The 2019 European Parliamentary elections
And the future of the European project
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Open Europe is a non-partisan and independent policy think tank. Our mission is to conduct rigorous analysis and produce recommendations on which to base the UK’s new relationship with the EU and its trading relationships with the rest of the world. We aim to ensure that Government policy and public debate is rational and well informed.

In the wake of the UK’s vote to leave the EU, our programme of research and consultation will focus particularly on:

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The 2019 European Parliamentary elections and the future of the European project

Executive Summary

- The 2019 European Parliament elections will take place across the EU between May 23 and 26, against the backdrop of Brexit and a divided European political landscape. Although their practical consequences for the functioning of the EU are limited, these elections will be an important barometer of European public opinion on the state of the EU.
- The elections are likely to reflect the increasing fragmentation and polarisation experienced across the liberal democracies of the West, including in the national politics of several EU member states.
- The 2019 election is projected to see a consolidation of the Eurosceptic and anti-establishment surge witnessed in 2014, rather than a second surge. Six member states are projected to see a Eurosceptic party win the most votes, while six will see a Eurosceptic party finish second.
- Though they will still be in a minority in the Parliament, the fact that Eurosceptic parties will cement and, in some cases, improve their performance is a warning sign that all is not well with the European project.
- There will also be an element of a national-level protest vote, as in previous European elections. An opposition party is expected to win the most seats in at least eight member states, including the UK – where the governing party has not won a European election since 1984.

- The European Parliament currently consists of eight official political groups, but only so much can be drawn from their overall successes and failures. Each group is a broad church, some hold very similar positions on the question of EU integration, and the groups will likely be reshuffled in the aftermath of the election. In particular, the new, pan-European nationalist group established by Italian Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini may lead to a greater capacity for organisation and co-operation between Eurosceptic parties.
- The narrative that these elections are a binary and existential struggle between progressive liberals and populists is wide of the mark. Instead, it is better to divide the political parties that will sit in the European Parliament into three groups: pro-integrationists who want “more Europe”, mainstream parties with a “keep calm and carry on” approach, and Eurosceptics who want “less Europe.”
- The Eurosceptic bloc remains internally divided, and their ability to block European decision-making through the Parliament will be limited. Indeed, for Eurosceptics, the European Council is a more effective vehicle for influencing EU decision-making than the European Parliament. National elections which determine the governments of member states arguably have more bearing on the direction of the EU than European Parliament elections.
The European Parliament’s role is important in the day-to-day legislative activities of the Union and in determining the personnel for some key institutional roles. However, it is not instrumental in setting the strategic direction of the Union or key constitutional issues, such as the future of Eurozone reform – these are largely a matter for national governments.

Nevertheless, the fragmented composition of the new Parliament may make it a difficult partner for the other EU institutions. In particular, the two largest political groups in the Parliament, the centre-left S&D and the centre-right EPP, are set to lose their combined majority for the first time. Currently, their combined majority is 34; after this election, they are projected to be around 60 seats short. They will have to rely on other groups to get legislation through.

In practice, the two-party ‘Grand Coalition’ of the EPP and S&D, which carried 74% of votes on legislation in the 2014-2019 Parliament, is likely to be replaced by a new three-party ‘Grand Coalition,’ which would include the liberal ALDE group. This risks exacerbating the polarisation between establishment and anti-establishment forces in the Parliament, and amplifying the message of the latter.

Despite their success, Eurosceptics are only projected to win around a third to a quarter of the seats – which will not be enough to block legislation if the mainstream parties unite. Pro-Europeans will not be able to blame Eurosceptics if the Parliament’s legislative stagnation continues for another five years.

The Spitzenkandidat process, which allows the parties in the Parliament to select the next Commission President, remains contested. It is far from clear that the next President will ultimately be one of the Spitzenkandidaten, with key EU figures opposed to both the process and the proposed candidates. Whatever happens, the selection of President Jean-Claude Juncker’s successor will be a source of both political and inter-institutional controversy.

The UK’s participation will only have a moderate impact on the composition of the European Parliament. It will alter the balance of the political groups incrementally, rather than decisively. Meanwhile, UK MEPs might be able to vote on the next Commission President, but their participation will not necessarily alter the outcome. UK participation will, however, cause problems for the anticipated reallocation of some of the UK’s seats to other EU member states.
Introduction

The May 2019 elections for the European Parliament will take place at a time when the EU is facing many internal and external challenges, ranging from Brexit to the future of migration policy and Eurozone reform. They will also take place against the backdrop of an increasingly fragmented and volatile political landscape. European-level tensions will reflect the divisions in the domestic political scene of countries such as France, the Netherlands, Germany and Italy during the past five years, as well as open conflict between the EU institutions and the governments of Poland and Hungary.

The 2014 European elections saw a significant rise in support for Eurosceptic parties. However, a further dramatic surge in support for these parties is unlikely; instead, the overall picture is likely to be one of Eurosceptics consolidating their earlier gains. Elsewhere, liberal, green and other challenger parties are expected to do well in many countries, while traditional centre-right and centre-left parties are expected to fall back. As ever, the results and issues will vary significantly in different countries – despite the growing importance of transnational, ‘pan-European’ issues, these elections will largely reflect politics at national level. Although an important barometer of public opinion on the EU, they are still best interpreted as 28 national elections in 28 countries; a European ‘demos’ remains a distant prospect.

There are two ways in which to interpret these elections, both of which are explored in this paper. The first looks at what the political composition of the Parliament might signify for the future direction of the European project. Although political parties currently sit in 8 pan-European political groupings, they are better divided into three broad categories: pro-EU parties who call for deeper integration (“More Europe”), anti-EU parties who call for less integration (“Less Europe”), and mainstream parties who largely favour the status quo (“Keep calm and carry on”).

The second way to look at the elections is their practical consequences for the day-to-day governing of the EU, particularly the legislative functioning of the next European Parliament and the so-called Spitzenkandidat process for selecting the next European Commission President. The procedural impact on the EU of the UK’s participation in the elections is also an important consideration here.

