

The E.U. Is Revealing Its True Identity. Europeans Don't Like It.

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In European Parliament elections this month, voters in most of the European Union's 27 countries rallied to parties that hold the union in contempt. Analysts have leaped to the conclusion that the European Union must have done something wrong.

It didn't. The specific policy grievances that drove the election results were national, not continental. In France, where the once-taboo National Rally party outpolled the party of President Emmanuel Macron by more than 2 to 1, voters were angry about the president's immigration policy and the snootiness with which he formulated it. In Germany, where a hard-right party anchored in the formerly Communist East got more votes than any of the three governing parties, voters cited highhanded energy policies.

Such local complaints, to be sure, occasionally echo frustrations with corresponding E.U. policies on immigration and energy. But the European Union's governing machinery in Brussels is never where voters' hearts and hopes are. Indeed, that is the real problem with the union: not what it does but what it *is*.

Founded in the wake of the Cold War to meld Europe's nation-states into an "ever closer union" and to form a continental government that would practice a new kind of politics, the European Union has wound up more outdated than the nation-states it was meant to supplant. Imposing common rules and laws on nations that had for decades or centuries viewed lawmaking as their own democratic business was harder than it seemed. The union is looking more and more like one of those 19th- and 20th-century projects to universalize the un-universalizable, like Esperanto.

The Maastricht Treaty, the 1992 agreement about currency, citizenship and freedom of movement on which the present European Union is built, was drafted for a world that was disappearing. Back then, only a handful of richer countries — France, Germany, Britain, and the Netherlands among them — had significant immigration, and already majorities were unhappy with it. These countries were industrial powerhouses, with economies structured to favor workers and benefits that were envied around the world. They had big militaries, which they no longer seemed to need now that the Cold War was over.

One way to look at the E.U. project, in fact, was as a codification of the values that had won the Cold War. That "values" win wars is a bold assertion, but

back then, the West was in a self-confident mood. The Luxembourg prime minister (and later, European Commission president) Jean-Claude Juncker was soon crediting European integration with having brought “50 years of peace,” even though the European Union had not yet been founded when the Berlin Wall fell. A more sober analysis would credit that peace to American occupation, NATO vigilance and Russian caution.

From the outset, the union was the expression of a love-hate relationship with the United States. On the one hand, it was emulative. Europe was to be, like America, a promise, a dream, a multiethnic experiment based on rights and principles, not blood and soil. It was a constitution-making project. On state visits to Washington in the late 1990s, the German foreign minister Joschka Fischer would stroll around Borders bookstore looking for books on the American founding.

On the other hand the European Union was rivalrous with America. It meant to consolidate the continent’s nations into a military-economic bloc of almost half a billion people, partly so Europeans would no longer need to dance to the tune of the American empire. For the French and Francophile theorists who conceived the union, it was a ruthless state-building project like those of Cardinal Richelieu under Louis XIII or Cardinal Mazarin and Jean-Baptiste Colbert under Louis XIV. American diplomats often blessed the E.U. project. They were naïve to.

There was only one way to get the power required to build a European superpower: by usurping the prerogatives of the continent’s existing nation-states. Tasks delegated to Brussels were considered to have been delegated to it permanently. The fight for leadership between Brussels and the national capitals was not a fair one: Brussels was a lean, mean, efficient and ideologically unified bureaucracy staffed with political system designers; the old nation-states were a dozen or two messy, contentious multiparty democracies that could agree on nothing. By the start of this century, London, Berlin, Rome and Athens were much less self-governing than they used to be, to the alarm of voters and to the benefit of populists. Brexit was one result.

An Orwellian vocabulary emerged. European Union leaders, widely viewed as politicians who had failed on their own national scene, referred to themselves as “Europe,” and to anyone who opposed their state-building schemes as “anti-European.” Soon “anti-European” joined the list of intolerances that were grounds for ostracism and censure. You would hear politicians described as

“racist, xenophobic and anti-European,” as if those were character failings of equal gravity.

The E.U. project could thus be looked at in a darker way: as the retroactive arrogation of the Cold War peace dividend by a generation of leaders — baby boomers, or '68ers, as they are more often called in Europe — who were lucky enough to find themselves in midcareer when the wall came down. The union's rise brought a wave of public browbeating about the lessons of the Cold War, even though the 1968 generation had been profoundly divided over it; and about the Second World War, which that generation was too young to remember. It was as if Nazism and Soviet Communism were just two ways of being “anti-European” *avant la lettre*. As long as the baby boomers still had parents and grandparents to tell them about the horrors of World War II, this was sufficient to freeze opposition to the European Union in its tracks.

