

Interview with Professor Simon Hix discussing the European Election results.

Government Department, LSE

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00.00

Justin Gest:

This month's European elections marked a significant turn in the political winds of Europe. Hi, I'm Justin Gest, welcome to the Government Department hotseat. With us today to discuss these different changes on the continent is Professor Simon Hix. Thanks very much for being here, Professor.

Great, well let's get started. Some commentators have claimed a massive victory for the European right. Others are saying that that impression is actually inflated. What do you think?

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Simon Hix:

Well, there's a difference between the extreme right and the mainstream right. There's been a lot of publicity about the rise of the extreme right in these elections – the British National Party for the first time won two seats in Britain; Geert Wilders, an anti-immigrant party in Holland won four seats; Jobbik, an anti-Gypsy party in Hungary won several seats; and across Europe it looked like we've seen a rise of the extreme right. It's not actually clear that that's the case. These elections, European elections, are always protest elections in which extremist parties do well, so it just happens that this time these parties have made a breakthrough, but there's also been votes for the extreme left as well. We've seen the extreme left do well in Germany, we've seen the extreme left do well in France, so it doesn't look like there's any more extremist voting this time than there is normally in European elections. The big difference however is that the centre-right parties have won, they've done very well – it looks like the economic crisis at the moment has favoured parties on the centre right, so whether they're in Government or opposition, voters tend to have flocked to them, and this has been the case in all of the big member states. We saw it in Britain with the Conservatives in opposition, we've seen it in France, in Poland, in Germany and in Italy – where the centre right are actually in Government, they've done well in these elections despite the fact they're in Government. So normally governing parties lose these elections, and opposition parties win; but this time round we saw governing parties in several of the big states win and they tended to be parties on the centre right.

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JG:

Right, now correspondingly the social democrats have lost across Europe. Why do you think that is?

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SH:

Well, its interesting, because in every country the social democrats when I talk to them are saying, well its all because of my country, its all because of Labour and scandals around expenses in Westminster. In Germany, they say the SPD are the junior coalition partner, they've done badly in Italy, they say the left have done badly because it's a new party that's formed and they need time to get on their feet, and in Poland they say we've done badly because the party's sort of collapsed in recent years. So all across Europe, they come up with a sort of local excuse. Well, something systematic must be going on, and what I suspect is happening is that the economic crisis means that the centre-left voters are turning away from these parties because the centre-right have taken on a lot of the baggage of the mainstream centre-left, so centre-right parties across Europe are now saying we're in favour of large public spending programmes to get the economy moving; we're in favour of regulation of financial markets – five, ten years ago they were opposed to these things. So, the centre left – where are they going, they haven't got anywhere to go. So its their voters who are either voting for these centre right parties in government saying yes, that's the policy I'm in favour of, or they're voting for more extremist parties, or they're voting for green parties. We saw green parties do very well, so green parties or more radical left parties. And some of their voters on the lower income groups who feel threatened by globalisation, by large scale immigration into Europe and across Europe, and by rising unemployment. Those voters are the voters who are starting to vote for the extreme right parties. We saw that with the BNP in the north of England – they were largely ex-Labour voters, Geert Wilders's party in Holland, these are largely ex Dutch Labour Voters, and Jobbik in Hungary, suggests that those voters are largely ex-social democrat voters in Hungary, so its interesting how these voters on more lower income levels are abandoning those centre left parties and going more extreme.

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JG:

The centre left has had their thunder stolen as it seems. How do you think this will effect European policy making?

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SH:

Well, there's a difference between the European level and the national level, so in Brussels it looks like the centre-right are now going to run the show for five years, so we've seen the mainstream group on the centre-right, the European People's Party, emerge as the most powerful force in the European Parliament. It looks like they're going to have a big enough coalition in the European Parliament to push more free market agenda in Brussels than we have done for the last five years. We've now got in a sense a unified government in Brussels; we've got centre-right majority in the commission, centre-right majority in the council, centre-right majority in the European Parliament, so I think we're going to see the EU pushing quite a sort of liberal free market globalisation agenda in the next five years, so we may see the EU moving even more in that direction that it has in recent years. At the national level its hard to know – I think what we're going to see in the coming years is a lot of these social democrat parties are going to have to think about how they react in some way, how do they

address the concerns of those voters who are being laid off, or those voters who are feeling threatened by migrants? Its very difficult for social democrats to think about how to address that but what they need to come up with is some kind of policy that gets these people back in jobs so they don't feel so threatened by migration.

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JG:

And many of those people, many of those voters, weren't even at the polls this time around, turnout was very low.

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SH:

Yes, turnout was about 40%. Turnout has sort of gone on decline in these elections but its been around 40-45% in the last three European elections, so on one hand you can say these are mid-term elections in a national election cycle, around 40% is not too bad. US Congressional mid-terms are around 40%. Local Government elections in Britain are around 40%, so its not that different. But from the European Parliament's point of view, it really does undermine their legitimacy, because one of the things the European Parliament rests on in terms of its power in Brussels, standing up against the Commission and standing up against the Government, is to say we speak for the people of Europe. So the Governments can easily turn round and say, who is more legitimate – us, the national Governments elected in our country by big turnouts, 75-80%, or you, the European Parliament, elected by only 40% of the people. So, the European Parliament is worried about turnout, and the European Parliament will have to think seriously about how does it address this issue in about five years time – they've let it fester for too long now. National governments are saying they don't really care about this low turnout, because they know they lose these elections in mid-term elections, so its going to be up to the European Parliament to think about how to address this issue.

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JG:

Alright that'll do it, Professor Simon Hix you are off the hotseat. Do join us next time for the next edition of the hotseat. Until then, goodbye.