This paper refers to opinion polling for the upcoming European elections. Unless otherwise stated, all polling data and seat forecasting are taken from Politico’s aggregation of national polling.¹

¹While no opinion poll can perfectly predict the outcome of elections, using a comprehensive aggregation of polls reduces the risk of data being skewed by outliers. Politico’s polling aggregation can be accessed at https://www.politico.eu/2019-european-elections/
1. The political composition of the European Parliament and the future direction of the EU

The political groups of the European Parliament

Political parties in the European Parliament currently sit in eight different groups, loosely divided by political ideology. The formation of a group requires at least 25 MEPs from at least seven different member states. The current Parliament is composed of the following groups:

1. **European People’s Party (EPP):** The mainstream pro-EU centre-right group, largely made up of moderate conservative parties.

2. **Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D):** The mainstream pro-EU centre-left group, mostly made up of social democratic parties. The UK Labour Party sit in this group.

3. **Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE):** An alliance of pro-EU centrist and liberal parties. The UK’s Liberal Democrats sit in this group.

4. **Greens/European Free Alliance (G/EFA):** An alliance of Green, regionalist and left-wing nationalist parties. The UK Greens, as well as the SNP and Plaid Cymru, sit in this group.

5. **European United Left-Nordic Green Left (GUE-NGL):** A left-wing group, comprised of socialist, left-Eurosceptic, and communist parties.

6. **European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR):** A conservative, Eurosceptic and anti-federalist group. The UK Conservatives are one of this group’s leading parties.

7. **Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD):** A diverse populist and Eurosceptic group. The ex-UKIP MEPs who have defected to the new Brexit Party sit in this group.

8. **Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF):** A right-wing to far-right group, which is nationalist and Eurosceptic. The remaining UKIP MEPs sit in this group.

The two charts below compare the composition of the current European Parliament groupings to the projected composition after the elections.²

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Political composition of the current European Parliament

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Seats as of April 2019</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GUE-NGL (far-left)</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G/EFA (Green)</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S&amp;D (centre-left)</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALDE (liberal/centre)</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EPP (centre-right)</td>
<td>217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECR (conservative Eurosceptic)</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EFDD (populist Eurosceptic)</td>
<td>41</td>
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<tr>
<td>ENF (far-right)</td>
<td>37</td>
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<td>Non-Inscrits (diverse)</td>
<td>21</td>
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There is a symbolic importance in how well each group does, and the parliamentary arithmetic has an impact on EU governance – in particular, the Commission President tends to be drawn from the largest group. Membership of a group also allows political parties and MEPs access to funding and speaking time. However, these eight groups do not paint a complete picture of the political composition of the European Parliament as a whole:

- Each grouping is a broad church which accommodates parties with different ideologies and policies. For example, the Hungarian ruling party Fidesz – widely seen as nationalist, populist and Eurosceptic – is a member of the mainstream centre-right EPP, though it has recently been suspended. Similarly, the ECR was established as the “respectable” face of moderate, reformist Euroscepticism, yet has recently been infiltrated by parties whose ideology is more akin to that of the EFDD or ENF – such as
the Sweden Democrats and the Brothers of Italy, both widely classified as hard right parties with some historical roots in neo-fascist movements. In practice, it is increasingly difficult to differentiate ideologically between the three right-leaning Eurosceptic groupings.

- The two largest groups – the centre-right EPP and the centre-left S&D – may come from different domestic political traditions, but hold similar positions on questions of EU policy and legislation. Indeed, analysis by VoteWatch Europe found that 74% of votes in this term of the European Parliament were carried by a ‘Grand Coalition’ of the EPP and S&D.\(^3\)

- As demonstrated in the chart above, there are a number of parties who are not currently set to join any existing political group, including one of Europe’s largest parties, the anti-establishment Italian Five Star Movement.\(^4\) There are also a handful of smaller parties which do not sit with any grouping.

- New groups will be established after the election, and old groups may disappear. In particular, Italy’s Deputy Prime Minister and Lega Party leader Matteo Salvini has launched a new Eurosceptic group, known as the European Alliance of Peoples and Nations (EAPN). This encompasses nationalists and populists from all three existing Eurosceptic groups (ECR, EFDD and ENF), and will likely lead to a significant realignment of the Eurosceptic right within the European Parliament. On the other end of the spectrum, French President Emmanuel Macron looks set to form a new centrist group, together with most of the parties that currently sit with ALDE and perhaps a few that currently sit with the S&D group.\(^5\)

The fortunes of the eight political groupings therefore only tell us so much about the future direction of the EU. It is much more instructive to divide the parties in the European Parliament into three groups, as outlined below. These groups are all broad coalitions, and there is some overlap between the first two in particular – with some individual parties effectively having a foot in both camps.

- **“More Europe”**
  - An assortment of pro-EU reformists who want to drive the EU in a new, largely integrationist direction.
  - Some are ardent Europhiles, while others – particularly the Greens – seek deeper EU integration as a means to an end, rather than an end in itself.
  - Most of these parties are centrist or centre-left. For many, their pro-EU stance is as much about demonstrating adherence to a set of progressive values as it is about actual integrationist policies.
  - **Associated with:** French President Emmanuel Macron and ALDE leader Guy Verhofstadt.

\(^3\)VoteWatch Europe, ‘EP2019: how have MEPs made decisions during these 5 years?’, 12 February 2019: https://www.votewatch.eu/blog/ep2019-how-meps-made-decisions-during-these-5-years/

\(^4\)The Five Star Movement currently hopes to establish a new anti-establishment group.

• “Keep calm and carry on”
  o This group, which is the largest, largely favours continuity and the status quo, with incremental reforms in key areas. Though broadly pro-EU, it is sceptical of grand plans for deeper integration – particularly on the Eurozone.
  o This group is dominated by the centre-right EPP, but also includes some parties from the centre and centre-left. Currently, its parties tend to be in government in Northern Europe, but in opposition in Southern Europe.
  o **Associated with:** German Christian Democratic Union (CDU) leader Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer and Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte.

