Elections

1979-2024

A history of the European Parliament at the ballot box (1979-2024)
10 Elections
A history of the European Parliament
at the ballot box (1979-2024)
Election 1

A publication by the Jean Monnet House - European Parliament and the European Observatory on Memories of the University of Barcelona’s Solidarity Foundation with the collaboration of Istituto di Studi Federalisti Altiero Spinelli and the support of the programme Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) of the European Commission.

Contact
c/ Melcior de Palau, 140
08014 - Barcelona
europeanmemories.net/about-us/contact/

First edition
2024

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Editor
Michele Fiorillo

Editorial board
Oriol López, Debora Righetti, Fernanda Zanuzzi

Image research
Michele Fiorillo (coordination), Antonio Argenziano, Erica Beccarello, Xesc Mainzer, Margherita Orsi, Giulio Saputo, Christelle Savall

Translation
European Parliament, Directorate-General for Translation, Directorate for Citizens’ Language Clear Language and Editing Unit

Images’ sources
AGIP / Bridgeman Images, Historical Archives of the European Union, Wikimedia Commons, Multimedia Centre of the European Parliament, European Federalist Archives (MFE, UEF, JEF), Istituto di Studi Federalisti Altiero Spinelli, Musée du Château des Rohan, Saverne, Fondation Jean Monnet pour l’Europe

Graphic design
Estudi Carles Mestre

Printing service
Prínceps

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Legal deposit: B 9445-2024
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Forewords
Representing our civil and civilly organised society is at the heart of democracy. It is the foundation of all systems of rights and freedoms and guarantees the separation of powers. Citizens have an opportunity to express themselves by taking part in elections in which candidates compete to represent the people, and regular universal suffrage reflects the will of the people. All societies are aware of this, although it can sometimes be overlooked by the powers that be or because of an extreme desire to amass power.

The aim of this publication is to take a look back at how supranational elections have unfolded across Europe, which is an interesting and necessary historical exercise. The book is the result of a new collaboration between the European Observatory on Memories (EUROM), led by the Solidarity Foundation of the University of Barcelona, and the European Parliament’s Jean Monnet House. This new volume is of high academic value and features an infor-
mative style and a wide range of different themes, enriched by the experience and expertise of the contributing authors.

As 2024 will be such an important year, with the tenth European elections taking place – a crucial event given the current trends on the European stage – we need to reflect on the history and political evolution of these supranational elections. Because we believe that democracies are a process of popular struggles that have been waged throughout history. Because we believe in the federalist vision of a united Europe that emerged after the horrors of the world wars. Because today’s challenges are testing Europe, while it still remains strong despite the many crises that it faces year after year and which affect everyone in Europe.

Participatory democracy reflects the will of the people and is a fragile system. It must, therefore, be safeguarded and protected today, by learning from the past and addressing the challenges of the future. State arenas and large supranational institutions are still facing multiple crises and conflicts that are reminiscent of the past. In 2024, a new round of European Parliament elections will be held, with projections of low turnout and, once again, a surge in far-right populism. Plurality is undoubtedly one of the foundations of democracy, but we must be wary about crossing red lines between democracy and totalitarian attitudes or even dictatorships. They are not only nostalgic reminders of times past when people lived without freedoms – they also put forward reforms and programmes that pose a threat to the democratic and parliamentary system itself.

When we look back over our more recent past, these representative and participatory agoras promote a political, social and, ultimately, ideological debate that makes us grow as societies with rights. For this reason, these spaces must be protected and defen-
ded. The history and – plural – memories of past conflicts often underpin today’s debates and political struggles in a forum where respect, social justice and civic freedom must prevail.

Defending a plurality of realities, identities and democratic memories, which are considered a right, is the responsibility of our state and suprastate institutions. It would be dangerous to move towards non-democratic spaces, given their capacity to persuade people and how this would mark a backwards step for rights and freedoms. The founding fathers and mothers of the concept of a united Europe warned against this, in the wake of the horrors of the Second World War. Today, as we face new challenges as part of more plural and inclusive societies, we must continue to defend justice in diversity.

I would like to thank the readers for their interest in this subject; all the authors for their wonderful contributions; the editorial team for their excellent work; colleagues at the Jean Monnet House for their commitment to the memory of today’s European Union; and the European institutions for their support as we carry out our mission of looking back at the past so that we can examine the present with the perspective of history. I hope you enjoy the book!
Celebrating the 10th election of the European Parliament is a political act that tells us much about the essence of the process of European unification: its successes, its still unresolved knots, and, above all, its nature as an experiment in building supranational democracy. There could not be a more opportune historical and political moment to propose this analysis and to reflect on how the European experience can help us on a similar path at a global level, i.e. to create the necessary conditions for the emergence of global democratic institutions, an indispensable step to enable humanity to govern itself in the age of interdependence.

European federalists proudly claim to have been in the vanguard of the battle for a European Parliament that would be directly elected by universal suffrage. Not only had they mobilised politically since the mid-1960s, leading up to the popular initiative
law, passed in 1969, establishing that Italy would unilaterally elect its European Parliament representatives by universal suffrage, but they also made a significant contribution in terms of vision and analysis\textsuperscript{1}. The direct election of the European Parliament, from the federalists’ point of view, was the change that would trigger a constituent process, leading Parliament to claim the democratic powers that, in democratic states, are normally attributed to the parliamentary bodies that represent their citizens. This would trigger an institutional evolution, in the supranational and federal senses. It would also force politicians to mobilise at the European level, to fight for and gain power that would increasingly resemble a form of state power. Moreover, in terms of values and ideals, it represented the first example of an exercise in supranational democracy, calling on the citizens of (then) nine integrated but sovereign countries to elect their representatives to a common parliamentary assembly. In the ever-evolving process of European unification, the direct election of Parliament was, therefore, a turning point that forced the European Community to pick up the political threads that had been cast aside after the failure of the European Defence Community and the revival of the European project with the 1957 Treaties of Rome.

The real driving force behind European integration has, in fact, always been political. The revolutionary project from which the European Coal and Steel Community emerged was designed with supranational institutions that anticipated a federal structure and an instrument to create ‘common foundations for economic development as a first step in the federation of Europe’\textsuperscript{2}. Without this project, the conditions for progress towards integration would not have existed, even within the common market. The poor performance of the European Free Trade Association, compared to the

\textsuperscript{1} Mario Albertini, Il significato politico del disegno di legge. \textit{Tutti gli scritti}, Vol. V, il Mulino, Bologna, 2008, pp. 703-713.

\textsuperscript{2} Schuman Declaration, May 1950.
European Community, says a lot about the added value of the European project, despite the decision to neglect the goal of political unity and to leave the levers of sovereignty and direct relations with citizens in the hands of the Member States. The political project was therefore the political driving force that also propelled the integration process of the common market. However, at the same time, the ambition intrinsic to the project, combined with the weakness of European states, individually, and the need to find ever closer forms of union, led to the construction of the common market itself clashing with the need to increase EU competences and to find common forms of political management, if not yet governance. In this sense, the decision to call upon European citizens – at the time still simply citizens of their respective countries – to elect their common political representatives permitted the governments to acknowledge the deeper reality of the European project and, at the same time, created the instrument that helped it to evolve in a truly supranational direction.

The history of these 10 elections, explained and analysed in this book, and the history of the 45 years of integration that have elapsed since the first European election in 1979, have confirmed the predictions and theses of the federalists, but have also witnessed very strong resistance on the part of the Member States to sharing certain areas of political sovereignty. This resistance led them to generate a system that strengthened the intergovernmental method – precisely in the face of the need to expand common policies. Decision-making mechanisms thus became exponentially more complicated, and certainly not only, as many believe, because of enlargement, although this also had a strong influence.

First of all, the European Parliament constituted a point of no return with respect to the issue of Europe needing to have a government of a federal nature, and therefore one that is supranational, sovereign in its sphere of action and democratic, in that it is accountable to its citizens and directly legitimised by them. Its very
existence and the logic it has triggered make it impossible to remove the issue from the European project, despite resistance and opposition from many national governments and parts of the EU.

The European Parliament has also effectively fought on two occasions to compel, first, the European Community and, later, the European Union to make political and institutional leaps in a federal direction. This happened in the first legislative term, under Spinelli’s leadership, as recounted in one of the essays published in this volume, when Parliament was still a consultative institution with the sole power to reject the Community budget proposal. The second occasion was during the parliamentary term ending in June 2024, following the process triggered by the Conference on the Future of Europe. We will reflect briefly on that moment at the end of the preface.

With the transition to the European Union and the considerable development of the Community system linked to the single market, alongside the requirements arising from the new international framework, Parliament has also acquired some political competences, on matters related to the single market and competition, and some, albeit very partial, supervisory power over the European Commission. However, it does not yet have the powers that are due to an assembly elected by the citizens, precisely because the European Union is not a federal Union. Therefore, despite transnational lists, it is not elected on the basis of a uniform electoral law throughout the Union, a factor that weakens the Europeanisation of the electoral debate. In addition, it has no powers of legislative initiative, taxation and budget, and it does not yet have oversight over the European Commission.

This is why every European election should be, firstly, a test of the political direction that voters want the European Union to take on matters of its competence, whether towards the right or the left. Secondly, given that these matters of EU competence do not concern fundamental issues affecting political sovereignty – from
foreign policy and defence to economic policy and the budget – the elections should also be a test of the will to complete the process of building political unity and to give Parliament the powers that would allow it to effectively represent citizens and their political will, as laid down in the Treaties.

In this regard, as already mentioned, during the legislative term ending in June 2024, Parliament took up the baton of Altiero Spinelli when it drew up proposals and provided tools to reform the Treaties and to make concrete progress on the road to political union. The decision to convene a Convention for the revision of the Treaties is now in the hands of the governments. They are trying to put the brakes on it, in an information vacuum and in an absence of public political debate, both of which are detrimental to the value of the parliamentary institution and undermine the importance of Parliament’s request to trigger the Treaty reform on which the future of our continent literally depends.

That is why we would like to conclude this preface to the Ten Elections volume with the wish that the 10th European elections may become a moment of European debate on the future of the European Union and on the achievements of the outgoing Parliament in this regard, so that we can embark on a new period of European unification that will provide a blueprint for supranational federal democracy throughout the world and constitute a model and a beacon on hope for the future of Europe and the world.

Finally, we would like to thank all the authors and the editor who conceived this book, under the direction of the European Observatory on Memories (EUROM) and the Jean Monnet House, with which the Federalist Movement and the Spinelli Institute will be honoured to continue collaborating on common European projects.

3. Article 10 of the Treaty on European Union.
The European elections in the perspective of the history of democracy

Martí Grau i Segú
Head of Service and Curator of
the Jean Monnet House of the European Parliament

We can place our current European supranational polity in a sequence of democratic milestones on our continent. For some, the roots of democracy are very old, going back to Athens in the 5th century BCE. For others, while acknowledging the continued inspiration that classical antiquity provided in the eras to follow, modern democracy is something fundamentally new that sets the enjoyment of individual rights as the core goal of society. Therefore, in its most fulfilled form, it does not condone the existence of disenfranchised people in its midst. In this sense, throughout the 19th century, democratic movements – and gradually, democratic regimes – were unable to establish themselves without espousing successive causes that would guarantee radical equality between individuals. These included the abolition of slavery, the passage from census suffrage to universal (male) suffrage and, in the 20th century, the hard-won right of women to vote. If we think that women did not have the right to vote in Switzerland until about 50
years ago, we realise how difficult it was to achieve equality on the European continent, and how fragile those accomplishments, on the whole, might still be. Similarly, if we think that, when Tocqueville extensively praised the US political system in La démocratie en Amérique, slavery still existed in the country and a civil war was about to be fought on this issue, we realise how flimsy some of our conventional democratic narratives may turn out to be.

Where does supranational democracy stand in all this? The coming of age of many democratic systems in European nation states in the second quarter of the 20th century was also the moment of democracy’s greatest challenge to date: the rise of authoritarianism and totalitarianism, in opposition to pluralism. In 1940, Altiero Spinelli and other prison inmates on the island of Ventotene reached a clear diagnosis when drafting the European Federalist Manifesto. They stated that the Second World War was raging at that very moment because of the inability of European nation states to combat totalitarianism¹. At the same time, they saw totalitarianism as an intrinsic endgame to the ceaseless competition between nation states. As such, they predicted that, if victory over totalitarianism was to mean a return to the previous status quo, new competition between nation states would inevitably lead to totalitarianism again in the future. Whether or not one agrees with the Manifesto’s pessimistic vision of the ability of national constituencies to protect their own democratic life, regardless of the way the wind is blowing on the international stage, it is fair today to recognise the appeal of the Manifesto in calling for ideological and material resources to be pooled, to protect democracy through unity. Looking back, the Manifesto’s authors – like many other early proponents of a European democracy – reconnected with at least one of the main tenets of the first philosophical concep-

tualisations of modern democracy of the 17th and 18th centuries: the idea of a brotherhood of individuals across nations. From that point of view, the first concrete steps towards European integration in the mid-20th century can be understood as a fulfilment of early democratic ideas.

Some might question this last assertion on the grounds that the Schuman Declaration – the text Jean Monnet wrote and Robert Schuman endorsed, laying out those very first concrete steps – opened the door to technocracy, to solutions from above, or even, as Alan Milward argues, first and foremost to a rescuing of the nation state. Underlying this idea is a myth that it is important to dispel. On the one hand, the beginnings of European integration drew on a staunch humanist tradition, espoused by, for example, Pierre Uri, one of Monnet’s closest collaborators, and Alexandre Marc, theorist of European federalism. On the other hand, since early on, Monnet had insisted on the need for a direct democratic vote to elect the European legislature. This view was shared by close allies, including a few other founding fathers: Paul-Henri Spaak and Alcide De Gasperi, who became Presidents of the Common Assembly, and Robert Schuman, first President of the European Parliamentary Assembly, later renamed the European Parliament. Even after Monnet relinquished the lead executive powers of the very first European community (the European Coal and Steel Community) when he stepped down as president of its High Authority in 1955, he continued to push for a directly elected European Parliament. This can be observed in the proceedings of many of the meetings of the Action Committee for the United States of Europe, the initiative to further European unity that Monnet was to steer for the next 20 years. Monnet concluded the work of the Action Committee in 1975, after the European Heads of State or Govern-


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ment at the Paris summit on 9 and 10 December 1974 declared that a direct election to the European Parliament ‘should be achieved as soon as possible’, and that they expected a direct election to ‘take place at any time in or after 1978’\(^3\). Nearing his nineties, Monnet was convinced that the announcement heralding a new generation of elected European representatives was the perfect time to retreat permanently to his home in Houjarray, France. He died just a few months before the 1979 election, and before two European founding mothers, Louise Weiss and Simone Veil, inaugurated the first ever directly elected European Parliament.

The publication you have in your hands reviews the nine elections that have taken place since 1979, as we look towards the 10th in 2024. This seems a fitting juncture for the historical and sometimes personal appraisals set out by the authors in the following pages. Together, they tell a story of excitement and shared ambition. That story also serves as a wake-up call for us not to take for granted the fruits of our common European democracy, and to stay committed to our European ideals through participation.

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The roots of the European elections
Unlike most national parliaments, the European Parliament has never regarded itself as part of a settled constitutional system, but rather as part of one that was evolving and that required change. Hence, it sought not only to influence day-to-day policies, but also to change the basic framework of the Union. It repeatedly pressed the Member States to revise the treaties, which constitute the basic rulebook or de facto constitution of the Union. It also sought to interpret the treaties, stretching them like a piece of elastic, and to supplement them with interinstitutional agreements or by unilaterally introducing new practices.

When the European Community (now the European Union) was created, it was given powers to adopt binding legislation in a limited number of fields. But the power to adopt such legislation was given to the Council, composed of ministers representing national governments, acting on a proposal of the Commission, a
collegial European executive appointed by national governments. The Council could approve Commission proposals in most matters through qualified majority voting (QMV), but unanimity was required to modify them. On some issues, unanimity was required to adopt a proposal. The European Parliament was merely asked for an opinion on some items of legislation, and it had no say at all on the appointment of the Commission.

So, when, in 1979, voters first elected the European Parliament, they were effectively asked to choose members of a debating forum, with no substantive powers on legislation. Parliament did have the right to dismiss the Commission in a vote of censure by a two-thirds majority, and to reject the budget – important but unwieldy powers that could scarcely be used on a day-to-day basis.

Many felt that such a system, whereby ministers alone could adopt legislation without requiring the approval of any parliament, suffered from a democratic deficit, a criticism not surprisingly shared by most of those elected to serve in the European Parliament. They became the vanguard for change.

E lecting Parliament transformed it from the previous, somewhat sleepy assembly composed of members of national parliaments, who were able to devote only a small part of their time to it, into a livelier and more active Parliament. It effectively created a new corps of elected representatives, coming from every main political party in Europe and engaged full-time on European issues. They were not just active in Brussels and Strasbourg: they also brought a more informed debate on Europe into their respective national parties, influencing the debate back home, at least in political circles, and sometimes beyond. This helped shape the attitudes and positions of national parties and governments, not just on some specific issues, but also, to a degree, on the fundamentals of Euro-
European integration. Over time, that helped encourage governments, including some previously reluctant ones, to be more amenable to a stronger European Parliament.

But Parliament’s route to power was nonetheless a hard-fought one. MEPs had to embark on a lengthy struggle, using a variety of tactics, from gentle persuasion to political conflict. They sought to interpret the treaties in creative ways, to supplement them with interinstitutional agreements, and to leverage the powers that they had to secure incremental concessions. They also proposed treaty changes.

Remarkably, over a period of four decades, Parliament became a genuine co-legislator in a European Union that had itself evolved considerably beyond the original European Communities, both in scope and in powers. Parliament and the Council now form a bicameral EU legislature. Parliament’s approval is required for:

- the adoption of almost all EU legislation,
- the approval of international agreements entered into by the EU,
- the adoption of the medium-term budget and the annual budget,
- the election of the President of the Commission,
- the appointment of the Commission as a whole,
- the conferral of delegated legislative powers on the Commission.

It also has a number of other powers, such as vetoing certain kinds of Commission decisions, electing an Ombudsman, and involvement in various other appointments (to the boards of agencies and to the European Central Bank).
There are still some gaps in what one might expect of a fully fledged parliament. There is still a category of special legislative procedures where the Council alone can adopt legislation. The dismissal by Parliament of the Commission in a vote of no confidence requires a two-thirds majority. Like the Council, Parliament can request the Commission to draft a proposal, but it itself has only a limited right to initiate legislative proposals. However, the latter is a traditional parliamentary power that most national parliaments rarely use, as legislative proposals in the modern era almost invariably come from the executive.

Let us now look at how these changes came about.
Treaty changes

The first elected European Parliament launched an ambitious initiative by putting forward a proposal to replace the European Community treaties with a new treaty on European union. Parliament took its lead from Altiero Spinelli, one of the founders of the federalist movement at the end of the Second World War, a former resistance leader and former member of the Commission who was elected to Parliament as an independent from a list put forward by the reformed Italian Communist Party. Spinelli hoped that a proposal agreed by a large majority of Europe’s political parties, as represented in Parliament, would carry weight and have momentum.

That strategy worked, to a degree. It did not result in Parliament’s draft treaty being ratified as such, nor even for negotiations to be based upon it (despite several national parliaments and governments calling for that), but it did lead to the convening of an intergovernmental conference (IGC), the procedure for revising the existing treaties. The European Council, meeting in June 1985 in Milan, decided by an unprecedented majority vote to convene an IGC, with the UK (Margaret Thatcher), Denmark and Greece voting against. The three recalcitrant Member States were eventually willing to negotiate compromises rather than be isolated.

