

Policy Brief

On the road to the 2024 European elections: Institutional timeline and missed opportunities

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#Elections
#Democracy
#EuropeanParliament

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The 2024 European elections could mark a turning point in EU politics: The European Parliament has traditionally been a progressive force in EU policymaking, often pushing for more far-reaching, European solutions than the Council. This dynamic could fundamentally change after the 2024 elections, with the current power balance expected to shift in favour of more right-wing forces. But even without a turn towards a Eurosceptic majority, the outcome will determine the direction of policies decided by the Parliament and shape EU politics over the next five years. This policy brief offers an overview of the need-to-know for this election year. First, it details the institutional timeline until the end of the current legislative cycle. Second, it provides an overview of how European political parties are approaching the election campaign. Third, it discusses election day, possible new majorities in Parliament and inevitable institutional haggling over key positions. Finally, it describes the missed reform opportunities since the 2019 elections and how this may undermine the integrity of the June poll.

Introduction

2024 is set to be the [biggest election](#) year in history with more than half of the world's population heading to the polls. These include the European Parliament elections from 6 to 9 June, when more than 400 million eligible voters can choose the 720 members of the EU's only directly elected institution for the tenth time since 1979. They matter greatly: The Parliament is a co-legislator on all files of Union competency, [has the power](#) to approve the EU's budget and the future European Commission.

At this year's elections, the stakes are high as some [polls](#) suggest that right-wing, Eurosceptic parties will make [sizeable gains](#). This could shift the EU's power balance significantly: The European Parliament has traditionally

been a progressive force in policymaking, often pushing for more far-reaching, pan-European solutions than Member States in the Council. With a new centre-right and far-right majority coalitions [possible after the election](#), the Parliament could go from championing pro-European initiatives to blocking them. But even in the absence of a shift towards a Eurosceptic majority, the outcome will determine the direction of the policies decided by Parliament and shape EU politics over the next five years.

This policy brief offers an overview of the need-to-know for this politicized election year. First, it details the institutional timeline until the end of the current legislative cycle and what files policymakers are still trying to close. Second, it provides an overview of the election campaigns of European political parties. Third, it discusses election day, possible new majorities in Parliament and the subsequent division of top jobs. Finally, it describes the missed reform opportunities since the last European elections and how this may undermine the integrity of the process.

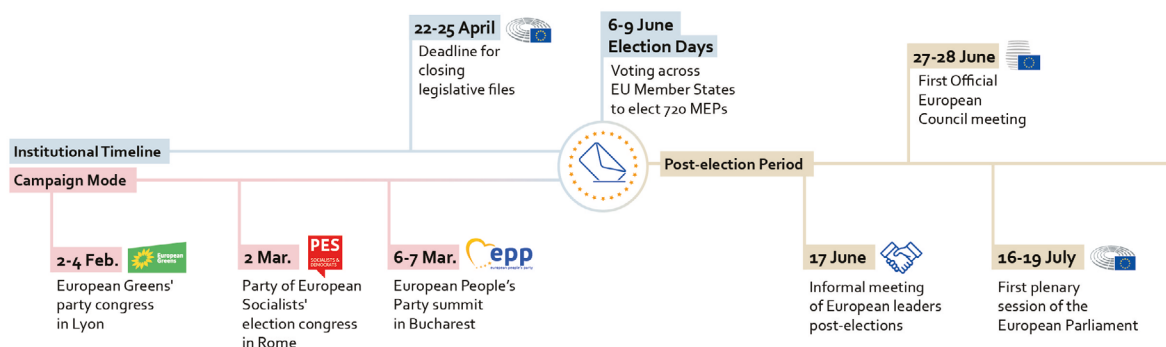
The institutional timeline

Until April: Closing open files

The European Parliament will meet for its **last plenary** session from [22 - 25 April](#) – marking the end of the window of opportunity to conclude any legislative initiatives for this institutional cycle. There are some important items policymakers are working on finishing off under the leadership of the Belgian Council Presidency by then, with different reasons for urgency:

Regarding the **EU budget** and support for Ukraine, the EU needs to adjust budget lines to reflect rising costs and unforeseen emergency needs so it can still finance its political priorities until 2027. In addition, Ukraine is dependent on quick support. Leaders will meet in the European Council on 1 February to discuss the ‘mid-term revision’ of the [2021-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework](#) and a [50 billion Euros](#) financial aid package for Ukraine. Parliament will also have to approve any deal reached at the summit. Also in the pipeline is the [reform](#) of the **EU’s fiscal rules**. After months of difficult negotiations, European finance ministers finally found a compromise in December. This agreement still needs to be formally negotiated with the European Parliament, but policymakers are hoping to conclude it quickly. The reform needs to be finalised by July to avert the eventuality that currently suspended fiscal rules that are no longer considered fit for purpose will be reinstated.