• “Less Europe”
  o A diverse group of parties representing various shades of Euroscepticism, who are internally divided over a host of ideological and policy issues. For the most part, they either want less European integration, or an EU so radically different that it would be unrecognisable.
  o **Associated with:** Italian Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini and French National Rally leader Marine Le Pen.

“More Europe”

This group of integrationists has historically been a strong force in the EU institutions, but now appears to have limited political capital to drive the EU in the direction they want. The election of Emmanuel Macron as French President in May 2017 was heralded as a turning point, but so far appears to be a false dawn. Macron has repeatedly attempted to reinvigorate pro-European forces against what he sees as the menace of populist Euroscepticism. In his 2017 Sorbonne speech he called for a “sovereign, united, democratic” Europe through an ambitious European agenda; more recently, he elevated the importance of the European elections to a fight for a “European Renaissance.” Since then, however, Macron has had to water down his ambitious proposals due to opposition from Germany and the so-called New Hanseatic League, a group of Northern European fiscally conservative states. Indeed, he did not even mention Eurozone reform in his recent open letter to European citizens, published in newspapers across the continent. Though Macron has continued to frame these elections as a straight fight between pro-Europeans and populists, he has watered down his policy proposals somewhat - an indication of the stalling momentum of integrationist sentiment, as well as his own struggles domestically.

Aside from Macron, a number of other parties also promote deeper European integration and co-operation. The liberal ALDE group in particular is home to several ardently Europhile parties, though these tend to win few votes at elections. They include Italy’s More Europe, the Swedish Liberals, the Dutch Democrats 66, and the Luxembourg Democratic Party – all small parties in their own countries, and expected to lose some of the seats they currently hold in the European Parliament. Some of the larger mainstream social democratic parties, particularly from Western European countries, also subscribe to a European vision that is ideologically close to that of Macron. The Social Democratic (SPD) party in Germany and the Democratic Party (PD) in Italy are key examples of this, with the SPD campaigning on a platform that states “Europe is the answer” and PD calling for a new Europe that is “green, just and democratic.”

The centre-left Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party (PSOE) and Portugal’s Socialist Party (PS) are also strongly pro-integration. Indeed, there has been some speculation that both the PS and the Italian PD might leave the S&D group to join Macron’s new alliance – they were the only S&D parties which attended Macron’s recent gathering of pro-EU and centrist parties. These four parties alone – SPD, PD, PSOE and PS – are amongst the largest in the current S&D group, forecasted to win 57 seats between them. This is despite the significant decline of both the German SPD and the Italian PD, both of which are forecasted to lose at least 10 seats and slip into third place in their own countries.

A separate and distinct force calling for change in Europe are the various Green parties, with their pan-European website saying, “The time is now for change in Europe” and “European unity must be developed further in every generation.” Most European Green parties are not ideologically Euro-federalist – their support for deeper integration is partly conceived as a means to an end (tackling climate change at international level), rather than supporting integration for its own sake. Their numerical strength largely relies on the dramatic rise of the German Green Party, which is expected to win 18 seats and replace the SPD as Germany’s second largest party in the European Parliament.

It is important to note that for many of these parties, their association with the “More Europe” camp is as much an expression of a particular set of cultural values rather than explicit support for integrationist policies. Whether accurately or not, being pro-European is increasingly seen in many national political debates as a shorthand for being liberal, progressive, open-minded and tolerant. Political positions on the European question are now interpreted through the framework of the ongoing and emerging “culture war” in European, British and American politics, and support for European integration is often framed as a response to the challenges thrown up by the perceived successes of “populism” – the election of Donald Trump, the Brexit vote, and a series of successful results for nationalist parties in elections across Europe. The increasing emphasis placed on socially liberal, environmental and pro-migration policies at the...
European level by progressive parties can be interpreted partly in this context. For instance, the success of the German Greens owes much to the way they have presented themselves as the diametric opposite to the right-wing, anti-immigration Alternative fur Deutschland (AfD).\(^{14}\)

“Keep calm and carry on”

This group consists of mainstream, establishment European political parties who are largely content with the current state of the European Union. They are exemplified by the way German Chancellor Angela Merkel has approached the European project, largely favouring a status quo consensus and incremental reforms over radical change. Merkel’s successor as leader of the German Christian Democratic Union (CDU), Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, looks set to continue this approach. In a response to Emmanuel Macron’s calls for a stronger Europe, she said, “European centralism, European statism, the communitarisation of debts, the Europeanisation of social systems, and the minimum wage would be the wrong approach,” adding, “the work of the European institutions cannot claim any moral superiority over the collaborative effort of national governments.”\(^{15}\)

The European Parliament, traditionally a force for deeper integration, is increasingly reflecting this trend towards a more cautious approach to EU reform. Almost all parties from the centre-right European People’s Party are in this group; though there are individual EPP figures who are staunch integrationists, the bloc as a whole is unlikely to throw its weight behind a Macron-style reformist project. The centre-left S&D are more divided. As outlined above, some of their largest parties are in the “More Europe” camp. However, others – notably those from medium-sized non-Eurozone countries, such as Sweden’s Social Democrats, Romania’s Social Democratic Party (PSD), and the Bulgarian Socialist Party (PSB), are more aligned to the status quo group; indeed, the Romanian and Bulgarian parties have flirted with Euroscepticism at times.\(^{16}\) Were it not for Brexit, the UK Labour Party would also be placed firmly in the status quo group, although its MEPs tend to be more pro-EU than other parts of the party. The continuity tendency is also represented within parts of the liberal ALDE group, even though it is traditionally the most integrationist party. While ALDE’s collective manifesto says the group is “firmly resolved to further deepen, reinforce and eventually enlarge the European Union,” some of the group’s largest and most influential parties – notably those from northern Eurozone countries, such as Germany’s Free Democratic Party (FDP) and Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte’s VVD – are more cautious and pragmatic on EU reform.\(^{17}\) Reports suggest both the VVD and the FDP will nonetheless be joining Macron’s new centrist alliance –

\(^{15}\) Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, ‘Getting Europe right,’ 9 March 2019: https://www.cdu.de/artikel/getting-europe-right
\(^{17}\) ALDE Manifesto for European Elections 2019: https://www.aldeparty.eu/political-programme-and-european-elections-manifestos
suggesting that even this new group will not be entirely united over the question of European integration.  