The result fell well short of what Parliament had proposed in its draft treaty. But it did increase the areas of European responsibility, extend QMV and give Parliament some, albeit limited, legislative power for the first time, by creating two new procedures: the cooperation procedure and the consent procedure. The cooperation procedure made provision for a second reading in which Parliament could approve, amend or reject the Council’s position. A parliamentary rejection, or amendments that were also backed by the Commission, could only be overruled by the Council.
That only applied to 10 articles of the treaty. The consent procedure (then called assent) meant that Parliament’s approval in a single yes/no vote was required for the accession of new Member States and for association agreements with non-EU countries.

This set of amendments and additions to the existing treaties was called the Single European Act (SEA). It introduced a deadline (end of 1992) for completing the single market, which gave a new sense of purpose to the EU and, in turn, generated new pressures for reform and further integration measures (such as a single currency for the single market). It was the first general revision of the treaties since 1957, breaking what had become a taboo and thereby paving the way for more revisions later.

Indeed, this pattern was to be repeated four more times: Parliament pushing for treaty reform, putting precise proposals on the table and helping secure an IGC, resulting in a partial but insufficient reform. This resulted in:

- the 1992 Treaty of Maastricht,
- the 1997 Treaty of Amsterdam,
- the 2001 Treaty of Nice,
- the 2007 Treaty of Lisbon.

For each of these negotiations, Parliament was brought further into the treaty reform process. For the IGC that led to the SEA, Parliament’s President and Spinelli were politely heard at one of the meetings. For the Maastricht negotiations, an interinstitutional conference met in parallel to the IGC. For Amsterdam, Parliament had two representatives in the preparatory Reflection Group and participated in some of the IGC meetings, including the final European Council meeting. For Nice, the two Parliament representatives participated fully in all IGC meetings. For Lisbon, a prepara-
tory convention (suggested by Parliament) composed of members of the European Parliament, national parliaments and national governments, prepared the reforms. These were codified in a new constitution which would have replaced the existing treaties, but which fell when France and the Netherlands rejected it. That led to a decision to keep the existing treaties but amend them through what became the Lisbon Treaty, which took up the bulk of the proposed reforms. The convention method is now laid down in the Lisbon Treaty for future revisions, except where Parliament agrees that it is not necessary.

Each one of these treaties extended the EU’s areas of competence, enlarged the area in which the Council can act by QMV, and extended the powers of Parliament. Each one was only a partial reform. But cumulatively, they transformed the European Community as it was before 1987 into the Union that we know today.

Parliament’s legislative powers were increased step by step. The SEA tentatively brought in the cooperation procedure. This was supplemented with the codecision procedure in the Maastricht Treaty, before being replaced by the codecision procedure in the Amsterdam Treaty. Codecision was itself revised in Parliament’s favour by the Amsterdam Treaty and extended in scope in the Amsterdam, Nice and Lisbon Treaties, until it became the ordinary legislative procedure, applicable to the bulk of EU legislation, and requiring the agreement of both Parliament and the Council for legislation to be adopted, with up to three readings in each institution. The consent procedure, initially envisaged only for the occasional cases of accession of new Member States and association agreements, was gradually extended to cover all significant international agreements and some specific types of legislation. Since Lisbon, any delegation of powers to the Commission to adopt delegated acts must be approved by Parliament and can be repealed by
it, and Parliament also has the right to block individual delegated acts adopted by the Commission.

Similarly, Parliament’s relationship with the Commission was modified step by step. The Treaty of Maastricht changed the Commission’s term of office to five years to coincide with that of Parliament. A new Commission would be appointed straight after each parliamentary election, with Parliament consulted on the choice of President and holding a binding vote to approve or reject the Commission as a whole. Amsterdam changed the consultative vote on the President into a binding one and gave the President a right to choose other Commissioners jointly with national governments. Nice gave the President the power to appoint Vice-Presidents, and to dismiss individual Commissioners (for instance, if Parliament called for that). It also introduced QMV for the European Council’s decision on who to propose for President, eliminating national vetoes. Lisbon required the European Council to take into account the European election results when deciding who to propose to Parliament as President of the Commission. It described Parliament’s vote on the nominee as an election; it was not merely a seal of approval on a decision taken elsewhere, but the key point of the process.

These changes strengthened perceptions of the Commission as a political executive needing the support of a parliamentary majority. It might be a relatively weak executive, since it is faced with a bicameral legislature that it does not control through compliant majorities, has limited areas of responsibility, and inevitably is a coalition in party-political terms. However, it is undoubtedly an executive; it is charged with carrying out agreed policies, endowed with the right of legislative initiative, responsible for executing the budget, and it employs the bulk of EU civil servants. The fact that, from that point onwards, neither its President, nor the Commis-
sion as a whole, could take office without the approval of Parliament was seen as the democratic counterpart to this. And, since the choice of a new President would be one of the first things a newly elected Parliament would vote on, it became inevitable that the choice of President would feature among the issues of the European election campaign. This has resulted in European political parties nominating their preferred candidate ahead of the elections, much as national parties do for the position of Prime Minister in most European countries, ahead of national parliamentary elections. These party candidates are often referred to as their ‘lead candidate’ (Spitzenkandidat) as they also lead their party’s election campaign, not least in televised election debates.

First meeting of the Common Assembly of the European Coal and Steel Community on 10 September 1952, chaired by Paul-Henri Spaak.

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But not just treaty changes

These changes to the EU’s de facto constitution (the treaties) were not the only way in which Parliament enhanced its role. Indeed, sometimes treaty changes codified practices developed previously by other means.

On the legislative side, immediately after the first elections, Parliament was presented with an opportunity to strengthen its position within the treaties as they then stood. The 1980 isoglucose judgment of the Court of Justice of the European Communities (Cases 138 and 139/79) struck down legislation because the Council had adopted it before Parliament had given its opinion. This ruling confirmed that Parliament’s mastery of its own timetable (something that many national parliaments do not have) means that it has a de facto delaying power. It therefore changed its internal rules of procedure, so that it could prepare amendments to legislative proposals but delay the formal adoption of its opinion as a whole until it received assurances about whether its amendments would be approved. Clearly, Parliament’s bargaining position was stronger when there was pressure for a rapid decision than when there wasn’t, but it was a start. It helped to get the Council used to the need to negotiate with Parliament.

On the appointment of the Commission, Parliament unilaterally started holding debates and taking a vote on an incoming Commission, starting with the Thorn Commission in 1981. The Member States recognised and accepted this practice in their Solemn Declaration on European Union (at the European Council in Stuttgart in 1983), in which they also agreed to consult Parliament’s Bureau on the choice of Commission President. In 1985, the incoming Delors Commission waited for Parliament’s vote of confidence before ta-
king the oath of office, an important symbolic gesture recognising
the significance of Parliament’s vote on the Commission, and im-
plying that, had the vote gone against it, it would not have proce-
ded. These practices paved the way for subsequent treaty changes.

Some innovations have not been codified in the treaties but have become accepted practice, even when initially resisted by other institutions. The most visible example of this is the public hearings of candidate Commissioners that Parliament organises ahead of its vote of confidence on an incoming Commission. Each candidate Commissioner is cross-examined by the parliamentary committee corresponding to their prospective portfolio. Parliament unilaterally made provision for this in its Rules of Procedure, invoked for the first time in 1994. Despite some initial reluctance, the proposed Commissioners agreed to participate in the exercise, not least because Parliament would otherwise have simply postponed its vote of confidence until they did. Although Parliament cannot vote on individual Commissioners, only on the Commission as a whole (the doctrine of collective confidence applies, as in most countries between a parliament and the executive), the hearings are not just a formality. Candidate Commissioners can fall by the wayside if they perform badly, or if the hearings draw attention to other problems, or if (following more recent changes) Parliament’s Committee on Legal Affairs finds a conflict of interest. This is especially the case if opposition to the candidate might endanger the vote on the Commission as a whole, as was dramatically illustrated in 2004. Then, criticism focused notably, but not exclusively, on Rocco Buttiglione, whose comments on the role of women and gay people caused many MEPs to question his ability to serve as Commissioner for Justice and Home Affairs, which included responsibility for non-discrimination. Initially, Commission President-designate Barroso appeared to want to braise it out and count on a narrow victory in the vote of confidence, but when it
became clear that he could lose, he instead announced in Parliament, just ahead of the vote, that he was withdrawing his team and would come back with a new proposal. He did so the following month with a new Italian nominee (Foreign Minister Franco Frattini), a new Latvian nominee, and a reshuffling of the Hungarian nominee to a new portfolio, thereby meeting Parliament’s main concerns. Strikingly, every prospective Commission since then (in 2009, 2014 and 2019) has seen at least one candidate Commissioner fall in this way.

Parliament did not just act unilaterally. It negotiated interinstitutional agreements (IIAs) bilaterally with the Commission (the most important of which is the Framework Agreement) and trilaterally with the Council and the Commission (the most important of which is the IIA on Better Law-Making). These IIAs specify a number of obligations, for reporting to Parliament and giving it access to documents (including confidential ones). They also require legislative programming to be negotiated and agreed by the three institutions, and set out requirements for responding within a deadline to Parliament’s legislative initiatives, and for the President-designate of the Commission to present political guidelines for their term of office before they are elected by Parliament.

The elected parliament also made use of its (few) old powers that the previous unelected parliament had never used. It has rejected the annual budget outright on four occasions, temporarily freezing EU spending and putting extra pressure on the Council in a second budget procedure. It has deployed the power to dismiss the Commission. Parliament had enjoyed this power from the beginning but it seemed rather theoretical until early 1999 when it was spectacularly illustrated with the resignation of the Santer Commission, after it became clear that there was the necessary majority in Parliament for a vote of no confidence.
Conclusions

The successive treaty revisions since the European Parliament began to be directly elected were all strongly influenced by Parliament. They illustrate that, while Parliament, like other institutions, is not able to secure all its wishes, it can nonetheless have a major influence and is a catalyst for change. The changes made transformed the European system as a whole and especially Parliament’s place within it.

When Parliament proposed its draft treaty in 1984, the Community was in crisis, and confidence in its future was at an all-time low. Summits had broken down over the issue of the budgetary contributions of Member States, the European economy was in a period of Eurosclerosis and few thought that there was any realistic chance of amending the treaties. Yet, in thrashing out an agreement among the political forces represented in Parliament and pressing it on governments, through national parliaments and via national political parties, Parliament was able to create sufficient political momentum for at least some national governments to press its case, and for a majority of them to accept that there was a case to look at. Of course, the bottom line of unanimity among the Member States meant that there were limits as to what could be achieved, but the momentum was sufficient to enable a compromise package to get through.

This process was repeated several times. Certainly, the general political situation often improved the prospects for change. The SEA was also responding to economic stagnation and the persisting fragmentation of the European market. Maastricht became about more than the single currency, in part because of the dramatic changes in eastern Europe. Amsterdam and Nice were driven, in part, by the prospect of 10 new countries joining. But there is no doubt that the extension of Parliament’s powers would not have found its way into these processes, had it not been for Parliament’s constant pressure
(and the same applies to new EU competences on citizenship, consumer protection, education and culture).

Taking these episodes together, their cumulative results are striking. In what is historically a short period of time, the European Parliament has come a long way. It sought and eventually obtained a power of codecision with the Council on legislation, so that the EU now has a bicameral legislature. It has acquired a central role in the appointment of the Commission and its President, to complement the right of censure that it had from the beginning. Its approval is needed for international agreements to be ratified by the Union. It now has an effective right of scrutiny and recall over delegated legislation. In short, the rise of Parliament is one of the most significant features of the five successive treaty revisions that took place between 1987 and 2009, and of the smaller adjustments and practices that developed during and since that time.

Having an active and assertive elected parliament with significant powers makes the EU radically different from a traditional intergovernmental organisation. To appreciate this, we need only imagine what the EU would be like without Parliament; it would be a system dominated by bureaucrats and diplomats, loosely supervised by ministers flying periodically into Brussels. Instead, the EU system is made more open, transparent and democratic than it would otherwise be, through the existence of a body of full-time representatives at the heart of EU decision-making, asking questions, knocking on doors, shining a spotlight into dark corners, in dialogue with voters back home, and whose approval is necessary for key decisions. MEPs are drawn from governing parties and opposition parties and represent not just capital cities but the regions in their full diversity. In short, Parliament brings pluralism into play and brings far more scrutiny to EU legislation.
It also takes the edge off national conflict. All too often, the Council can give the appearance of decision-making by gladiatorial combat between those representing ‘national interests’. Reality is more complex, and the fact that Parliament organises itself, not in national delegations but in political groups, shows that the dividing line on most concrete subjects is not so much between nations but between different political viewpoints or between various sectoral interests.
Simone Veil and the first European universal suffrage

Nadine Vasseur
Journalist and writer

The European Parliament’s first elections by universal suffrage in 1979 marked the beginning of a new chapter in Europe’s history. The election of Simone Veil as the first European Parliament President on 17 July 1979 was one of the most powerfully symbolic moments of this new period.

French President Valéry Giscard d’Estaing grasped the significance of her election from very early on. As Simone Veil put it, ‘Giscard has always loved symbols that capture people’s imagination. For a former deportee to become the first President of the new European Parliament seemed to him to augur well for the future’.

Simone Veil was a Jewish woman who survived Auschwitz. Most of her family was exterminated by the Nazis. Following her entry

into the government in 1974, she became the most popular political figure in France and was also admired beyond the country’s borders. Veil was both the embodiment of the worst suffering that Europe’s 20th century wars could have inflicted and the personification of resilience. It is impossible to imagine a more powerful symbol of Franco-German reconciliation than her election as President of the European Parliament.

In September 1978, Giscard asked Veil, who was still his Minister of Health, to head the list of the party in government (the Union for French Democracy) for the European elections.

When Veil was put forward as a candidate, she had never been registered with a political party, had never been elected into office and had never taken part in an election campaign. She hated the

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heated atmosphere of the meetings, was uncomfortable with the political clichés and was certainly not the greatest speaker there. None of this kept her from defending herself brilliantly when she felt attacked. All French people who were alive at the time remember the images from the meeting she attended on 7 June 1979, violently interrupted by far-right National Front militants, and Veil’s cutting retort which would go down in history: ‘You don’t scare me at all! I’ve survived worse than you. You’re just the SS in miniature.’

In addition to her immense popularity as the Minister of Health and as a media personality, her unrehearsed style on the campaign trail was her real strength. Simone Veil spoke like everyone else, avoiding political jargon. She was outspoken and thought freely, which allowed her to reach even those who were not of her political persuasion.

Her list, which gained 27.5% of the vote, won by a large margin, coming ten points ahead of the Gaullist list headed by Jacques Chirac. ‘Indeed’, Simone Veil noted, with her characteristic astuteness, ‘standing for a parliament whose very existence they contested looked like a paradox, as the public was not slow to observe’.

Unlike President Giscard d’Estaing, who had always been committed to holding European Parliament elections by universal suffrage, the Gaullists were actually strongly opposed to the elections. Following in the footsteps of General de Gaulle and President Georges Pompidou, they saw it as a first step on the road to abandoning national sovereignty. This lack of agreement on Europe was one of the issues that would always distance Simone Veil from de Gaulle and Gaullism, despite her lifelong friendship with Jacques Chirac.

Following the Union for French Democracy’s victory, Giscard worked tirelessly to promote Simone Veil’s election as European
Parliament President, with the discreet support of Chancellor Helmut Schmidt. She secured a majority in the third round of voting.

For Simone Veil, being elected President of the European Parliament was the culmination of a lifelong struggle.

The day after Veil’s death, Sylvie Kaufmann wrote that she was part of ‘this impressive Franco-German generation who dared to build the Europe of hope on the still smoking ruins of the Second World War’, at the same time recalling the life’s journey of Chancellor Helmut Kohl, who had passed away several days earlier, and who had also been a great architect of Europe.

As Simone Veil pointed out during the 1979 European election campaign, ‘of the peoples of Europe, the most European are those who have endured the greatest suffering’. She was certainly thinking of the Jews who survived the Holocaust but also undoubtedly of the German members of her audience who, early in their lives, had experienced the loss of close relatives at the same time as that of their country’s honour.

In her inaugural speech on 17 July 1979, she did not forget the Spanish, the Portuguese or the Greeks, recently liberated from dictatorships, stating that ‘the Community will be happy to receive them’. A fervent advocate of European enlargement, she would not fail to think later, after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, of the peoples of eastern Europe. She felt that those living in western Europe, who had been ‘lucky … to live in a free system … when the Iron Curtain closed off the other half of Europe’ had taken on a kind of debt towards those in the East. ‘When history gave us

the opportunity, it would have been unthinkable for the EU not to open its doors to these countries ... even at the expense of our immediate economic interests. ’5

This ‘European adventure was and remains the great challenge faced by my generation,’ she would say in her twilight years, during her 2010 acceptance speech to the Académie française.

While Simone Veil’s journey is similar to that of many of the great pro-European figures of the post-war era, it is nevertheless distinguished by one unique trait: its European fibre is part of a story which goes back well before the post-war period. In her memoir, one is struck by the precision with which she recalled conversations she had heard between her mother and father, when she was just a child and the dangers Europe and her loved ones were facing were coming into focus.

On the one hand, there was her father, who had been taken prisoner by the Germans during the First World War, and whose hatred for the people he only ever referred to as the ‘Boches’ never diminished. On the other hand, there was her mother, who, faced with the burgeoning Nazi threat, bitterly regretted that the Franco-German rapprochement advocated by Aristide Briand and Gustav Stresemann had never materialised. It could have prevented Hitler’s rise to power.

Simone Veil never forgot her mother’s words. Even after being deported, she remembers that she did not stop thinking about the lessons of the past: ‘I didn’t understand how we hadn’t learned from the horrors of 1914 to 1918’. ‘At the camp, when I imagined returning home – which was not something I did often – I wonde-

red how we would manage with the Germans ... I thought that if we couldn’t find a way to reconcile, our children would also become caught up in this hatred.”

Later, when her husband Antoine Veil was appointed to a post in Germany in the early 1950s, she did not hesitate to follow him, to the utter amazement of many of her relatives. Simone Veil often expressed her lack of a desire for revenge. She never let emotions cloud her view that the reconciliation between France and Germany was crucial. It was based on a rational vision: to preserve peace in Europe for future generations.

The Europe she was promoting was above all geopolitical and cultural in nature. It was the Europe of peace after centuries of fratricidal conflicts, of democratic freedoms in the face of totalitarianism. It was also the Europe of solidarity.

For Simone Veil, justice was important. She had a social conscience, which sometimes made it difficult to position her on the political spectrum, and which often aroused the sympathy of voters and figures with socialist tendencies. This can be seen, for example, in the warm tribute paid to her following her death by former President of the European Commission and left-wing French political figure Jacques Delors, who also passed away recently. “Simone Veil and I were elected together in 1979. We were not elected on the same lists, but we shared a lot of beliefs about Europe. In her inaugural speech, she also talked about a Europe of solidarity, a Europe of independence and a Europe of cooperation.”

At the beginning of her term of office, back when the European Parliament’s powers were still limited to approving the Community

budget, Simone Veil went against her own government’s position and managed to secure financial aid to combat hunger in Africa. Issues of human rights and women’s rights would be at the heart of many of her journeys around the world.

It was not only Veil’s renown but also her aura that enabled her to make the European Parliament shine at a time when it still seemed lacklustre and niche. She played a major role in giving the European Parliament its fully international dimension. Simone Veil proudly upheld the values of a democratic Europe wherever she went. First as European Parliament President, then for over ten years as an MEP, she met most of the great heads of state, including Anwar Sadat, Nelson Mandela, Margaret Thatcher, Bill and Hillary Clinton and Václav Havel.
In a 2010 interview, Jacques Delors praised another ‘rare quality’ Simone Veil demonstrated during her time as European Parliament President: ‘discernment’.

