



POLICY OUTLOOK

European Elections 2019: Will the Eurosceptics Prevail?

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European Elections 2019: Will the Eurosceptics Prevail?

The European Parliament (EP) elections are among the largest democratic events which occur in the world. Around half a billion European citizens will have a say on the future direction of the European Union (EU) between May 23 and May 26. The Europeans across the union are set to vote for 751 Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), initiating new five-year terms.

The elections are taking place at a time when the European Union is facing threats from within. An increasing number of EU member governments are undermining democracy, the rule of law and open society values. The debate for the election is not about the Eurozone,

trade, or budgetary issues, but for a return to a "Europe of the Nations". The rising nationalist and Eurosceptic parties have transformed the EP election campaign into a truly transnational debate about the future of Europe. Their prospects for entering the parliament as a new political group could turn the EP into a major battleground between competing visions for the future of Europe. This policy outlook aims to examine the European Parliament elections, the probable victory of Eurosceptic populist parties, and the implications for the future of the EU.

What is the European Parliament and do the Elections Matter?

The European Parliament is the bloc's only directly elected institution and has supervisory and budgetary responsibilities. It passes EU laws and its decisions have a direct legal effect on EU member states. It decides how public money is spent through the EU's common budget and how the European Single Market is regulated. MEPs are elected by proportional representation. Elected national parties then organise themselves into pan-European groups. In order to form these groups, the parties need at least 25 MEPs from 7 member states. Party groupings also put forward candidates (spitzenkandidaten) for the president of the European commission. Since 2014, the president of the European Commission (EC) has been appointed by the European Parliament. The commission is chosen from the majority party after the European elections. In 2014 the spitzenkandidaten system drove Jean-Claude Juncker to the EU's top position. Therefore, when voters cast their votes, they do not only choose a list of MEPs; they

also indicate their preference for the EC's president. The new European Parliament and the next European Commission will have major responsibilities in shaping the union during these challenging times. The most important development for the EP elections seems to be that Eurosceptic populists will make strong gains in their number of EP seats. The central-right and the central-left have dominated the EP for the last 25 years, but in this election, it seems they are likely to lose their combined majority to the Eurosceptic populist parties. Most opinion polls show that the Eurosceptic populist parties are set to win one-third of the seats in the EP (Europe Elects, 2019).

The election is considered a battle ground for the continent's soul, pitting a pro-European mainstream who believe in a more integrated, open Europe against a resurgent, far-right, populist and Eurosceptic group of parties who advocate for a "Europe of Nations".

Political Groups of the European Parliament and Their Candidates for the EU Commission

In the European Parliament, national parties group themselves into party families according to their ideological spectrum. At the moment, the Centre-right European People's Party (EPP) constitutes the largest group in the EP, having 216 MEPs. It includes all of the Christian Democrat and Conservative parties (Except the UK conservatives, which pulled out in 2009). The second largest group is the Centre-left Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D) which has 185 MEPs. The other smaller mainstream parties are grouped under the European Conservatives and Re-

formists (ECR, 77 MEPs), the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE, 69 MEPs), the European United Left/Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL, 52 MEPS), and the European Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens, 52 MEPs). The far-right parties are spread among the several party groups, including the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR, 77 MEPs), Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD, 42 MEPs), and Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF, 36 MEPs).



Candidates to the presidency of the Commission participate in a debate at the European Parliament in Brussels, Wednesday, May 15, 2019. Leading candidates in the EU elections are facing off Wednesday in a final televised debate before millions of people take part in the world's biggest transnational polls on May 23-26. (AP Photo/Francisco Seco)

Distribution of MEPs

European People's Party (Christian Democrats)	216
Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the EP	185
European Conservatives and Reformists	77
Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe	69
The Greens/European Free Alliance	52
European United Left - Nordic Green Left	52
Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy Group	42
Europe of Nations and Freedom	36
Non-attached Members	20
Total	751

Candidates Representing the Four Leading pro-EU Political Groups

- Manfred Weber – Centre Right European People's Party (EPP)
- Frans Timmermans – Party of European Socialists (PES)
- Guy Verhofstadt – Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE)
- Ska Keller – European Green Party

The Evolution of Party Systems Across Europe

Europe's political landscape is going through profound changes. The rise of Eurosceptic populists has exterminated the old political party system that has dominated European politics since the end of World War II. Many voters have been abandoning traditional mainstream parties over the past decade. The parties that were established based on class or identities of faith have largely lost their relevance. The majority of Europeans no longer identify themselves as conservatives, socialists or Christians (Lehne & Grabbe, 2018).