Parties in the “Keep calm and carry on” group are represented across the EU. However, they are currently in opposition in Southern European countries (such as France, Spain, and Portugal), and in government in Northern European countries (such as Germany, the Netherlands, and Denmark). To an extent, this reflects divisions over Eurozone reform in the European Council, particularly between France and the countries of the New Hanseatic League.

As far as general attitudes to the EU are concerned, the parties in this group are broadly pro-EU – they are much more closely aligned with “More Europe” than with “Less Europe.” Together, the two pro-EU groups will have a comfortable combined majority after the 2019 election. If measures to foster deeper integration stall, it will not be because of Eurosceptic “wreckers” – it will be because the mainstream cannot agree. Arguably, the biggest obstacle to a Macron-style reform project are not Eurosceptics, but cautious pro-Europeans.

“Less Europe”

The performance of this diverse coalition of Eurosceptic parties will undoubtedly be the focus of considerable media attention in the elections. However, when assessing their success, it is important to remember that Euroscptic parties are already in a strong position after the 2014 European elections, in which they won roughly a quarter of the available seats. 2019 will therefore likely see a consolidation of earlier gains, rather than a major “surge” for Eurosceptics. It is also important to note that their success in larger member states may exaggerate the breadth of their appeal. For example, France’s National Rally, Germany’s AfD and Italy’s Lega and Five Star Movement are together projected to win 77 MEPs – around a third of the projected total of Eurosceptic MEPs, yet only representing 4 parties from 3 out of 28 member states. On the other hand, the disproportionate success of Eurosceptics in the largest member states may itself be an indication of the health of the European project.

There are three explicitly Eurosceptic parliamentary groupings – the ECR, EFDD, and ENF. Traditionally, the ECR are considered to be the most moderate, and the ENF the most radical – with the EFDD somewhere in between. In practice, however, the parties in each grouping do not map neatly onto this. The ECR, for example, includes parties such as the Danish People’s Party, the Sweden Democrats and the Brothers of Italy – all of whom are generally seen as right-wing populists, rather than conservative reformists. Conversely, there are parties in other groups who are Eurosceptic in practice. Most of the left-wing GUE-NGL parties can be classed as Eurosceptic; other Eurosceptic parties include Hungarian ruling party Fidesz in the EPP, and a disparate group of unaffiliated parties.

Moreover, it is unclear whether the current formulation of Eurosceptic groupings will survive the 2019 elections. Notably, Italian Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini has established a new pan-European nationalist group, the European Alliance of Peoples and Nations (EAPN).

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18 Politico Europe, ‘Macron’s party hosts centrist gathering ahead of election,’ 10 May 2019: [https://www.politico.eu/article/macrons-party-to-host-centrist-gathering-ahead-of-election/]
This has already attracted several major populist parties from all three Eurosceptic groupings – the ENF (Marine Le Pen’s National Rally, Austria’s Freedom Party, and Salvini’s Lega), the EFDD (Germany’s AfD), and the ECR (the Danish People’s Party and the Finns Party). After the election, the ENF will likely fold wholesale into the EAPN, while the EFDD seems increasingly unlikely to survive the elections – it currently depends heavily on MEPs from Italy’s Five Star Movement, which now intends to establish a new group, and the UK Brexit Party, whose MEPs may not be there for long. The ECR, on the other hand, has made clear that it does not intend to merge with EAPN or any other group – but with its Danish and Finnish MEPs defecting, and the UK contingent’s future uncertain, it will likely be a diminished force. In 2014, it was the third largest group – this time, it is projected to slip to fifth, behind ALDE and the EAPN and only narrowly ahead of the Greens. The eclipse of the ECR – nominally the most constructive Eurosceptic group – by the more hardline EAPN will likely exacerbate the increasing polarisation of the Parliament as a whole.

Given the ill-defined and fluid nature of the official groupings, it is much better to divide the different groups of Eurosceptics according to political ideology:

- **Centre-right Euro-critical parties**: They can be broadly described as conservative parties opposed to further transfers of sovereignty, and most of them sit with the ECR. By far the largest party in this group are the Polish Law and Justice Party (PiS). In total, this group is forecasted to win 38 seats.

- **Anti-establishment parties**: These parties defy right and left classification and are predominantly defined by their opposition to the political establishment, including the EU status quo. The archetypal example is Italy’s Five Star Movement, though there are smaller parties in other countries who are also in this group. They are forecasted to win 22 seats.

- **National Populist parties**: By far the largest, this group is comprised of mostly right-wing, populist parties who are openly hostile to many EU norms and values, particularly on immigration and globalisation. Some previously called for their country’s exit from the EU, but have since rowed back on this demand. The largest parties in this group include the Italian League (forecasted to win 26 seats), the French National Rally (20), the German AfD (11), and Hungary’s Fidesz (14). In total, this group is estimated to win 109 seats.

- **EU Exit parties**: Only parties which openly champion their country’s departure from the EU are in this category. The vast majority of these are from the UK (the Conservatives, the Brexit Party, UKIP and the DUP), but the Dutch Forum for Democracy (FvD) are also in this group. In total, this group are forecast to win 39 seats, though most are UK MEPs who may not be in the Parliament for very long.

