

Patrick Lawrence

American media's Surreal coverage of the E.U. elections

Among American media, the elections to the European Parliament held 6–9 June were advanced for weeks beforehand as the most decisive in the Strasbourg legislature's history—a battle of Biblical magnitude between liberalism, as Americans and centrist Europeans now use this term, and those who resist it. So these polls just proved to be. But no journalist this side of the Atlantic foresaw the earthquake that has, decisively and abruptly, shaken the Continent—or at least the technocratic orthodoxy that has long had a secure grip on E.U. politics.

And now, with the results in and the consequences emerging, U.S. media, reproducing the perspectives of those in power, are quietly beside themselves. They eagerly anticipated the confrontation between the forces of good and the forces of evil. But they eagerly anticipated that European “liberals” would win out. And the battering these mainstream parties have just taken leaves the American mainstream floundering. The American press is currently covering Continental politics in a state of barely concealed befuddlement.

Some background here. The U.S. press and broadcasters have come to trade in “narratives” over the past couple of decades—ideologically driven stories that always come out the same, with endings that demonstrate the ineluctable advance of the liberal consensus (which is neither liberal nor a consensus). The inevitability of “the what-is,” as with Margaret Thatcher's famous “there is no alternative,” is the core theme.

Last week's polls across Europe, to put this point simply, contradicted the triumphalist narrative. This always creates problems for those who tell stories instead of reporting events. U.S. media are effectively left to describe Europe's transformed political landscape while obscuring the very sound reasons for this by leaving all thought of causality—indeed of legitimate political aspiration—out of the reporting.

In consequence, reading *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, or various other dailies, or watching the news on CNN or the major networks, makes for a certain mildly Surreal experience. They report something that devastates the narrative, but they then proceed to tell readers and viewers that what they just reported is not actually so and that the narrative is intact.

European commentators, scholars, and numerous political analysts have already said and written much about the results of the just-concluded polls. Here I will note simply what Europe's new political turmoil looks like to someone on the other side of the Atlantic who is ungiven to conjured narratives. It looks messy but of necessity messy—welcomely messy, messy but disruptive of an orthodoxy that needs pressingly to be disrupted.

The profound anxiety that now overtakes Europe's technocratic elites comes through clearly in American media coverage. But there is a prevalent insistence that the virtuous "centrists" who now hold power in most E.U. members states, and certainly in Brussels, are likely to prevail as national elections proceed in political seasons to come. *The New York Times*'s first news piece on the contests, published as the results were just short of final, is perfectly exemplary of U.S. coverage. "In E.U. elections, the center holds," the newspaper's Brussels bureau chief, Matina Stevis-Gridneff, announced.

This is true only by the narrowest reading of the election results. As is widely reported, the “centre-right” European People’s Party remains the largest in the Strasbourg legislature, with 189 seats, a gain of 13 over the previous polls. But the E.P.P.’s No. 1 position in the E.U. Parliament cannot by any stretch be properly interpreted as a successful Continent-wide defense of the reigning orthodoxy. Stevis–Gridneff would have been a better correspondent if she quoted accurately *The Second Coming*, the famous Yeats poem, and included a few more lines of it:

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*Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold...*

How true these lines are when one thinks of the results at the national level, where things, indeed, appear to be falling apart. In France, President Macron’s eight-year-old Renaissance party already seems a spent force. With its *Besoin d’Europe* coalition partners it won only 14.6 percent of the French vote. Counting the Republicans’ 7.25 percent, France’s center-right took a drastic loss to the *Rassemblement National*, Marine Le Pen’s party, which finished with 31.37 percent of the vote. When Macron instantly dissolved the National Assembly and called for a snap election in early July, it looked from across the ocean like panic.

While the Scholz government is unlikely to call a similar election, the E.U. polls were something close to a massacre for Germany’s mainstream parties. *Die Grünen* failed to clear even 12 percent of the vote—and how deserved a reversal is this—and the governing SPD, the Social Democrats, did little better, finishing with 13.9 percent. This puts *AfD*, *Alternative für Deutschland* (15.9 percent), in second place behind the *CDU–CSU* coalition, which led with 30 percent of the vote.