What has emerged instead in European politics is the move from classic left vs. right divisions toward pro-EU vs. nationalist-populist cleavages. As the left has

dramatically declined in Europe, the Social Democrats, French Socialists and Dutch Labour Party have received their worst election results in the last parliamentary elections since the Second World War (Henley, 2017). The European left must now choose to either support the Centre-right as kingmakers and be stakeholders in power by supporting the centrist coalition, defending the EU against the rising Eurosceptic nationalists, or they can watch the mainstream Centre-right fall away into the fringes.

The German Social Democrats' decision to join the Merkel-led coalition government to save the Eurozone is a clear example of this centrist coalition against the

Decades of Decline for Social Democratic Parties Across Western Europe

Vote share in national legislative elections for social democratic parties

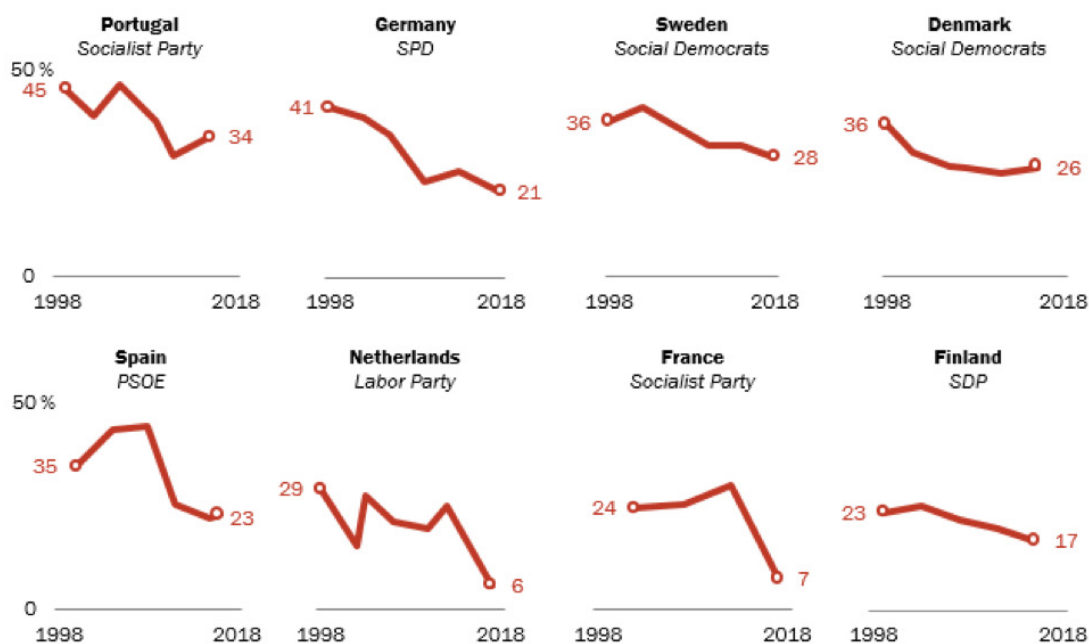


Figure1: Pew Research Center

rise of Eurosceptic nationalists. (Chazan, 2018) The competition in European politics is now between the Centre parties, united around the idea of defending the symbolic value of the European Union, and the Eurosceptic nationalist parties. The main distinction between the two is their attitude toward the European Union. As Belin and Reinter argue, “the old mainstream political forces on the Left and Right are coalescing around a pro-European agenda, imposed by the political reality of today’s Brussels, while the only forceful opposition comes from those who reject the EU (Belin & Reinert, 2018).”

