

LOOKING AHEAD TO THE 2019 EUROPEAN ELECTIONS

EUROPE'S CITIZENS ELECT THEIR PARLIAMENT



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Executive summary

From 23 to 26 May 2019, six months from now, 450 million citizens in the European Union will be able to decide on the composition of the European Parliament for the ninth time. There are already data and surveys that help sketch out what the European Parliament might look like after the election.

This **outlook on the European elections in 2019** examines the imminent changes in the political power structure by drawing on current forecasts on the composition of the next European Parliament. The three most important factors influencing the power structure after this election are:

- **Voter shifts**, which cause many national political parties belonging to the European People's Party (EPP) or Social Democrats and Socialists (S&D) to lose votes;
- The **UK's withdrawal from the EU**, which will leave 73 seats vacant in the European Parliament (of which 27 seats have been redistributed and allocated to 14 of the remaining 27 Member States); and
- The **new composition of the political groups**: for each political group in the European Parliament there are three alternative lines of development, each with a different level of plausibility. The most likely scenario for each is highlighted in grey in Table 1 (on page 8).

The expected gains of populist and Eurosceptic forces will not paralyse the European Parliament, but will lead to (even) stronger cooperation between the mainstream parties, since the dominating informal "grand coalition" of the European People's Party (EPP) and Socialists and Democrats (S&D) will probably no longer have a majority on its own.

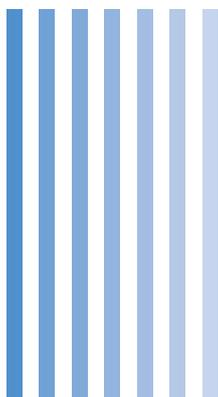


TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	3
1. Background to the 2019 European elections	3
2. Factors influencing the post-election power structure	4
2.1 Voter shifts	5
2.2 The UK's withdrawal from the EU	6
2.3 The new composition of the political groups	7
3. The difficulty of finding a majority after 26 May 2019	9
3.1 EVP and S&D probably without their own majority	10
3.2 A key role for ALDE and "En Marche"	10
3.3 Medium-term consequences of the election	11
Conclusion	12
Bibliography	13
On the same topic	14

INTRODUCTION



AN IMPORTANT AND
CRITICAL ELECTION FOR
THE FUTURE OF EUROPE

Forty years after the first direct election of the European Parliament in 1979, the European election of 2019 will be an important and critical one for the future of Europe.¹ This Policy Paper provides an outlook on the May 2019 election. In a first step, the voting is contextualised. The second part then examines the three most important factors influencing the future power structures: voter shifts, the UK's withdrawal from the EU, and the new composition of the political groups. After that the third part of this Policy Paper analyses the likely difficulty in finding a majority after 26 May 2019.

1. BACKGROUND TO THE 2019 EUROPEAN ELECTIONS

With regard to the European elections, on the one hand, Eurosceptics hope that they will be able to fundamentally change the direction of the European Union. On the other hand, a number of EU supporters wants to receive a mandate to continue and deepen the integration process at the election in May 2019. In addition, the UK's deadline for leaving the EU is just eight weeks before the election date.

The opening of the election campaign promises to be exciting. The two major European party families have already found their lead candidates (**Spitzenkandidaten**) around six months before the election. At the EPP Congress in Helsinki on 8 November, the leader of the EPP group in the European Parliament, **Manfred Weber**, won by a clear majority against former Finnish Prime Minister Alexander Stubb: Weber received 492 out of 619 valid votes (79%), Stubb reached 127 votes (21%). The top candidate of the European Socialists and Social Democrats organised in the PES will be the current First Vice-President of the European Commission **Frans Timmermans**.