Figure 1: Institutional timeline in the European election year 2024



In the areas of **green transformation and environmental protection**, a sense of urgency that stems from the uncertainty of how political priorities might change after the election is gripping policymakers. Initiatives that currently have the support and momentum to win final approval will probably face worse odds with a less progressive majority in the European Parliament. In addition, the [EPP](#) and liberal [Renew](#) group have indicated that environmental policies will not be a priority in the next legislative period (see more on this below). Currently high on the agenda and with good prospects of being passed in time is the [Net-Zero Industry Act](#). It seeks to boost strategic net-zero technologies in the EU. The Belgian Presidency is hoping to reach a final interinstitutional agreement on [6 February](#).

There is also some concern over a long-planned reform of the EU's **asylum and migration system**. The Council and European Parliament have been working intensely on overhauling it— but getting the deal adopted in time before the elections will be difficult. In December, an agreement on the core elements was [reached](#). EU ministers are planning to iron out the [technical details at the end of April](#). [Centre-left leaning actors](#) hope that a timely agreement could take some wind out of the sails of far-right parties. Conservative EU ministers, by contrast, might favour a delay as a centre-right leaning Parliament could be more aligned with their own position.

From May onwards: Campaign mode

From May onwards at the very latest, one can expect EU politicians' attention to shift from policy to campaigning. EU election campaigns are organised by **European political parties**. These 'Europarties' are made up of national, like-minded parties, not individual members. Once elected, one or more European political parties form the political groups in Parliament.

The Europarties generally decide on common lead candidates (*Spitzenkandidaten*) and adopt their election programme, or 'manifesto', at a party congress in February or March: The centre-right, pro-European European People's Party (EPP) will name a lead candidate, most likely Ursula von der Leyen, and adopt their election programme at their summit in Bucharest on [6 -7 March](#). The Party of European Socialists (PES) group has already named Nicolas Schmit, Luxembourg Commissioner for labour, as their lead candidate. Schmit is generally seen as a [rather weak candidate](#), but was perhaps the only one interested and swiftly backed by the PES's strongest member parties, the Spanish PSOE and German SPD. The official PES election congress will take place on [2 March in Rome](#). Members of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) have voiced scepticism about of the lead candidate process and have not named a single lead candidate but a team, as they did in 2019. They have put together an international team to work on a manifesto for the [2024 campaign](#). The European Greens are staunch supporters of the lead candidate process and will nominate two leading candidates at a party congress from [2 - 4 February](#) in Lyon. The Eurosceptic European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) and far-right Identity and Democracy Party (ID) oppose the lead candidate process. While the Europarties' manifestos are not officially published yet, leaked drafts already indicate their priorities. The [EPP wants](#) to pivot to a more conservative position and move from a Green Deal to an 'Economic Deal', after Ursula von der Leyen's outgoing term as Commission President was dominated by a green agenda. This manifesto embraces a '1 in, 2 out' principle that aims at reducing the overall regulatory burden, for example easing excessive bureaucratic requirements for farmers. The [liberals have also indicated](#) that they want to make cutting red tape and lowering bureaucratic burdens their top priority. The [European socialists](#) want to focus on strengthening international relations, especially with the US and China. They reject any idea of abandoning the Green Deal and want to continue on the path to climate neutrality. The [European Greens make](#) the case for large-scale investments in the green transition and

call for a Green Social Deal.

June 6-9: Election day

Last year, the [Council announced](#) 6 - 9 June 2024 as the election period. According to the [European Electoral Act](#), elections can take place over a period of four days, from **Thursday to Sunday**. The legal default, and when elections were held from 1979 to 2009, is the start of June. The European Electoral Act, however, allows the Council to set the date at any time between early April and early July. In 2014 and 2019, elections took place in the last week of May. In 2022, the European Parliament [proposed](#) to make 9 May, Europe Day, the fixed election day in all Member States. In addition to the historic significance of the date, an earlier vote would give the European Parliament more time to prepare for, and thereby control, the appointment of the new Commission – a process that should be completed before 31 October when the outgoing Commission's term officially ends. The Council, however, decided to stick to the wording of the European Electoral Act.