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20 Statement by Jan Zahradil, Spitzenkandidat of ECR group, 7 April 2019: https://twitter.com/ZahradilJan/status/1114792808689410048

21 The UK Conservatives are historically part of this group, but as they are now committed to Brexit, they can no longer be categorised as merely ‘Eurocritical.’

22 Projections from Politico’s Poll of Polls, last updated 8 May 2019.
• **Left Eurosceptic parties:** This group consists of left-wing parties who are hostile to EU structures and policies they see as ‘neo-liberal,’ especially austerity. It includes parties such as Germany’s Die Linke and Unbowed France. Some are hardline Eurosceptics, while others, such as Greece’s Syriza and Spain’s Podemos, have moderated their rhetoric in recent years. Almost all GUE-NGL parties are in this group, though there are exceptions. In total, left Eurosceptics are forecasted to win 44 seats.

• **Extreme Right parties:** This tiny group contains four parties with an overtly neo-fascist and ultranationalist agenda, such as Greece’s Golden Dawn and People’s Party Our Slovakia. They are only predicted to win a total of 6 seats.

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23 Sinn Fein, for example, are no longer best classified as Eurosceptic.
Different Eurosceptic parties offer different critiques of the EU, a feature which partly stems from these ideological differences. While most emphasise the EU’s lack of democratic accountability and alleged threat to national sovereignty, this can be expressed in different ways. The Five Star Movement, for example, tends to focus its criticism on the Eurozone, particularly the EU budget and the European Central Bank. Left Eurosceptics, unsurprisingly, criticise the EU for austerity policies and liberalisation. On the other hand, the main concern of parties in the ‘National Populist’ group is external migration, and its perceived challenge to European identity and Christian civilisation.

However, even Eurosceptic parties which broadly agree ideologically on their criticisms of the EU often articulate very different policies and priorities, often grounded in their country’s national politics.

- **Migration**: there is a geographical split over whether migrants should be dispersed across the EU. Parties in countries which are entry points to the EU, such as Lega in Italy, want other countries to take in migrants. However, Eurosceptics in low-migration Eastern European countries, such as Fidesz in Hungary, are strongly opposed to migrant quotas. This demonstrates the difficulty in uniting avowed nationalist parties, which represent competing national interests, behind a common goal.

- **Economic policy**: some nationalist parties, such as France’s National Rally, are protectionist; others, such as Germany’s AfD and the Danish People’s Party, are economically liberal. Moreover, Eurosceptics in Western Europe often oppose further EU funding for Eastern Europe – while Eurosceptics in the East see this as the biggest advantage of EU membership.

- **Foreign policy**: many of the National Populist parties, including Lega and Fidesz, have expressed pro-Russia views. However, this view is not shared by parties such as Poland’s PiS, the Sweden Democrats and Latvia’s National Alliance, which see Russia as a strategic threat.

Given these multiple ideological and policy divisions, the cohesiveness of Eurosceptic parties as a collective force should not be overestimated. Moreover, despite their growing strength, Eurosceptics will remain a minority, and will have limited ability to block EU legislation.
Box 1: European elections as a national protest vote?

European Parliamentary elections are often seen as an opportunity for a national level protest vote. This is particularly the case in the UK – famously, the governing party has not won an EU election in the UK since 1984. This trend exists in other European countries, but is less pronounced. Politico’s aggregate polling suggests that a party not currently in government will come first in eight out of 28 member states – the UK, Denmark, Estonia, Greece, Lithuania, Latvia, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg.

Assessing the strength of Eurosceptic performances across Europe

In 2014, Eurosceptic parties of various shades won the most votes in six out of 28 EU member states (the UK, Hungary, Belgium, France, Denmark and Greece) and came second in two others (Italy and Poland). This time, polling forecasts suggest they will again come first in six countries (the UK, Hungary, Belgium, the Netherlands, Poland, and Italy), but will this time come second in six (Slovakia, Italy, Sweden, Finland, France, and Greece). Italy is set to be the only country where Eurosceptic parties take both of the top two spots. Seven of the 11 countries set to have a Eurosceptic party finish in the top two also saw this happen in 2014. However, strong Eurosceptic performances in the Netherlands, Slovakia, Sweden and Finland will mark an improvement from 2014, whereas in Denmark a Eurosceptic party looks set to drop out of the two.

There are also significant national variations in how many seats Eurosceptic parties are set to pick up. As shown in the map below, Eurosceptics are set for strong finishes in Hungary (winning 80% of the available seats), Italy (66%), Slovakia (58%), Poland (49%) and the UK (47%). On the other hand, they are not set to pick up any seats at all in Ireland, Malta, Romania or Bulgaria.

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25 Defined as winning the most seats, or the most votes if two parties are projected to be tied on seats (as is the case in Estonia and the Netherlands). Projections from Politico’s Poll of Polls, last updated 8 May 2019.
26 Open Europe comparison of Politico’s Poll of Polls with the composition of national governments. It should be noted that in both Estonia and Latvia, the opposition party projected to win the most seats in the European elections is also the largest single party in their domestic parliament.
27 It should be noted that these parties emphasise their Euroscepticism to differing degrees. For example, while the New Flemish Alliance in Belgium are a moderately Eurosceptic party, their defining characteristic is Flemish nationalism.
28 Current polling aggregation in the UK suggests the Brexit Party will win the most votes, although Labour will win the most seats. https://www.politico.eu/2019-european-elections/united-kingdom/
29 In France, polling suggests a very close finish between the Macron’s LREM and the anti-EU National Rally led by Marine Le Pen. As of 8 May 2019, Politico’s aggregation of polls puts LREM narrowly in front, but some individual polls show National Rally in the lead.
2. The consequences of the European Parliament elections for the day-to-day functioning of the EU

Background: the role and powers of the European Parliament

The European Parliament scrutinises, amends and votes on proposed EU legislation sent to it by the European Commission. Its powers were expanded by the Lisbon Treaty, which gave it co-decision powers with the European Council to over the majority of EU policy areas – including energy, justice and home affairs, agriculture, and single market regulations. It also signs off the EU’s annual budget and ratifies EU trade deals with third countries. In a few areas, however – notably the Common Foreign and Security Policy, as well as taxation and competition – the European Parliament is merely “consulted”, and ultimate decision-making power lies with the European Council.