Whether one of the lead candidates ultimately becomes President of the European Commission is hard to gauge at this time. According to Article 17 (7) TEU, *"Taking into account the elections to the European Parliament and after having held the appropriate consultations, the European Council, acting by a qualified majority, shall propose to the European Parliament a candidate for President of the Commission."* The European Parliament elects the President of the Commission by a majority of its members. According to this procedure, in 2014 **Jean-Claude Juncker**, the EPP's lead candidate, was proposed by the European Council for the office of President of the European Commission and elected in the European Parliament. While the European Council insists that there is no automaticity between being a *Spitzenkandidat* and the Commission's presidency, the European Parliament has positioned itself as an advocate of the *Spitzenkandidaten* mechanism.²

1. For analyses of previous European elections, see: Yves Bertoncini and Valentin Kreilinger, [What political balance of power in the next European Parliament?](#) Policy Paper, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, November 2013; Michael Kaeding and Niko Switek, [Europawahl 2014: Spitzenkandidaten, Protestparteien und Nichtwähler](#), Wiesbaden 2015; Valentin Kreilinger, [Prognosen zur Zusammensetzung und Arbeit des Europäischen Parlaments nach der Wahl 2014](#), integration 1/2014, p. 3–20; Sarah Seeger and Valentin Kreilinger, [Europawahl 2009: Erwartungen – Programme – Visionen](#) (C·A·P Aktuell No. 8, Centrum für angewandte Politikforschung, December 2008).

2. For more details, see: Valentin Kreilinger, [A more democratic European Union: Positions and scope for political action](#), Policy Paper n°212, Jacques Delors Institute Berlin, December 2017, p. 11–13.

Due to the looming difficult majority situation expected after the European elections in May 2019, the next President of the Commission will need to be supported,³ at least in the parliamentary vote, by a coalition still to be formed, which holds at least 353 seats. In addition to the lead candidates of EPP and S&D, the current EU Competition Commissioner **Margarete Vestager** has been seen as a potential candidate for the post of Commission President, supported by the Liberals around the existing ALDE group and the “En Marche” movement of French President Emmanuel Macron.

It is important to note that in summer 2019, in addition to that of the European Commission, **other top-level positions will need to be filled**: these include the posts of the Presidents of the European Council and the European Central Bank and the Office of the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy.

Thus the European elections are only the beginning of a routine renewal of most of the EU institutions. However, the party-political composition of the next European Parliament (and the European Commission) will also have a significant impact on the direction of the European Union’s political agenda for the years 2019–2024.

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2. FACTORS INFLUENCING THE POST-ELECTION POWER STRUCTURE

The future power structure in the European Parliament is not determined solely by voter shifts (see 2.1). Two other factors play at least as important a role: first, after Brexit, the United Kingdom will no longer send MEPs to the European Parliament (see 2.2), and second, if delegations of national parties decide to change group, the individual groups will have a different composition, or new groups could emerge (see 2.3).

BOX 1 ■ Political groups in the European Parliament (2014–2019)

Since 2014, Members of the European Parliament have been organised into the following eight political groups:

- The European People’s Party (EPP)
- The Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D)
- The European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR)
- The Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE)
- The Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA)
- The European United Left – Nordic Green Left (GUE-NGL)
- Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD)
- Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF)

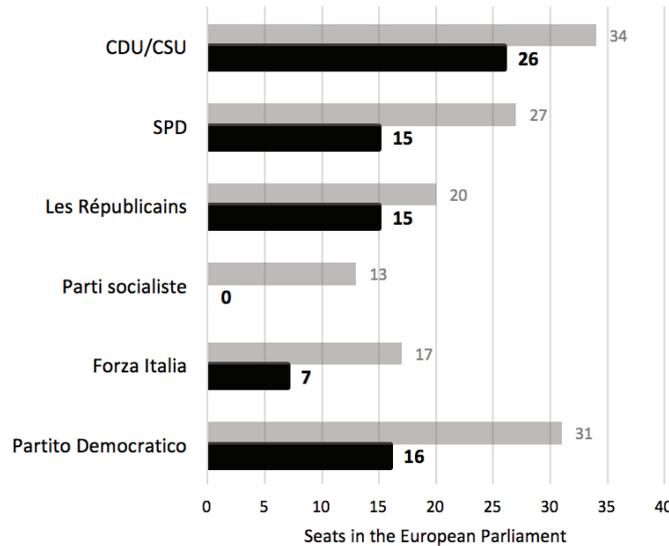
Source: Compiled by the author. For more information on the different groups, see: Lamy and Verger et al. 2018, Appendix 2: Political groups in the European Parliament, pp. 9–10.