This tendency has clearly showcased itself in the last French general election where Le Pen’s far right Front National and Macron’s La République En Marche Party have clashed after defeating the established left and right parties. The second round of the presidential elec-

tion debate was almost all about the EU and the issues of immigration, national sovereignty, protectionism and free movement of people. Thus, Macron’s victory has been perceived to be a triumph of pro-EU forces over anti-EU forces in Europe (Krastev, 2019). Macron himself, dedicating his victory to the future of Europe, described the 2019 elections as “decisive for the future of our continent” at a time when Europe “has never been in so much danger” (Macron, 2019).

Both pro-EU and anti-EU parties see this election as a stepping-stone to assert themselves as the new agenda-setters for the future of the EU.

The Impact of Brexit on EP Elections

1- The Impact of Brexit on UK Political Parties

Perhaps one of the most important developments for this European election is the UK’s participation, despite the triggering of Article 50, which officially began the UK’s departure from the EU. As the UK’s deadline has been extended until October 2019 since they failed to strike an exit deal with the EU, the UK is eligible to participate in this European Parliament election. Prime Minister Theresa May has said that if a deal gets through Parliament before the date of the election, the UK will not participate. However, it seems likely that the UK will still be a part of the EU for the upcoming elections as the cross-party negotiations appear unproductive.

The European Parliament election is seen as an opportunity for the voters to express their views on the current Brexit negotiation process. The Remainers regard the election as a chance to voice their demands for another referendum or revocation of Article 50. Brexiters, on the other hand, will go to the polls to express their

frustration with the government’s failure to deliver the referendum result. Former Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair has described the stakes as follows: “This is not a vote to choose a prime minister or a government. It is a vote for the Farage Brexit — or against it (Blair, 2019).”

Two parties have emerged from the Brexit crisis: The Change UK Party and the Brexit Party. The Change UK Party is a breakaway group of anti-Brexit Labour and Conservative MPs. They joined forces to form the Independent Group in February 2019. The group registered as a political party under the name of Change UK and has appointed the former Conservative MP Heidi Allen as interim leader. It is a pro-EU party that demands a people’s vote and a subsequent campaign to remain in the EU. The Brexit Party is led by Nigel Farage, who left the UK Independence Party (UKIP) after it moved to the right and became an anti-Islam party. He aims to push for Brexit on World Trade Organization terms

