

Edited by
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The 2004 Elections to the European Parliament





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*For Europeans of the new European Union
and especially Keri-Michèle, David and Chris; Tom, Hannah and
Laura; Jade and Sophie.*

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Malta

Mark Harwood

Few would have blamed the Maltese electorate had they followed the majority of their European brethren and showed a marked apathy towards the 2004 EP elections. In less than a year they had been bombarded by a highly polarised and politicised referendum campaign, followed almost immediately by a highly tense general election revolving around the issue of EU membership. Most Maltese were simply relieved when it was all over. Although turnout was markedly lower than in general elections – 82 per cent compared to 96 per cent at the last general election¹ – it was still the third highest in the EU,² even though voters had to elect only five MEPs, the smallest quota for any EU state, a fact that rankled some and became a campaign issue for others.

Background

Malta is a predominantly two-party political system with the consequent polarisation of policies extending to the issue of EU membership. The ruling Christian Democrats, the Nationalists, had been campaigning for EU membership since the late 1980s. Their policy was endorsed in the 2003 referendum on EU membership (with 53.65 per cent saying 'yes' and 46.35 per cent saying 'no'³) and by the subsequent general election which saw them returned to power with a sizeable majority in parliament. The main opposition Socialists, the Malta Labour Party (MLP), had long campaigned against what it termed 'full membership'. It was finally compelled to change its position after its defeat in the last general election, making a commitment to respect the wishes of the majority of the electorate. Thus, the divisive issue of EU membership was resolved before the EP elections. With both major parties in agreement on Europe, Malta's traditional two-party, polarised system was challenged by the rising popularity of the Maltese Greens, *Alternativa Demokratika*, which had never won a seat in the Maltese parliament, gaining

on average 1 per cent of the vote in general elections. Its popularity had steadily risen at the local level with electoral success in local council elections in 2003 and 2004. Consistently pro-EU membership, the Maltese Greens represented the greatest challenge to the ruling Christian Democrats due to their popularity in affluent, middle-class areas from where the Nationalists' normally drew their support.

The electoral system

The EP elections took place on Saturday 12 June. Simultaneous local council elections were held in 22 localities in Malta and Gozo. The EP elections may have boosted turnout in these localities from the 71 per cent registered in 2001 when the same localities last held local council elections.⁴ However, long-term voting trends would need to confirm this.

As in all elections in Malta, the EP elections were carried out using the single transferable vote system, a form of proportional representation used mainly by Malta and Ireland. The system allows voters to opt for candidates rather than parties. People give their order of preference for candidates from 1 to 10 with number one being given to their most popular candidate. Voters are not obliged to vote for the same party or to use all their preferences. Based on the size of the electoral district and votes cast, a quota is established which candidates must meet to be elected. Once they have reached that quota, any additional votes they win are then passed on to the candidate listed as the second choice on the voting papers. Once the second-choice candidate has reached the quota, votes are then passed on to the third preference, and so on, until all available seats have been filled.

The system was modified slightly for EP elections. Normally, Malta and Gozo are divided into 13 electoral districts with candidates needing relatively small quotas to be elected. For the EP elections, the fact that Malta was only able to vote for five MEPs meant that the electoral districts had to be scrapped and the vote became a national one. The quota was thus exceptionally high, standing at 40,954. Only one candidate, from the Christian Democrats, was automatically elected. While his additional votes were then passed on to the second preference, most candidates were elected through the elimination of those candidates who performed worst. Eliminations, additional counts and further eliminations made the process very protracted and results were not fully known until the following Wednesday. In addition to the protracted nature of calculating such a large quota, the merging of the electoral districts into one was also expected to have a huge impact on the campaign. Traditionally, candidates target constituents in their district, making door-to-door visits, organising local events and receptions, distributing leaflets. Patronage plays a key role. Large scale canvassing is limited to mass meetings, mass media and billboards. With many of the former methods unsuited to target the whole

population as one electoral district, the EP elections put greater emphasis on mass media methods, thereby giving a huge competitive advantage to the Christian Democrats and Socialists, both of whom have their own television and radio stations and extensive print media. Campaign spending is officially capped at Lm 600 (roughly £1,400) per candidate but the rules on spending are generally ignored, something denounced by the Greens. The main political parties are not obliged to disclose how much they spend and no official figures are available.