It is impossible to read Simone Veil’s biography without being struck by her clear-sightedness. She did not delude herself and was not afraid to look danger in the eye. As a child during the war, despite being the youngest member of her family, she was already the most realistic about the grim fate that awaited them all.

Her unwavering commitment to Europe never blinded her to the threats that could jeopardise its future: in particular, the threat that national interests could prevail over those of the Community. This risk became all the more serious as Europe expanded, making it increasingly difficult to achieve unanimity, or even a majority, in matters of governance. Long before being elected to the European Parliament, Simone Veil had, like others, imagined a federal Europe; an outlook which, as far back as 1979, was no longer shared by the younger generations, who had a greater desire to ‘go back to the roots’.

An aspiration which would, in her view, grow ever stronger: ‘I can’t help but notice the citizens’ growing attachment to their national frameworks and to the historical factors that have shaped unique identities’, she remarked, not entirely unconcerned, after the 2005 vote to ratify the draft Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe, which resulted in a ‘No’ vote in the referendums held in France and the Netherlands.

Simone Veil’s time as an MEP ended in 1993. In 1998, the French Government appointed her to the Constitutional Council,

where she served until 2005. That year, she went against her duty to remain politically neutral and strongly committed herself to the ‘Yes’ side in the referendum, because ‘a Europe built patiently for decades can crumble tomorrow. What some have tirelessly built, others can destroy.’

The 2005 referendum would be her last public political commitment.

Simone Veil said on numerous occasions that, ‘The fact that we have built Europe has reconciled me with the 20th century.’

At the dawn of the 21st century, she was determined to warn people about the fragility of this common good. She believed that it was essential to remind younger generations, who had not experienced war, that this ‘miracle of peace’, which seemed natural to them, was the fruit of the relentless determination of men and women who had wished to leave them a Europe which was no longer a place of destruction. She asked them to take good care of it.
Louise Weiss, a campaigner for Europe

Christine Manigand
Professor of Contemporary History at Paris Sorbonne Nouvelle University

On 17 July 1979, Louise Weiss, as the oldest Member, stood at the rostrum of the European Parliament in Strasbourg to address her fellow Members after they had been elected by direct universal suffrage for the first time. She spoke of the pride and joy that she felt, at the age of 86, on taking her seat in the chamber and presiding over Parliament’s inaugural session. The ‘President for a Day’, as she called herself in a memorable speech\(^1\) entitled ‘A fight for Europe’, expressed to her colleagues ‘the greatest joy a human being can experience in their autumn years, the joy of a youthful vocation miraculously achieved’. The following day, in the same debating chamber, she handed over to Simone Veil, who had been elected President of the European Parliament.

During her speech, Louise Weiss described herself as ‘someone

\(^1\) Speech by Louise Weiss, the oldest Member, at the opening sitting of the European Parliament on 17 July 1979 in Strasbourg.
in love with Europe’, and it is the journey of this committed wo-
man, a campaigner for Europe, which we would like to retrace, from
the battles she fought as a young woman in the interwar years to
the final speeches she made to the European Parliament elected in
1979. Louise Weiss left us a series of six books recounting her life
entitled *Mémoirs d’une Européenne* (Memoirs of a European). The
title shows that Europe dominated her life, which spanned almost
a century, from 1893 to 1983.
An emblematic European figure

In many respects, her childhood was European and she was raised between the Protestant and Jewish minorities, which strongly supported the republican model. Louise Weiss was born in Arras in 1893, into a Dreyfusard, upper-bourgeois family, and her Alsatian and Protestant roots came from her father, Paul Weiss. He was a graduate of the École Polytechnique and the École des Mines, Paris, and he left his position in the Ministry of Public Works for the private sector, where he felt more useful. Louise Weiss’ mother Jeanne Javal was from a wealthy Jewish bourgeois family with relatives in Alsace, Germany and Austria. At a very young age, when her father took her on visits, or almost pilgrimages, to Alsace, she came to understand the resentment that existed between France and Germany.

At the age of 21, and without daring to tell her father, she passed the agrégation teacher training examination in arts subjects, an extremely rare accomplishment for a woman at that time.

During World War I, she served as a nurse in a military hospital in western France and saw her brothers and her parents painfully separated on either side of the River Rhine. It was also during the First World War conflict that she wrote her first articles under a pseudonym and, at a salon in Paris, met Milan Štefánik, a Slovak astronomer serving in the French army as a pilot. This first ill-fated love story had a major impact on her campaigning, prompting her to espouse the cause of Milan Štefánik and Edvard Beneš, the leader of Czech emigrants in Paris: she instantly embraced their aspirations for a future independent Czechoslovakia that would be free from

the yoke of the Austro-Hungarian empire. For a time, her imagination was captured by the ‘beacon in the East’, which was developing in Russia and which she explored in her first pieces for a leading daily newspaper of the period, *Le Petit Parisien*. Weiss’ 1921 report, ‘Cinq semaines à Moscou’ (Five weeks in Moscow), earned her the beginnings of international renown.

![Image of Louise Weiss at the headquarters of *L’Europe nouvelle*](source: Fondation Jean Monnet pour l’Europe)

She continued her journalism work in an international news weekly, *L’Europe Nouvelle*


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One of Louise Weiss’ strengths was her ability to build around herself a network of permanent and temporary contributors, unofficial journalists and occasional columnists, as well as prominent statesmen and diplomats from all over Europe. Her close circle consisted of distinguished academics such as Louis Joxe, a young history professor; René Massigli, a young diplomat; Georges Bonnet, who would later become France’s Minister for Foreign Affairs; Wladimir d’Ormesson; and a multitude of French and European politicians, including Aristide Briand, to whom Louise Weiss was very close, Édouard Herriot, Léon Blum, Paul Valéry, Drieu La Rochelle and Jacques Benoist-Méchin. The foreign names were equally illustrious and revealed a whole network of European elites who embraced the ideals of pacifism based on the new concepts of collective security.

Louise Weiss gave her journal a distinctive style based on the seriousness and quality of her sources; the aim was to make it an instrument of well-reasoned information on international affairs serving the cause of a true science of peace. Significant column space was dedicated to the economic, financial and trade issues of the time. The weekly publication very quickly became the almost Official Journal of the League of Nations⁴, as it published documents produced by the Geneva-based organisation in full. Apart from the arts and literary section, most of the articles focused on international affairs, the work of the League of Nations, and the economic and political situation in various European countries, because, as the editor-in-chief wrote, ‘it is through in-depth knowledge of the elements that make up Europe that the workers of the European Federation will be able to work effectively’⁵. The aim of L’Europe Nouvelle was to explain the increasing complexity of in-

⁵ L’Europe Nouvelle, 16 November 1929.
ternational politics, and also to encourage the formation of new competent elites, with expertise in tackling international issues.

Louise Weiss was committed to the reconstruction of Europe, the League of Nations and projects to build European unity as part of a multi-scale approach that combined universalist and regional views and, very often, coincided with the stances taken by Aristide Briand, the ‘eternal’ Minister, who served as the French Minister for Foreign Affairs from 1925 to 1932.

It was really from 1924 onwards that Weiss, in her role as editor-in-chief of *L’Europe Nouvelle*, became a champion of the League of Nations and involved in the mystique of the Geneva organisation; when she arrived in Geneva in September 1924 she was captivated by the atmosphere that pervaded the banks of Lake Geneva. From that moment on, the magazine began to dedicate substantial space to the debates taking place in Geneva and to the prominent figures that took part in them, and provided its readers with first-hand sources and documents in full. In the wake of the failure of the 1924 Geneva Protocol, which was based on the three pillars of ‘arbitration, security and disarmament’ and had been rejected by Great Britain, Louise Weiss placed her hope in Aristide Briand and his policy of détente; whether she influenced him or the magazine was a sounding box for Briand’s ideas, there was, in any case, a complete affinity between the two figures.

Starting with the Locarno Conference in 1925, Louise Weiss decided to take part in all major international conferences and welcomed Germany’s entry into the League of Nations in 1926. In 1928, the agreement to renounce war, known as the Kellogg-Briand Pact, cemented her disappointment and made it clear that it would be

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impossible to bring the United States back into an important role in European affairs.

She therefore supported Aristide Briand’s proposal to establish a European federation in his speech before the League of Nations in September 1929. *L’Europe Nouvelle* served as a testing ground for this revolutionary proposal and, as early as July 1929, it published an article entitled ‘Towards a European Federation’ and, after September 1929, it became the most effective sounding board for Briand’s plan. There was a clear link between the topics that were being supported in the political and economic fields and their purpose: ‘The clear-sighted and profound mind of Aristide Briand does not make him a visionary spirit; he is a realistic spirit ... he does not know, and nor do any of us know, what form an organised Europe will take and what destiny will await it. He only knows that Europe must be collective, that it is necessary, that it is called for and that it is immediately reflected in the unanimous support of the other countries of Europe ... what must be understood is that it is a matter of European peace, much more so than of the United States of Europe’.

While the expectations of both were quickly dispelled, support for the League of Nations continued, but it too began to give way to disillusionment. Her final editorial (3 February 1934), when her struggle was inextricably linked to the aims of her journal, revealed an insightful European who perceived the dangers of the Nazis’ exploitation of pacifist topics from 1934 onwards. In 1936, for the same reasons, she suspended the activities of the Nouvelle École de la Paix (New Peace School, NEP), which she had established in 1931 to disseminate her ideals. Throughout the years, she had been driven by an unwavering commitment with three dimensions: the goal of bringing international cooperation

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into the mainstream and organising peace, a dedication to actively promoting Geneva’s ideals and a pro-European commitment.

While she bid farewell to *L’Europe Nouvelle* in February 1934, she became involved in a related endeavour. As a committed feminist, she founded the magazine *La Femme nouvelle* and organised suffragette demonstrations to call for women’s right to vote and equal civil and political rights. She symbolically ran in a number of elections, even though women did not have the right to vote. Once again, her commitment to peace, through women, was one of her key purposes.

During the war, given her Jewish origins on her mother’s side, she was obliged to be cautious and did not take part in the clandestine activities of the Resistance, instead limiting herself to resistance through the written word. It was perhaps for this reason that, after the Second World War, neither General de Gaulle, who gave women the right to vote, nor Jean Monnet offered her a fitting political role; she then decided to travel the world and directed ethnographic films and documentaries while establishing herself as a renowned speaker and writer.

**Return to Europe**

In the 1970s, Louise Weiss returned to the European stage, firstly with her book *Mémoires d’une Européenne*, made up of six volumes, which were published in the 1960s by Payot and then completed by Albin Michel in the 1970s. In a very real sense, Europe dominated her life for almost an entire century.

In 1978, she was awarded the Robert Schuman Prize. Then, in 1979, after a lengthy process, the first elections of the European Parliament by universal suffrage were held. Louise Weiss took part
in the French election campaign.

She was the fifth candidate on the Defence of France’s interests in Europe (DIFE) list, which was led by Jacques Chirac, and during the campaign she refused to challenge Simone Veil, who headed the competing list of President Valéry Giscard d’Estaing’s UDF party.

However, the competitive tension between the names on both lists was evident. After Jacques Chirac made his ‘appeal to the French people’ at Cochin Hospital on 6 December 1978, the position of the Rally for the Republic (RPR) party became increasingly anti-Europe, and ‘the list essentially brought together Gaullists known for their anti-European views – with the notable exception of Louise Weiss – and most of whom were national and local elected representatives’.

That list contained fewer women than the other four major lists (12 women out of 81 candidates). Is it therefore possible to speak of a ‘Louise Weiss smokescreen’? Jacques Chirac had, indeed, promised her, that she would ‘be our First Lady’! The complexity of this situation was reflected in the few statements that Louise Weiss made during the election campaign.

One year later, these first elections would be considered second-order elections, that is, unusual elections with minor effects, no real issues at stake and a strong national focus, as well as very high abstention rates and a general lack of a European dimension. Nevertheless, the debate was at its fiercest and most intense in France. There were clear lines of opposition between


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the many political lists, which either took a pro- or anti-Europe stance. In a statement to *Le Monde*, Valéry Giscard d’Estaing explained that those elections were to be an opportunity to decide how France would be represented externally and not how it would be divided internally\(^\text{12}\). The European dimension of the elections was less diluted in 1979 than in later years because of the views of two parties, the RPR and the French Communist Party (PCF), who challenged the very legitimacy of the vote. Europe was evidently not a central concern for French people, since ‘only 25% of respondents declared that they had voted according to the decisions taken by the parties on the construction of Europe, while 59% stated that they had voted according to the challenges that France faced in

economic and social policy matters’¹³.

Indeed, while an overwhelming majority of French people approved of European integration, it actually seemed more like formal support than unreserved commitment, since only 35 % said that they would be willing to make personal sacrifices in order to achieve this European goal, compared to 60 % who would refuse to make such sacrifices¹⁴. A slight decline in the percentage of French people who were in favour of European unification was also recorded: it decreased from 61 % in autumn 1973 to 59 % in autumn 1978, and dropped further to 56 % in spring 1979¹⁵.

The election of France’s 81 representatives to the European Parliament on 10 June 1979 did not spark much discussion despite the elections being widely acknowledged as important. Although they showed little interest in the European elections, French people did consider them to be important, but more because of the impact they would have on French politics than because of their importance for Europe as a whole. Throughout the campaign, national political issues therefore dominated and a major source of disappointment was the low turnout. In France, voter abstention reached an almost record high (38.8 %), with particularly high levels among young people (36 % of 28 to 34 year olds said that they had abstained) and manual workers (30 % intentionally abstained from voting)¹⁶.

The list led by Jacques Chirac received only 16.09% of the votes cast, while the list headed by Simone Veil won 27.39% of votes\(^{17}\). She led the list of France’s then-governing party, which fared better than the RPR, whose results made it one of Gaullism’s poorest performances. However, in France, as was the case in the United Kingdom and Denmark, there was no shortage of debate due to the strong opposition (of the Communist Party and the RPR) to direct elections and the construction of a political Europe.

Louise Weiss then took her seat in Strasbourg in the group of European Progressive Democrats (DEP) and on 17 July 1979, the date of Parliament’s opening sitting, she was one of 67 women Members elected, some of whom had already been Members of the European Parliamentary Assembly. Following the first direct elections, 16.3% of the European Parliament’s Members were women, nine of whom were already sitting Members and were given a direct mandate from voters\(^{18}\). Louise Weiss, as has been described, was President of the European Parliament for one day, 17 July 1979, during which she handed over the Presidency to Simone Veil, who served as President until 18 January 1982.

During her term as a Member of the European Parliament, her main addresses focused on the Soviet Union’s intervention in Afghanistan, world hunger, human rights violations and Strasbourg’s European vocation.

She was a member of the Committee on Youth, Culture, Education, the Media and Sport. Its main aim was to give the European

\(^{17}\) The list led by François Mitterrand (Socialist Party and the Movement of the Left Radicals) received 23.73% of votes, while the PCF list, headed by Georges Marchais, received 20.59%.

Community a museum of the history of European unification. To that end, she authored a report on ‘on the contribution of the Community to the development of Europe prior to establishing a museum of the history of European unification’. Louise Weiss was unable to finish her term, as she passed away in 1983.

In 1996, a museum was dedicated to her at Rohan Castle, in Saverne, France. Then, in 1999, the main building that houses the European Parliament’s debating chamber in Strasbourg was named the Louise Weiss building.

Louise Weiss, who Helmut Schmidt called ‘the grandmother of Europe’ in 1983, was one of those (rare) women who is always mentioned, but is not widely known as having been a campaigner for Europe. Although she may not have been included in the pantheon of the architects of Europe in the post-1945 period, the role she played went far beyond that of a pioneer of Europe. In the interwar years, she used her networks to promote the issues of Franco-German reconciliation, peace, international arbitration and the need for European unification. All the debates and challenges arising from the European project were considered, addressed and discussed after the Second World War. The influence she had, therefore, came from herself, from her philosophy of being committed to a cause with a determination that never wavered throughout the campaigns she fought as a European feminist in the 20th Century, and from a certain coherence between her ideas and actions.
The 9+1 EP elections
The European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) distinguished itself from other international organisations with a regional dimension (including the Consultative Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe) in many ways. Firstly, the ECSC’s sectoral competences had a supranational dimension; secondly, it gave a pre-eminent role to what was called the High Authority; and, thirdly, it created a parliamentary institution, namely the Assembly. The Assembly consisted of ‘delegates whom the Parliaments are called upon to appoint from among themselves once a year or elected by universal and direct suffrage in accordance with the procedure laid down by each High Contracting Party’ (Article 21, Treaty establishing the European Coal and Steel Community).

Three characteristics of this Assembly defined its supranational dimension:
• its name (Europäisches Parlament in German, Europees Parlement in Dutch) evoked a relationship with the democratic legitimacy of national parliamentary assemblies;
• its composition, made up of European political families (Christian Democrat, liberal and socialist) and not of national delegations, thus evoking the transnational foundation of 19th-century political cultures, conceived from Christian universalism, liberal cosmopolitanism and socialist internationalism;
• the mandate given to it by the foreign ministers of the six founding members to draw up the statute, i.e. the constitution, of the European Political Community, as the political and democratic framework necessary for the birth of the European Defence Community.

After the birth of the European Communities through the 1957 Treaties of Rome, the assemblies of the ECSC, the European Economic Community (EEC) and the European Atomic Energy Community (EURATOM) were merged. This enlarged Assembly met for the first time in Strasbourg on 19 March 1958 and decided, on 30 March 1962, to take on the name of European Parliament – as Fernand Dehousse put it, ‘destined to one day become a real Parliament’.

The Treaties stipulated that ‘the Assembly shall draw up drafts for the purpose of permitting election by universal and direct suffrage in accordance with a uniform procedure in all member states’ (Article 2 of the Convention on certain institutions common to the European Communities and Article 138 of the Treaty establishing the European Economic Community). Relying on the power conferred on it by the Treaties, the European Parliament fulfilled its mission as early as 17 May 1960 and after two years of preparatory work, by approving a draft convention for the direct election of its members.
The Council did not implement the convention or the other proposals that the Assembly subsequently voted on because, for a long time, the governments and the prevailing doctrine supported the grotesque idea that a parliament without powers could not be elected by universal suffrage. At the same time, they supported the idea that no powers could be given to a parliament that was not representative of the vote of the citizens.

Despite the fact that it was not elected by universal and direct suffrage, and despite the letter of the Treaties, the European Parliament gradually gained some supranational powers in budgetary matters. In 1970, it was given the power to reject the draft budget prepared by the governments based on the proposal from the Commission. In 1975, it exercised this power again, following the Council’s recommendation to use a value added tax to finance the European budget. Parliament also gained the power to table amendments on so-called non-compulsory expenditure (i.e. all except agricultural expenditure), based on the principle of ‘no taxation without representation’.

As a logical accompaniment to the new budgetary powers, a conciliation procedure was introduced, i.e. an embryonic codecision procedure or legislative dialogue concerning ‘acts of general scope with important financial implications’, that later formed the basis of the trilogue process between the Commission, the Council and Parliament.

These steps forward had two effects, offering institutional potentials that were realised in the first legislative term of the Parliament elected in June 1979.

The first potential concerns regional policy, which, since the 1970s, had progressively become an essential part of the European
budget, and within the framework of economic, social and territorial cohesion, now exceeded expenditure on the agricultural price support policy.

In 1978, Parliament decided that it fell within its decision-making powers of last resort to set the level of funding for the European Regional Development Fund, as non-compulsory expenditure. Parliament did this in the 1979 budgetary process, despite the Council’s attempt to prevent this act of parliamentary will linked to a European economic policy that was in the initial stages of development.

