



The first elections to the European Parliament

In 2019 we voted in the European elections, the ninth in history. The first began forty years ago on 7 June 1979: they were won by the Socialists, they led to the election of the first female president of a European institution, and for a long time they were the most visible result of the path of European integration that began after the Second World War. The European Parliament is the direct descendant of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), the first true European institution, created in 1951 and made up of representatives from Belgium, France, West Germany, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands. Already in 1960 the Assembly - which recently became an organ of the European Community, descendant of the ECSC and ancestor of the European Union - proposed to be directly elected by the citizens every five years, to increase its democratic legitimacy, but the proposal was accepted many years later. The elections were originally supposed to be held in 1978, but some states did not have time to adapt their electoral laws.

The first European elections looked a lot like those still held every five years today. Each country elected a fixed quota of MEPs (Member of the European Parliament), who were to represent all European citizens and remained in office until the end of the legislature. The first European Parliament elected by the citizens had 410 MPs. Each of the most populous countries - France, Italy, West Germany and the United Kingdom - held 81 seats, the rest were split between the Netherlands, Belgium, Denmark, Ireland and Luxembourg.



Session of the Parliamentary Assembly in 1954 in the seat of the French Senate in the Palais du Luxembourg in Paris. (© picture-alliance, akg-images)

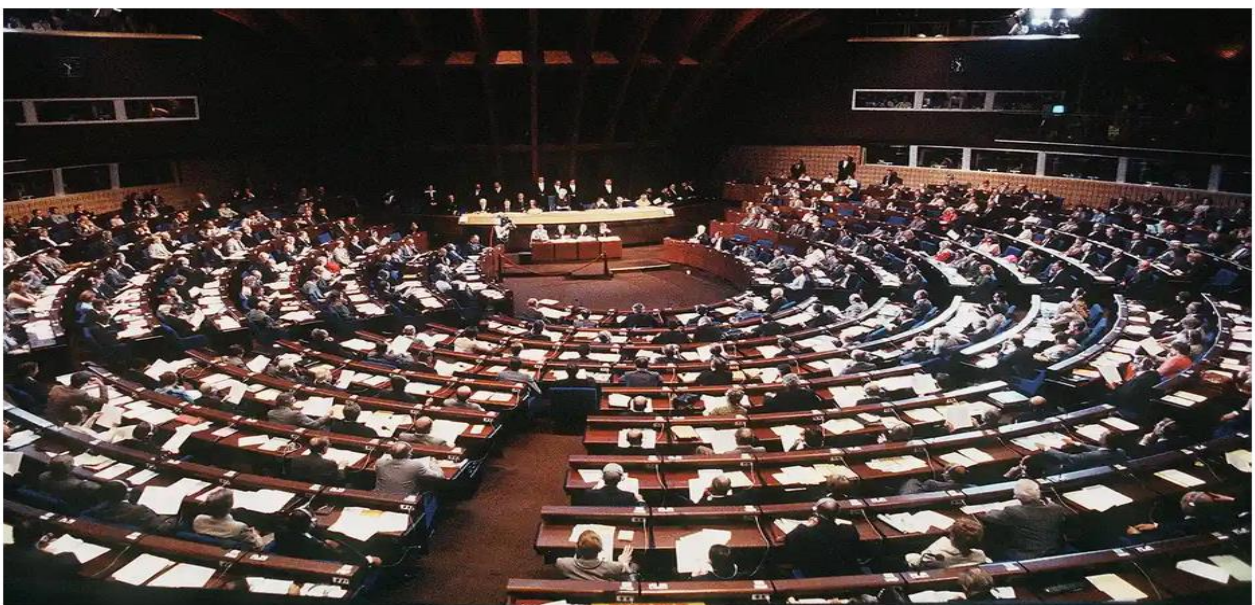




The powers of the Parliament were still very limited, and would have been extended only by the Lisbon Treaty of 2009: it could above all express opinions on the proposals of the European Commission, and in case discourage it, and worked on the Community budget together with the Council. The official seat was still that of Strasbourg, even if Brussels was establishing itself as an informal seat of daily work due to the proximity of other important European institutions.

The first elections were presented to the voters as a great democratic opportunity - until then the members of Parliament were chosen by governments - as well as part of a process of European integration that seemed inevitable. An educational video that was released in Italy before the vote explained: «The big problems of today are not just us. In Europe, for example, there are over 6 million unemployed, and most of them are young. All the countries of the community are aware of this, and are looking together for solutions to overcome the crisis: because every problem divided by nine is a little less big ".

However, some dynamics were the same as today. John Palmer, the Guardian's historical correspondent to European institutions, wrote in an editorial published in May 1979 that "in West Germany, Ireland, Belgium and the Netherlands it seems to us that the elections will be used as a convenient national poll to interpret consensus on national issues ". In another



📷 The European Parliament during the opening of its first session. Strasbourg, July 1979.
Photograph: -/AFP/Getty Images





passage, Palmer feared that the shortage of famous leaders among the candidates was reflected in the fact that "the most promising young politicians continue to think that their careers will be better if they stay in London or Paris.

How it went?

The turnout was very impressive, equal to 63 percent of the electorate (a record never broken again). The elections were won by the European Socialist Party, which obtained 27.6 percent of the votes, one and a half points behind the Popolari, the main center-right party. The Socialists did well almost everywhere, with some notable cases: in Germany the Social Democrats won the elections before the CDU (*Christian Democratic Union*), and in France the Socialist Party got a good result, coming close to the centrists - two years before François Mitterrand won its first presidential election.

In its first session, the new Parliament elected Simone Veil as its first President a position she held until 1982. "We need a Europe capable of solidarity, of independence and of cooperation," she stressed in her inaugural speech.



📷 Simone Veil giving a speech after her election as President of the European Parliament in 1979. Photograph: ullstein bild via Getty Images

Change and Sequel



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The basic pattern of the European party system continues to exist. However, it has expanded. In the 1980s the Greens came along and the Communists suffered break-ins. In the 2014 EP election, right-wing populists were also able to win numerous mandates for the first time. However, there are still two central actors: Christian Democrats (EPP) and Socialists / Social Democrats (PES / PES) form the largest political groups. In 2019, the EP consists of eight political groups and 22 non-attached MEPs. These MEPs represent around 160 different national parties, most of which have come together to form European parties at the European level.

Useful links:

<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/from-the-archive-blog/2019/jan/23/first-european-elections-june-1979> : The first European elections, June 1979

https://www.europarl.europa.eu/ftu/pdf/en/FTU_1.3.1.pdf : THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2019/637957/EPRS_ATA\(2019\)637957_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2019/637957/EPRS_ATA(2019)637957_EN.pdf): European elections: A historical perspective

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N_vjU6P2MSA: Simone Veil - first President of the elected European Parliament [Strasbourg 17 July 1979]