The 27-strong list of candidates was exceptionally long because one list had to be offered for the whole country. The two major parties each tabled eight candidates. In both cases they were a mixture of television personalities, the party faithful and one or two new faces. The Christian Democrats provided the most diverse and balanced list of potential MEPs, including a former minister, an academic, a Gozitan lawyer (the only candidate from Malta's sister island) and a non-partisan figure from the referendum campaign, a key to the party's attempts to win back floating voters. While none of the first three candidates was elected, the last candidate, Dr Simon Busuttil, had gained a strong reputation during the referendum for being an expert on the EU. This was reflected in his automatic election after easily jumping the quota on the first count. The list of Nationalist candidates was also notable for having two female candidates, the only women on the ballot paper. However, neither was elected.

The Socialists originally planned to nominate three candidates but subsequently nominated eight. While the list bore no surprises, it included a current MP, a high-profile journalist from the Socialist media and a founding member of the Green party, who had switched from Labour to the Greens and back to Labour. While the MP was successful, the latter two were not. The Greens nominated only one candidate, Professor Arnold Cassola, a high-profile member of the party and Secretary-General of the Greens in the EP. The remaining ten candidates, either standing as minor parties or independents, were mostly marginal figures with limited exposure and limited policies. However, four candidates were of particular note. Dr Emmy Bezzina (Alpha Party) campaigned in favour of divorce and abortion, political suicide in this staunchly Catholic country. Malta's first non-native candidate, the Nigerian-born Damian Iwueke, promised to represent everyone on the fringes of society while attacking the main parties for mismanagement of the country. The hunters' lobby, long dominant in local politics due to its sizeable membership and persistent threat to rescind its support from parties failing to defend its interests, tabled its first, independent candidate, Carmelo Farrugia and many keenly followed his prospects to see how truly coordinated and influential this group actually was. Finally, Norman Lowell, a highly colourful public speaker, gained wide exposure under his Imperium Europa party, largely thanks to his oratory skills rather than his extreme, far-right policies.

The campaign

Campaigning began some six weeks before 12 June. As the emphasis was on the mass media and billboards, the two main parties had a huge advantage with little, if any, exposure of non-party candidates on their political stations or in their papers. The Greens and other candidates had to rely on state television and the English-language press, although many independent candidates only got airtime on minor cable stations. The EP ran an exceptionally limited campaign, almost entirely restricted to the capital city, while even a high-profile visit by EP President Pat Cox near to the elections had a limited impact on the general public.

An interesting blend of domestic concerns and European factors appeared to dominate the electoral campaigns. Most candidates were preoccupied with promoting their credentials as prospective effective MEPs. Few candidates actually addressed policy or suggested initiatives. Wider European issues such as the new constitution or adoption of the euro were complete non-starters. The leader of the Opposition stated that it was more a question of jobs, unemployment and the cost of living than factors like the Constitution, which would dominate the debate.⁵

The Christian Democrats hinged their campaign on presenting a unified team with the slogans 'Competent, Consistent, Credible' and 'Yes, Let's Grow in Europe'. Rather than pushing any specific agenda, the party tried to win votes by attacking the opposition Socialists' credentials to stand as MEPs while promoting its status as a potential member of the largest EP group, the EPP-ED. The Christian Democrats argued that it was best to vote for consistent candidates who had always supported EU membership rather than for Socialist candidates who had only recently made, according to them, a superficial U-turn on Europe. They argued that members of the ruling party would sit with the largest group in the EP and so have greater ability to advance Malta's interests. This point was reiterated constantly, with billboards showing clearly the political makeup of the EP and the predominance of blue within that institution, even though the EPP's colour is green. EPP-ED Chairman, Hans-Gert Poettering, visited Malta in early April 2004 to stress this point. The Nationalists also made extensive use of reports that suggested that the EPP would perform best in the elections, as if hoping to score points through association.⁶ However, the EPP-ED manifesto was hardly mentioned, although the Christian Democrats did try and stress that the EPP-ED had been the most effective party in pushing for a sixth EP seat for Malta despite lack of support from the Greens and the Party of European Socialists (PES).

