



The 2019 European Electoral Campaign

In the Time of Populism
and Social Media

Edited by Edoardo Novelli
Bengt Johansson · Dominic Wring

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“This volume is ground-breaking in several ways. It offers insights on change over time, showing a growing understanding among voters of the European Union that they can affect with their votes. It is commendably sensitive and informative on variety and character of difference. It reveals clusters of states, parties and voters all on the move. Scholars and lay-readers alike will find insights explaining undercurrents that steer future trends more than the gusts on the surface.”

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University of Helsinki, Finland

“A timely examination of the challenges that the European Union faces through the magnifying lens of the last European Election campaign. The book places populist and right wing sentiments spreading on the Continent, including Brexit, multiculturalism, environmentalism and economic restoration, in the spotlight. Are these old issues of the EU agenda? Perhaps so, but for the first time they are explored from the perspective of the new communication ecosystem. Insightful reading, for both scholars and students!”

—Gianpietro Mazzoleni, Professor of Political Communication,
University of Milan, Italy

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Editors

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: A Campaign (More or Less) About the European Union

Bengt Johansson, Edoardo Novelli, and Dominic Wring

THE 2019 EU ELECTIONS

The 2019 European parliamentary elections took place against a backdrop of increased polarization within the EU involving several member countries. It was the first post-Brexit election, even though UK citizens still cast their ballots for candidates and parties in May 2019 just like voters in all the other 27 participating states. However, the British contingent was

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elected for only part of the term because the UK intended to be the first country to leave the EU, eventually doing so in 2020. Brexit definitely cast a shadow over the whole 2019 election campaign (Bolin et al. 2020; Webb 2020). Elsewhere challenges to the EU's authority from Hungary and Poland and the election of a Eurosceptic government supported by two populist parties in Italy further intensified debate over the legitimacy of the Union. This narrative was reinforced by the rise of anti-EU sentiments across Europe. Eurosceptic parties of a populist and even far-right persuasion believed electoral success in EU elections would help mobilize similar opinions and movements in several other member countries (Tallberg 2020).

When the campaign started, there was a general feeling that, this time around, something was actually at stake in terms of the European project. Maybe the EU election was not a so-called second-order affair anymore. Related to these tensions were political controversies stemming from the large flows of immigrants from the Middle East and Africa during 2015; these resulted from a refugee crisis that had deepened divisions between and inside member countries. The resulting polarization challenged the role and effectiveness of the EU-project, but also highlighted the greater need for transnational cooperation (Bolin et al. 2020). Another issue high up the public agenda, due to the particularly dry summer of 2018, was environmental policy. The Swedish teenager and activist Greta Thunberg became globally famous for challenging world leaders to take immediate action to mitigate the challenges posed by climate change (Holtz-Bacha 2020).

The aforementioned controversies ensured the political context was radically different from that preceding the last EU election in 2014, when the aftermath of the global financial crisis had heavily influenced the ensuing campaign. However, while other issues challenged the primacy of economics this time, the topic continued to inform political debate in the lead up to the vote. The Eurobarometer poll in the spring of 2019 showed that welfare also remained a high priority in terms of the wider public agenda. As will be demonstrated in this book, political parties in some parts of the EU continued to place considerable emphasis on these issues in their campaigns.

Aside from the changing political landscape, there were also important developments in campaigning. The breakthrough of social media and alternative media during the last decade helped ensure they would play more of a role in the 2019 EU elections compared with previous contests.