to try to create majorities. The French two round system allows a main party to get a majority through ballot by exhaustion.

The underlying problem seems to be EU and Euro economic policy. The traditional parties in each country are wedded to EU and Euro requirements. The policies often do not work out well economically for many people, so frustrated voters decide to challenge the orthodoxy by voting for a challenger party. Many of the challenger parties are explicitly Eurosceptic. Wilders in the Netherlands, Le Pen in France and Grillo in Italy are hostile to the Euro scheme. The Austrian Freedom party is hostile to EU migration policies, as is the National front in France, the Freedom party in Austria and the Freedom movement in the Netherlands. The AFD in Germany began with opposition to the Euro and has moved on to be in favour of more restrictive immigration policies.

Meanwhile in the UK the opposite movement has happened. In the 2017 election the Conservative vote share rose by 5.6% and the Labour share by 9.6%, taking the two main traditional parties to a combined 82.4%. In Germany the equivalent was 47.3% combined share for the CDU and SPD, in the Netherlands 30.4% combined, and Greece 34.4%. Why did this happen?

There were two main reasons. The first is both UK parties decided to accept

the verdict of the referendum and became Eurosceptic. The UKIP vote collapsed as a result. The second is Labour cut loose from the austerity policies of the EU budgetary system and offered to spend and borrow much more money. This proved very attractive to young voters who were told they would get all their large student debts paid off, a promise which Labour only admitted was impossible after the election.

By offering to take back control, and by having a genuine difference of economic policy and approach, the two main parties in the UK re captured most of the vote. On the continent the refusal of main parties to criticise any aspect of the EU approach left voters looking around for ways to change a consensus that does not work for them.

It is the oddest situation I have ever seen in politics. Normally old well established and successful political parties adapt and change, altering policy when the electorate want change. Instead on the continent party after party is being slimmed or demolished by sticking with Euro austerity policies. As the member states governments get weaker, so the Commission gets stronger. More powers will inevitably gravitate to the centre, making the task of national pro EU parties ever more difficult.