3. Pascal Lamy, Christine Verger, Pervenche Berès, Jean-Louis Bourlanges, Monica Frassoni, Valentin Kreilinger, Alain Lamassoure, Alessia Mosca, Geneviève Pons (2018), *European Parliament 2019: The Parliament and Europe to come*, Décryptage, Jacques Delors Institute.

2.1 Voter shifts

The European elections in 2019 will be marked by two major trends: on the one hand, vote losses for the EPP and S&D, and on the other hand, gains for populist and Eurosceptic parties at the expense of the mainstream parties. In particular in Germany, France and Italy, the national parties belonging to the EPP and S&D groups will, according to recent surveys, suffer from significant losses (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1 – Number of seats in the European Parliament held by the EPP and S&D member parties in Germany, France and Italy (2014 result and projection for 2019)



Source: Own elaboration. In the next legislative term (2019–2024) Germany will continue to have 96 seats, with France having 79 seats (+5) and Italy 76 seats (+3).

Some other political forces could achieve high or even very high results in May 2019. Since some of these parties already had successes on the same scale five years ago, they would now have almost no effect on the distribution of seats. This applies, for example, to good results for the French Rassemblement National, formerly the National Front (23 seats, current projection: 19 seats), and Italy's Five Star Movement (17 seats, current projection: 25 seats⁴).

The influence of the populist and Eurosceptic parties in the next European Parliament will also be structurally limited by their fragmentation into several groups and by their weak cohesion. For this reason, the direct consequences of 150 or even 200 MEPs⁵, who would be counted to populist and Eurosceptic parties, for the functioning of the European Parliament are therefore less far-reaching than generally assumed. These parties do not constitute a homogeneous bloc, but can be found politically on both the right and left fringes of the political spectrum, and sometimes, as in the case of the Five Star Movement, they are difficult to classify in the right-left scheme.

Populists and Eurosceptics will remain far away from viable majorities after the 2019 European elections even in the event that their electorate is heavily mobilised and overall voter turnout is low. National elections in recent years, which have been characterised by an increasing turnout, could also indicate a reversal in the trend of EU-wide voter turnout continuing to decline since 1979 and stagnating in 2014 (2009: 43.0%, 2014: 43.09%).

4. EP 2019 projections for the number of seats are taken from Pollofpolls.eu (as of 2 November 2018)

5. 200 MEPs (out of 705) corresponds to 28% of the seats. Current analyses situate the Eurosceptic camp after the May 2019 election "at the same (high) level of just over 20% of the seats" (von Ondarza and Schenuit 2018, p. 5) and "between 20–25% of seats in Parliament" (Lamy and Verger et al., 2018, p. 4).

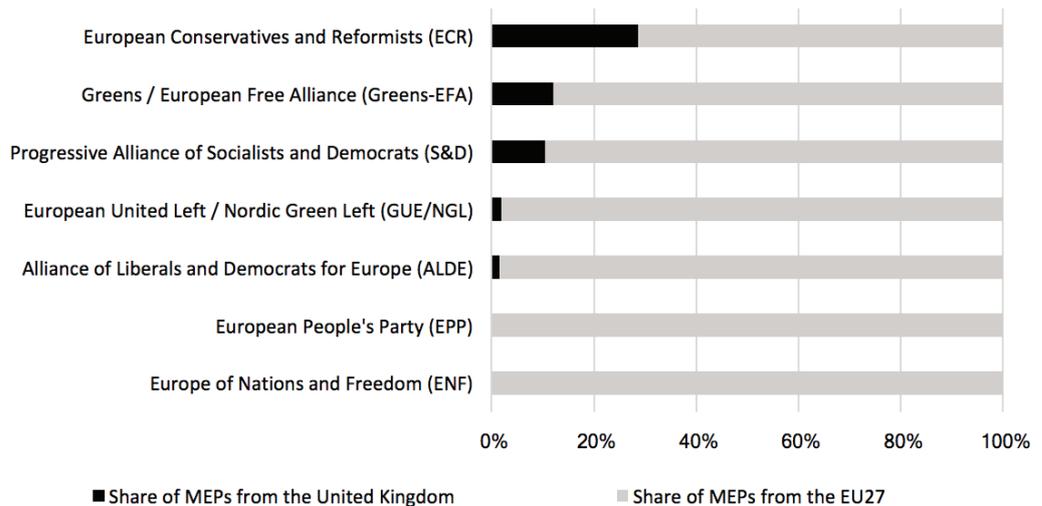
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2.2 The UK's withdrawal from the EU