UK EU Election Poll Tracker

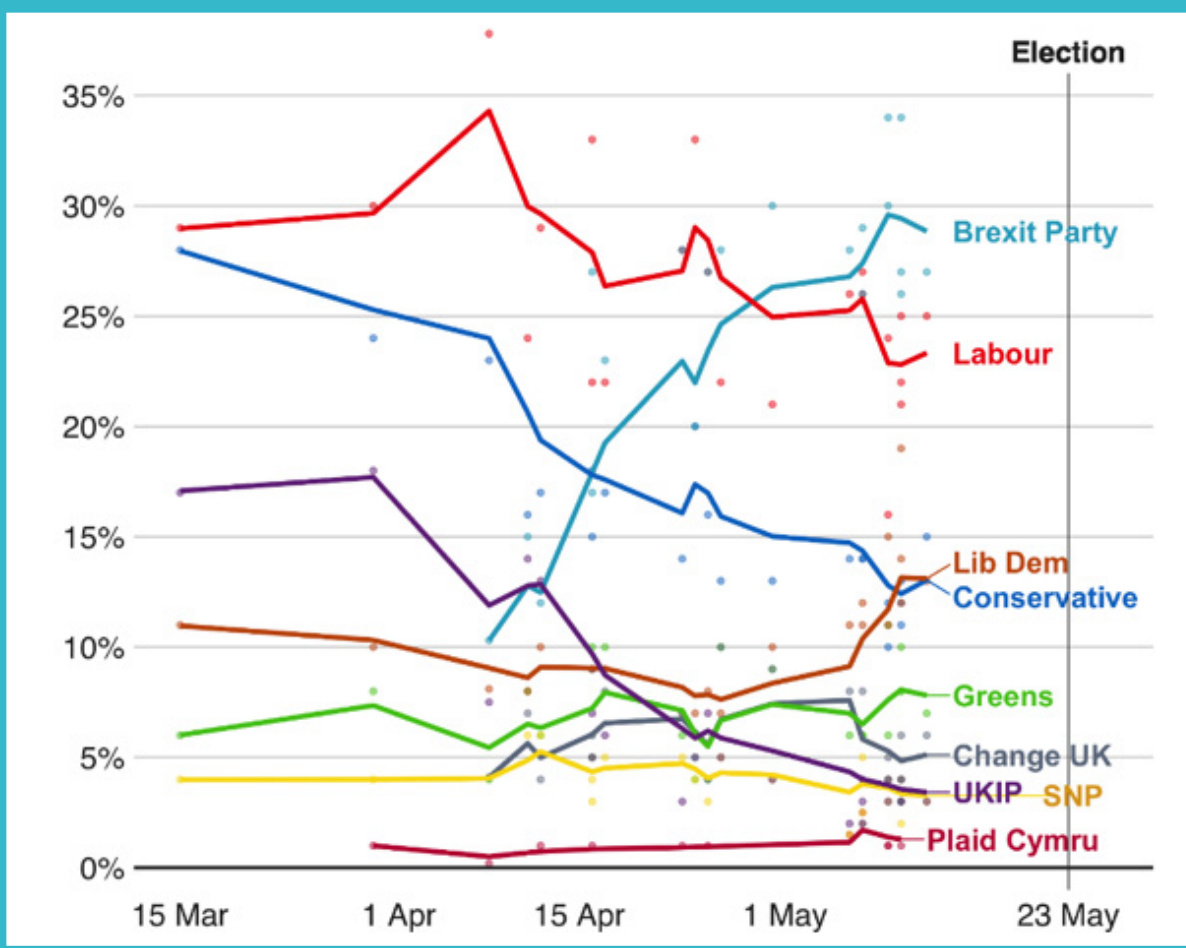


Figure 2: Each dot shows one poll result for one party. The trend lines are calculated as an average of the polls to date, with greater weight given to the most recent polls and to larger polls.

without any withdrawal agreement with the EU (BBC, 2019). In 2014, Nigel Farage's anti-EU UKIP came in first in the UK's European elections. At the launch of his party, Farage accused the government of having betrayed the 17.4 million people who had voted for Brexit. (Faulconbridge, MacAskill, & Greaves, 2018) Brexit betrayal is a powerful message for the electorate, and Farage is once again likely to finish first. (Al Jazeera, 2019)

Ahead of European elections, two separate polls - by ComRes and Opinium - give Nigel Farage's newly

founded Brexit Party the biggest share of the vote, with the Conservatives in fourth place behind Labour and the Lib Dems (BBC, 2019).

Both the Change UK and Brexit parties are set to make an impact on the Brexit process via the European Parliament election. They see the election as a means toward strengthening their position on Brexit.

The Brexit Party's lead in the polls does not necessarily indicate that the British public at large favor Brexit. Pub-

lic opinion polls show that support for staying in the EU is at its highest level since the referendum. According to a YouGov survey, when undecided voters are excluded, 56 per cent have said that they would remain in the EU if there was a new referendum, while 44 per cent said they would vote to leave, a margin of 12 per cent. When taking the undecided voters into account, the figures show that 48 per cent would remain and 38 per cent would leave the EU (YouGov, 2019).

It is expected that the Conservative Party will suffer badly for having failed to deliver the referendum result. Thus, the pro-leave voters will tend to vote for the Brexit Party both to punish the government for their breach of faith and to push government to pursue a harder Brexit (The Economist, 2019).

As the opposition Labour Party's ambiguous stance on Brexit persists, defections to other remaining parties, the Liberal Democrats in particular, have risen sharply (Kellner, 2019). Because pro-remain parties, including the Greens, the Liberal Democrats, and the Scottish and Welsh national parties all advocate for a second referendum to remain in the EU, they are all entering the election. Therefore, the remain votes will be dis-

persed among the pro-remain parties. The UKIP and Brexit parties, however, are the only two UK parties that clearly aim to take the UK out of the EU. This explains why the Brexit Party is leading in the polls.