After that vote, Giorgio Amendola, leader of the Italian Communist Party group in the European Parliament, wrote an editorial in *L’Unità* entitled ‘Today European democracy is born’. He argued that budgetary power would be the basis for embryonic European parliamentarianism, just as it had been foundational for the birth of modern democracies, as they transitioned from absolute to constitutional monarchies and parliamentary assemblies.

Even more evident in its institutional potential was the act by which the
first elected European Parliament rejected the Council’s draft budget for the 1980 financial year on 13 December 1979, using that ‘negative’ power that had been granted to Parliament in 1975.

That vote of peaceful institutional insurrection set in motion Parliament’s main political activity between 1980 and 1984, as it drove the evolution from the European Communities to the European Union, based on the idea that successful political action is achieved by combining the content of a project, the choice of a method and the commitment to an agenda.

It is worth recalling that three events had marked the European integration process in the years leading up to the election by universal and direct suffrage in June 1979, when the parliament of a political community of nine Member States was created,:

- the establishment of the European Council in 1974 on the initiative of Valéry Giscard d’Estaing;
- the launch of the European Monetary System (EMS), also on the initiative of Giscard d'Estaing;
- the decision to elect the European Parliament by universal and direct suffrage.

It was, above all, the creation of the EMS, with its constraints on national economic policies, and the change in the democratic nature of the European Parliament that laid the foundations for the core work of Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) during the first parliamentary term, during which the integration process took a historic turn towards political unity.

Despite the intrinsic limitations of the EMS, its creation was a significant political act. This was in part owing to the commitments of the countries that had agreed to be part of it, as well
as the obligation to create a common operational will. But most significantly, it was because compliance with its rules would have required monetary measures to be accompanied by a strong economic policy for the Communities and appropriate sectoral, regional and social policies of solidarity and recovery.

Its creation should have meant that the Communities – the Commission, the Council, Parliament, the national governments and parliaments, the central banks, the economic think-tanks – should have restarted the work on the economic and monetary union that had begun with the Werner Report but that had been hastily and irresponsibly shelved seven years earlier.

Its creation should have meant the transition to a definitive system with a monetary fund endowed with its own resources and a parallel real currency. However, beyond that, it should have meant a thorough re-examination of all Community policies linked to three main fields of action: (i) the new budget revenues and the budgetary powers of the European Parliament that would be elected in that year; (ii) the renewal of the Lomé Agreements, addressing the Communities’ relations with Africa in particular and the fight against hunger in the world; (iii) the enlargement of the Communities to include countries of southern Europe and the consequences of this on agricultural and regional policy.

Closely linked to policies was the issue of the governance of the European economy, i.e. politics. The actions of governments were aimed at depleting the powers of the Commission and besieging Parliament – the ‘citadel of European democracy’ – even before it was elected by universal and direct suffrage, while the actions of Parliament were aimed at breaking through the siege and creating the conditions for a new balance between the institutions and the Member States.
This was the starting point for the new and, indeed, the first European parliamentary term for MEPs elected amid the conflict between the Council, entrenched in defence of the status quo, and Parliament, committed, with partisan determination, to supporting the goal of new policies and a new system of government.

In total, 410 MEPs representing nine Member States were elected. MEPs from the Socialist Group slightly outnumbered those of the European People’s Party, but the overall centre-right majority allowed Simone Veil, from the Liberal and Democratic Group, to be elected as President. Greek MEPs joined their counterparts in 1981 after an election following Greece’s entry into the European Communities.
This marked the beginning of a new era for European democracy as Parliament consistently showed its broad majority will in support of pluralism, fundamental rights inside and outside the European Communities and the development of common policies.

The 1979 elections were dominated by four major themes:

- the worsening of economic problems linked to the increase in structural unemployment, not experienced equally across Member States, and the high rate of inflation, which led to deepening inequalities between regions in countries subject to the constraints of the EMS;
- international tensions linked to the Euromissile crisis and the Soviet SS-20 missile affair that had caused divisions between European countries;
- the confrontation between the pro-Europeanism of the traditional political powers (popular, socialist and liberal, and joined by the Italian communists led by Enrico Berlinguer and Giorgio Amendola) and the widespread anti-Europeanism in the United Kingdom among the majority of Conservative and Labour Party members, as well as in certain parts of Danish society, and which was also present among Gaullists and communists in France, who contested the democratic legitimacy of the supranational dimension of the European Communities, giving rise to the phenomenon of Euroscepticism;
- a high average turnout, of well over 60%, in spite of a lack of knowledge of the role of the European institutions and, in particular, the European Parliament; Italy, Belgium and Luxembourg had peaks of over 80 %, facilitated by compulsory voting in Belgium and Luxembourg and despite parliamentary elections having been held shortly beforehand in Italy and Luxembourg.
Parliament and the Commission ran a wide-ranging information campaign, not only on radio and television, but also in local communities and schools. This interinstitutional collaboration, which was not repeated in subsequent campaigns, aimed to compensate for the difficulty in discussing European issues that was experienced by national political parties, which were subject to purely national voting rules. This was clearly shown by the election manifestos and the substantial absence of European election programmes, owing to the embryonic nature of supranational parties.

The first elected European Parliament had a mandate that was both national and European. Its intake of 410 MEPs was enriched by the active presence of national leaders, including Willy Brandt and Otto von Habsburg in Germany, Leo Tindemans in Belgium, Jacques Delors and George Marchais in France, Enrico Berlinguer and Benigno Zaccagnini in Italy, alongside the charismatic Altiero Spinelli, who had already entered the unelected Parliament in October 1976.

Contrary to widespread opinion among scholars of the European institutions who argue that those elections, and the parliament that emerged from them, were to be regarded as a second-rate political phenomenon, Parliament was able, from the outset, to assert its role as the representative of the European people. It has continued to do so, step by step, throughout successive European parliamentary terms.

The new policies to cope with the effects of high inflation and structural unemployment led to conflict over the 1980 budget. The newly elected Parliament opposed the national governments’ calculations, while the Commission, chaired by Luxembourger Gaston Thorn, quickly fell into line behind the Council.

With democratic pride and in a peaceful act of ‘institutional in-
surrection’, as mentioned above, on 13 December 1979, Parliament rejected and returned to the Council a budget that was inconsistent with the political, economic and financial consequences of the creation of the EMS.

Since Parliament only had the negative power to reject the draft, in accordance with the Treaties and the 1975 agreements, the Council stubbornly adopted a new draft endowed with the same incoherence. This forced Parliament to choose between surrendering the besieged citadel or engaging in a new, unprecedented form of institutional revolt, starting the constituent process to reform the Treaties of Rome.

Thus it was that, between 9 July 1981 and 14 February 1984, on the inspiration of Altiero Spinelli, and building on the transparent and democratic work of all political powers, Parliament debated, drafted and approved a Draft Treaty on European Union, initiating reform that has not yet been completed, notwithstanding the Lisbon Treaty.

With the creation of the Crocodile Club on 9 July 1980, named after the restaurant in Strasbourg where they met for the first time, nine MEPs, inspired by Altiero Spinelli, launched the challenge of the constituent role of the European Parliament, elected in June 1979 for the first time by universal and direct suffrage.

The initiative arose as a response to the inability of the governments of the then nine Member States (France, Germany, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, the United Kingdom, Ireland and Denmark) to take appropriate decisions in the interests of citizens on the issues of real economic, budgetary and foreign policy. This inability was patently represented by the demand issued by British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher – ‘I want my money back’ – in the clash on European funding.
The Crocodile Club initiative was initially met with scepticism by the popular, socialist, liberal, communist and conservative political groups in Parliament and with hostility from governments and the Commission, because:

- the Treaties of Rome did not give Parliament a constitutional power of initiative;
- many believed that new policies could provide answers to issues, without changing the Treaties;
- the more ‘daring’ of the MEPs were proposing to ask, or rather, beg the Council to propose certain changes to the functioning of the institutions and to submit them to an intergovernmental conference for approval.

Over the months, the innovative realism of the Crocodile Club initiative prevailed over the scepticism of political groups and the hostility of governments, thanks also to the action of some European leaders in all Member States, and provoked growing interest, even outside of Parliament. From October 1980 to June 1983, the Crocodile Club initiative published a regular newsletter, addressed to MEPs, ‘Crocodile: lettre aux membres du Parlement européen’, produced by Altiero Spinelli, Felice Ippolito and Pier Virgilio Dastoli, with organisational assistance from Viviane Schmit. The newsletters were published in all the official languages of the European Communities, and 10 000 copies of each were disseminated throughout Europe.

The Crocodile newsletter was again published from 1989 to 1995 in support of the Parliamentary intergroup for the European Union, which was created by nine MEPs as the successor to the Crocodile Club and which promoted the creation of intergroups in other national parliaments. This initiative produced a consultative referendum in Italy on the conferment of a constituent mandate to
the European Parliament; the referendum was combined with the 1989 European elections. The letter was supported by the Commission’s Directorate-General for Communication, with responsibility for the dissemination of European policies, and it followed the entire process of European treaty reform from the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 to the start of negotiations leading to the Treaty of Amsterdam in 1996. All issues from 1980 to 1995 are archived at the European University Institute in Florence and the Centro di eccellenza Altiero Spinelli in Rome and are available via their websites.

The initiative ended in the success of parliamentary democracy because, on 14 February 1984, Parliament approved, by a large majority, a draft treaty to establish the European Union (the Spinelli
project). French President, François Mitterrand, initially committed his support for this, although he would later withdraw his backing, in favour of an intergovernmental approach.

Since then, some innovative proposals from that draft were included in subsequent treaties (Single European Act, Maastricht, Amsterdam, Nice, Lisbon). Other high-quality proposals, however, have remained in the European archives, owing to the hostility of governments who consider themselves the ‘masters of the Treaties’ and the requirement for unanimous national ratification for every revision.

Among the core proposals from the Spinelli project that have been taken up in subsequent Treaties are:

- the division of competencies between the European Union and the Member States;
- a genuine foreign and security policy that includes defence;
- the extension of majority voting in the Council of the EU and the limited role of the European Council,
- fiscal and budgetary powers of Parliament, along with the power of legislative initiative when there is no intervention by the Commission;
- a European electoral law;
- an effective mechanism for upholding the rule of law;
- the governmental role of the Commission;
- a constitutional method to enable a majority of countries to continue on the path of ever closer union;
- an ad hoc procedure to supplement the treaties with constitutional laws passed by a double qualified majority in the Council and Parliament.
Institutional action to reform the Treaties included the premise of the decision to require the Commission to appear before Parliament to obtain a vote of confidence and consensus on its programme, as has been the case since 1981, beyond the letter of the Treaties.

During the legislative term, these actions were accompanied by political initiatives on the costs of non-Europe, i.e. the cost of stalling or reversing European integration. These paved the way for Jacques Delors’ initiatives on the single market, energy supply, the restructuring or conversion of obsolete industries, legislative and financial means dedicated to structural (social, research, agricultural, regional) policies, aid to developing countries, the budget and own resources.

The innovative capacity of the first European Parliament, elected between 7 and 10 June 1979 by universal suffrage, developed throughout its parliamentary term and culminated in the approval of the draft treaty establishing the European Union following the democratic, constituent method. However, it ran aground in the spring of 1984 when, on the eve of the European elections from 14 to 17 June in that year, the election debates were negatively influenced by conflicts between the 10 governments on numerous issues: the budget, agricultural policy, the accession of Portugal and Spain, monetary policy with particular reference to the fluctuations of the Italian lira, international relations over the Euro-missile affair and, last but not least, the model of European integration.

Conflicts between the governments of the 10 Member States, which became 12 in January 1986 after the accession of Spain and Portugal, were exacerbated by tensions in the Middle East, with Türkiye’s occupation of Northern Cyprus, and by Cold War tensions.
between the United States and the Soviet Union. Ronald Reagan had launched the Star Shield strategic defence initiative and the first cracks were beginning to appear in the Soviet regime. The deaths of Brezhnev and Andropov and the short-lived appointment of Chernenko prepared the way for Gorbachev’s arrival in power. This geopolitical situation prompted Jacques Delors, the governments’ chosen candidate to chair the European Commission, to try, un-successfully, to relaunch European defence, before falling back on the more pragmatic goal of establishing the single market.

These tensions weighed on the 1984 election campaign by marginalising the European debates and instead exalting the national dimensions of confrontations between parties, facilitated by the fact that, once again, the elections were held under 10 different electoral systems. In addition, there was an unmistakable signal that the governments were leaning toward renouncing Spinelli’s constituent method and following the intergovernmental route, preceded by the appointment of yet another committee of wise men (the Dooge Committee).

The 1984 elections altered the political balance in the European Parliament. The campaign was a success for the Socialist Group, which increased its number of MEPs from 113 to 130. The European People’s Party Group showed resilience, growing from 107 to 110 MEPs at the expense of the conservative European Democrats, who plummeted from 64 to 50, despite Margaret Thatcher’s success in the British elections. The Liberal Group was reduced from 40 to 31 MEPs, and the losses of the French Communist Party were compensated by support for the Italian Communist Party, which overtook the Christian Democrats as Italy’s biggest party, driven by emotion over the sudden death of Enrico Berlinguer. Out of the June elections emerged a more fragmented Parliament containing two new groups: the so-called Rainbow Group, formed by environ-
mentalist parties, in particular the German Greens; and the far-right Group of the European Right, led by Jean-Marie Le Pen.

Altiero Spinelli had focused his election campaign on the idea that Parliament should take up the Spinelli project, update it on the basis of the ideas that had emerged from the political powers, and initiate consultation with the national parliaments. However, the governments’ decision to convene the intergovernmental conference that led to the Single European Act effectively paralysed Spinelli’s and the Parliament’s initiative.

Once again, as had been the case in 1979, the European election campaigns run by the parties focused on national dynamics and divisions, and the issue of treaty reform, which had been raised by Parliament with the draft approved on 14 February 1984, was prevented from taking centre stage.
“The world and the being do not blindly obey the orders of a technocrat or a political engineer, and they are not there in order to fulfil their forecast” - Václav Havel

The 1989 European elections took place in a Cold War political scenario that imploded dramatically just after. In fact, there were seismic announcements worldwide. In the former Soviet Union, Gorbachev’s coming to power in 1985 launched the policies of glasnost (openness) and perestroika (restructuring), the first proof of which was the diplomatic recognition of the European Community (EC) in 1988.

June 1989 witnessed a succession of political earthquakes. On 4 June, Poland’s Solidarity won an overwhelming victory in partially free elections, the same day as the events of Tiananmen in China; on 15 June the European Parliament was elected; on 28
June, the Hungarian Gyula Horn, leader of goulash communism, together with the Austrian Christian democrat Alois Mock, symbolically cut the wire fence of the Iron Curtain, setting in motion a peaceful chain reaction in which the Eastern Bloc disintegrated. Tourists from East Germany occupied the West German embassies and escaped to the West. Mass demonstrations also took place in Czechoslovakia. The Soviet Union, the core of the Eastern Bloc, imploded at the end of 1991, while the former Yugoslavia broke up in a bloody civil war.

It was not just a European earthquake. History took on a frantic rhythm: from China to South Africa with the end of apartheid and the liberation of Mandela; in Central America with the peace process; in Chile with the failure of Pinochet’s plebiscite.

Meanwhile, the EC was living in the 1980s the second creative period in its open ended constitutional process of building a peaceful, democratic, prosperous and united Europe, applying “pas à pas la methode communautaire”. The direct election of the European Parliament in 1979 had opened up a new way forward.

A crisis was overcome in 1985 with the election of Jacques Delors as Commission President, with a programme to achieve the Single Market - the Common Market plus the social dimension - and the Monetary Union. The European Parliament had approved in 1984 the “draft Treaty establishing the European Union”, known as the Spinelli Treaty, in recognition of his unrelenting federalist work. The next leap was the Single European Act approved at the European Council held in Milano: the first time that the Council had voted, on the initiative of President Bettino Craxi. The reaction of British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, was compared to the eruption of the Krakatoa volcano.
After fighting for democracy in Spain and its participation in Europe, as a member of the Government that had negotiated the accession to the EC, I then volunteered to join the European Parliament. I coordinated the election manifesto of the Confederation of Socialist Parties of the European Community, approved in February 1989. The main statement on Europe was “our refusal to consider perpetual the division of the continent and our will to overcome the barriers”.

Our policy was based on the Helsinki Final Act and the implementation of the relations between the EC and the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE). The rest of the text was dedicated to disarmament, control of nuclear proliferation and missiles, and fostering trust and security. This approach was not

Election night, June 1989. Jacques Delors with TV journalists
| © Communautés européennes.
just a vision of familiar realpolitik; it was a common view on a scar that we would like to heal in the future.

The priorities in the election campaign were to implement the Horizon 1992, a Community without borders based on the four freedoms, with the addition of the social dimension and the protection of the environment. We fostered a democratic Europe, as had been drafted in 1984 in the “Treaty establishing the European Union”, based on the double legitimacy of States and citizens, and the protection of human rights.

Our main challenge was to explain to voters and convince them of the value of their ballot, because the only link an elected member of the European Parliament had was to their political group based on ‘political affinities’ - European political parties did not exist - but without any link to or power over the election of the President of the Commission. There was no connection or leverage between the citizen and the European Parliament in terms of legislative power, which was in the hands of the Council of Ministers. Parliament had only a limited power in relation to the spending budget, won through a hard fight. In spite of this, the election turnout was 59%.

A key point that was not controversial in the campaign was the joint endeavour to support the effort to make one big leap towards the European Union: “un saut dans l’inconnu” was the answer that Robert Schuman gave to a journalist, after reading his Declaration in 1950. Later, he became the first President of the European Parliament.

The newly elected members of the European Parliament were thus able to react in a positive way to the unexpected fall of the Berlin Wall on the evening of 9 November 1989. I was preparing
for a gala dinner hosted by the Italian Government at the majestic Villa Madama on the occasion of my official visit to Italy. I received a phone call from a young journalist, Marco Zatterin, who told me that the Berlin Wall had fallen. He asked me for a statement. My response was to ask him, in turn, whether the Wall had fallen in a physical or figurative sense.” We spent half an hour checking the news. Needless to say, during the dinner - with the Italian President Francesco Cossiga, the Prime Minister Giulio Andreotti and the Foreign Minister Gianni De Michelis - the only political dish was the news and its consequences.

A fortnight later, at my invitation, which both had immediately accepted, President François Mitterrand and Chancellor Helmut Kohl made a historic joint appearance before the European Parliament, following the announcement that the Sakharov Prize was to be awarded to Alexander Dubček.

In his speech, President Mitterand stated that, on 9 November in Berlin, history in action had offered the world a spectacle, which had been unlikely even the day before, of a breach in the Wall that, for nearly 30 years, had itself symbolised the fractures in our continent. On that day, democracy and freedom had won one of their most wonderful victories. The people had spoken; their voices had crossed borders and broken the silence of an order that they had not wanted and that they aspired to reject in order to recover their identities. After indicating his excitement, welcoming Chancellor Kohl and expressing his regard for Gorbachev for the role that he had played, he placed the issue in a moment of reflection, in a joint analysis of the consequences for the European balance, and also the willingness of the Community and its members to assist the Eastern Bloc countries that ‘have made commitments to themselves’. His conclusions with regard to the future concerned the very future of the Community itself and the common values which were
demanded and which knew no bounds. His first conclusion involved ‘affirming our own identity as a Community in order to open up to the East’, which ‘absolutely depends on the political will to show that, in the end, it is political unity that has prevailed over all the actions taken since the founders conceived the European idea’. He highlighted the need to be ready, at the imminent European Council in Strasbourg in December, ‘to successfully complete the fundamental plans that will allow our Europe to equip itself with the necessary economic and monetary, social and environmental policy tools and also to complete the internal market’. He concluded by expressing his desire for ‘the way in which the Community decides on its actions to serve as an example to the Eastern Bloc countries, which are searching, moving, worrying and hoping. For the millions of men and women who, like us, dream that one day Europe will be Europe’.