The departure of the United Kingdom leaves 73 seats vacant in the European Parliament. In order for the number of seats per country to better reflect the population size at the forthcoming European elections, a total of **27 seats have been redistributed** among the remaining EU Member States according to the principle of degressive proportionality as defined in the EU Treaties. At the same time, the total number of MEPs in the European Parliament will be reduced from the current figure of 751 to 705 in the next parliament. These 46 seats are kept in reserve for possible extensions and the introduction of transnational lists.

With Brexit, the S&D group loses the delegation of the British Labour Party (20 MEPs) and thus almost 10% of its members. In addition, in the Greens/EFA group, British MEPs (Green Party of England and Wales, Scottish National Party) also account for about one-tenth of the members. The ECR group is incurring an even greater loss, with over one-quarter of the group with the British Conservatives (20 MEPs). However, the hardest hit is the EFDD group, in which 24 UKIP MEPs represent just under half of its members (see Figure 2). As a consequence of Brexit, it is expected that the political groups on the right of the EPP will reorganise (see 2.3).

FIGURE 2 ■ Proportion of British MEPs in the political groups in the European Parliament



Source: Own elaboration. The calculations are based on the groups and group affiliations of MEPs at the beginning of the eighth legislative term (1 July 2014). The ENF group, which was established on 15 June 2015, has been included for the sake of completeness.

2.3 The new composition of the political groups

The formation of political groups in the European Parliament follows domestic political practices; it helps in overcoming problems of collective action and allows for a division of labour and competition along ideological positions as at the national level. With reduced volatility, greater predictability, and greater policy efficiency, this system is advantageous to all.⁶ In addition to size, the internal cohesion of the parliamentary groups determines their actual influence in the European Parliament.

The rate of cohesion of the political groups in the European Parliament (the percentage of members of a political group voting the same way) stands at a remarkable 90%. Groups do not permanently support a “government”, but their internal cohesion relies solely on genuine ideological convergence. In some groups (EPP, S&D, ALDE, Greens/EFA) cohesion is higher than in other groups, according to data from VoteWatch Europe⁷:

- Green/EFA, S&D and EPP have the highest cohesion rates (92–95%);
- the internal cohesion of ALDE (89%), GUE-NGL (82%) and ECR (78%) is somewhat lower; and
- the cohesion of the ENF is 69%, while the EFDD achieves only 48%.

The balance of power between the groups after the election is the decisive factor in the European power structure. In addition to voter shifts and the one-off Brexit effect (see above), there are a number of parties whose group affiliation is unclear or who could look for a new political home and switch political groups. Such parties, delegations or individual MEPs could join one of the existing groups or try to form a **new political group**, for which **at least 25 members from at least seven Member States** are required.

For example, in 2014 an attempt to form a right-wing populist group under the leadership of the French National Front, the Dutch Partijvoor de Vrijheid, the Austrian FPÖ and the Italian Lega Nord failed because the parties did not find a sufficient number of partners to fulfil the dual criteria for the establishment of a political group in the European Parliament (25 MEPs from at least seven Member States). In the end, however, three separate Eurosceptic groups were formed in the eighth legislative period.⁸ At the same time, earlier examples of Eurosceptic/populist groups on the right-hand side of the political spectrum show that differences of opinion between members can lead to the break-up of such a group.