The result will definitely play a decisive role in the Brexit process. The government will have to consider the European Parliament election results in its negotiations whether to decide for a second referendum or to push for a soft or hard Brexit deal. It is possible that the European elections will not put forth a strong case either for a harder Brexit or a second referendum. However, the likely electoral crash of the Conservative Party will intensify the voices calling for Theresa May to step down as Prime Minister, which would pave the way for hard Brexiter Boris Johnson. Johnson is seen as the favorite candidate as the next leader of the Conservatives and to become the next Prime Minister. Boris Johnson's premiership would once again raise the prospects of a harder UK Brexit (Schuette, 2019).

2- Impact of Brexit on European Political Parties

The impact of Brexit on other European political parties is twofold: for the central parties, it has made them adopt a much more explicit pro-EU stance; for the Eurosceptic populist parties, Brexit has had a moderating impact.

Brexit has made it clear to both sides of the political spectrum that leaving the EU has significant political and economic consequences. However, as the Brexit process has not yet been completed, one cannot be certain what the effect would be on the Eurosceptic parties if Brexit were finalised.

Brexit has made the Eurosceptic populist parties overhaul their strategies. Until Brexit, most Eurosceptic populist parties were advocating for exiting the EU, includ-

ing Frexit and Italexit. However, since Brexit has proven to be rather inconvenient and troublesome, these parties have changed their strategies. Goodwin says that many European populists have shifted from wanting a Brexit of their own to instead believing that they can influence Europe from the inside (McGee, 2019).

According to Henley, Giuffrida and Willsher, "In 2016 at least 15 parties were campaigning for a referendum on EU membership; today, faced with 30-year-high approval ratings for the EU across the bloc, they instead want a different kind of EU, focused more on security, immigration and "nation first" economics (Henley, Giuffrida, & Willsher, Going to extremes: the stark divides in Europe's political map, 2019)."

Eurosceptic Parties in the Course of Forming Alliances and Implications for the EU

Over the last decade, the European Parliament was dominated by the Centre-right and Centre-left parties. Politicians from the mainstream Centre-right and Centre-left parties held a majority in EU institutions, including the European Council, European Commission and European Parliament. However, their dominance may come to an end with the next European Parliament elections. As the mainstream parties are losing support, rising Eurosceptic populists are on the rise. Indications show that the seating, formation and alliances in the EP will be significantly different after this election.

Centrist parties, including Centre-right, Centre-left and Liberal parties will not be able to maintain the majority of seats in the European Parliament. Anti-EU and Nationalist parties have made strong showings in recent elections and the next European Parliament elections are likely to reflect that trend. According to a report by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), Eurosceptic parties are set to win one-third of the seats in the parliament (Cunningham, Hix, Marsh, & Dennison, 2019). Eurosceptic parties could align with one another tactically in support of promoting their own version



A moment of a rally organized by League leader Matteo Salvini, with leaders of other European nationalist parties, ahead of the May 23-26 European Parliamentary elections, in Milan, Italy, Saturday, May 18, 2019. (AP Photo/Luca Bruno)

of Europe. Winning one-third of the seats would enable them to form a minority that could block some of the EU's adoption of new legislation and procedures. It would also enable Eurosceptic MEPs to shape the policy agenda since each of the coalitions would be smaller and a majority would be much more difficult to form. Thus, Eurosceptics would likely gain key policy-making positions in the parliament such as committee chairs. As a result, they would be able to influence policies on refugees, asylum and more exclusive protectionism.

Discouraged from Brexit, the new strategy of the Eurosceptic populist parties is now to remain in the EU and change it from within by creating new parliamentary alliances (Baume, 2018). Although it seems like they have backed away from an explicit call to leave the EU, the reforms that they have in mind will cause the European Union's wholesale destruction (Baume, 2018). If the populists do well and then manage to form a single force in parliament, they could then combine their strength and implement their points on the EU agenda one at a time.

