

# Introduction

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The peoples of Europe may not all share a common language, a common currency, a common foreign policy or a common army but, with a few notable and notorious exceptions, they share a common right: the right to take part in, fashion and supervise what one of the great Europeans is said to have described as “the worst form of government except for all others”, via an essential and much fought for activity: that of voting. The relatively new European institutions that most of them do share may be criticised for the “democratic deficit” on which some put so much emphasis in the UK, France and Denmark, for instance, and yet the improvements in the way other Europeans vote (in the West Balkans in particular) owe a great deal to those institutions. Besides, it is voting that allows the former to peacefully consider leaving the European Union (EU), protest against it in the European Elections—for reasons seldom genuinely European—or limit the extent of their participation in and cooperation with the EU or other Europe-wide institutions. Political Europe is currently confronted with several major, potentially life-threatening crises. As it is attacked, for interfering or for doing too little, there is a feeling in many places that it is also Europe’s politics as we know it that is being attacked. The helplessness of

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Europe echoes the helplessness of politicians all the more loudly since the latter tend to find comforting short-term expediency in blaming theirs on Brussels. As a result, Euro-enthusiastic parties are taking an electoral hit in many countries, notably because they tend to be more open to the world and more liberal—in most senses of the word—whereas the parties that are capitalising on fears currently inspired by globalisation, Americanisation, immigration and perceived encroachments on their precious sovereignty often share a visceral dislike of Europe—that is, of Europe-wide economic policies, of Schengen, of the so-called European super-state.

These fears are fuelled by the economic slowdown, the Euro crisis and the mass immigration resulting from five years of bloody conflict in Syria in particular; the subsequent dislike is often a central plank in the strategies of these parties which, in some cases, are redolent of an ideology that, in the past, had very little regard for voting. Yet it is these parties that are taking votes away from traditional parties and, sometimes, from the rather substantial party of abstention. Old Europe is weary of its political elites and unhappy with what it sees as a crisis of representation. That engenders a rising interest in alternatives to traditional voting, entrenched absenteeism and, increasingly, an attraction to alternative parties or unexpected leaders. Breaking away from the traditional mould of politics, voters are attracted in greater numbers to outsiders like the decidedly “Old Labour” leader of the British Labour party, Jeremy Corbyn. Well-established two-party systems are being challenged in several European countries—notably in Spain and to a lesser extent in the UK with its Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government from 2010 to 2015. Far-right parties are making gains in Eastern Europe—forming governments not only in Hungary, Poland and, recently, in Slovakia—where populism cements an illiberal left-wing party and a very radical extreme-right—but also in Western Europe with the Front National claiming with more and more justification to be “France’s first party” (cf. Chap. “Exploring the “Americanisation” of French Politics”). Many European countries, inside or outside the EU, are therefore facing a fragmentation of the political spectrum and a sharp decline in the loyalties inspired by the main political parties (e.g. in Germany, as shown by Professor Krüper in Chap. “Constitutionalizing Electoral Politics: Democracy in the Berlin Republic”).

At a time when the European Parliament, the only democratically elected European institution, has gained a good deal of institutional clout and legitimacy (as is explained by Professor Rossetto in Chap. “Elections to the European Parliament”), European citizens’ turnout is on the decline.