For each political group in the European Parliament, **three alternative lines of development** can be derived from the decisions of individual national parties, delegations or individual MEPs (hereinafter referred to as “scenarios”). These scenarios each have different plausibility: **the most likely scenario is highlighted in grey in Table 1.**

⁶ Simon Hix, Amie Kreppel, Abdul Noury: *The Party System in the European Parliament: Collusive or Competitive?*, in: *Journal of Common Market Studies* 2/2003, pp. 309-331, here: pp. 313–314; Simon Hix, Abdul Noury, Gérard Roland: *Democratic Politics in the European Parliament*, Cambridge 2007, Cambridge University Press, p. 89.

⁷ VoteWatch Europe, *Cohesion of (trans-national) political groups in the European Parliament* (last accessed on 2 November 2018).

⁸ For more details, see: Nicolai von Ondarza and Felix Schenuit: *Schatten über den Europawahlen*, SWP Aktuell No. 58, October 2018, pp. 3–4.

TABLE 1 ■ Scenarios for changes within and between political groups in the European Parliament after 26 May 2019

	"FRAGMENTATION" SCENARIO	"CONTINUITY" SCENARIO	"EXPANSION" SCENARIO
European People's Party (EPP)	Fidesz leaves (-14 seats*)	No change	PiS joins (+27 seats*)
Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D)	Partito Democratico splits (off) (-16 seats*)	Loss of Labour MEPs	Syriza joins (+6 seats*)
European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR)	PiS leaves (-27 seats*), collapse of the group	Loss of Tory MEPs	Fidesz joins (+14 seats*)
Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE)	Departure due to the formation of an "En Marche" group	"En Marche" does not join; no competing group	"En Marche" joins (+21 seats*) along with other parties
Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA)	No foreseeable departures	Loss of Green Party and EFA MEPs	No foreseeable entries
European United Left – Nordic Green Left (GUE-NGL)	Syriza leaves (-6 seats*)	No change	New left parties / movements join
Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD)	Collapse of group after loss of UKIP MEPs	Loss of UKIP MEPs	Renewal of the group by Five Star Movement (25 seats*)
Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF)	Departures due to formation of a new (competing) group	No change	AfD joins (+16 seats*)

Source: Own elaboration. For a more detailed discussion of the conceivable developments in the individual groups, see: Lamy and Verger et al. 2018, pp. 4–8.

*) According to the current EP2019 forecast for the number of seats from Pollofpolls.eu (as of 2 November 2018).

If "continuity" prevails in EPP and S&D (boxes highlighted in grey in Table 1), the **EPP** would currently achieve **between 25 and 26%** of the seats and **S&D between 19 and 20%**.⁹ This would make the EVP by far the strongest group: the S&D would follow with around 40 seats (178 seats to 137 seats). Assuming that the existing **ALDE** group, En Marche and other parties (such as Ciudadanos) form a common political group, close to 100 MEPs could be grouped in the political centre (**12–14%**). In the case of the smaller groups, the **Greens/EFA** are likely to face losses: they could achieve **5%** and have around 35 of the 705 seats. **GUE-NGL** with about 58 seats (**8%**) seems to be on the upswing.

