

Europe Elections 2016-17: The Votes to Watch

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Europe in Crisis: The Elections to Watch for Political Risk

Voters across Europe will determine the destiny of a continent in turmoil.

by

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Brexit. The largest influx of refugees since World War II. A spate of terrorist attacks. A populist insurgency. Another banking meltdown.

The crises buffeting the European Union show no signs of letting up. The U.S., Europe's strongest ally, is embroiled in the most tumultuous election in living memory, Turkey is in turmoil and Russian President Vladimir Putin is watching from the sidelines.

Europe's response to its multiple challenges will be shaped by a rash of elections over the coming year. Countries accounting for about 40 percent of the EU economy are going to the polls in 2017, when Chancellor Angela Merkel could be running for a fourth term in Germany.

Here is a list of the votes that could have the most impact.

German state elections

Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania and Berlin

September 4 and 18

So what: The two state contests will offer clues on whether populist anti-immigrant Alternative for Germany is managing to capitalize on recent attacks to build opposition to Merkel's handling of the refugee crisis.

Outlook: The AfD's prospects are best in the Baltic coast state of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, which includes Merkel's home constituency. Another eastern state, Saxony-Anhalt, gave the party more than 24 percent of the vote in March. The AfD may also gain support in the state of Berlin, long a Social Democratic stronghold.



Anti-AfD party demonstrators in Munich.

Photographer: Joerg Koch/Getty Images

Croatian parliamentary election

September 11

So what: Croatians will vote for the second time in less than a year after the wobbly coalition formed after November's election collapsed in June.

Outlook: With the Social Democrats ahead in the polls, the next administration will seek to cut the deficit for a second year and steer a recovery from record recession.

Regional elections, Spain's Basque Country

September 25

So what: After the election, the Basque nationalists will likely return to Madrid with requests for more money and local empowerment, adding to the strain on a constitutional model that's struggling to handle national divisions and a separatist push in Catalonia.

Outlook: Polls suggest the Basque Nationalists will remain the biggest party, while anti-austerity party Podemos will claim third spot, taking votes from both the separatist left and the Socialists.



The Italian Senate.

Photographer: Elisabetta Villa/Getty Images

Italian referendum

October or November

So what: Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi's job is on the line. Italians will vote on his Democratic Party's plan to enact the most ambitious government overhaul in decades: a bid to end unstable coalition building by stripping the upper house of parliament of the ability to bring down governments. The number of senators would be cut by two-thirds.

Outlook: A July Euromedia poll showed 35 percent of Italians opposing the plan and 29 percent supporting it -- with 18 percent undecided. Renzi pledged to quit if he loses, a move that could benefit the anti-establishment Five Star Movement. Five Star, which supports a referendum on Italy's euro membership, has already overtaken Renzi's Democratic Party in at least one poll. While Renzi has indicated a vote in October or November, the premier may seek to hold the referendum on Nov. 27, according to La Stampa newspaper.

Austrian presidential election

October 2

So what: Austria's far-right Freedom Party will get another chance at the highest office after a court rescinded the May 22 presidential election. In that vote, Green Party-backed candidate Alexander Van Der Bellen barely edged out the Freedom Party's Norbert Hofer, thwarting the anti-immigration faction's ambitions to produce a head of state, which would have marked an unprecedented victory for the EU's populist right.

Outlook: While the Freedom Party is polling well ahead of traditional parties nationally, polls still show the presidential contest as a dead heat.



Austria's Freedom party candidate for president, Norbert Hofer.

Photographer: Lisi Niesner/Bloomberg

Hungary referendum

October 2

So what: Prime Minister Viktor Orban called the vote on whether the EU should be able to order Hungary to accept the settlement of migrants without parliament's consent. Orban has opposed any EU plan to relocate asylum seekers across the bloc but he has little prospect for overturning an EU initiative.

Outlook: Orban will rely on huge majorities opposing such moves to whip up anti-EU sentiment -- which could lead to an EU exit vote. Still, the vote isn't risk-free for Orban. If turnout is less than 50 percent, the vote would be invalid -- and Orban potentially weakened.

Czech regional elections

Scheduled for October

So what: Regional elections in the Czech Republic will test Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka's control over his Social Democratic party. A poor result could revive internal attempts to oust Sobotka and replace him with a more euroskeptic Social Democrat.