The Parliament’s powers over the appointment of senior EU officials vary. It elects its own President, has a considerable say in the election of the new President of the European Commission, and a consultative role in the appointment of the President of the European Central Bank. It also approves the appointment of the rest of the European Commission, though in this case it votes on the body of Commissioners appointed by the Council rather than on individuals. Other officials, such as the European Council President and the High Representative for Foreign Policy, are appointed solely by the Council.

As such, despite its increasing powers, the European Parliament has some way to go before its relationship with the Council and Commission is akin to that between a national parliament and government. On major constitutional and strategic questions such as Eurozone reform, the European Parliament has a very limited role. For example, the Parliament was almost entirely excluded from the formation of the Eurozone bailout mechanisms at the height of the Eurozone crisis, which were decided at intergovernmental level instead.
Box 2: The European Parliament’s legislative stagnation since 2007

The last decade has seen a growing trend of legislative stagnation in the European Parliament. Since 2007, the number of legislative resolutions adopted in plenary each year has trended towards decline and stagnation, with the exception of a brief spike in 2013-14. This is illustrated in the chart below.\(^{30}\)

The consequences of the 2019 elections for the European Parliament’s legislative functioning

The European Parliament may become a more difficult legislative partner for the Commission and the Council, due to its increasing fragmentation. In particular, the ‘Grand Coalition’ of the centre-right EPP and the centre-left S&D, which carried 74% of votes in the 2014-2019 European Parliament, is projected to lose its combined majority for the first time.\(^{31}\) The EPP and S&D’s combined majority is currently 34; Politico’s projections suggest that they will be short of a majority by 62 seats after May’s elections.\(^{32}\) They will have to rely on other groups – chiefly the liberal ALDE, together with the MEPs from Macron’s party – for an overall majority. The likely effect of this will be the creation of a new ‘Grand Coalition’ of the three mainstream


\(^{31}\) Vote Watch Europe, ‘EP2019: how MEPs have made decisions during these 5 years?’, 12 February 2019: [https://www.votewatch.eu/blog/wp2019-how-meps-made-decisions-during-these-5-years/](https://www.votewatch.eu/blog/wp2019-how-meps-made-decisions-during-these-5-years/)

\(^{32}\) Projections from Politico’s Poll of Polls, last updated 8 May 2019.
pro-European parties for most votes on legislation. This new three-party coalition is projected to win around the same number of seats (414) as the current two-party coalition (412), with ALDE’s gains cancelled out by considerable losses for the two larger parties.

This development reflects domestic political trends and will have symbolic importance – as well as substantially increasing the political power of groups like ALDE and the Greens. The likely formation of a three-party ‘Grand Coalition’ will exacerbate the establishment vs anti-establishment dynamic present in the current Parliament. The relative size of the various groups also has an impact on the appointment of MEPs to various parliamentary roles, notably committee chairs.

In procedural terms, however, the loss of the EPP-S&D majority should not be overstated. Relying on ALDE is not necessarily problematic for the EPP and S&D – ALDE is already a ‘Commission party’ (in that it is represented in the European Commission), and does not hold radically different positions from the other two parties on many questions of European policy. However, we might expect parliamentary votes to be closer than usual in the next term of the European Parliament. As well as a smaller EPP-S&D coalition, other potential legislative coalitions – such as a ‘right bloc’ of the EPP, ALDE and the ECR, or a ‘left bloc’ of the

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33 The European Commission consists of 28 Commissioners (one per member state). 5 of the 28 are currently drawn from ALDE, compared with 14 from the EPP and 8 from the S&D.
S&D, Greens and GUE-NGL – are also expected to shrink in overall size after the election. In the 2014-19 term, only 10% of votes were passed by a majority of less than 50; with a Parliament fragmented in multiple directions, this tally will likely be higher for 2019-2024.34

Meanwhile, Eurosceptic parties are currently projected to win about 240 seats in total, nearly a third of the parliament. However, this is unlikely to make a major difference to the legislative functioning of the European Parliament. 240 Eurosceptic MEPs is not a huge increase from the status quo – the 2014 European elections also saw over 200 Eurosceptic MEPs elected. If Eurosceptics were not able to significantly disrupt the EU’s functioning during the last parliament, they are unlikely to be able to do so in this one. If the mainstream parties remain united, they will still comfortably outnumber the Eurosceptics.

Indeed, as a vehicle for influencing collective EU action, the European Council may well be a more productive avenue for Eurosceptics than the European Parliament – particularly on decisions that require unanimity. Eurosceptic parties now lead the governments of Poland, Hungary and Italy; they are also junior coalition partners in Austria, Bulgaria and Slovakia. Arguably, national elections that determine the governments of member states still have more bearing on the direction of the EU than European Parliament elections. 2019 will see a further five national legislative elections, in Belgium, Greece, Denmark, Poland and Portugal.

In one sense, then, the election of Eurosceptic MEPs is a symptom, not a cause, of the European Parliament’s legislative stagnation. While the election of Eurosceptic MEPs can be interpreted as an indictment of the health of the European project, they are simply not numerous enough to wreck legislation on their own. If legislative stagnation continues for another five years, it will be because the mainstream parties are unable to reach a consensus.

Box 3: Will the composition of the European Parliament affect the Brexit process?

If the UK is to leave the EU with a deal, the Withdrawal Agreement must be ratified by the European Parliament. The European Parliament has not yet ratified the Withdrawal Agreement, preferring to wait until ratification has been completed on the UK side. If the UK is still a member state past 1 July, ratification will have to be conducted by the newly elected European Parliament. 35 In theory, the elections could therefore have an impact on the ratification process on the EU side. However, the ratification of the deal by the European Parliament has long been expected to be a formality, and this is unlikely to change substantially after the elections. The Parliament’s Brexit Steering Group, which has worked closely with EU negotiators over Brexit, contains representatives from five of the eight parliamentary groups (EPP, S&D, ALDE, Greens/EFA and GUE-NGL). Together, these five groups are projected to hold over 500 of the Parliament’s 751 seats.