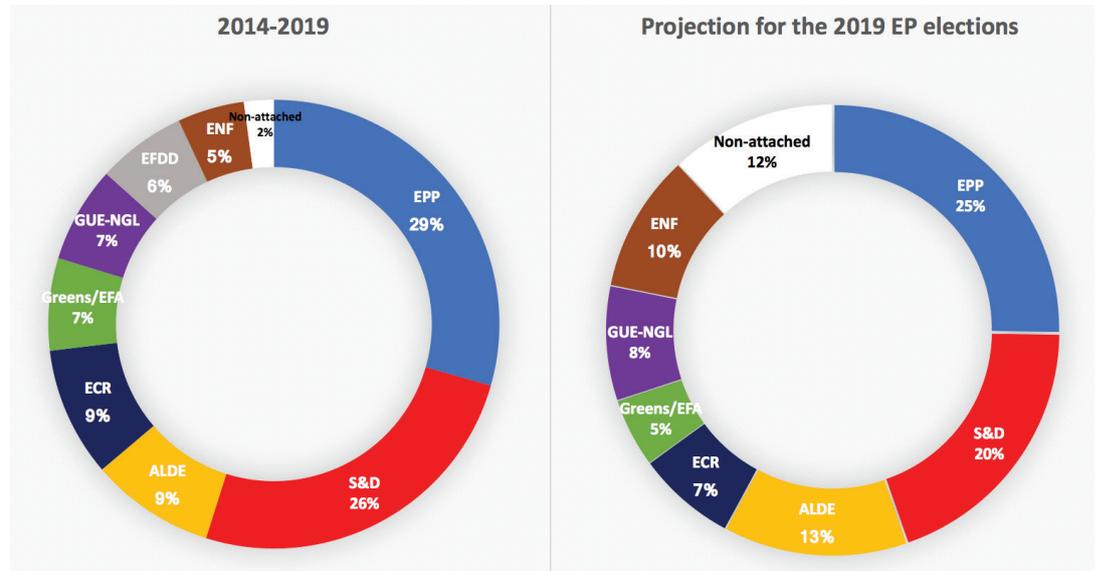
On the right-hand side of the political spectrum, a re-composition of the political groups appears very likely in the event of the dissolution of the EFDD group. In that case, however, the question which political home the Five Star Movement would then find remains open. Both the ECR group (around 48 seats without existing EFDD members) and the ENF group (around 59 seats without existing EFDD members) will in all likelihood find additional members as a result of the EFDD's breakup. The entry of the AfD in the ENF group with Rassemblement national, FPÖ and Lega also seems to be the most likely scenario. At the same time, the formation of a broad right-wing collective movement, as supported by Steve Bannon, cannot be ruled out.¹⁰

9. The figures from POLITICO based on Pollofpolls.eu and the European Parliament, Lamy and Verger et al. 2018, and von Ondarza and Schenuit 2018 (and Pollofpolls.eu itself) hardly differ in this respect.

10. See Scenario C in von Ondarza and Schenuit 2018, pp. 6–8.

However, it would be exposed to strong divergences between individual right-wing parties (for example in Russia policy). Therefore, in spite of other conceivable scenarios, one can expect a strengthening of the **ECR** group (around 50 seats, **7%**) and the **ENF** group (around 70 seats, **10%**), which could divide up the political spectrum to the right of the EPP after the election, and would bring together 16 to 20% of the seats.

FIGURE 3 ■ Composition of the European Parliament



Source: Own elaboration. Author's calculations based on the most plausible scenario in Table 1. This projection for the European elections in 2019 represents a "snapshot" in early November 2018 (EPP 178 seats, S&D 137 seats, ALDE including En Marche 93 seats, ECR 50 seats, Greens/EFA 35 seats, GUE-NGL 58 seats, ENF 70 seats, with 84 non-attached seats). In this projection, "non-attached" includes 25 seats for the Five Star Movement.