Address by German Chancellor Helmut Kohl on the situation in Eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall at the EP in Strasbourg, 22 November 1989. Mitterand and Baron Crespo are recognisable to the right and behind Kohl respectively | © Communautés européennes
For his part, Chancellor Kohl started by saying that ‘in Western Europe, the Member States of the Community are actively preparing for the challenge of the 21st century, in which, thanks to the internal market of 320 million people, we can move towards the political union that we cherish and that must be achieved’. He then went on to examine the changes that were occurring with dizzying speed across the continent. He expressed his appreciation of Gorbachev’s perestroika, which, for the first time since the end of the Second World War, was encouraging the justified hope of an end to the East-West conflict and of lasting stability based around a common freedom for the whole of Europe, ‘to which not only London, Rome, The Hague, Dublin and Paris belong, but also Warsaw, Budapest, Prague and Sofia, and also of course Berlin, Leipzig and Dresden’. After commenting on the progress made by Poland and Hungary, he said that ‘the desire for freedom among the Germans of East Berlin and the German Democratic Republic has brought a peaceful end to the Wall and the barbed wire, with a celebration of coming together, mutual belonging and unity’ and that ‘the division of Germany has always been a visible and particularly painful expression of the division of Europe. However, the unity of Germany will only be achieved if we can unify our old continent. German policy and European policy are inseparable. They are two sides of the same coin.’

The Commission President, Jacques Delors, after welcoming the events and assuming responsibility for implementing the measures proposed by President Mitterrand on behalf of the Council, reiterated comments that had just been made by Valéry Giscard d’Estaing. ‘Today will perhaps mark the political birth of the European Parliament, at a time when the tide of freedom is flooding across Eastern Europe’ : this had been said during the debate by the former French President, now MEP, who had also underlined how the response should be ‘to speed up the union of the Community and
provide massive Community aid to the Eastern Bloc countries, subject to two vital conditions: not to run any unnecessary risks in terms of military alliances that could threaten peace, and to speed up the union of the Community in order to achieve a modern federalism based on subsidiarity’. Delors then expressed solidarity ‘with our German friends on both sides of the iron curtain that is now falling’. As a militant pro-European, he underlined his conviction that the political cooperation measure adopted by the Council was the most important in the Community’s history and that more resources, coordination and speed were needed to ensure that hopes were met. As a result, he said that ‘the Community must be strengthened, its proactiveness increased and its integration accelerated; now we must design the architecture for the great Europe’.

The debate ended with an overwhelming majority vote – with only two votes against – for a resolution in which the events in Central and Eastern Europe and the collapse of the Wall due to the people’s peaceful aspiration for freedom were warmly welcomed. The resolution recognised the right to self-determination of the German Democratic Republic’s population, including the possibility of becoming part of a unified Germany in a united Europe; it called for a rapid response from the EC in terms of aid and cooperation for Central and Eastern Europe, ‘within which institutional ties may be offered to all those countries that are interested in it’ (a timid euphemism for accession); and, last but not least, it insisted on the importance of a mutual security policy and disarmament negotiations on the eve of the Bush-Gorbachev summit. Chancellor Kohl commented, at a later date, on his astonishment at the firm socialist support, both in the European Parliament and among the Heads of Government in this political family, for the resolution of the German question.

That debate in the European Parliament was important owing
to its timeliness, taking place less than two weeks after the fall of the Wall, and particularly owing to the nature of its participants: leaders and parliamentarians who had mostly lived through, participated in or suffered from the Second World War. Most Germans, members of the largest population in the centre of the continent, without any defined borders but with a strong cultural and historical identity, cherished the hope of reunification. For many others, the prospect of a unified and powerful Germany, which could once again adopt its *Sonderweg* or special path, was seen as a threat. However, both the atmosphere and the result showed that the Community spirit had become deep-rooted among Western Europeans and also that it constituted a legitimate aspiration for those excluded from power by the construction of such an indestructible wall as an iron curtain, as I had the honour of saying directly on behalf of the European Parliament before the democratically elected parliaments of Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia.

The words and silences of Mitterrand and Kohl during their joint appearance before the European Parliament were particularly important: they were able to channel positively and overcome their differences, despite the long history of confrontation, including on a personal level. That is one of the virtues of the Community method, or rather its spirit, which had also made it possible for Pierre Uri, a French philosophy professor who was persecuted by the Vichy Regime, to draft the Treaty of Rome from beginning to end, under the supervision and control of Hans von der Groeben, a senior German civil servant.

As a result of that historic debate, an elected European Parliament with a majority of members who had fought or suffered in the European civil war that had become the World War, supported German reunification as part of the construction of a stronger and peaceful Europe open to enlargement.
We prepared and negotiated with the Council and the Commission the *Conférence Interinstitutionnelle Préparatoire* (CIP), prior to the Conventions and the Conference of the European Parliament with national Parliaments in Rome in November 1990, to discuss the framework for the Treaty on European Union (TUE).

None of its points were as in the electoral programmes - they were in our aspirations.

We lived through momentous times, more fruitful than interesting, because we had learnt to amend our history of ‘*enfer et paradis’* and build on joint endeavours of common values and shared destiny.

People power peacefully broke down the Wall dividing Europe and the world. However, there are still many mental walls between us in the noble cause that we share. The walls of mistrust and narrow nationalism are more difficult to combat and overcome than physical walls.

On 29 December 1989, the dissident Václav Havel was elected President of Czechoslovakia.
The fourth and fifth European Parliament elections, in 1994 and 1999 respectively, are important, less for what happened at the ballot box and much more for what happened in the intervening years. This was perhaps the period that saw the most dramatic changes hitherto in the character of the European Union and in the role of the European Parliament. It was during these years that Parliament was able to make the first full use of the new legislative powers that it had acquired under the Maastricht Treaty, permanently altering Parliament’s relationship with the Council of Ministers. It was the period when the character of Parliament’s stance towards the Commission also changed radically, with the introduction of hearings for new Commissioners as well as the forced resignation of the Santer Commission. And it was a time of major change in the character of the European Union itself: the Member States were irreversibly committed to the creation of a single currency, three new countries (Austria, Finland and Sweden)
joined the EU, and the provisions of the Schengen Agreement entered into force, guaranteeing free movement for most European citizens.

The elections were not without their effect on the shape of Parliament. Since 1979, the Group of the Party of European Socialists (PES) had always been the largest group but, because of changes in the affiliations of other smaller groups, the difference in size between the Socialist group and the second-largest group, the Group of the European People’s Party (EPP), reduced between 1994 and 1999. Then, in the 1999 elections, the EPP, with 233 Members of Parliament (MEPs) overtook the Socialists, whose numbers fell to 180. This established a pattern that has continued to this day. However, these two groups continued to dominate the institution, with their combined number of seats corresponding to almost two thirds of the total. This dominance obliged the two groups to cooperate to achieve common goals, given the decision rules of the EU, but also made it difficult at times for them to make their different standpoints clear to the electorate.

What was striking about the two elections was that, despite the dramatic changes that took place in 1994 and 1999, the level of participation in the elections did not increase. In fact, turnout declined from 56.7 % in 1994 to 49.5 % in 1999, revealing the gap between the world of the institutions and the life of the electorate, who were not motivated to take part in the elections in greater numbers. Two factors contributed to the limited interest of European citizens in European elections. The first was the predominance of national themes in the election campaign, in other words, the inability of the European parties to persuade their affiliated national parties to adopt a European objective and vision. The second, and perhaps more important factor was that the effective alliance between the PES and EPP (and later the Liberals) gave the
impression to voters that they could not influence or change the composition of leadership in Europe. Since then, a whole series of changes – Brexit, Spitzenkandidaten (lead candidates), COVID-19, climate change, the energy crisis and, last but not least, war on the borders of the EU – have been instrumental in halting the decline in turnout; in the 2019 elections, participation increased for the first time in the history of the directly elected Parliament.

This brief article will offer an overview of the significant changes in the period between the two elections, as seen by the participants inside and outside the European Parliament. It will make use of the oral history database held at the Historical Archives of the European Union (HAEU)\(^1\) in Florence. One section of the archive holds more than 100 interviews with former MEPs, many of whom were active during the period under consideration. In particular, we will draw attention to the interviews with former Presidents of Parliament, including the German MEP Klaus Hänsch and the Spanish MEP José María Gil-Robles Gil-Delgado, who were in office during the five-year period. In addition, numerous interviews were given by former Commissioners and Commission officials, which imparts a flavour of how the changing behaviour of Parliament was perceived outside the institution. We are using this material in a European University Institute (EUI) blog entitled ‘The contribution of the European Parliament to the European project, as seen by the actors inside the Parliament and beyond (1979-2019)’\(^2\). The list of interviews used in writing this contribution and links to the audio files are provided at the end of the chapter.

\(^1\) Historical Archives of the EU (HAEU) oral history database.

\(^2\) The contribution of the European Parliament to the European project, as seen by the actors inside the Parliament and beyond (1979-2019).
Some major events

Despite the apparent lack of interest of European citizens in the European elections during this period, the events of those years permanently shaped the European Union. As we will see, the signing of the Maastricht Treaty (February 1993) and subsequently the Amsterdam Treaty (October 1997) had significant implications for interinstitutional relations and the legislative process.

However, these changes took place against a broader backdrop. The enlargement of the EU to include Austria, Finland and Sweden was an important development which led to new balances within each institution. Alain Lamassoure, former French Minister and MEP, underlined the political, economic and budgetary relevance of this enlargement in a press conference\(^3\). He noted that, after the Maastricht Treaty had come into force, the Union had a political mission. Those countries had joined the European Union to participate in all aspects of the Union, including the common foreign policy. He also stressed that those three countries engaged in significant levels of trade with other European countries and that enlargement would therefore open up new horizons for European companies. Moreover, the new Member States would be net contributors to the Community budget.

The tension between enlargement of this kind and the strengthening of European unity has continued to mark the development of the Union to this day.

The period from 1994 to 1999 also witnessed a particular boost being given to the free movement of persons, a principle already embedded in the Treaty of Rome, especially after the entry into

\(^3\) Déclaration d’Alain Lamassoure sur l’élargissement de l’Union européenne (Paris, 2 mars 1994).
force of the Schengen Convention in 1995. The most visible aspect of this free movement was the abolition of borders between the Member States adhering to the convention, a measure very much appreciated by citizens of the Member States concerned. Parliament voiced criticisms, firstly, because the agreement was concluded outside of the Community method, lacked transparency and was not subject to democratic control and, secondly, because the convention introduced discrimination, based on nationality, between citizens of the Union, as well as against the citizens of non-EU countries who were legally resident in one of the Member States.

It was also a period when the implementation of the internal market was a major priority for the EU and the Member States. Eneko Landaburu, former Director-General of the Commission, stressed that the implementation of the internal market and the free movement of capital and goods was a way of modernising the European economy, supporting growth and boosting employment. It was important, in his view, that Europe should defend not just a free economy but a social market economy, based on solidarity.

Four key developments

Hearings for Commissioners

The Maastricht Treaty, which came into force in 1993, had already formally recognised important changes in Parliament’s role in the appointment of the Commission. In particular, it:

- changed the Commission’s term of office to five years to coincide with that of Parliament;
- formally provided for Parliament to vote to approve or reject the Commission as a whole;
stipulated that Parliament as a whole had to be consulted on the choice of President.

This last provision effectively became a de facto binding vote once Jacques Santer, in 1994, undertook to withdraw if the vote in Parliament on his nomination as Commission President went against him. Together, all these changes formalised tighter bonds of accountability between the two institutions.

The character of this accountability was broadened again when Parliament set out in its Rules of Procedure that, before voting on the Commission, it would require each prospective Commissioner to appear in a public hearing before the appropriate parliamentary
committee. The then President of the Parliament, Klaus Hänsch, explained the background to these hearings as follows:

It was necessary to get a procedure to make out of the installation of the Commission a sort of installation of a government, not a copy of what happens in most cases in the national parliaments but a procedure appropriate to the European Parliament ... it was clear to me that it had to go in the direction of the American Congress hearings ... It was not easy to get it through ... Delors was absolutely against in the beginning because he feared that the College of the Commission would be destroyed or endangered at least, because he saw that there would be votes on single designated Commissioners and that was exactly what a lot of colleagues wanted to have ... So the challenge was to find a procedure at least for the first time ... to convince colleagues that they will not have a vote on single Commissioners and to get from Delors and specially also from the national governments the agreement that they would support the procedure ... So we had for the first time ... those hearings of the designated Commissioners. We had no votes but we had impressions ... I had the idea to inform the press immediately after the meeting of the appropriate committees ... giving a general impression of the result of the hearing. By this, we could say afterwards where Parliament ... had a certain reluctance of the quality of the designated Commissioners and in the next five years this reluctance was justified.

Hänsch was therefore successful in setting up a procedure which was not in the Treaties but which has stood the test of time. As he suggested, the pressure grew to have votes on individual Commissioners and this led to President Barroso having to modify the composition of the Commissions he had submitted for approval in
2004 and 2009. If there had been votes in 1994, it could have been fatal for the chances of the prospective Danish Commissioner, Ritt Bjerregaard, who had suggested that Parliament was not really a proper parliament. As Hänsch points out, he had been in no way inclined to give her the floor in the plenary to explain her position.

Introducing these changes in how the Commission was appointed had a broader effect in changing relations between Parliament and the Commission. It led to a new code of conduct, signed in 1995, where Parliament was able to enhance its role of co-legislator, beyond the provisions of the Treaties. The Commission committed to forwarding to Parliament all its proposals and other documents which it had forwarded to the Council, and to inform Parliament before making them public. Similarly, the Commission undertook to contact Parliament before choosing the legal basis for its proposals. Even more importantly, the Commission committed to withdrawing legislative proposals that were rejected by Parliament. This 1995 code of conduct was part of Parliament’s strategy to be on the same footing as the Council, a strategy that was further developed in the context of the codecision procedure.

**Codecision with the Council**

It is not an exaggeration to say that the fourth term of Parliament constituted a pivotal moment in the democratisation of the European legislative process. The introduction of codecision, albeit initially limited to a number of subjects, marked a significant shift, paving the way for a more influential role for the European Parliament in shaping European legislation⁴.

The entry into force of the Maastricht Treaty (1993) and the

adoption of the Amsterdam Treaty (1997) changed the paradigm and altered the power dynamics between institutions. The ensuing paragraphs delve into the impact of these changes on the legislative process. Parliament’s new-found role in approving the President of the Commission and taking a vote of confidence on (or rejecting) the entire Commission, as discussed above, added a fresh dimension to Parliament’s function.

Before 1994, the consideration given to Parliament by other institutions was minimal, to say the least. Now Parliament was transformed from being a mere procedural step to a full participant in the legislative process. The Council had to engage in the search for compromise with Parliament to be able to pass legislation.

1994 was the beginning of what former Parliament President Nicole Fontaine described as ‘a “silent revolution”, largely unnoticed by the public yet absolutely key to shaping the future of European integration’.

Despite the existence of legislative conciliation since 1975 and the introduction of the cooperation procedure in the Single Act of 1987, these procedures only initiated a dialogue among institutions without producing binding outcomes for the Council.

The establishment of the codecision procedure made it necessary to define practical procedures, a task assigned to a techni-


cal interinstitutional group\textsuperscript{8} with the goal of reaching agreement among the three institutions on the interpretation of articles.

While Parliament’s staff eagerly anticipated confrontation with Council representatives, the latter were faced with a substantial cultural shift. Una O’Dwyer, a former director at the Commission, explained that:

contacts with EP officials were virtually forbidden to colleagues in the Secretariat of the Council. It was not exactly a formal ban, but they were not encouraged in this regard. In addition, the representatives of the Member States in the Council did not want to be obliged to intervene in parliamentary committees, except as a representative of the Presidency, nor be put under pressure by Members of the European Parliament.

Jean Paul Jacqué, a former director in the Council, emphasised the instrumental role played by European Parliament President Nicole Fontaine and Vice-President Renzo Imbeni:

It was at that time that we began to invent trilogues, which were very effective, especially since at the time we generally did not adopt everything at first reading; Parliament preferred to go as far as the second reading and we sometimes had conciliations, and gradually, the conciliations took place entirely in the form of trilogues.

A good illustration of the success of the new procedures was in legislation concerning the internal market, where Parliament had

\textsuperscript{8} The group was composed of directors-general and directors of the three institutions and chaired by Karlheinz Neunreither, a director-general in the European Parliament.
always been a driving force. Its influence was clear in one of the most important pieces of legislation of this period, Directive 96/71/EC on the posting of workers. This directive draws up a set of working conditions which workers who are temporarily posted abroad by their employer must be granted in the country to which they are posted (host country). Its purpose is to guarantee the protection of workers as well as to provide a level playing field for service providers. As was to happen later with the Services Directive (2006/123/EC, also known as the Bolkestein Directive), many of the amendments proposed by Parliament were the best compromise among contrasting positions within the Council.

The initial years of codecision contributed to a deepening of trust between the institutions and a shift in attitude. Before the signing of the Amsterdam Treaty, Parliament President Gil-Robles met Win Kok, president-in-office of the Council, who informed him that the major requests of Parliament had been accepted in the preliminary text of the draft Treaty (later called the Amsterdam Treaty). This acceptance by the Member States of a broader role for Parliament paved the way for the ordinary legislative procedure, introduced 10 years later in the Lisbon Treaty.

Launch of the single currency

The road leading to the single currency was long. The formal process began with the Treaty of Maastricht in 1992. However, the concept had been around for some time and materialised in the European Parliament’s draft Treaty of 1984, based on the Spinelli report. This report advocated the participation of all Member States in the European Monetary System.

Jean-Claude Trichet, former Governor of the Banque de France and President of the European Central Bank, in his interview for the Historical Archives of the EU (HAEU), highlighted the pivotal role played by the decision of the Heads of State to establish the Committee of Central Bankers, chaired by Jacques Delors. This committee, formed in response to the Commission’s proposals on the creation of a financial area, became instrumental in the decision-making process embedded in the Treaty of Maastricht. The conclusion of the Delors committee rendered the decision on the single currency irreversible.

Parliament was not central to this process but it was kept closely informed by President Delors. It made its voice heard through several resolutions, expressing full support for the project and its timeline, while also being critical on certain aspects of the project.

Christa Randzio-Plath, MEP, Chair of the Sub-committee on Monetary Affairs and later of the Economic and Monetary Committee, in the interview held at the HAEU, emphasised Parliament’s crucial role in communicating with citizens, particularly given the contentious nature of monetary union in most citizens’ minds, especially in Germany.

I had to persuade not only the public about the role and importance of this next step for European integration, for deepening the integration and putting closer together the Member States of the European Union, but it was also important to lead this committee in a way which made the Parliament a really knowledgeable and decisive place, and on the other hand, to contribute also to the better implementation and acceptance of the monetary union ... and I was hated by a lot of people, being in favour of monetary union. But if you
want to deepen integration, you have to take the step the Member States agree upon, and, as it was not possible to have a political union, that was, for me, monetary union.

And, as we have had the monetary union since 1 January 1999, this was of course a historical date. It was not just the change of money and coins and bank notes, it was really for me the historic day that Europe wants to go forward in deepening the European integration and in playing a proper role in this world from the political and from the economic point of view.