34 VoteWatch Europe, ‘EP2019: how have MEPs made decisions during these 5 years?’, 12 February 2019: https://www.votewatch.eu/blog/ep2019-how-meps-made-decisions-during-these-5-years
35 1 July is the day before the new MEPs take up their seats on 2 July. If the EU wished to ratify the deal before 2 July, this could in theory be conducted by the existing European Parliament, whose MEPs would be recalled for that purpose – even if this fell after the elections on 23-26 May.
Perhaps more significant is the impact of the European Parliamentary elections on the ratification of future EU trade deals, including with the UK. From an EU perspective, a trade deal with the UK will be far more politically controversial than the Withdrawal Agreement. If a large number of protectionist MEPs from both the left and the right are elected in 2019, this may have complications for the ratification of a UK-EU trade deal before 2024.

The European Parliament elections and the Spike project

The so-called Spitzendavit process to elect the European Commission President was first used in the 2014 European elections. Under the process, every pan-European group nominates a leading candidate to become European Commission President, with the idea that the winning candidate of the largest party becomes President. The candidate then has to command majority support from the newly elected European Parliament and from a qualified majority of the EU Council (55% of member states, representing at least 65% of the EU's total population). The process was intended to democratise the leadership of the Commission, as it allows voters to indirectly influence the choice of Commission President. In theory, a vote for any EPP party is therefore a vote for its Spitzendavit, Manfred Weber of Bavaria's Christian Social Union (CSU), to replace Jean-Claude Juncker as Commission President.

However, the Spitzendavit process is not codified, and remains controversial. It is informed by Article 17(7) of the Lisbon Treaty, but this merely states that the Council should propose a candidate to the European Parliament after "taking into account the elections to the European Parliament and after having held the appropriate consultations." When it was first used in 2014, both the process itself and the candidate – Jean-Claude Juncker – were fiercely opposed by then UK Prime Minister David Cameron, who said the process would "shift power from the national governments to the European Parliament without voters' approval." This was likely a reference to the fact that the process invariably leads to an EPP Commission President – a party which does not necessarily have a significant political presence in every member state, and none at all in the UK. Although the Spitzendavit process was ultimately used in 2014, it could yet be bypassed this time round – the process is not, after all, strictly required under EU law.

There has already been considerable institutional infighting over the use of the Spitzendavit process. In February 2018, the Parliament said it would reject any nominee not selected through the process; within weeks, the Council responded firmly that the process could not be considered "automatic." Moreover, both ALDE and Macron are opposed to the process;

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37 Ibid.
38 POLITICO EU, ‘Cameron hits out at Spitzendavites system’, 13 June 2014: https://www.politico.eu/article/cameron-hits-out-at-spitzendavites-system/
ALDE have put forward a "team" of candidates rather than a Spitzenkandidat, while French Interior Minister Christophe Castaner has called the process "a real democratic anomaly" that only benefits the EPP. The question is further complicated this year by the EPP’s selection of Manfred Weber as their candidate. Weber has never held high executive office; he is also seen as on the right of the EPP, and therefore has limited cross-party appeal across the European Parliament. There has therefore been considerable speculation that the process might be bypassed, with a consensus EPP candidate ending up as Commission President instead – such as EU chief Brexit negotiator Michel Barnier, who is highly respected in EU circles. There will be a special European Council summit on 28 May, shortly after the elections, to begin the process of deciding the next leaders of the European institutions.

On the other hand, some forces in the Parliament will likely see the bypassing of the Spitzenkandidat process as a 'stitch-up' by the Commission and Council. Either way, the selection of Juncker’s successor will likely be a source of political and inter-institutional controversy – particularly when the choice of President will have a knock-on effect onto the appointment of other Commissioners, including the powerful High Representative for Foreign Affairs. The choice of Commission President would also feed back into the Brexit process – a Commission led by Barnier, in particular, might cleave more closely to the approach of the Article 50 Task Force than the Juncker Commission has.

What will UK participation in the European elections mean for the EU?

It has now been confirmed that the UK will take part in the European Parliament elections, as it will not have time to ratify a Brexit deal before 23 May. Opinion polling suggests a high degree of fragmentation, with Labour and the new Brexit Party competing for victory. As is the case in other European countries, the current state of play in the European Parliament needs to be taken into account when assessing the success of Eurosceptic parties; some polls suggest the UK will actually elect fewer Eurosceptic MEPs than it did in 2014. This is illustrated by the two charts below, which cluster Eurosceptic parties towards the right and pro-EU parties towards the left.

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42 Announcement by European Council President Donald Tusk, 9 May 2019: https://twitter.com/eucopresident/status/1126511009886134272
43 The Commissioners and the High Representative are appointed by the Council, but in agreement with the President-elect – as per Articles 17 and 18 of the Treaty on European Union.
### UK MEPs elected in 2014 EP elections

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Seats won in 2014</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sinn Fein</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plaid Cymru</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SNP</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Greens</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lib Dems</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Labour</td>
<td>20</td>
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<tr>
<td>UUP</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>DUP</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conservatives</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UKIP</td>
<td>24</td>
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Box 4: What happens if the UK leaves the EU after electing MEPs?

As the UK was not expected to take part in these elections until recently, the EU had initially planned to reallocate 27 of the UK’s 73 seats to 14 other EU27 countries. As the UK is due to participate, this will no longer happen. The biggest losers will be France and Spain, who were due to gain an extra five seats each. Italy and the Netherlands were due to gain three, Ireland two, and nine other countries one seat each.