3. THE DIFFICULTY OF FINDING A MAJORITY AFTER 26 MAY 2019

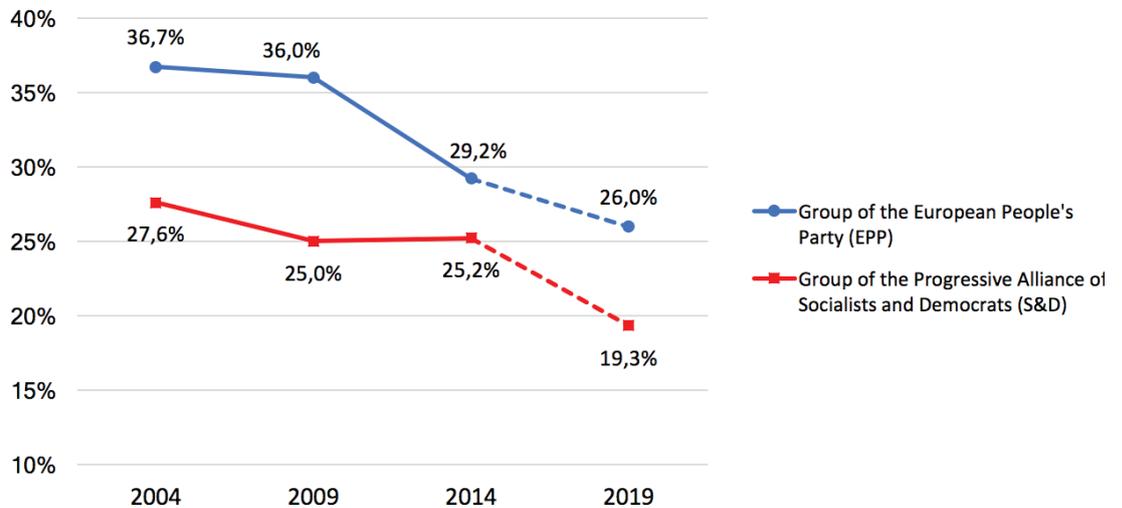
The real challenge in the European Parliament therefore lies in obtaining political majorities. The European Parliament is the parliamentary assembly of a political system based on the separation of powers, and consists of **eight political groups** (see Box 1, above). There are several co-existing majority coalitions, but thus far the Parliament has functioned mainly on the basis of an informal "grand coalition" of the two strongest political groups.

However, the EPP and S&D are unlikely to have their own **majority** (353 seats) in the ninth legislative period (see 3.1). This will result in a strengthened position for the ALDE group as well as the approximately 20 MEPs of the French "En Marche" movement who will enter the European Parliament (see 3.2). However, such an emerging quasi-permanent cooperation in the political centre also entails the medium-term risk of a further strengthening of Eurosceptic forces (see 3.3).

3.1 EVP and S&D probably without their own majority

Despite the expected gains in votes on the part of Eurosceptic and populist forces, the direct consequences will be very limited. Their numerical increase will not particularly affect the functioning of the European Parliament, which is largely characterised by compromises between established groups in the political centre. But it is likely that EPP and S&D will no longer hold their majority. The current projection of the distribution of seats by POLITICO Europe sees the EPP group with 183 seats (26.0%) and the S&D group with 136 (19.3%). This would continue the long-term **downward trend for the two largest groups of the European Parliament** (see Figure 4).

FIGURE 4 ■ EPP and S&D's share of the total number of seats in the European Parliament



Source: Own elaboration. Data for 2004, 2009 and 2014: Hix, Noury and Roland 2018, p. 53. Projection for 2019: POLITICO Europe, Projected Composition of the next EU Parliament, 23 October 2018.

3.2 A key role for ALDE and “En Marche”

Out of the eight parliamentary groups, three co-existent majority coalitions have been formed in previous legislative terms. These vary from policy area to policy area, but have been relatively stable over time:

- First, a “grand coalition” between EPP and S&D, often involving ALDE;
- Second, a centre-right coalition of the EPP, ALDE and ECR (the right-wing group of the EPP); and
- Third, a centre-left coalition of S&D, ALDE, and Greens/EFA and GUE-NGL (the two groups to the left of the S&D).

This means that the ALDE group (with around 10% of MEPs) plays a central role in the European Parliament, extending far beyond its respective share of the total number of seats.

In this context, Simon Hix and Bjørn Høyland argue that the European Union also “produces a particular set of policy outcomes that is close to the preferences of many European liberal

parties and centrist voters: free-market economic policies (such as deregulation of the single market) and liberal social policies (such as open immigration policies, high environmental standards, and gender equality)."¹¹ The central role of the liberal ALDE group is thus not only the product of coexisting majority coalitions, but also corresponds to political preferences.

The **ALDE group**, which will be significantly **strengthened in the number of seats it holds thanks to “En Marche”**, could help the two large but diminished political groups to achieve an absolute majority. This gives rise to the question of whether, under these conditions, EPP and S&D would be willing to elect an ALDE Commission President and how much room there would be for a “compromise candidate” who was not a lead candidate (*Spitzenkandidat*).