As the Group of 7 convened along Italy's Adriatic coast Thursday, it was plain that Europe's center, if you insist on the allusion to Yeats, is now holding by its fingernails. Justin Trudeau made a usefully revealing assertion in this connection as the G7 assembled. "We have seen around the world a rise of populist right-wing forces in just about every democracy," the Canadian prime minister righteously declared. "It is of concern to see political parties choosing to instrumentalize anger, fear, division, anxiety."

This is a remarkable statement—remarkable for its unbearable combination of arrogance and stupidity. And American media have faithfully reflected these same failings in their coverage of the just-completed elections and their implications.

Anger, fear, division, anxiety: Yes, these are very obviously abroad among European electorates. This is acknowledged, if reluctantly and only occasionally, in America's media coverage of the Continent. But you see no effort in the U.S. press or among the broadcasters to analyze why these profound emotions are so prevalent. It is as if a proportion of the public must be expected to be angry, "deplorables" who are fearful, anxious, and against us—we the technocratic elites, we the "liberals" who hold power. And to reflect these widely shared feelings in a political party platform, to bring them to bear in electoral contests: Well, this is contemptibly to "instrumentalize" them—to make cynical use of them.

Based on the above-quoted remark, Justin Trudeau would have made an excellent journalist reporting Europe for a mainstream daily newspaper in New York or Washington or Los Angeles. What we have read since the results came in 9 June is the same disapproval, if more subtly rendered, of the drift among European voters: "Danger" now haunts the Continent, "chaos" and "havoc" loom. "Populism" is suddenly an immediate threat.

As American media are wont to do, their resort as they report and analyze the E.U. polls is to labels. They affix simple labels to parties, candidates, movements, people, political sentiments. All week—indeed, for months before the elections—Americans have read of Europe’s “far right,” “extreme right,” “hard right,” “the right wing,” “nationalists,” and, of course, “anti-immigrant” parties and voters. To my Continental readers: Believe me, please, this is all our corporate media have told us and all most of us know about those who have just voted to reject Europe’s liberal elites. This is the virtue of labels for those who rely upon them: Once applied, they obviate all need for explanation or understanding.

It is interesting to consider a great range of questions European voters face in the context of the terms just enumerated. Better relations with Russia in recognition of the densely woven web of interdependence between Europe and the Russian Federation; a cessation of aid to Ukraine because the Kiev regime is hopelessly corrupt, because Europe’s support is a waste of resources, because it is a proxy war the U.S. started, and because the war cannot be won: These are the positions of “hard right” European parties and those who support them.

There are others: contempt for those who have force-marched Europe into Washington’s sanctions regime against Russia—notably but not only Die Grünen and their odious foreign minister, the supremely contemptible Annalena Baerbock; greater national sovereignty as a reply to the increasingly anti-democratic regime in Brussels; a Europe more independent of Washington as a matter of principle and because of immense damage subservience to the U.S. has done to European economies; opposition to large-scale illegal immigration because middle- and working class communities are simply not capable of absorbing such numbers of newcomers.

Next to nothing of this has been noted or analyzed in U.S. media coverage of the E.U. elections. Certainly there is no mentioning growing sentiment among European voters against the Brussels technocrats who dictate much E.U. policy or of mounting animosity toward the U.S. The immigration question is noted, but only as a symptom of the drift of European voters toward “the hard right.”

Americans have read nothing, finally, of the ideology professed by European “liberals” and why it has so graphically provoked so many voters against it. This is the same as in the U.S. This ideology is, for one thing, profoundly illiberal—intolerant of all deviation. For another, its inflexible devotion to market fundamentalism has had much to do with the devastation of European communities and the social fabric altogether. But nothing of this in the reports from across the Atlantic last week and this.

The essential question at work in the American media coverage is genuine understanding. The E.U. election results could easily be read as a variant of American experience and potentially as a harbinger of what Americans will see in this autumn’s national elections. But most Americans do not understand what has just occurred in Europe. Those in power do not wish them to do so, for they might then understand their own predicaments.

To my European readers: American media cover American elections in more or less the same fashion for more or less the same reasons.

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