To understand today's discontent with the European Union, it may help to look at the recent elections generationally rather than ideologically. It has shocked some observers that in France, the National Rally, descended from the hard-line National Front that Jean-Marie Le Pen founded in 1972, drew so many votes from the young: 28 percent of those under 35, more than any other party. Among voters under 25, the National Rally took 25 percent, tying for the lead. In Germany the nationalist and anti-immigration party Alternative for Germany more than tripled its vote among voters under 25, to 16 percent from 5 percent, since the last E.U. election five years ago.

Although at 46 a young leader by European standards, Mr. Macron is almost two decades older than the National Rally's 28-year-old leader, Jordan Bardella. When the modern European Union began with the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, Mr. Bardella was not yet born. The world looks different to him and his contemporaries than it does to those who cling to fond memories of the early 1990s.

Back then, Europeans embodied environmental advocacy, self-actualization, self-expression and other values described by the University of Michigan political scientist Ronald Inglehart as “post-materialist.” Europeans actually used that term. They were proud of it. Today, European politics — and French politics above all — is crudely materialistic. The most explosive issues of the past few elections have been purchasing power, the price of diesel, the age of retirement and the shortage of housing (often taken by migrants awaiting

asylum hearings). Europe's preoccupations are closer to the 18th-century world of bread riots than to the 20th-century one of Save the Whales.

Hard-line parties like the National Rally and Alternative for Germany, with their proposals to limit asylum rights, to stop favoring electric cars over "burners" and to claw back retirement benefits, cater to this reality. Like them or not, such proposals open up the situation to democratic debate. The European Union's role is often to close off such debate, citing refugee-treaty obligations that migrants be prioritized or budget-deficit ceilings requiring that welfare benefits be kept lean. These propositions are sometimes sensible, but publics are less inclined to listen to them than they were in the boom years of the 1990s.

Europeans no longer take prosperity for granted. A decade after Maastricht, it seemed that E.U. companies like Nokia and Ericsson might do with cellphone hardware what the United States was doing with data. But that didn't pan out. Today, [by Forbes's rankings](#), not one of the top 15 digital companies in the world is European. This is not just a humiliation. It also means that Europe has little to build a credible economic recovery out of.

Baby boomers and other adults who were alive in 1992 see the economic ghosts of that time. They think about what the European economy might look like if only we could revitalize trade unions or reopen shipyards. Mr. Bardella's generation asks: What's a trade union? What's a shipyard? Their economic policy is more transactional: They'll cut heating bills.

Nothing better demonstrates the European Union's ambivalent standing than the suddenness with which popular attention shifted to national elections the moment President Macron called them in the wake of the European Parliament results. The elections Mr. Macron has called are the *real* elections. They are where a self-governing people will pronounce on its ideals, its history, its destiny.

Even in this specifically French context, mutual incomprehension among the generations tells us a lot about the European bloc's prospects. Mr. Macron's allies warn that with the rise of the "anti-European" National Rally, the dark days of France's World War II collaboration with the Nazis are returning. Mr. Macron's interior minister, Gérald Darmanin, has even likened another party's vote-sharing deals with Mr. Bardella to the Munich Agreement, the 1938 pact in which France, Britain and Italy vainly sought to avoid war by assenting to

Hitler's territorial demands in Czechoslovakia. Such comparisons used to make swing voters think twice.

But the National Rally does not today seem like a party that especially deserves exclusion or excommunication. You can add as many adverbs as you like to "extreme right," but the definitions of right and left have grown hazy. Mr. Bardella attended a march against antisemitism after the Hamas attacks of Oct. 7. France Unbowed, a party of the "left" led by Jean-Luc Mélenchon, chose not to. Serge Klarsfeld, the 88-year-old Holocaust survivor who made a career of bringing Nazis to justice, has said he would vote for Mr. Bardella's right over Mr. Mélenchon's left, should the two ever face each other in a runoff. A defining E.U. narrative — in which right-wing critics of "Europe" are cast as would-be Nazis — has been turned on its head.

Starting a new form of government at the close of an era, as the founders of the European Union tried to do, is not necessarily a doomed project. The United States might be called the last nation that was established before the onset of the Industrial Revolution. But you cannot really have an overarching federal government, such as the United States has, unless people are content to see the states lose power to the capital over the long term. Americans have made their peace with this, although it required a civil war and a good deal of other violence to bring consensus.

Europe is different. Europeans are mostly not aware that they have been enlisted in a project that has as its end point the extinction of France, Germany, Italy and the rest of Europe's historic nations as meaningful political units. Brussels has been able to win assent to its project only by concealing its nature. Europe's younger generation appears to have seen through the dissembling. We are only at the beginning of the consequences.

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/23/opinion/european-union-elections-nationalism.html>

Does it not seem that people—some people—find ways to ruin just about every good thing? A bureaucratic tyranny is as bad as any, just more insidious and insensitive. If "elites" are the problem, the EEU was tailor-made for takeover by them. They just had to hire and co-opt the technocrats to enforce their will. Critics like Yanis Varoufakis <https://www.yanisvaroufakis.eu> get ignored. TJB