The UK is now due to leave the EU on 31 October. Non-member states cannot be represented in EU institutions, so if the UK does leave in October – or later, if there is a further extension – its MEPs will have to leave too, just months after having been elected. This would effectively cancel out some of the political changes outlined below – for instance, the gap between the EPP and S&D would increase as Labour MEPs leave.
The European Parliament currently has 751 seats. If the UK did not participate and 27 of its seats were reallocated, this would be reduced to 705 seats. If the UK did participate and elected MEPs which subsequently left, the Parliament would in theory be down to 678 seats. In practice, however, the re-allocation of the 27 seats would belatedly kick in at this point. When the EU Council made the decision to reallocate UK seats in June 2018, it ruled that, if the UK’s departure was delayed beyond the elections, the extra MEPs receiving British seats would effectively have their seats “frozen”, and only take them up once the UK eventually leaves.\footnote{European Council, Decision establishing the composition of the European Parliament, 19 June 2018: \url{http://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7-2018-REV-1/en/pdf}}

It seems unlikely that the UK’s participation, and the Brexit process more broadly, will have a major short-term impact on campaigns or voting behaviour elsewhere in the EU. Brexit is not a major issue in the domestic political scenes of other member states – though it has had the indirect impact of shifting many Eurosceptic parties away from advocating outright exit from the EU.

UK participation could, however, have a moderate impact on the balance of the political groupings in the Parliament. Firstly, the expected election of around 20 Labour MEPs will mean that the gap between the S&D group and the EPP will be closer than it would otherwise be – as there is no UK EPP party. However, even with Labour, the S&D will still be around 30 seats behind the EPP. The (possibly temporary) gains for the S&D from UK participation are also somewhat blunted by the fact that they will no longer gain any of the seats reallocated from the UK to other EU countries.

The UK’s participation will also mean the Parliament contains an additional contingent of hard Eurosceptic MEPs from the Brexit Party and UKIP. These MEPs will have rather different political objectives to continental Eurosceptics – desiring to send a domestic signal about Brexit, rather than seeking to transform the EU from within. However, a larger Eurosceptic contingent will have symbolic importance. It remains unclear whether Brexit Party and/or UKIP MEPs will join Salvini’s EAPN alliance, but if they did, current polling – which gives the Brexit Party and UKIP a combined 20 seats – would bring EAPN much closer to overtaking any ALDE-Macron alliance as the European Parliament’s third largest force.\footnote{On the assumption that Change UK join the ALDE-Macron group, which already includes the Liberal Democrats.}
UK MEPs will be able to take part in parliamentary votes on the next Commission President and body of Commissioners. Some EU member states and officials were unhappy about this prospect, especially if the UK is to leave soon after; it potentially damages the legitimacy of EU officials who will remain in post long after UK MEPs have left. However, it is far from clear that UK MEPs could play a decisive role in the actual outcome of these votes. For one, UK MEPs will not all vote as a bloc. It is also not certain that the vote will be close enough for UK MEPs to have a decisive impact, as the Council will likely settle on a candidate who they know will command the confidence of the Parliament. In 2014, Jean-Claude Juncker, himself a controversial candidate, was voted in as Commission President by a huge majority of 422 MEPs for, to 250 against.
Conclusions

EU federalists have long hoped that the European Parliament elections would become a true expression of a new, transnational, pan-European politics rather than the second-order national elections they have tended to be in the past. Ironically, this May’s elections could be more “European” than ever before, but not in the way federalists would have hoped.

First, they are likely to reflect the increasing fragmentation and polarisation experienced across the liberal democracies of the West, including the national politics of several EU member states. The EU is clearly not immune to its own version of the “culture wars” and identity politics of the US or post-Brexit UK; in many countries, this is seeing votes seep away from the traditional establishment parties towards anti-establishment Eurosceptics on the one hand and liberals and greens on the other.

Second, the 2019 election is projected to see a consolidation of the Eurosceptic and anti-establishment surge witnessed in 2014. That was the first European Parliament election since the Eurozone debt crisis; the 2019 election follows the height of the refugee crisis in 2015/16. That Eurosceptic parties will cement and, in some cases, improve their performance is an important warning sign that all is not well with the European project. While Brexit may have dampened the temptation to point to the exit, the series of European crises is likely to see voters electing anti-establishment and Eurosceptic parties to around a third of the Parliament’s seats.

These parties, mostly of the nationalist right but also of the far-left, reflect a complex mix of grievances driven by European (Eurozone and refugee crises) and national issues which often means they have as many differences as similarities. However, the creation of a new, pan-European right-wing nationalist group (the EAPN) in the next Parliament would signify a greater capacity for organisation and cooperation than these parties have achieved to date.

Third, it would be significant if, as expected, the combined weight of the main centre-right EPP and centre-left S&D groups falls below 50% for the first time. This ‘Grand Coalition’ already carries EU legislation in the European Parliament three-quarters of the time. If ALDE, the other mainstream pro-EU party, is co-opted to form a three-party ‘Grand Coalition’ this will only exacerbate the establishment versus anti-establishment dynamic present in the European Parliament. At the same time, neither the Green nor the ECR groups are likely to be big enough to offer “constructive opposition.”

Finally, whilst the consolidation of the Eurosceptic and anti-establishment parties is important, French President Emmanuel Macron’s depiction of this election as a great turning point in a battle between progressive liberalism versus populism for the future of the continent is wide of the mark. The European Parliament’s role is important in the day-to-day legislative activities of the Union and, in some cases, in helping to determine the personnel for key roles in the EU institutions. However, the Parliament is not instrumental in setting the strategic direction of the Union or key constitutional issues, such as the future of Eurozone reform, which is largely a matter for national governments.
Despite an increase in its powers, the European Parliament has been passing fewer pieces of legislation not because of a Eurosceptic blocking minority but because the European project is stuck in a rut. This reflects the lack of consensus, amongst the mainstream leaders of national governments, about either significant steps forward or radical reforms to the process of European integration.
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