Most Member States will vote on 9 June and the **results** can be expected that evening. Member States that vote on the preceding days [are not allowed](#) to publish results before polls close across the EU. A decisive factor for the **outcome** of the elections will be the turnout, which usually varies widely between Member States: [In 2019](#), Slovakia saw the lowest participation rate with 23 percent and Belgium, where voting is mandatory, the highest at 88 percent. The EU-average was 50.5 percent, the highest since 1994. Factors that [influence voter turnout](#) include institutional reasons such as whether there are other simultaneous elections and the day of the week but also whether [people are in favour](#) of the EU.

The 720 new MEPs will be elected in what are essentially 27 simultaneous national elections, with national parties on the ballots and national voting systems. The [European Electoral Act](#) only sets out basic rules and leaves aspects such as minimum voting age (ranging from 16 to 18) and threshold (ranging from 0 to 5 percent) to Member States. The distribution of seats in the European Parliament is 'degressively proportional' to the population of Member States – meaning that while population size is a factor, smaller Member States still have at least six MEPs (Cyprus, Luxembourg, Malta). Germany has the highest number of MEPs, 96, followed by France with 81.

June: The outcome

In Parliament, MEPs sit in political groups. Forming those, and a majority coalition, will be a first step after the elections. Centre-right and far-right groups are expected to see significant gains in the election – they could conceivably end up with more than half of the seats. This could fundamentally change Parliament's traditionally progressive, pro-European approach and the EU's power balance, with new majority coalitions likely on issues such as climate change and migration.

There are currently seven political groups (see graph) in the European Parliament: the Christian Democratic European People's Party (EPP); the Socialists and Democrats (S&D); the centrist/liberal Renew Europe; the Greens/ European Free Alliance (EFA); the European Conservatives and Reformists Group (ECR); the most right-wing group, the Identity and Democracy Group (ID) and the Left group (GUE/NGL). 52 MEPs are 'non-attached' – meaning they belong to no political group.

The most notable changes that current [polls](#) predict are significant gains for the centre-right and extreme right. Depending on the poll, the far-right ID group can be expected to gain between [30](#) and [40](#) seats and could overtake liberal Renew as the third largest group in

Parliament. The centre-right ECR is also projected to gain [11](#) to [18](#) seats. In addition, Viktor Orbán’s Fidesz party is [negotiating](#) to join this group, adding as many as an extra 14 seats, and enabling it to overtake Renew as Parliament’s third largest group.

Following this projection, a centre-right/ right-wing coalition of ID group, ECR and EPP with Fidesz could end up with a majority of close to 370 seats. But: a pro-European grand coalition of EPP, S&D and Renew would also have a majority of around 390 out of 720 seats. Such a grand coalition is the expected outcome of the election as the EPP has said it [would never work](#) with ID. But while it is unlikely that the ECR and the ID group will play a role in forming a majority coalition and determining the subsequent division of top jobs, this constellation still leaves a lot of power in the hands of the EPP. They could rely upon the votes of right-wing groups on contentious issues such as climate change and migration. Overall, it will lead to a shift to the right in the balance of power in Parliament, and potentially across EU institutions as a whole.

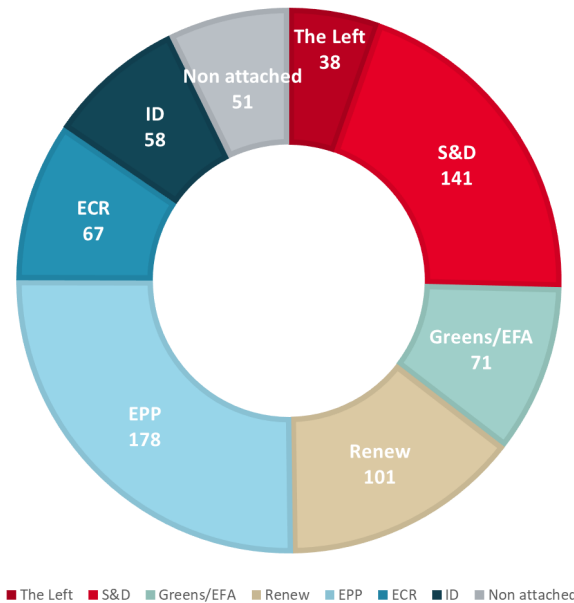


Figure 2: Current composition (political groups and number of seats) in the European Parliament.