Parliament did not fully endorse all the points in the Treaty of Maastricht, and critical voices were raised against the convergence criteria relating to budgetary discipline (notably, the 60 % indebtedness and 3 % budget deficit criteria) and their inclusion in a European treaty, with the risk that they might not resist external shocks. As Randzio-Plath explained, this debate was particularly difficult for her as a German:

The EP could not understand in what way a European constitutional treaty fixed figures which could be overthrown by external shocks or developments which even the governments could not control ... And as a German I had even more difficulties to explain because everybody said, ah, this is the German handwriting in the Maastricht Treaty. And so, being critical towards these criteria, I had nevertheless to defend them because the Treaty was a treaty and there was no chance to change the Maastricht Treaty.

The convergence criteria in the Treaty of Maastricht were a very delicate issue. Jean-Claude Trichet, in his interview, expressed his surprise when Germany later did not respect the criteria and re-
called how those points were central in the hearing he had before Parliament prior to his appointment in 2003 as President of the European Central Bank (ECB).

Such hearings were an important legacy of this period when the ECB was being established. Many MEPs were critical of the independence of the ECB as established by the Treaty, but that Treaty granted the European Parliament a significant role by explicitly establishing the ECB’s accountability to Parliament. This responsibility fostered trust and a close relationship, allowing Parliament subsequently to influence monetary decisions through regular appearances by the ECB President before the Committee on Economic and Monetary Affairs and in plenary sessions, utilising a form of soft power.

Resignation of the Santer Commission

Less than three months before the 1999 European elections, the Santer Commission resigned in anticipation of a vote of censure in the European Parliament\(^\text{10}\). This right of censure was enshrined in Article 24 of the 1951 Treaty establishing the European Coal

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\(^{10}\) See M. Shackleton, ‘The fall of the Santer Commission’, *The contribution of the European Parliament to the European project*, Historical Archives of the EU, 1 July 2023.
and Steel Community. This article granted Parliament a privileged position in enforcing the principle of accountability. However, although nine motions of censure were introduced between 1972 and 1999, none of them secured a majority. The decision of the Commission to resign in March 1999 thus marked a dramatic moment in the history of the institutions.

The origins of the crisis can be traced back to an argument about granting budgetary discharge to the Commission in accordance with what is now Article 319 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. Following up the report of the Court of Auditors on the 1996 budget and its refusal to give a ‘Statement of assurance’ as to the legality and regularity of transactions underlying the payments for that year, Parliament decided in March 1998 to postpone the granting of discharge. There followed a fraught period, during which allegations of mismanagement and fraud proliferated and the mood of Parliament darkened, with many ready to refuse the discharge and to consider the next step of bringing a vote of censure.\[11\]

Pat Cox, who was leader of the Liberal Group and later President of Parliament, gives an account in his interview of how the seemingly abstruse debate about the management of money by the services of the Commission came to be viewed by him and many others as a much broader argument. As Cox put it, ‘the issue was not one of accountancy’, as revealed in the discharge procedure, ‘but one of public accountability’. Once the dispute was presented in these general terms, it proved impossible for President Santer to defend his position in terms of the collective responsibility of the College of Commissioners. Cox described it as ‘the shield of responsibility being transformed into a sword of accountability’.

This transformation took place, in part, because of the way in which the Commission had behaved towards Parliament and had perceived its position inside the institutions. Gil-Robles, President of Parliament between 1997 and 1999, was very struck by the arrogant attitude of the Commission and its officials. He saw them as determined to maintain a level of independence, which, in his view, was incompatible with a parliamentary system, where the executive depended on the support of a parliamentary majority:

The Commission thought itself to be the centre of the life of the EU and this was reflected in a particular interpretation of independence, an independence from everything, not just from pressure groups or the Member States but also a political independence. At this time, I repeated to President Santer what I had already told him: in a democracy an institution can never be politically independent. There must be what the English call accountability, a political responsibility to someone and that someone must be the representatives of the people ... at that moment, the Commission had civil servants, notably the Private Office of Santer who were convinced that they were independent of the Parliament.

What then was the impact of the Commission’s fall? It had a considerable effect on Parliament’s view of itself, with the event acquiring an almost legendary status. Most Members saw it as marking a major shift in relations between the Commission and Parliament, between an executive and a parliament. Pat Cox describes it in his interview as a ‘high act of parliamentarism’.

A more specific result arose from the inability of Jacques Santer to sack Edith Cresson, the former French Prime Minister and the Commissioner at the centre of the discharge argument. This weakness of the Commission President assumed particular impor-
tance after the 1999 European elections. As we have seen, the EPP became the largest group in Parliament and was emphatically unhappy about the decision of the European Council to nominate a centre-left politician, Romano Prodi, as President of the Commission. The group made it clear that its support for Prodi and his Commission for the full term from 2000 to 2005 was dependent on him making a series of commitments, particularly concerning his relations with individual Commissioners.

This pressure from Parliament provoked a strong debate inside the Commission. David O'Sullivan, who became Head of the Private Office of President Prodi, was very much involved in persuading the President to accede to the pressure from the EPP. As he indicates, there was resistance, notably from Delors, who reiterated the positions he had taken at the time when hearings were instituted, arguing that the Commission was a collective body and not one composed of individuals who could be held to account as individuals.

Subsequently, Prodi was ready to make the following statement to Parliament before he and his Commission won a vote of approval at the September 1999 plenary:

Where the Parliament expresses a lack of confidence in a member of the Commission – subject to the substantive and representative nature of the political support for such a view – I as President of the Commission will examine seriously whether I should request that member to resign.

Hans Gert Pöttering, leader of the EPP at that time and later President of Parliament, saw the acceptance by Prodi of this change as a ‘great institutional step’.

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Overall, it is hard to disagree with Priestley’s judgement that ‘however tortuous the process ... Parliament eventually found the means to impose accountability on the Commission, which had yet to come to terms with the significance of its relations with a body which derived its higher legitimacy from direct universal suffrage’\textsuperscript{12}.

Interviews referred to in this article:

Pat Cox  
https://archives.eui.eu/en/oral_history/INT818

Nicole Fontaine  
https://archives.eui.eu/en/oral_history/INT1027

José María Gil-Robles Gil-Delgado  
https://archives.eui.eu/en/oral_history/INT830

Klaus Hänsch  
https://archives.eui.eu/en/oral_history/INT832

Jean Paul Jacqué  

Eneko Landaburu  
https://archives.eui.eu/en/oral_history/INT1062

Una O'Dwyer  
https://archives.eui.eu/en/oral_history/INT1094

David O'Sullivan  
https://archives.eui.eu/en/oral_history/INT1095

Hans Gert Pöttering  
https://archives.eui.eu/en/oral_history/INT847

Christa Randzio-Plath  
https://archives.eui.eu/en/oral_history/INT850

Jacques Santer  
https://archives.eui.eu/en/oral_history/INT1123

Jean-Claude Trichet  
https://archives.eui.eu/en/oral_history/INT797
Leading up to 2004, the European Union had faced a combination of unprecedented challenges. That was the time of the reunification of Germany and the grand transition of the Central and Eastern European countries towards democracy and a market economy. But it was also the time of emerging populist movements in Europe influencing politics in the contexts of migration, putting emphasis on the protection of citizens and a community with a clear sense of borders. I believe it is legitimate today to look back critically at those years leading to the European unification miracle and ask ourselves whether, before and after 2004, we all – European institutions, states, academic communities, politicians and civil society – did enough to address the challenges of this unprecedented enlargement. The geostrategic enlargement that is now ahead of us brings challenges of a similar scope.

The 2004 enlargement took place in an international environ-
ment with functioning authoritarian regimes and dictatorships of all sorts. For the EU, this enlargement, extending for the first time to new democracies in Central and Eastern Europe, was definitely a moment of political revolution, which called for new ideas. We did not know the response to the main question about what would give us a feeling of belonging together, not only at the level of states and peoples but also at the level of citizens. It was the biggest enlargement ever and it brought unprecedented economic disparities into the EU. The diversity within the Union grew fundamentally in all respects. Solidarity became a crucial political fact, decisive for the EU’s success. But the challenge of ensuring that a deeply diversified EU would remain viable and able to act as a political community based on shared principles could not be expected to be a walk in the park. New unifying forces and strengthened solidarity seemed to be obvious needs. An open question was ‘what will be our shared identity?’

My memory tells me that, when participating in debates in Brussels think tanks and then in Council meetings, we put emphasis on different issues. Meetings with Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), whether on an individual basis or within political families and official, enlargement-related structures, extended the time and space devoted to discussions on cooperation, mutual support and shared responsibility. The European Commission was overwhelmed by the epochal challenge of building a political community of 25 Member States and their peoples. Being responsible in my home country for preparing for the accession of Poland, I worried, on behalf of this candidate country and its people, future EU citizens, whether the EU was investing enough in identifying the forces that would keep us together as a community of values. Had the EU found the right balance between freedom, competition and solidarity with and for those who were weaker? Were all of us prepared for the fundamental choices we had to face?
When I look back, I have the impression that we all saw European solidarity as a starting point and not as part of the long process of integration and building of an ever closer union and European citizenship, a concept that still requires further consideration. I believe we saw the consequences of enlargement in a static way and were not taking into account the strategic patience needed to make solidarity grow, to maintain hope in the project and, last but not least, to ensure that the newcomers developed feelings of ownership and responsibility.

The 2004 enlargement countries had only recently regained political sovereignty and were prioritising broadly understood security issues, going beyond the military dimension. For some of those in charge of accession, it was obvious that there would be difficult situations, tensions and moments of lost votes, but probably none of us assumed at that time that anti-European political forces would grow on Polish soil.

The 2004 enlargement did not go unnoticed by our neighbours, the people of Ukraine, who saw it as a new iron curtain erected by the Union. At that time, we told our neighbours that the capacity for their institutional participation in European integration did not yet exist in the European Union. That led to the concept of the Ring of Friends, envisioned by Romano Prodi. While providing a form of coaching for Ukrainian administrators, politicians and civil society over the past two years, I realised that we must not ignore the lessons from 2004. It is true that you join the EU on your own merits but Central and Eastern European countries have a lot in common in their experiences of the enlargement process.

While the focus on a new sense of European identity, solidarity, values and the human face of Europe played key roles in debates about the ‘big bang’ enlargement, issues of ethics and politics were
rather absent. The good news was that the ‘new’ Europeans clearly saw the idea of the public realm as much broader than the idea of the nation state. I would say that the European dimension was gradually getting through to people and winning their hearts and minds. I would say, however, that there were doubts about whether the core values that seemed sufficient for the existence of a Europe of six, nine or even 15 Member States would suffice for a Europe of 25.

This led to the introduction, in 1993, of more elaborate accession criteria, the Copenhagen criteria. There was strict monitoring of the implementation of the entire acquis before accession. Whether we should have looked for other things that could unite us, provide new aspirations and ensure a common understanding of solidarity, including responsibility for the community, remains a
valid question. For Ukrainian accession, I am insisting on investing in the best possible enlargement process, with both the European Union and Ukraine being well prepared for it.

I remember conversations with French and German MEPs regarding the growing inequalities after 2004 and their expectations that the very sharing in the same legal project would generate feelings of belonging, inclusivity and responsibility. That was good to hear but I expected that, in reality, solidarity would be put to a serious test after 2004. I was not only thinking in terms of institutional or collective solidarity, based on law, but also solidarity on a personal level, between citizens. That was probably due to the fact that, in the new Member States, solidarity was seen as being based on emotion rather than on shared values.

The idea of the boundaries of solidarity popped up in the context of support from the European budget for the newcomers. It is true that, throughout the history of enlargement, the newcomers have always grown faster than the older members, also thanks to the solidarity-based policies. Of course, enlargements have never been only about economic benefits from trade and the single market for old and new Member States. And we all know, only too well, that, for the 2004 newcomers, the EU was an anchor ensuring that all the reforms put in place as they transitioned to democracy and a market economy would be irreversible.

The treaties had to be changed but there was relatively little change in the European institutions, beyond adjustments of size, which could hardly be seen as reform. This was true for the European Commission, where 10 new Commissioners were added and shared responsibilities with the functioning college until the next election cycle. It was true for the European Parliament, which was joined by observers appointed by national parliaments, from the
time the accession treaty was signed, through to formal accession and beyond, until the 2004 elections. The decision-making process was not damaged. The legislation mechanism continued working. Where we could see some hiccups was in the areas requiring unanimity, in my view delaying reforms in the areas of justice and home affairs.

What I would describe as unfortunate changes became quickly visible when it came to the intergovernmental machinery. Unprecedentedly frequent meetings of ad hoc or regular groups of Member States took place and summits increased in number. The European Council gradually became a quasi-legislative and decision-making institution, and decisions were frequently pre-agreed among the old Member States, in particular within the Eurogroup. Chancellor Angela Merkel spoke about the Union method in the College of Europe in Bruges at the end of 2010 but the spirit of intergovernmentalism had been reinforced by the 2004 enlargement. This spirit was additionally fortified by the Lisbon Treaty, which made the European Council a new European institution, although it also gave the European Parliament important new powers.

Having said all that, I would insist that the 2004 European elections made more visible the sense of a common destiny and an understanding of European unity within diversity. However, this did not eliminate uncertainties, and sometimes even a lack of trust, expressed through the Commission introducing new elements into the accession process. During the electoral campaign, I could see concerns in some old Member States, particularly in Germany, related to economic inequalities or fear of potential tensions regarding the labour market. The post-2004 history raised the questions of whether formally shared values made solidarity sufficiently powerful to avoid undermining the legitimacy of the new order, and whether we did enough after 2004 to protect the
solidarity concept, and in particular to achieve a good balance between attitudes of collective and individual solidarity.

The data on the 2004 elections in the eight post-communist states demonstrate huge differences in participation rates, from 16.97% in Slovakia to 20.87% in Poland and an average of 38.85% in the Baltic republics. To a certain extent, these differences had a concrete historical basis. In the case of Slovakia, it is useful to remember that, owing to its political situation, it joined the accession group after a delay. In the Baltic states, historical and security-related factors played a role, while in Poland the perception of the general public was that an extraordinary pro-accession mobilisation had already taken place, at the time of the accession referendum, on 7-8 June 2003.

The question is to what extent the 2004 elections could have added democratic legitimacy to the EU in the new Member States. In the old Member States, the European elections had already acquired significance as an instrument for the representation of citizens’ interests. The political capital of the European Parliament was already appreciated there, while, in the new Member States, European integration had mostly been a matter for national governments which played publicly visible roles during the whole accession process.

One can say that the perceived importance of the European Parliament was reflected in a low turnout. But it is worth noting that the 2004 elections took place at the end of the period between 1999 and 2004 when participation rates across the EU had been declining generally. From dozens of academic articles taking into account a huge number of independent variables impacting voter turnout, only few seem sufficiently relevant to the 2004 elections in the new Member States. I would underline the fact that the 2004
elections were held for the first time in the new Member States, eight of which had fresh memories of the non-democratic past. This, combined with a lack of understanding of the relevance of the only directly elected European institution, led to a lack of political interest among the public at large.

In countries like Poland, where participation rates were 58.85% in the accession referendum and 45.68% in the 2019 European elections, it is clearly not justified to take the turnout of 20.87% in 2004 as a political demonstration of anti-European sentiment. In the European referendum in June 2003, turnout had been 58.85%, and 77.45% had voted for accession. So when elections came, for most people in Poland, EU accession was already an accomplished deed, confirmed on 1 May 2004, and even before that when we had celebrated the end of negotiations in Copenhagen on 13 December 2002. Even if the elections could be seen as putting the finishing touches to the enlargement process, the epochal moment of returning to Europe had already been achieved and the people of Poland felt they had already mobilised themselves in extraordinary numbers for that purpose. The last moment of exhilaration was 1 May 2004. People on the voting lists for the 2004 elections were not associated with the European process but rather with Polish politics. Still, having looked at those elections with hindsight, it can be said that they were one of the defining moments for European integration. But people’s engagement in European elections did not recover until 2019 when, for the first time, two truly European challenges – the rule of law and the climate crisis – dominated the campaign and stimulated the turnout (which reached 50.66% for the EU as a whole).

Moreover, if we look at the European institutions through David Easton’s ‘black box’ model, as a structure of relations in each society through which binding or authoritative allocations are formed
and executed, 2004 can be seen as a crucial moment in the history of the EU.

With the accession of 10 new members with different historical trajectories and social models, and various modes of governance and political cultures, the space for various interests to be represented and the capacity to absorb differentiated constituencies expanded geographically and politically. This opened the possibility of forming and executing those authoritative allocations in a different way, not only on the basis of Member States’ interests, but also on the basis of citizens’ expectations.

The 2004 elections were monumentally significant also because they provided a decisive step in legitimising Parliament as a pan-European project. Sending a diversified crop of new MEPs to Brussels and Strasbourg, Parliament had expanded its reputational power as representing a larger base of European citizens. This, in turn, gave Parliament increased

“How much information do we really need? Make your choice in the European elections on 6 June.”
Greek poster to promote the 2009 elections | © European Parliament
bargaining power in interinstitutional relations, where both the Commission and the Council tend to be conservatively configured along the lines of national representation. For the European Parliament it was a watershed moment, in which it became a progressive counterpart.

Thus, any subsequent elections should be put on a spectrum of continuity, as a moment of consolidation or disruption of the EU’s evolutionary processes. It is my view that this evolutionary process between 2004 and 2009 was driven by a congruence between citizens’ expectations and the institutional reforms that were to serve those expectations. It was also the beginning of the evolution toward a community of shared values where trust and solidarity were tested.

The 2009 elections came round very quickly and took place in the rather traumatic context of a global financial crisis. It can be said that they constituted a crucial test for the European institutions and the 27 Member States, which began to be measured according to how capable they were of solving problems that extended beyond national borders, impacting EU citizens and assuaging their anxieties about the climate, growth, energy and the rule of law. Some of these issues remain on the EU’s agenda to this day.

In the 2009 elections, turnout continued on its downward trend. I would venture to say, though, that what really should concern us was and is the discrepancy between different levels of citizens’ interest in European elections in different countries. If we take 2009, we see Member States with mandatory voting systems (Luxembourg and Belgium) where participatory rates were 90.76 % and 90.39 % respectively. The real issue is huge disparities among all other states where citizens themselves decide whether or not to vote. We see among them Malta, a new Member State with 78.79
% participation and, at the other extreme, Slovakia with 19.64%.

What this shows is that, back in 2009, we had not yet found the key to unlock the hearts and minds of the voters, to ensure that they would see Members of the European Parliament as their representatives in decision-making at the EU level.

European electoral law, in spite of the efforts of the European Parliament, continues to be unfinished business and, as in 2009, voters in 2024 will do their European job within a variety of national electoral frameworks. It will take many more years, especially in relatively young European democracies, for people to stop seeing the EU as a political construct based on cooperation between national governments. In both 2004 and 2009, national electoral templates weakened the European legitimacy of the elections, making them devoid of a European dimension. It took us 10 more years to start seeing the European elections as an inherent part of the European political landscape with a growing number of truly European issues dominating the campaigning processes, and forming a European public.

In both the 2004 and 2009 elections, the European Parliament was rather unsuccessful in promoting itself as the only directly elected European institution whose power and impact on citizens’ lives had been seriously expanded since the direct elections in 1979.

The 2009 elections were also, in a sense, a check on the pulse of the new enlarged Union. Some politicians, observers and promoters of a small EU considered the outcome of the bold geopolitical decision of 2004 as an artificial implant that would be rejected by the EU’s body. However, low participation in the election by citizens of new Member States did not have any impact on the qua-
lity of their representation in the EU. The big bang enlargement actually added smoothness and improved functionality to the EU as a whole. For full representation is always better than partial representation.

