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The Current: What do the European Parliament election results tell us about EU politics?

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PITA: You're listening to "The Current" from the Brookings Podcast Network. With us today is Célia Belin, a visiting fellow with our Center for the U.S. and Europe here at Brookings. This weekend, voters in Europe turned out in record numbers to elect representatives to the Parliament of the European Union.

Célia, it looks like the balance of power has shifted, but perhaps not so dramatically as some feared. What can you tell us about the result of this election?

BELIN: So, as you said, this weekend, all 28 member states of the European Union, including the United Kingdom, obviously, held election to choose national representatives to send to the European Parliament. And you know that the European Parliament is one of three main bodies within the European Union, along with the EU Council and the EU Commission. But it's the most representative, maybe, of voters as well of popular preferences.

So, maybe, I will say there's three lessons from this election. The first one is a very high participation. It was record high in 20 out of 28 member states, with around 51 percent participation. It means that Europeans want to say something about the future of the EU. The second lesson is that there is always a domestic message and that domestic message cannot be broken. I cannot give you the whole domestic message for each country because it varies tremendously. The power was reinforced in Hungary, in Poland, even in Italy with a clear win of the far right over maybe the populist coalition of Five Star. But, in some other countries, like Greece, it even led to future elections when Tsipras, who suffered a big loss, decided to call for elections.

And the third big lesson is that behind the domestic consequences of these elections, you always have a European message -- a clear European message. And that's what you were referring to in terms of results -- is that you do have a strengthening of Eurosceptic, far-right, nationalistic forces all over Europe. However, it is not maybe the very big wave that people really feared. And it has just showed its strength, but two thirds of the Parliament, more than two thirds of the Parliament, still squarely is pro-

European, whether it's from the left or from the right. And you have surprises among the Greens, among the Liberals, so new forces are emerging as well.

PITA: What is some more of the context about what's going on? Maybe pull out some of these particular countries and some of the highlights about what's happening there that fed into these results that you think is really important for us to understand.

BELIN: So, I think at this particular moment in time, and that might explain the high turnout and participation from Europeans, Europeans feel they are under threat and feel the world is changing around them. And maybe the way the European Union is functioning right now might not be the ideal way for Europeans to organize. So, on the nationalistic side, there is a push for a return to the power of sovereign nation, for taking sovereignty back from Brussels, you know, refusing to pull sovereignty on a whole range of issues, and believing that in this globalized world, the best answer to globalization is that the nation-state level. And so, you see a force in that direction. At the same time, Europeans feel under threat from migration, from climate change, from the emergence or consolidation of strategic competition with China, Russia, the U.S., and what is the European Union in the middle of all of this?

And so, for all of these different challenges, all sides offer different answers. So, the Liberals will say that -- for example, French President Emmanuel Macron will push the idea that the EU needs to be strong, that it needs to be integrated, that it needs a European army. But, the Greens will say that in the face of the biggest challenge, such as climate change, they need to address that challenge first, and maybe in cooperation with other powers outside.

The second big element of context here is, of course, Brexit and the future of the EU. British voters took a sovereign decision in a referendum to decide to exit the European Union. But, it's been three years already and this has not happened for many different domestic reasons in the UK, and the difficulty, the sheer difficulty of leaving the EU as well. But this has sort of framed the debate for all of the other member states on whether staying in the EU was actually a good idea. And the resounding answer is yes, because there is actually nobody at that moment really pushing for an exit of any other European member states, including within nationalistic, sovereign forces.

PITA: A lot of the focus here from the States, I think, is particularly on that Brexit question. What are some of the other important aspects of this election that we shouldn't lose sight of and all that?

BELIN: I would say there was a temptation to frame that election as a battle, like French President Emmanuel Macron often says, between progressives who wants to integrate further and nationalists who want to reduce the power of the European Union. But actually, this election has demonstrated that there's a sort of third voice -- a voice that is definitely pro-European, but is not squarely in the liberal camp of Emmanuel Macron, or even in the conservative camp of someone like Angela Merkel in Germany. It's the voice of the Greens. It's the voice of the Social Democrats who, even if they've lost 30 seats, like the conservative, are still present and they're holding up better than expected. And these voices are actually pro-European, progressive voices who are focused on social justice and

are focused on providing a pro-European vision, but that would maybe push for more social growth or push for more ecological agenda. That has not yet found its voice at the European level.

PITA: So, these new members of Parliament will take their seats in July. What are some of the important things we should look for to happen, both between now and then, and then moving forward from there?

BELIN: So, immediately after these elections, the main political consequence is the beginning of a series of discussions and negotiations among European heads of states and within the European institutions for the making of the next European Commission, and deciding who should preside this commission, but also who should preside the European Council or who should be the next high representative. Who is the foreign affairs voice for the European Union? All of this are decided mostly by European heads of states, nominated by them and then a vote in parliaments. And so, the idea is that the political landscape that emerged out of these elections will have a tremendous influence on the choice from these heads of states.

So, because the first party was the European People's Party, the conservative group, at the European level, there is sort of a legitimate question on whether the next head of the commission, president of the commission, should come from this conservative force. However, the Social Democrats are making a push, and even the Greens are making a push for new voices and they have their own candidate and they're hoping to gain some leverage over these discussions.

At the same time, the Liberals and, in particular, Emmanuel Macron from France, are hoping to be a kingmaker -- because they sit in the center, between the left and the right -- hoping to have a voice and maybe decide on the next head of the commission. So, it's all of these discussions that will take place from now until November.

PITA: Okay. Alright, Célia, thank you so much for being here in explaining this today.

BELIN: Thank you.