At present there is a strong case to be made for co-operation between the EPP, S&D and ALDE. The European Council of Heads of State and Government also consists of about one-third each from EPP, S&D and ALDE. The process until the new Commission takes office has become more complicated due to the Lisbon Treaty; the process already took several months in 2004, 2009 and 2014, although in the end a large majority always supported the candidate for the post of President of the European Commission.

3.3 Medium-term consequences of the election

However, owing to external circumstances, permanent co-operation in the medium term between EPP, S&D and ALDE poses significant risks, as it could lead to a further strengthening of populist and Eurosceptic forces in the **2024 European elections** and also in the national elections before then.

It is also unclear whether the behaviour of the majority groups towards the stronger, but more diverse bloc of Eurosceptic and populist forces might change. On the one hand, there is a risk that the analyses and recommendations formulated by the populist forces will find their way into the party manifestos and policy demands of mainstream political parties. On the other hand, the players involved could also move over to an energetic defence of the European Union and a clearer articulation of their alternative visions and proposals for the Future of Europe. In that case it would be important to emphasise the differences between the centre-left and the centre-right, because Eurosceptic and populist forces will (continue to) try to distinguish themselves as a voice against “Brussels”.

11. Simon Hix and Bjørn Høyland: [Empowerment of the European Parliament](#), in: Annual Review of Political Science, 2013, pp. 171–189, hier: p. 181.



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CONCLUSION

In the 1990s, the elections to the European Parliament were considered as “neither really European nor really elections”,¹² because they display national political processes and political concerns that might dominate particular national elections would not be reflected in the European elections. Today this judgement is no longer valid: the European elections represent European political processes and are as political as national elections.



THE EUROPEAN ELECTIONS
AS A “TEACH-THEM-A-
LESSON ELECTION”

Nevertheless, the European elections are still referred to as **second-order national elections**. The so-called “political arena of the second order” (European Union) stands next to the “political arena of the first order” (nation-state). European elections also take place at various stages of national electoral cycles and political alternatives at European level play little or no role in the vote.¹³ Citizens still often vote on national rather than European issues and use the European elections as a “teach-them-a-lesson election” to show their disapproval of national policies. In 2019, the European elections also amount to a testing of the political waters for new national governments that took office in 2017 and 2018 (for example in Germany, France, Italy and Spain).

Following the “second-order national elections” approach, there are three key differences between national and European elections:

- Voter turnout in the European elections is lower given the limited competencies of the European Union;
- Larger parties tend to fare worse compared to the previous election at the national level, and smaller parties fare better; and
- Mainstream governing parties at the national level suffer losses.

Although some of these tendencies continue to apply, the European elections in 2019 are a **strongly Europeanised vote**: The Euro crisis and the refugee crisis have sparked controversial public debates and have brought European issues to centre stage in many Member States, even in national elections.¹⁴

This outlook on the European Parliament after the May 2019 election shows that, despite many unknowns, possible changes resulting from the European elections can already be outlined. The expected gains of populist and Eurosceptic forces, which could achieve 150 or even 200 seats, will not paralyse the European Parliament, but force a (still) stronger co-operation between the mainstream parties.

¹² Cees van der Eijk and Mark N. Franklin: *The Problem: Representation and Democracy in the European Union*, in: *Choosing Europe? The European Electorate and National Politics in the Face of Union*, Ann Arbor 1996, pp. 3–10, here: p. 10.

¹³ Karlheinz Reif and Hermann Schmitt: *Nine Second Order National Elections – A Conceptual Framework for the Analysis of European Election Results*, *European Journal of Political Research*, 1/1980, pp. 3–44, here: p. 3f.

¹⁴ One of the first national elections in which this phenomenon was observed was the Italian parliamentary election in 2013. See Renaud Dehousse: *Europe at the polls. Lessons from the 2013 Italian elections*, Policy Paper, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, Paris 2013.

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