I would also say that, in Poland, for example, the 2009 European election influenced the domestic political market in a positive way. The results suggested stability in voting patterns in the country. Previously, the political environment in Poland had been somewhat unpredictable, with big swings away from established parties towards alternative parties, and ongoing splits and mergers of key parties. In 2009, the large national parties consolidated their positions, and smaller ones failed to make a breakthrough. The voters opted for a stable domestic political scene, perhaps also perceiving it as a sign of a desired Europeanisation and a retreat from the dog-eat-dog nature of national politics. In this sense, paradoxically, the fact that European elections were treated as an extension of domestic politics had a civilising effect on shaping the country’s political party system.

The 2009 elections were not groundbreaking or revolutionary in the way that the 2004 elections had been. They showed instead the consolidation of the new EU, the absorption of possible enlargement aftershocks as a form of learning how to ‘be together’. And, looked upon from this vantage point, they moved the needle toward continuation on the proposed spectrum of continuation and disruption. It is true, however, that, in those times, disruptive, anti-European parties had not yet become politically meaningful.

Campaign issues and the recent visibility of the EU in the context of pandemics, climate-related matters, and Russian aggression towards Ukraine point to a rather high turnout in 2024. Also, the accumulated political power resulting from a number of electoral
cycles will most likely contribute to further stabilisation of electoral patterns.

For some time, the idea of citizens as ‘masters of the treaties’ has been floating around. This change towards a citizen-based Union is slowly but inevitably materialising. And, in my view, the lesson from this comparison between 2004 and 2009 is that this change is best metabolised politically through enlargements.

The accession of Ukraine, Moldova, remaining candidate countries from the western Balkans, and possibly Georgia, will enfranchise their peoples as EU citizens. It will allow them to vote in the European elections. We, the citizens of countries that are already EU members, often do not appreciate enough the symbolic meaning of the European vote. But for the newcomers, the ability to participate in an electoral process with a continental impact gives additional weight to the initial decision on accession.

I thus hope that the elections to be held after the next enlargement will be a moment as important for reuniting Europe as were the elections of 2004 and 2009.
The 2014 elections were marked by two key realities: a European Union (EU) that has been deeply transformed with the Eurozone crisis of the previous years and the invention of the lead candidate process. It is safe to assume that the former contributed to the latter, since the EU has gone through a period in which the legitimacy of decisions, including the austerity measures that were implemented in some countries, was deeply questioned.

The inception of the lead candidate process in 2014 has to be understood as the result of various long-term trends since the Treaty of Amsterdam, including the increasingly empowered and assertive role of the European Parliament, the growing empowerment of the President of the European Commission and the increasing role of the European Council.
The 2014 European Parliament elections were also the first elections to take place after the Treaty of Lisbon, which prescribed that the European Council must take into account the elections to the European Parliament when proposing a candidate for President of the European Commission (Article 17(7) of the Treaty on European Union). The Treaty had thus established a link between the result of the European elections and the appointment of the head of the EU’s executive.

Based on that provision, the main political parties appointed their lead candidates, on the understanding that the candidate of the political family that won the most seats in the elections would become the President of the European Commission. Accordingly, the 2014 elections witnessed a competition between the following candidates: Jean-Claude Juncker (Group of the European People’s Party), Martin Schulz (Party of European Socialists), Guy Verhofstadt (Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe), José Bové and Ska Keller (European Greens) and Alexis Tsipras (Party of the European Left). The European People’s Party won the most seats, and Jean-Claude Juncker became the Commission President.

The lead candidate process, known mainly by its German name, *Spitzenkandidaten*, has created many debates and controversies within the EU. The 2014 elections are remembered primarily for this process, despite being the first European elections to take place after the financial and economic crisis, which had shaken the EU to its core. The EU’s response to the crisis had created many divisions between the Member States.

This chapter sheds light on the rationale behind the creation of the *Spitzenkandidaten* process, its (lack of) impact and its potential effects on the institutional set-up of the EU.
The rationale

The core rationale behind the lead candidate process was to bolster EU democracy, primarily by doing two things: Firstly, by creating an electoral link between Parliament and the Commission, it would make the EU’s core executive more democratic. Secondly, by making executive power the prize in European elections, the lead candidates would seek to raise awareness about those elections, and thereby increase voter turnout.

The logic, based on observations from national elections, was clear: the personalisation of candidates tends to enhance electoral competition by informing and mobilising voters. This was also
expected to hold true in the European elections; the nomination of lead candidates was expected to personalise the election campaign and, in turn, boost voter turnout. It had been suggested that open candidacies and rivalry for the position of the Commission President would liven up electoral competition and build a greater connection between voters’ choices and the make-up of the EU institutions. In short, the aim was to raise the stakes of European elections and personalise European politics, thereby increasing turnout and ultimately strengthening the EU’s democratic legitimacy.

While the overall motivation behind the lead candidate process was to bolster the EU’s democratic credentials, Parliament’s willingness to support the process was also driven by its interest in strengthening its own position within the EU’s institutional set-up. The issue of interinstitutional dynamics and the division of labour between EU institutions is beyond the scope of this chapter. Having said that, the lead candidate process cannot be discussed without touching upon this key dimension, which is addressed briefly in the final section of this chapter.

The (lack of) impact

In the 2014 elections, turnout remained low, in fact hitting an all-time low at 42.61% (compared to 42.97% in 2009). EU citizens were largely unaware of the lead candidate system and the indirect influence that their vote would have on the selection of the Commission President. An in-house study by the European Parliament revealed that merely 5% of voters in 2014 identified ‘influencing the choice of the President of the European Commission’ as their primary motivation for casting their votes. Citizens were unawa-

re of individual lead candidates, particularly those outside their respective home countries. One study showed that awareness was highest in Luxembourg, France and Germany, at 74.8 %, 63.3 %, and 60 %, respectively.

By contrast, awareness was considerably lower in northern and eastern European countries, averaging 35.2 %, with the United Kingdom exhibiting the lowest level of knowledge at 13.9 %. Not surprisingly, the study revealed that familiarity with specific lead candidates was highest in the candidates’ home countries. Approximately 55 % of voters in Luxembourg and 25 % in Germany and Belgium could name one or more lead candidates. However, in other Member States, the average was only 8.2 %, and, in the UK, only 1.1 % of voters could recognise a lead candidate. While recognition of lead candidates increased the likelihood of voters turning out to European elections, at least for the most visible candidates (Juncker, Schulz and Verhofstadt), those effects were minor because only a minority of EU voters were able to identify the political party to which the candidates belonged.

All in all, post-electoral research reaches sober conclusions regarding the overall impact of the lead candidate process. Scholars conclude that the role of the lead candidates was minimal in most countries and, therefore, had a minor impact on voter participation and voter choices. The lead candidate process neither defined the EU’s policy agenda nor boosted public engagement. Overall, the

2. Based on a post-election survey by the Alliance of European Conservatives and Reformists (now the European Conservatives and Reformists Party) in 15 Member States, where voters and non-voters were asked directly after the elections about the degree of awareness of the political parties and candidates at the European level.

process ‘had little impact on the second-order nature of European Parliament elections’.

**Why so little effect?**

This lack of effect is unsurprising, considering that the lead candidate process was implemented hastily. Firstly, the election campaigns were insufficiently developed, offering minimal time for the visibility of both the candidates and the election process to be established. Candidates tended to focus their campaigns on countries where they already had recognition, anticipating a positive impact on the electorate. Larger Member States, notably Ger-

many and France, were preferred campaign locations because of their larger populations, which translated into more seats in the European Parliament. Consequently, Germany and France emerged as the most appealing countries for campaign activities.

It is clear that exposure to information on EU politics, the European elections and the lead candidate process is crucial to ‘enable citizens to formulate a preference for the Spitzenkandidaten’\textsuperscript{5}. However, while the overall coverage of the elections was ‘adequate’, media interest in providing information about the lead candidates was low and did not produce any mobilisation effect. This was the second reason behind the lack of impact.

Exposure to (televised) debates between the candidates resulted in heightened cognitive and political engagement and increased support for the EU among young citizens. However, unfortunately, the debates reached only a limited audience.

Thirdly, it was problematic that national parties did not pay much attention to the lead candidate process and did not explain it sufficiently to their voters\textsuperscript{6}. Starting the process without the necessary buy-in from national parties limited the impact.

Overall, the pre-electoral debates did not result in ‘increased party-political competition or a real choice between rival political


\textsuperscript{6} D. Braun & S.A. Popa, S. A. This time it was different? The salience of the Spitzenkandidaten system among European parties, \textit{West European Politics}, 41(5), 2018, pp. 1125-1145. For a very detailed account of the political happenings in the run-up to the elections (the nomination procedures of the European parties, their nominees as well as their campaigns) and the preceding negotiations, see N. Peñalver García & J. Priestley, \textit{The making of a European president}. Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2015
programs”. In fact, debates were primarily shaped by anti-establishment and Eurosceptic parties rather than the lead candidates.

**Parliamentarisation?**

While the innovation of the lead candidate process does not seem to have had a significant impact on awareness or turnout in the 2014 European elections, there is one more important question to ask: did it affect the EU’s interinstitutional dynamics?

The 2014 election has been judged as a victory for the European Parliament, in its role as ‘the constant challenger of the principles of EU governance”. Parliament introduced a competition to define the shape of representative government which had been unthinkable for much of the EU’s history. After one of the lead candidates had become the Commission President, analysts built on the parliamentarisation thesis to affirm ‘the institutionalisation of the *Spitzenkandidaten*”.

Studies assumed that the freshly established lead candidate process would have ‘important implications for the interinstitutional dynamics in the Union and the future of European democracy”.

They argued that this procedure had constituted ‘a decisive and perhaps irrevocable shift in the EU’s institutional balance from a system centred on the European Council to a parliamentary

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model, with the accompanying “perils”\textsuperscript{11}.

In 2019, as Ursula von der Leyen, who had not run as a lead candidate, became President of the European Commission, it seemed that the experiment had not necessarily led to a radical transformation. Accordingly, there is no ‘inevitability about the development of parliamentary government in the EU’\textsuperscript{12} but rather a path dependency that ‘has characterised the EU’s interinstitutional relations and party politics’\textsuperscript{13}.

Opinions on the desirability of the EU’s parliamentarisation diverge significantly. While some promote a contest for the head of the executive and the political programme as being key to a democratic polity, others warn against the danger of the Commission losing neutrality-based legitimacy.

\textit{Conclusion}

The lead candidate process was introduced in 2014 to strengthen the links between EU citizens’ choices and the EU’s policies and actions. However, one key issue with the process was that it largely remained an initiative of the Brussels elite and failed to raise awareness among the wider public. The reasons behind this were multifaceted and included election campaigns that were too targeted and a lack of attention from media and national parties.

The lead candidate process has certainly bolstered the powers of the European Parliament. In 2019, the process did not work out as intended by the groups in the European Parliament, and it re-

\textsuperscript{12} Shackleton ibid., p. 199.
\textsuperscript{13} Christiansen ibid., p. 1007.
mains to be seen how it will be implemented for the upcoming elections in June 2024, but the genie is out of the bottle, and Parliament will continue to demand its say – in one way or another – on who becomes Commission President. However, as the EU is not a fully-fledged parliamentary system but is based on dual legitimacy (of its Member States and its citizens, represented by Parliament), the decision on who sits at the helm of the Commission will remain a process of negotiation between the European Parliament and the European Council.
Between 23 and 26 May 2019, European citizens voted in the ninth European Parliament elections, 40 years after the first European elections by direct suffrage in June 1979. The world had clearly changed in the interim. The number of countries called to vote had tripled: 28 compared to the nine of the first elections (i.e. the six founding countries, plus Denmark, Ireland and the United Kingdom), and common rules, including proportional representation and minimum thresholds, were now in place to smooth out some of the differences between electoral systems. However, profound differences in national electoral systems remained, and these had a significant impact on the election campaign and the selection and election of candidates, with several countries using a system of blocked lists, while others used preferential voting.

The European elections of May 2019 took place in a challenging context, notably because the 2016 Brexit referendum had caused
the biggest setback for the European integration process since the
collapse, in 2005, to approve the Treaty establishing a Constitution
for Europe.

**Brexit: a lever for relaunching the debate on the future of Eu-
rope**

The withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European
Union provoked an even greater trauma than the rejection of a
treaty or, more generally, any non-agreement. This was the exit of
a Member State from the Union based on the rules laid down in
Article 50 of the Treaty on European Union. On 23 June 2016, Brit-
ish voters did, in fact, vote to leave the European Union, by a very
narrow margin (51.89 %) and with widely differing results across
the UK. The Remain campaign won in London and Scotland, with
60 % and 62 % of the vote respectively, while the Leave campaign
triumphed in areas with lower incomes and high unemployment.

Although the referendum was only advisory and non-binding,
the political effect was gigantic and set in motion the tortuous pro-
cess of the United Kingdom’s withdrawal from the European Union,
which went on for years; the formal announcement of the with-
drawal was made in March 2017 but membership did not effectively
end until January 2020. The Brexit process strongly influenced the
whole debate on the future of the European Union, prompting an
internal debate about relaunching European integration. On 7 Fe-
bruary 2018, Parliament had already voted to reduce the number of
Members of Parliament (MEPs) from 751 to 705, but the postpone-
ment of the UK’s exit resulted in an election campaign in 2019 for
the same number of parliamentary seats as previously, with the UK
also electing MEPs, despite having already voted to leave the EU.

Expectations regarding the 2019 European elections were very
high, not only in relation to the results themselves, as always, but also regarding the overall turnout. Voter turnout was exceptional; at 51%, it was higher than in the four previous elections and the highest since 1994, exceeding the psychological threshold of half the eligible voters, with an overall increase of more than 8% compared to 2014, and increases in 19 Member States. That achievement was primarily thanks to the strong participation of young people, with a 14% increase in turnout among citizens under 25 and a 12% increase among those between 25 and 39. The European Parliament also played an important role through its institutional campaigns; 44% of Eurobarometer survey respondents confirmed that they had seen or heard messages from the European Parliament encouraging citizens to vote; this figure was 39% among non-voters but rose to 50% among those respondents who had actually voted in the elections.

The Spitzenkandidaten process in the 2019 European elections

According to a Eurobarometer survey, the motivations that led Europeans to vote for the renewal of the European Parliament were, firstly, the economy and growth (44%), followed by the environment and climate change (37%) and human rights and democracy (37%). The issue of Brexit also played an important role; according to 22% of respondents, Brexit was a decisive factor that influenced their choice to vote. More generally, it is important to highlight that the increase in turnout could be linked to a growing feeling of belonging to the European Union and the belief that one’s vote can influence the political dynamic, at least partly. Just over two thirds of respondents (68%), the highest level recorded since 1983, said their country had benefited from EU membership.

Following the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty in December
2009, Article 17 of the Treaty on European Union was applied, according to which the European Council, by qualified majority, proposes to the European Parliament a candidate for the office of President of the Commission, taking into account the outcome of the elections, and thus strengthening the ability of the citizens’ vote to influence the EU’s democratic processes. In 2014, the Spitzenkandidaten (lead candidate) process was successful, and Jean-Claude Juncker was elected by the European Parliament as Commission President, after having been nominated as the lead candidate for the Group of the European People’s Party (EPP), and after the EPP had obtained the largest share of the vote in the elections.

In 2019, the major European political parties had each nominated a candidate for President – Manfred Weber for the EPP and Frans Timmermans for the Party of European Socialists – but even these two largest parties were aware of the inevitable need to reach agreement after the elections. After delicate negotiations, in which the political groups in Parliament could not agree on a common
candidate to preside over the Commission, agreement was reached on Ursula von der Leyen, the then Minister of Defence in Germany. Von der Leyen finally obtained the support of the largest parliamentary groups and the government leaders in the largest Member States. This fact led to the European Parliament’s vote of approval for her candidacy on 16 July 2019; the first female President of the European Commission was elected by the European Parliament with 383 votes in favour, i.e. by only 9 votes more than the required expected majority of 374. The mandate of the College of Commissioners began on 1 December 2019 with this slim majority, and, shortly afterwards, in January 2020, the United Kingdom effectively withdrew from the EU, leading to a change in the composition of the European Parliament, with a partial redistribution of seats (27 out of 73).

The start of the European legislative term: the COVID-19 pandemic and the European recovery plan

The European legislative term began, therefore, with an excellent turnout in the elections for the European Parliament, but with a significant challenge; at the beginning of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic abruptly changed everything and threw Europe and the entire world into a frightening health, economic and social crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic posed significant challenges for our societies, adding more stress to life in European households and families. It soon became clear that the European Union had to deliver a collective response to the phenomenon and to show that it still stood for the principles of solidarity between Member States and the idea of a common destiny. In May 2020, in response to the unprecedented crisis caused by the pandemic, the European Commission proposed a temporary recovery instrument, entitled Next Generation EU, and targeted measures in the EU budget, with a timetable for the approval of new own resources for the 2021-2027 period. This was
adopted in December 2020 following the European Council’s agreement on 23 July 2020.

What was unusual and novel about this experience was the establishment of a European recovery plan to support the European economy and the labour market, which led to investments of EUR 1 800 billion (more than EUR 2 000 billion in today’s money). This included NextGenerationEU, which contained a new EUR 672.5 billion transfer instrument, the Recovery and Resilience Facility, to foster investment and make Europe greener, more digital and more resilient. This was an extraordinary step forward in European integration; the European Commission was able to finance itself on the markets, thanks to the issuing of European common debt, which allowed funds to be raised on the markets to finance common objectives.

NextGenerationEU constituted a new paradigm for the EU. Unprecedented additional measures on the economic and social fronts were essential to ensure that Member States had sufficient resources at their disposal to buffer the crisis. These included the suspension of the Stability and Growth Pact and the establishment of the Support to mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency (SURE) instrument to safeguard jobs from the pandemic crisis, as well as the new framework on State aid rules. The EU had thus decided to accelerate, in a practical sense, an integration process that had seemed stagnant, if not in decline, after Brexit.

**The Conference on the Future of Europe**

The crisis forced unprecedented decisions, but it was clear to all that the constitutional instruments at the Union’s disposal were not up to the challenge. The Conference on the Future of Europe started on 9 May 2021 with precisely these premises. It represented
a genuine and innovative political process and dialogue between citizens, European, national and regional institutions, civil society and social partners – a form of collective reasoning on the current and future objectives of the European Union.

The Conference ended after a year of online discussions and in-person events organised in the form of citizens’ panels, and more institutional work carried out by the Conference Plenary Assembly and its thematic working groups, which were places of close and heated confrontation between institutional representatives, social partners, civil society organisations and citizens.

Citizens, who had been randomly selected, were encouraged to share their ideas, voice their doubts, and propose alternatives in panels, in an open and direct dialogue with the three main European institutions. This unprecedented opportunity for citizen engagement signalled a significant shift towards a more inclusive and democratic decision-making process at the European level. This commitment resulted in a final set of conclusions, with 49 recommendations and 326 concrete measures to strengthen the EU’s policies and capacity to act on the main themes of the European agenda, namely climate change and the environment; health; a stronger economy, social justice and employment; the European Union in the world; values and rights, the rule of law, security; digital transformation; European democracy; migration; and education, culture, youth and sport.

After the start of Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine in February 2022, the enlargement of the European Union to include Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and the Western Balkans and the deepening of the EU’s legal and institutional dimensions were more necessary than ever. Following these events, in May 2022, the Conference released its ‘Report on the final outcome’, proposing
significant treaty reforms, including the introduction of European referenda; a substantial reduction in the use of national vetoes and an end to unanimity in decision-making; the extension of the ordinary legislative procedure to more policy areas; the adoption of a new European electoral law with transnational lists (as set out in the position adopted by the European Parliament on 3 May 2022 that now requires unanimity in Council to be adopted) and the call for a Convention to reform the European Treaties.