Outlook: Sobotka's party is trailing billionaire Finance Minister Andrej Babis ANO's Party, which opposes increased EU integration and Czech membership in the euro area.

Lithuanian parliamentary election

October 9

So what: The contest could see the populist Lithuanian Peasants and Green Union enter a government

coalition.

Outlook: The ruling Social Democrats are still ahead in polls, with the populists not far behind -- nor the opposition Homeland Union-Lithuanian Christian Democrats. Donald Trump's remarks in July, singling Lithuania out as one NATO member not worth defending from a Russian attack if they haven't met financial obligations, which could polarize the nation.



Victor Ponta.

Photographer: Akos Stiller/Bloomberg

Romanian parliamentary election

November or early December

So what: Romanians will vote to replace their current technocratic government. The country may hit an impasse if the Social Democratic party of disgraced former Prime Minister Victor Ponta fails to win a majority.

Outlook: At stake is the EU's second-fastest economic growth and the country's fiscal health with already-approved tax cuts and wage increases. EU and NATO relations aren't on the agenda as all parties are staunch supporters of membership.

Dutch parliamentary election

March 15

So what: The vote will determine whether far-right populist Geert Wilders and his Freedom Party will get to try to form a government, though most political parties have sworn they won't govern with him. Wilders has called for a Dutch referendum on leaving the EU, closing the country's borders and "de-Islamizing" the west.

Outlook: The Freedom Party could win 28 seats in the 150-member chamber, more than the 27 projected for Prime Minister Mark Rutte's Liberal Party, according to a July 7 Ipsos poll. Still, Wilders' brand of populism may have its limits: The same poll showed that only 34 percent of voters want a referendum on Dutch EU

membership.

French presidential election

First round in April, runoff in early May

So what: For the most unpopular president in France's history, Francois Hollande's main challenge in national elections in May will be to make it to the second round -- if he decides to run at all. Former President Nicolas Sarkozy is expected to declare his candidacy after the summer and run against Alain Juppe, a seasoned opponent, to lead the Republican party. Ultimately, however, the election will be a test of how close the National Front's Marine le Pen comes to France's highest office. Her far-right, anti-EU and anti-immigration base has rallied on her call for shuttering borders, deporting non-French citizens and exiting the EU.

Outlook: Le Pen is leading the polls for the first round in the presidential race, though consistently forecast to lose in any second-round scenario. So the contest may be determined by which traditional candidate makes it to the second round.

U.K. local elections

May 4

So what: Local ballots across the U.K. will provide the first major electoral test for new Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May as she seeks to steer the country toward an "orderly" Brexit while limiting damage to the economy.

Outlook: Polls have shown the Tories taking a lead of as much as 16 percentage points over the opposition Labour Party, currently distracted by a leadership contest. The elections in Scotland will gauge support for First Minister Nicola Sturgeon's Scottish National Party, which is considering calling a second referendum on independence.

German regional elections

Schleswig-Holstein and North-Rhine Westphalia

May 7 and 14

So what: Should the Social Democrats lose to Angela Merkel's Christian Democratic Union in their traditional stronghold of North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany's most-populous state, the CDU could get a boost heading into the September's parliamentary elections.

Outlook: The latest poll in May showed the CDU tied with the Social Democrats

German Parliamentary Elections

September

So what: If Merkel decides to run for a fourth term, the vote may ultimately be a referendum on the German chancellor. Europe's most powerful leader has been the anchor of European integration through a decade of crisis and turmoil, but her dominance has been questioned in the past year by the backlash against her refugee policy. Any change in the chancellery would shift the political foundations of the European project.

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Outlook: Merkel's CDU, alongside her Bavarian allies, the Christian Social Union, have been dented by the refugee crisis, but has maintained a strong lead over all other political factions since winning the 2013 election. Still, neither the CDU-led bloc nor the rival Social Democrats have enough to form an alliance with favored

partners, potentially leaving them once again to form a so-called grand coalition.

—*With assistance from Helene Fouquet, Mark Deen, Balazs Penz, Esteban Duarte, Eddie Buckle and Chad Thomas.*

QuickTake: Angela Merkel's Political Risk

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