The Christian Democrats were always aware that the principal threat came from the Greens. In trying to offset support for the latter, the Christian Democrats may have made their gravest miscalculation. The persistently pro-EU Greens could not be discredited in terms of EU membership, so the party tried to highlight the European Green's support for abortion. This backfired

disastrously. The allegation emerged early in the campaign, giving the Maltese Greens the opportunity to show clearly that they were, and had always been, against abortion. Coupled with allegations of a whispering campaign against them, the Greens took legal action against six Christian Democrats, including Dr Busuttill and the party's secretary-general. Citing the well known fact that the Greens had advised their supporters to vote blue in the last general election, to ensure a pro-EU victory and so membership, the Greens were able to argue convincingly of being betrayed and so to ride a wave of sympathy that may have significantly contributed to their winning nearly 10 per cent of the vote. The Christian Democrats tried to drop the issue but the damage had been done.

The Socialists did not run such a coordinated team campaign. They emphasised individual candidates and their ability for self-promotion. The party's main slogan, 'Europe is all about You', seemed to reiterate this point. Party individuals played different cards, though all seemed united in attacking the government on the state of the economy, unemployment, the environment and the proposed pension reforms. Another principal preoccupation of the Socialist candidates was defending their individual and the party's right to change its policy on Europe. Some even claimed that by being anti-EU membership the party was the real European party because it had a realistic and unblinkered approach to the EU. Little if any emphasis was placed on the role of the PES in the EP other than its general voting pattern in favour of such issues as the environment, but the PES' manifesto was also a non-starter in campaign terms.

The Greens focused much of their attention on the personal credentials of their candidate as a long-serving member of the European Greens. With the slogan 'For the Country, not for the Party', the Greens hoped to capture the vote of all those dissatisfied with both major parties, repeatedly calling for a break with Malta's traditional two-party system. In a country where floating voters are few and people are more likely to abstain from voting rather than switch party affiliation, the Greens hoped that people could and would now opt for a third choice. Contrary to the message from the Christian Democrats, the Greens advocated Maltese representation in all three major EP political groupings to protect Malta's interests. While emphasising the European Greens' environmental record, the Maltese Greens downplayed the European Greens' general manifesto, their own commitment to divorce as well as contesting the Christian Democrats' claim that the Greens had blocked the campaign for a sixth EP seat for Malta.

While official results took some days to be issued, it became clear early on that there had been a large swing away from the Christian Democrats, and the Socialists had not won an absolute majority of votes (Table 22.1). Once the first preference votes were counted, it was noted that the Christian Democrats had won just under 40 per cent of the vote while the Socialists had won just over 48 per cent. The real and notable surprise of the election was the Greens' exceptionally strong performance with just under 10 per cent of the vote.

Table 22.1 Malta: 2004 EP election results

<i>Name of party or candidate</i>	<i>Number of first preference votes</i>	<i>% of overall votes cast</i>	<i>Number of EP seats</i>
The Malta Labour Party (Socialists)	118,983	48.4	3
The Nationalist Party (Christian Democrats)	97,688	39.7	2
Alternativa Demokratika (Greens)	22,938	9.3	–
Carmello Farrugia (Pro-hunting)	3,119	1.3	–
Imperum Europa (Far-right)	1,603	0.6	–
The Alpha Party	756	0.3	–
Damian Iwueke (Independent)	153	0.06	–

Source: Department of Information.