The proponents of this idea is Matteo Salvini, the leader of the Lega Nord Party in Italy and Marine Le Pen, the leader of France's far-right National Rally. Salvini and Le Pen's aim is to create a pan-European political grouping of right-wing parties which would promote their own 'modus operandi' of how the EU should be governed and run. Salvini has also been flirting with Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orbán's Fidesz—a problematic member of the European People's Party (EPP)—and with Poland's Law and Justice Party. (France 24, 2019)

At the moment, the Eurosceptic populist parties are dispersed under three other umbrella groups. The French National Rally and the Italian League are part of the Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF) bloc, which recently included the German Eurosceptic Alternative for Germany (AFD) and smaller Scandinavian and Eastern European far-right parties. However, Poland's ruling Law and Justice Party and the Swedish Democrats sit in the European Conservatives and Reformists group. The UK's newly founded Brexit Party and Lithuania's Order and Justice are part of the Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy group.

A larger populist presence in the next European parliament may diminish mainstream right and left parties' control over the chamber and thus disrupt their plans for a changeover of top positions in EU institutions: the presidency of the European Commission, the European Council, and the European Central Bank. Kuper refers to these groups as Remain Eurosceptics and comments that "they are more dangerous than the hapless leave Eurosceptics (Kuper, 2019)."

The success of this new coalition will largely depend on whether they will be able to join together and speak with one voice. The challenge for the far right parties is that they have been very diverse and often have radically different economic and social policies. They also have diametrically opposing views on Russia and they all have their own agendas. Time will show if they will be able to unite under one umbrella.

What is common among Eurosceptic parties?

- A belief that EU institutions have too much power; more power for national governments is needed
- Restrictive refugee and asylum policies
- More protectionist trade policies
- Greater emphasis on security; belief that Europe requires tighter border controls; more spending is needed for EU external border controls

What this means for the EU

To what extent the division between pro- and anti-EU forces will dominate the work of the future parliament will depend on the relative success of the populist radical right.

As forecast, if the populist Eurosceptic parties receive higher votes in the election, the European parliament will face the following choices:

- Whether respect for democratic values, tolerance, inclusive society, and pluralism will prevail, or the European Parliament will become weaker toward these values
- Whether the EU will be able to punish the rogue governments that refuse to respect the rights of their citizens and residents, or it will turn a blind eye to their undemocratic practices
- Whether the EU will create greater political accountability by broadening political participation and representation, or the politicians that promote fearmongering and social divisions will be rewarded with high offices in the EU

The commission and parliament may often face clashes on policies and legislation. The new parliament will also find it difficult to work with EU governments. This may create divisions and impasses within the EU. As a result, an inoperative and ineffective EU combined with an already fragmented appearance is likely to exacerbate public opinion against the EU.



This March 27, 2019 file photo, shows the European Parliament during a plenary session in Strasbourg, eastern France. The Parliament discusses the conclusions of the 21-22 March EU summit, including Brexit, with European Council President Donald Tusk and Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker. (AP Photo/Jean-Francois Badias, File)

Conclusion

This policy outlook has examined the European Parliament election that will take place between May 23 and May 26. It first explained what the European Parliament is and why these European elections are so important. It then discussed the evolution of political parties and their move from classic left vs. right divisions toward pro-EU vs. nationalist-populist cleavages in Europe. It also examined the impact of Brexit on both UK political parties and other European parties. This report also analysed the probability of Eurosceptic parties winning one-third of the seats in the European Parliament and the implications for both the European Parliament and the future of the European Union. The election is a test

for the future of the EU, whether it will continue to promote democratic values, tolerance, respect for minority rights and inclusive society, or it will be an inward-looking union, intolerant of others that promote exclusive society. The Europeans will vote to decide what kind of EU they want in 23-26 May. It is a choice between saving the European project, the idea of European unity and integration, that is under threat from a resurgent populism and a return to "Europe of nations" in which each country retains more sovereignty that will lead to more fragmented and divided Europe. if the Eurosceptics prevail this may well be the end of the EU as we know it.

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