From June until November: Institutional haggling

Once the new MEPs have worked out their allegiances, European leaders will gather to make their highly anticipated personnel picks. They will meet informally on [17 June](#) for the first time after the elections. The first official European Council meeting is on [27-28 June](#). On the agenda is proposing contenders for the EU’s most influential positions: **Commission President**, European Council President and a [High Representative of the Union](#) for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. Generally, leaders take party affiliation, regional representation and gender into consideration when filling the top jobs, making one nomination contingent on the other and the institutional haggling rather complicated.

In 2019, it took three days of intense negotiations between national leaders to agree on a Commission President. This year, Ursula von der Leyen’s chances of a second term as Commission President are strong. With the most important nomination out of the way, the process could go more smoothly than last time. But an open question with [few serious contenders](#) is the nomination for **European Council President**. The [antics](#) of incumbent Charles Michel have earned him the reputation of being, at most, mediocre at the job. [Even members of his own political family have called](#) for the scrupulous selection of someone worthy of the position next time. Finding such a person might prove difficult.

The first plenary session of the **European Parliament** after the election is scheduled for [16 - 19 July](#) before the Parliament’s summer break in August. Here, Parliament has to approve the new Commission President proposed by the European Council by an absolute majority. After that the [Council proposes Commissioners](#), one from each Member State. They then have to appear before parliamentary committees for [US-inspired ‘confirmation hearings’](#). Once all hearings are completed, Parliament is asked to consent to the Commission as a

whole. With this approval, the new Commission is formally appointed by the European Council by qualified majority for its five-year mandate until the next elections in 2029.

The European Parliament elections 2024: Open questions and missed chances

When it comes to the European elections, it is not just the who but also the how that is worth debating. And, arguably, the how has an influence on who ends up in the European Parliament. There are two notable areas of reform that could have contributed to galvanising pro-European voter turnout and curbing the success of extremists: First, the strengthening of transnational elements and harmonisation of electoral rules. Second, protection against disinformation and foreign meddling. With four months to go until the elections, it is clear what opportunities for reform were missed by EU policymakers in recent years. The 2024 elections will likely highlight the prevailing need to step up in these areas and spur the momentum for change in time for the 2029 elections.

The lead candidate procedure: Dead or alive?

The lead candidate procedure was conceived as a way to invigorate European elections, lend democratic legitimacy to the office of Commission President and increase voter turnout. In 2014, the process worked when the EPP's Jean-Claude Juncker was elected President. In 2019, the European Council members, notably French President Macron, refused to endorse the EPP's then lead candidate Manfred Weber, while the European Parliament failed to rally behind another candidate. EU leaders then, in several behind-closed-doors meetings, chose instead Ursula von der Leyen, who had not been mentioned before as a possible candidate. In 2024, the enthusiasm for the process appears curbed among Europarties, except perhaps for the Greens.

Ursula von der Leyen is all but certain to run for a second term as Commission President as EPP lead candidate. Rumour has it she will announce her bid on [19 February](#). However, [she will not run](#) for a seat in the European Parliament. The European Greens [harshly criticized von der Leyen's approach as](#) an “unacceptable denial of European democracy”. However, at least the EPP would campaign with a well-known political figure that citizens recognise. In the absence of transnational lists, only a fraction of citizens would have been able to vote for von der Leyen anyway. Campaigning with a **lead candidate** that is not running for a seat in the European Parliament could be a new interpretation of the lead candidate process.

In summary, the Greens appear to be the only party that still cares about the lead candidate process. The S&D's nomination of Schmit signals that the group only chose a front runner *pro forma*, rather than throwing a big name in the ring. Given the current lack of support, it appears very unlikely the process will be formalised. The Parliament could use its leverage over confirming the new Commission to insist on a commitment from the Council to formalise the process – but again, there probably would be no majority for this. It appears that thinking of ways to avoid the off-putting chaos and backroom haggling after the 2019 elections is time better spent than musing on what the lead candidate process could have been.