The need for a Convention to reform the Treaties

Alongside the adoption of the final report and the conclusion of the Conference on the Future of Europe on 9 May 2022, the European Parliament adopted two resolutions. The first, on the follow-up to the conclusions of the Conference on the Future of Europe, was
approved on 4 May 2022 and affirmed the position of the European Parliament in initiating the process of the revision of the Treaties. The second, on European Parliament proposals to review the Treaties, was approved on 9 June 2022 and already proposed specific amendments for the reform, with the aim of starting the procedure with the Council of the European Union and the European Council. In this resolution, special importance was given to ending unanimity in decision-making, extending the ordinary legislative procedure and introducing into the text of the Treaties a Social Progress Protocol and the European Pillar of Social Rights, among others.

Finally, on 22 November 2023, a report drafted in the Committee on Constitutional Affairs was adopted by the European Parliament’s plenary with amendments to the Treaties and triggered the procedure of Article 48(2) of the Treaty on European Union. The European Parliament proposal was forwarded by the Spanish Presidency of the Council of the European Union on 18 December 2023 to the President of the European Council, Charles Michel.

**Conclusion**

Despite the developments outlined here, many national governments today still subscribe to the idea that passarelle clauses can be used within the existing treaty framework to move from unanimity to qualified majority voting in the Council. This notion is not realistic, as the passarelle clauses have not once been activated since the Lisbon Treaty entered into force.

The European Council President must now include on the agenda of the next Council meeting, on 21 and 22 March 2024, a discussion and a decision on the call for a Convention for treaty revision, given the increasing urgency of a unified approach to the enlargement process and institutional reforms. Article 48(2) of the Treaty
on European Union establishes that only a simple majority of the Member States (i.e. 14 Member States in favour) is required to initia-
te the Convention.

This is the context in which campaigning for the European elections of 6 to 9 June 2024 will start. The campaign should be more European, following the recommendations made by Parliament in its resolution of 12 December 2023 on the European elections 2024. Proposed measures include making the logos of the European po-
itical parties more visible on the national ballots, enhancing the visibility of the candidates from all political families who could pre-
side over the Commission and setting up post-election procedures to strengthen the role of the European parties in the appointment of the President of the Commission. These proposals may be adop-
ted by the European political parties at their respective congresses. Council must also adopt the new European Electoral Act during the 2024-2029 term; this includes new measures such as a Union-wide constituency and transnational lists, with the goal of strengthening the European public sphere and overcoming the divergences of 27 national electoral systems.

For the 2024-2029 term of the European Parliament, a multitude of challenges awaits, each challenge demanding careful considera-
tion and proactive solutions. It is time for the European political parties and others involved in the European project to disseminate the message, in their election campaigns, that a reform of the Treaties is necessary and urgent. In this regard, and inspired by the ‘Ventotene Manifesto’, the Spinelli Group in the European Parliament adopted the ‘Proposal of a Manifesto for a Federal Europe: Sovereign, Social and Ecological’ on 29 August 2022, setting out a detailed programme towards a European federation that reflects the most innovative ambitions of the Conference on the Future of Europe.
Representing a population of approximately 450 million individuals across the European continent, the European Parliament has the significant responsibility of addressing the diverse needs and aspirations of its citizens. As we embark on our campaign for the 2024 European elections, our vision is clear: to champion a united, democratic, sovereign, ecological, social and solidarity-based Europe. We are called upon to embody the spirit of the ‘Ventotene Manifesto’ as we navigate the complexities of governance and strive to build a Union characterised by solidarity and peace. It is through collective effort and unwavering commitment to our shared values that we will be able to surmount the challenges ahead and usher in a new era of progress and prosperity for all Europeans.
Many words have resurfaced in the early 2020s: quarantine, curfew, etc. Words that were no longer in use in everyday life in most of Europe or were only used in a very limited time or space.

War. War never went away, but it was tuned out because, since the Yugoslav wars, it has never felt as close as it does now. Conflicts in Europe in the 21st century were at the edge of the continent and became (semi-)frozen conflicts rather than escalating. War in Europe was not a front-page topic for the past four elections. However, for the European elections of 2024, war and its consequences are taking centre stage again.

Those negative words also brought with them more positive words that were present for a long time but now went from simple ideas to realities. A case in point is common EU borrowing, which became reality thanks to the COVID-19 pandemic through the Next
Generation EU programme.

Other words, like enlargement, progressed, being at last pronounced positively by European Union representatives. Although at too high of a price, the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia brought us new energy invested in enlargement. Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia are now candidate countries. Prior to 2022, very few, apart from their own populations and the Young European Federalists (JEF Europe), had supported the aspirations of those countries to become EU members.

This war created further positive externalities for the enlargement process of the Western Balkans, with the accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia finally starting after being stopped many times by vetoes, Bosnia and Herzegovina becoming a candidate country and Kosovo applying for candidate status.

When asked which words best describe their emotional status, Europeans chose uncertainty, frustration, helplessness, anger and fear. Among all those negative emotions, one positive shone through: hope.

A revolution of hope is needed for 2024 and JEF Europe therefore chose hope as the focus of our European election campaign, EurHope. Hope does not mean sitting on your couch hoping things will get better but getting up and acting. Things do not change by themselves; you have to make it happen. This is the core of active citizenship.

1. Resilience and recovery: Public opinion one year into the pandemic - European Parliament’s Spring 2021 Eurobarometer: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/files/be-heard/eurobarometer/2021/spring-2021-survey/key-findings.pdf
1.5 million votes and 5 069 proposals gave us the Agenda of Hope, the outcome of our representative consultation in which we asked young people what they wanted for the future. The platform, in 22 languages, was similar to a dating application, not making matches between people but between the ideas they hold in common.

Young people’s top three concerns are institutions, the economy and the environment. The youth of the EU is more forward thinking than is typically acknowledged, and its number one priority was institutions. Young people understand that meaningful change can only occur through updating of the EU’s structures. Transparency, ethics, justice and citizen participation are particular consensus areas where they agree that change is needed.

Institutional change is also needed to strengthen the EU’s voi-
The economy and social justice are also at the heart of young people’s ideas for the future, ranging from easier access to employment to encouraging ‘Made in Europe’. The 2024 elections take place in June, like the very first elections, and, as in 1979, inflation will be an important topic. Already then, federalists had asked for the budget of the Union to be strengthened to tackle that challenge. Now, while instruments like the Support to mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency (SURE) have helped, the financing of the budget, including by additional resources, is rightly again on the agenda of the election and of Belgium’s presidency of the Council.

Support for health, education, innovation and technology, all enablers of a better economy and the well-being of people, are also among the main concerns of young Europeans.

The climate crisis remains a burning topic, with one third of the Agenda of Hope dedicated to it. Young people want to enjoy a clean environment and sustainable food and to preserve biodiversity, all of which requires a faster energy transition and a more sustainable economy. Moreover, to continue to benefit from the right to travel freely without harming the environment, young people demand the development of accessible rail transport.

Civil society has a big role to play in advocating for these ideas, reflecting on what they mean in practice and on the path to make them a reality, day after day. This is why the reflections and analyses of civil society are part of the Agenda of Hope.

The Conference on the Future of Europe was an important democratic exercise, in which civil society, and JEF Europe in particular,
played their part. However, the conference conclusions, the proposals from citizens, still have to be put into practice. Many of them are linked to the major challenge that young people identified in the EurHope consultation: institutions.

In 2022, we marched for Europe in Strasbourg with hundreds of young people to ask for the Conference proposals to become reality. However, they have yet to be implemented. Citizens’ panels, citizens’ agoras and other similar mechanisms are seen as a bridge between two elections. While participative democracy is very important, asking what people want without delivering it risks doing more harm than not asking at all outside of the elections. Listening to citizens means not only passively hearing what they have to say but also actively listening, to answer their requests. 2024 is yet another occasion to answer them, but for this to happen, we citizens need to be loud and clear.

The direct election of the European Parliament was a major victory for the federalists. Over the course of 10 elections, progress has been made and the European Parliament is more powerful now than the appointed assembly it was at the beginning of the European construction. The European Union is more democratic and closer to a federation than when it was founded. Still, a lot of work is needed to make European elections truly European and the European Union fully democratic.

European parties have to take the wheel and engage proactively with citizens’ priorities. While they are taking their time to emerge as political forces, they are critical in making European elections transcend national debates and in ensuring that the European elections are truly European. Their emergence and role was already the key demand of JEF for the first 1979 campaign. The demand for transnational lists remains today. Although Parliament has voted in
favour of transnational lists, they have not yet been put in place, at a time when the Union direly needs European public opinion, and Europe-wide debates.

In 2024, 20 years after our ‘Give Europe a face’ 2004 campaign slogan, this issue persists and the foreign affairs policy of the EU is a case in point with the presidents of the different institutions elbowing their way past one another to represent the EU.

The constitution we requested for the past 10 elections has yet to become a reality. Once again, our Union reacts to crises but, for the 2024 elections, we can choose a long-term perspective on the type of union we need – not to react but to act. Treaty change and
conventions are also words making a comeback. Blocked since the attempt at a Constitution for Europe in 2005, Parliament’s resolution of November 2023, following the Conference on the Future of Europe, resurrected the hope for a Union fit for purpose. A hope for new treaties to face the common challenges of today and tomorrow, and which could also have helped us with the challenges of the past.

‘It’s time for change... It’s time for Europe’, the slogan of our 2009 election campaign, is still relevant: Parliament still has no right of initiative and the electoral system needs reform. It is high time to break away from nationalist vetoes and intergovernmentalism to embrace truly democratic and transparent decision-making with codecision of the European Parliament and the Council of the EU.

2014 and the successful use of the Spitzenkandidat (lead candidate) system, brought some clarity to the electoral process for citizens, even if short-lived. ‘Move Europe forward’, our slogan for those elections, did come partially true, but the lead candidate process was trampled over in 2019. With parties still in the process of selecting their lead candidates for 2024 as these lines are written, the scenarios of 2014 and 2019 remain open.

In 2019, JEF Europe’s campaign slogan for the European elections was ‘I choose Europe’. At the time, after the Brexit referendum, the choice seemed to be between stopping here or continuing this beautiful yet unfinished project. A few months before the election, in March 2019, members of JEF Europe had demonstrated with JEF United Kingdom at the Put it to the People march in London in support of the Remain campaign. While the United Kingdom chose to leave the EU, the rest of the Union chose to unite, and the 2024 elections have other stakes.

2024 will be the first election of the European Parliament without
the participation of United Kingdom citizens, as the country left the EU at the end of January 2020. As in 2009, only 27 Member States will vote for the future of the Union but, while the 2019 Union was a shrinking one, the EU of 2024 is looking at expanding once again.

When asked in December 2023 if they will participate in the upcoming European elections, 68 % of EU citizens said they were likely to vote if the elections were held in the following week\(^2\). This was nine percentage points higher than five years earlier, and the responses in all Member States were at 50 % or higher. Participation rates in 2024 are likely to be pushed up by the departure of the United Kingdom, as this country has a large population and was in the bottom 10 countries in terms of participation (37.18 % in 2019).

The participation of citizens in democracy is key. Civic education on their rights and the duty to vote, especially for young generations, is a crucial element that is mostly lacking in the curricula of EU countries. This is why civic education projects such as JEF’s Europe at School activity, running for 25 years and counting across Europe, are key. Increasing citizens’ participation and their understanding of the EU is among the Agenda of Hope proposals. Our bus tours of 2014 and 2019, as well as all our street actions to raise awareness of the importance of this democratic exercise at every election since 1979, have taught us this much: informed European citizens are more likely to want to vote. The same can be said about positive attitudes toward a topic, as we can see with the increase in positive views on enlargement now that it is being widely discussed (in spring 2023, 64 % of Eurobarometer respondents agreed with the EU granting candidate status to Ukraine\(^3\)).

2. EP Autumn 2023 Survey - Six months before the 2024 European Elections: https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3152
For many years, lower participation in European elections compared to national elections in several countries was mentioned as proof of disaffection towards the EU. In 2019 participation was the highest it had been since 1994\(^4\). However, differences between countries is striking: the average of 50.66% hides the disparity between a participation rate of 22.74% in Slovakia and 88.47% in Belgium.

This election year is another occasion for all of us to hit the streets to get others to vote and to join us to enact change. Year after year, election or not, we have to step up democracy and keep it alive by acting. JEF Europe has raised awareness about ‘Democracy under Pressure’\(^5\) every year since 2006. The state of democracy in our own countries but also elsewhere in Europe is fundamental for the future. A democratic Russia would not have invaded Ukraine again, a democratic Belarus would not have helped Russia, a democratic Hungary would not have vetoed support for Ukraine and countless other important decisions.

People coming together can defeat the odds and reverse the course of history. As Polish people showed in 2023, high participation can change the results of an election. 2024, with its record number of elections worldwide, is a strong reminder of what we can lose, but also of how much progress we can make. There is hope for democracy but it requires all hands on deck.

2022 was the year of youth; may the elections make 2024 the year of hope!

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5. https://jef.eu/campaign/democracy-under-pressure/
Actions
As one reads the contributions to this book, among the emerging themes are the gradual broadening of the powers of the European Parliament and its growing role in the functioning of the European institutions. This development was made possible by the struggles and determination of men and women who saw in this institution, elected by universal suffrage, the centre point of European democracy, as it directly represented the citizens of the European Union.

The Single European Act, which was the first substantial amendment to the Treaty of Rome, recognised the fundamental role of the European Parliament\(^1\). Moreover, the establishment of the coope-

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1. Extract from the preamble, Single European Act, 1986: ‘Convinced that the European idea, the results achieved in the fields of economic integration and political cooperation, and the need for new developments correspond to the wishes of the democratic peoples of Europe, for whom the European Parliament, elected by universal suffrage, is an indispensable means of expression’.
ration procedure with the Council marked a key milestone in Parliament’s transformation into a genuine co-legislator.

In 1992, the Maastricht Treaty established EU citizenship and explicitly mentioned the principle of democracy as a pillar of the emerging European Union.

When the Treaty of Lisbon entered into force in 2009, ‘representative democracy’ was recognised as the basis for how the EU functions. The Treaty updated the architecture of the institutions following the biggest enlargement in the history of the European Union.

It also introduced the participatory dimension of democracy, which is based on strengthening the role citizens play in political decision-making individually and directly. The European Citizens’ Initiative is one of the key innovations in participatory democracy introduced by this Treaty. It allows one million citizens from at least seven EU countries to ask the European Commission to propose legislation or other measures they deem necessary in its areas of competence.

The many consultation procedures available in the European Union also aim to boost direct participation by allowing citizens to make their voices heard on the topics being discussed.

More recently, the Conference on the Future of Europe was a major pan-European democratic exercise, with citizen-led debates, allowing people from all over Europe to share their ideas and help

2. ‘The functioning of the Union shall be based on representative democracy’ Article 10(1) Treaty on European Union
3. 2004 enlargement: Czechia, Cyprus, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Malta, Poland, Slovenia and Slovakia.
shape our common future. It was held between 2021 and 2022, and 800 EU citizens were divided into four panels, which held 12 meetings and covered 9 themes, resulting in a final report containing 49 proposals with more than 300 concrete measures for the Presidents of the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission. Those measures came about thanks to over 50 000 Europeans who took part through the work of the citizens’ panels.

Strengthening the EU’s democratic system is one of the priorities of the European Parliament, which is committed to developing new channels and tools to involve citizens more directly, actively and regularly.

Together.eu is a European Parliament project that started off under the slogan this time I am voting in the run-up to the 2019 European elections, with the aim of building a pan-European community committed to democracy.

It welcomes individuals, civil society organisations and youth networks from across the EU that want to get involved in the democratic life of the EU, in particular by encouraging voters to go to the polls in the 2024 European elections.

Bringing the European Union and its citizens closer together also calls for a good understanding, based on reliable information, of what the EU does and its impact on the lives of Europeans.

The What Europe does for me website created by the European

Parliamentary Research Service is an example of a trustworthy platform. It provides a wide range of clear and concise information with examples of the positive difference the European Union has on people’s everyday lives. Everyone can easily find specific information about what the EU is doing for their region, the sector they work in or their leisure time activities.

By exercising our right to vote, we have the opportunity not only to choose a Europe in line with our beliefs and values but also to actively commit to the fundamental value underlying the EU’s way of life – democracy – and to defend this place of peace, freedom and rights that we have been building since 19507.

7. Reference to the Schuman Declaration of 9 May 1950, considered the founding text of European integration.
For more information on how you can vote in the 2024 European elections, check the link:

For more information or to join the together.eu community:
Preserving the memories of the European Elections

Inês Nauwelaers
Assistant Curator at the Jean Monnet House Service of the European Parliament

For the 2024 European elections, the Jean Monnet House, along with the House of European History and the Parlamentarium of the European Parliament, held an exhibition entitled *VOTE: A European Story. Ten European elections that shaped our world*. This exhibition delved into the history of supranational democracy in Europe and the European elections.

Using historical objects and documents, the exhibition aimed to prompt reflection on the history of Europe and the events that led to a united and democratic Europe. Among the artefacts displayed were the artwork *Vassoio di Ventotene* created by Ernesto Rossi and depicting his time as a political prisoner on the island of Ventotene in 1940, and a facsimile of the 1950 Schuman Declaration, the document that laid the foundation for what would become the

Each European election is characterised by certain debates and political issues, and each of those elections can be remembered differently, for example, by the treaty that entered into force during that election, or photographs depicting a notable demonstration at that time, or the slogan used for a certain election. Safeguarding these forms of historical heritage, for example, by exhibiting them if they are tangible or by sharing them with others through storytelling if intangible, is essential, as it contributes to the preservation of the history of European democracy.

These forms of heritage are proof of our history and, as such, can allow us to reflect on, but also learn from, the past. By preserving these memories of the European elections, we ensure that the lessons of the past are not forgotten and that we remember the milestones leading to the European project and the values of the European Union: equality, human dignity, the rule of law, freedom and human rights.

Remembering our shared past also enables us to fight against disinformation and misinformation, something that poses a challenge and threat to our democracies. To tackle them, we must understand and safeguard our past.

In recent years, we have seen a surge in youth protests, where people take a stand on a range of issues. This active participation by individuals is what reinforces democracy. Objects preserved from the protests, for instance, banners and posters from demonstrations or photographs of the protests, can remind us that we have a right to civic participation but that we can also put those thoughts on paper by going to vote and choosing candidates who align with our values and priorities. By exercising our right to vote, we make
our voices heard and contribute to the decision-making processes.

Current and future generations should thus familiarise themselves with these memories of the European elections, to better understand the importance of participatory democracy and the role that we, as individuals, play in shaping our future. This civic engagement and the lessons from the past can then help us to make informed decisions when going to vote. We should, therefore, stay informed and invest time in our democracy, but also take the time to safeguard and share these memories with others.
The European Parliament elections of 2024 mark the tenth occasion for Europeans to directly elect their representatives at a supranational level. Since 1979, universal suffrage has enabled citizens to be at the heart of the decisions that affect their lives at the European level. This book surveys these ten formative milestones, their roots, and their implications for the future. The contributors, some of them firsthand actors or witnesses of the events, provide a compelling overview of the elections, covering a wide range of perspectives. Through both scholarly and hands-on approaches, the authors consider the ten European elections in their historical context, from the first steps towards a fully democratic Parliament to the gradual widening of its powers, with meaningful reflections on the future prospects of European democracy.