

Europe's new political landscape to determine top EU jobs candidates

Two weeks after the European Parliament elections, the field remains wide open for top EU jobs. Voters have expressed two very clear messages, but leaders are finding it difficult to take them into account as they search for European Commission chief Jean-Claude Juncker, EU summit chair Donald Tusk and ECB president Mario Draghi's successor



European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras, President of the European Council Donald Tusk, ECB President Mario Draghi, German Chancellor Angela Merkel

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Given that voter turnout increased massively, from a meagre EU-wide 43% in 2014 to 51% this time around, in a continent-wide trend, the first message of voters was: "EU politics matters to us". Clearly, voters realise decisions in Brussels, Strasbourg and Frankfurt affect their lives, values and interests and they want to have a say.

Their second key message was: "We want change." The most spectacular trend across Europe was a heavy loss for traditional governing parties. It happened in the UK, with Labour and the Conservative party together receiving less than 25 per cent of the vote. Even if this was partly Brexit-related, the same phenomenon was seen in France, where the ex-powerhouses on the right and the left together received less than one-sixth of the vote. In Germany, Angela Merkel's

Christian-Democrat CDU lost, while the Social Democrats (SPD) was humiliated. In a first for a national election, Germany's Green party beat the Social Democrats and did well in a number of other countries too.

No wonder EU leaders are having trouble

Alongside the trio of new chiefs for the Commission, the European Council and the ECB, top jobs include a new Speaker in the European Parliament and a new foreign policy supremo.

These five jobs must show a balance on three accounts: geographically, gender and party-political terms. There needs to be balance between the East, the West, East and South and big and small; in gender, with at least one, perhaps two women; and in party-political terms, with three parties getting some part of the pie rather than just two as was seen in the past, making the puzzle more complicated than ever. In such a situation, informal networks tend to do the deals. The traditional mainstream parties on the right and left can no longer play that role. They had started to lose their grip on the electorate before but the process is now accelerating and also affecting the two formerly formidable German Volksparteien ("popular parties"), CDU and SPD.

No wonder EU leaders are having trouble agreeing on how to divide top EU jobs

Revealingly, in the six biggest member states, Christian-Democrats came out on top only in Germany and the Social-democrats only in Spain. In the four other big states, the national populists ended first: in France with Marine Le Pen, in Italy with Matteo Salvini, in the UK with Nigel Farage's new "Brexit" party and in Poland with the governing PiS of Kaczynski.

This is why nobody can see a clear centre of power among national leaders in the European Council.

What will Chancellor Merkel will do?

The Parliament offers no compensation. The body has a strong say over the nomination of the Commission president, a process in which it arm-twisted the European Council last time around by imposing the winning party's candidate, Jean-Claude Juncker. Back then, the Parliament's institutional objective trumped internal party-political rivalry. Not so much now: the "lead candidate" of the party which ended first, Manfred Weber (EPP), doesn't have the support of his main rivals. Social-democrat Frans Timmermans (S&D) and Liberal Margrethe Vestager (ALDE) are rooting for their own chances, which is making Brussels rife with gossip.

It's hard to imagine the German Chancellor letting go of the main political prize - the Commission presidency

A key question is what Chancellor Merkel will do? As so often, she stays out of the frontline and prefers to wait. She certainly lost power at home and in Europe but she is still the informal leader

of the biggest parliamentary bloc (the EPP has 180 Strasbourg seats out of 751) and has the largest number of national leaders in her party. Even if her party sent a weak candidate to the arena - the unimpressive Manfred Weber, it's hard to imagine the German chancellor letting go of the main political prize - the Commission presidency.

Two ways out

Observers see two ways out. One would be to make sure Germany gets the ECB presidency, for instance with Bundesbank president Jens Weidmann. A second way out would be to strike a deal with French president Emmanuel Macron and have Weber at the helm of the European Commission, which would also pacify the Parliament's institutional appetite, but grant the Frenchman a face-saving institutional reform - the creation of a transnational European list for the next elections in 2024.

Even if new power centres make their voices heard, the old guard will not give way that easily. Let's see what that would do for voter turnout in 2024.

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