No harmonisation of voting rules

The European election system has long been assessed as imperfect. In the absence of a uniform voting system, the applicable rules differ widely between Member States. This underpins the criticism that European elections are really second-order national elections,

leaving EU citizens with uneven opportunities to participate and the European dimension of the vote weak.

While the need for reform is [widely acknowledged](#), any reform has a high bar to pass: It has to be adopted through a unanimous Council decision, supported by the European Parliament and ratified by all national parliaments. There have been two recent attempts at reform that were intended to improve the 2024 elections but may only enter into force in time for 2029: One by the Council in 2018 and one by Parliament in 2022. The Council successfully passed an [amendment](#) that would have introduced some **harmonisations** including a mandatory threshold of at least 2 percent for Member States with more than 35 seats (in practice, this would only apply to the five largest Member States, Poland, Spain, Italy, France, Germany). This would have made the elections more transparent and reliable. However, Germany only ratified the amendment in June 2023.¹ Cyprus and Spain have not yet ratified the amendment at all.

In May 2022, European Parliament [proposed](#) a reform of the European Electoral Act that provided for even more harmonisation. It included: a common minimum electoral threshold, voting at 16 where constitutionally permissible, the right to stand as a candidate in elections for every European from the age of 18, a lead candidate system, a quota to ensure gender equality and elections on Europe Day, 9 May. The proposal also stipulated that each voter should have an additional vote to elect 28 additional MEPs on transnational lists,² creating a Union-wide constituency. But Member States [have been hesitant](#) on, among other things, endorsing the lead candidate process and an EU-wide constituency. The proposal has made [no significant progress](#) in the Council. There has thus been no real advancement towards a uniform European elections process in the last 20 years.

With four months to go, the vulnerabilities of the process are clear. These long-discussed reforms could have addressed some of the issues around unequal participation and representation, limited voter engagement and the weak European dimension that now play into the hands of Eurosceptics. These reforms represent a missed opportunity to strengthen European democracy, at a time when the EU political landscape is more divided than ever.

No adequate protection against undue influence and disinformation

Disinformation campaigns and **foreign influence** pose a [real risk to the integrity](#) of the 2024 elections – a risk that policymakers have not managed to address in time, even though the Commission has proposed several initiatives and MEPs called for urgent [measures](#) in June 2023.

An initiative proposed by the Commission in 2021 is designed to fight disinformation and protect elections by making political advertising more transparent. With this law, political ads would need to be clearly labelled and include information on their sponsor, banning mass micro-targeted messages to voters from obscure sources. It would also ban non-EU based entities from sponsoring political ads. A trilogue agreement on this was only reached [in November 2023](#), too late for the 2024 elections. The proposal also still needs to be formally voted on. In addition, the Commission adopted the so-called Defence of Democracy package last December, [‘ahead of the 2024 elections’](#) but obviously too late to have an impact. This includes plans for a [transparency register](#) for civil society organisations and lobby groups that receive funding from third countries.

¹The German Constitutional Court [has twice rejected the introduction](#) of a threshold in European elections, in 2011 and 2014.

²This is the [fifth time](#) transnational lists have been proposed and the second time the proposal has made it to a plenary vote.

In the absence of effective rules to protect this year's electoral integrity, EU policymakers should at the very least closely **monitor** the elections. This could provide more evidence on prevailing risks and the necessity of reforms to ensure that changes are made in time for 2029.

Conclusion

The 2024 European Parliament elections will have significant implications for the future of the bloc. As more than 400 million eligible voters prepare to head to the polls, the rise of right-wing, Eurosceptic parties threatens to reshape the power balance within the Parliament. It could shift the Parliament from a traditionally progressive force to a potentially more right-wing, Eurosceptic one. But even without that shift, the outcome will determine the direction of the policies decided by Parliament and shape EU politics over the next five years. The EU has missed the chance to strengthen the integrity of the 2024 elections and protect them from foreign influence and disinformation, which will likely benefit extremists.

A decisive factor in the outcome of the elections will be voter turnout. In 2019, the number of voters rose for the first time to an EU average of 50.5 percent. Back then, Brexit and the rise of Eurosceptic parties were an [important motivation](#) for people to head to the polls. The projected rise of populist, Eurosceptic parties should be a compelling reason to mobilise EU citizens again, given what is at stake: nothing less than the future of the EU.

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