Because of the complicated nature of the counting and the fact that only one candidate, Dr Simon Busuttil, immediately reached the quota and was elected, it was uncertain for some time whether the fifth seat would go to the Greens or the Socialists. While the Green vote was significant, it was not enough to win a seat: two went to the Christian Democrats (Simon Busuttil, former head of the Malta-EU Information Centre; David Casa, executive secretary of the Malta-EU Steering Committee) and three to the Socialists (John Attard Montalto, MP; Louis Grech, former chairman of Air Malta; Joseph Muscat, MLP activist). The pro-hunting candidate won only 1 per cent of votes, barely one-fifth of the lobby's 16,000 members. The far-right Imperium Europa candidate did much better than many feared, scoring the second highest vote of any candidate not coming from the three major parties. The results surprised the ruling Christian Democrats who had expected to ride out a wave of euphoria following the 1 May celebrations and the valid criticism that the Socialists' U-turn on Europe lacked conviction. The latter had failed to convince many that the party had any policy on Europe other than its commitment to respect the wishes of the electorate. While support for the Socialists remained static, they claimed 'victory' in the EP elections, and the fall in support for the Christian Democrats reflected increasing criticism of government policy and EU membership.

The government faced several major challenges in the first few weeks of EU membership, with a new political leader and extensive negative press in the run-up to the elections. This included stories accusing the government of knowingly returning Eritrean refugees to their country of origin where they were subsequently tortured, accusations against the Foreign Affairs Minister which the Prime Minister announced he was investigating and yet

declined to launch an official investigation into, as well as negative press surrounding EU membership. The latter included disgruntled farmers accusing the government of misinformation to win the 2003 referendum, an outbreak of rodent infestation in Gozo after the island's landfill site was closed to comply with EU regulations, and Opposition claims that the fall in prices of certain commodities after membership would last only until stocks did, when prices would rocket. Several long-term factors worked against the Christian Democrats. An attempt to curb fiscal spending and increase revenue meant a substantial increase in the VAT rate on membership, a highly unpopular inheritance tax reform which hit the middle classes most, a planned reform of the pension system and general economic downturn with dwindling tourism, factory closure, troubles in Malta's national airline and problems with privatised national companies. All in all, the Maltese Christian Democrats got off more lightly than other ruling parties across Europe.

While the EP elections seem to become a confidence vote in the government, it is debatable as to how well they reflect general voting trends in Malta. The EP elections offered no scope for local patronage with little, if any, direct relevance for the daily lives of voters. People appear to have gone for candidates based on merit with all those elected having a strong knowledge of the EU. With a sixth seat now available in the 2009 EP elections, and, consequently, a lower quota, it is possible that the Maltese Greens could challenge Malta's traditional two-party system. For Malta's current batch of MEPs, it is imperative that they take up the suggestion of one successful candidate, Joseph Muscat, and try to coordinate regular meetings amongst themselves to make the most of Malta's limited voice. In outlining priorities, as Mediterranean people they can make a vital and much needed contribution to push for regional initiatives in this much neglected sea. At the same time, Malta desperately needs initiatives to tackle its environmental problems to ensure that future citizens have a habitable place in which to live. In this respect, it is to be hoped that the five MEPs make a real and valid contribution to Malta and the EU.

Notes

1. Department of Information, *European Parliament Election Results, 2004*. W. Hirczy de Mino and J. Lane, 'Malta: STV in a Two-Party System', <www.maltadata.com/2pty.htm>. The Maltadata website <www.maltadata.com> is a wealth of information on the STV system and Maltese electoral results.
2. *The Times of Malta*, 15 June 2004.
3. Department of Information, *Referendum Results, 2003*.
4. Department of Information, *2001 and 2004 Local Council Election Results*.
5. *The Times of Malta*, 9 May 2004.
6. S. Hix and M. Marsh, 'Predicting the Future: The Next European Parliament', <www.bmbrussels.be/files/news_4.pdf>