

Analysis of the 2024 European Parliament elections

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Sara Hobolt analyses the results of the European Parliament elections, highlighting that although populist radical right parties performed well, the real winners were the centre-right European People's Party. She explores the implications for EU policymaking and subsequent national elections.

Around half of the 357 million eligible voters across the EU's 27 member states voted to select the 720 members of the European Parliament in elections on 6-9 June 2024. As predicted, there was clear shift to the right. The most striking result was perhaps Marine Le Pen's far-right National Rally topping the polls in France. With 31% of the vote, the National Rally gained more than double the votes of President Emmanuel Macron's centrist party and prompted him to call snap legislative elections in France.

Elsewhere, the populist radical right also had successful elections with Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's Brothers of Italy taking the largest share of the national vote in Italy (29%), and the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) had their best election to date, coming second in Germany with 16% of the vote.

But looking across Europe, who are the winners and losers? What drives voters in European Parliament elections? In what ways do these elections matter for policy making in the EU? And what are the ripple effects across member states?

Who are the winners and losers?

While most of the media's attention has focused on the successes of the far right, in many ways it was the centre-right European People's Party (EPP) who emerged as the election's real winner. Not only has the EPP remained the largest party group in the European Parliament with an increased seat share, the overall shift to the right also means they are the true king makers.

The other election winners are the Eurosceptic conservative European Conservatives and Reformist (ECR) group – where Meloni's Brothers of Italy and the Polish Law and Justice (PiS) form the largest national parties – as well as the far-right Identity and Democracy (ID) group, dominated by the victorious French National Rally, the Austrian Freedom Party and the Matteo Salvini's Italian League. Until very recently, the German AfD also belonged to the ID group, but they were expelled for being too extreme when their lead candidate told Italian newspapers that the Nazi SS were "not all criminals".

The losers are all on the centre-left, especially the liberal Renew Group, where Macron's party sits, and the Greens that had a bad election in both France and Germany. The centre-left Socialist & Democrats (S&D) remained relatively stable.

The incoming European Parliament is therefore more fragmented and polarised. It is not uncommon for parties in opposition, and those on the fringes, to perform better in European elections than they do nationally – not least as many voters treat them as 'mid-term elections' where they can express their dissatisfaction with the incumbent. Yet, Europe-wide issues such as immigration, climate change action, energy prices, economic woes and military assistance to Ukraine also played a role in the campaigns.

Figure: Alix d'Agostino, DeFacto

Does it matter for EU policymaking?

As the only directly elected body in EU, the European Parliament has increased its legislative powers over time, and together with the Council composed of member state governments it is now a genuine co-legislative body. That means that most EU policies must be approved by the Parliament before they become law.

But are these elections likely to change the policy direction of the EU? Since the centrist pro-European 'grand coalition' of the EPP, S&D and Renew – that has dominated policy-making in the European Parliament in the last Parliament – retains its majority, we might think that this Parliament will produce more of the same when it comes to policies. However, given that coalitions form issue-by-issue in the European Parliament, and the shift to the right makes the EPP the pivotal (median) party, this suggests that on

some issues we could see an alternative right-wing coalition of the EPP and the far right (ECR and ID).

Recent [research](#) has shown that policies most likely to be affected by such a right-wing coalition are scaling back on EU's ambitious environmental policy as well and greater support for restrictive rather than liberal migration policies. Most significantly, the European Green Deal may face challenges as the populist radical right are mobilising it as a [wedge issue](#) by taking an adversarial stance and highlighting the immediate costs of the green transition for consumers, farmers and businesses.

Much depends on whether the EPP decides to side with the far-right parties on issues such as this, and whether the far-right manages to overcome divisions within their own ranks to form stable political groups in the parliament.

These elections also influence who becomes the next president of the EU's executive body, the European Commission, as parliamentary approval is required. Again, this looks likely to be a case of continuity rather than rupture, since the current Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, is also the lead candidate of the EPP, which secured the largest seat share. And since the centrist pro-European party groups still hold a majority, and have expressed support for von der Leyen, she looks likely to continue in post.

However, as it is a secret ballot to confirm her presidency, the vote could still be tight. In 2019, von der Leyen won her approval vote by only 9 votes, despite having a much larger grand coalition behind her.

Can the centre hold?

Elections to the European Parliament matter not only at the European level but also for politics in the member states. European elections have long provided an important platform for [challenger parties](#) that has been shown to improve their chance in subsequent national elections. Humiliating defeats for incumbent governments could also lead to a policy shift of mainstream parties, towards more anti-immigration, climate policy-sceptic positions.

With snap legislative elections called in France, President Emmanuel Macron will be hoping that the success of Le Pen's National Rally does not repeat itself at the national elections. Yet, as the combined vote share of the far right in the European elections in France came close to 40%, there is a real possibility of a new French prime minister supported by the far right, cohabiting with President Macron.

Similarly, the victory of the Freedom Party in Austria suggests that we might see a far-right Austrian chancellor following the country's legislative elections later this year. In the medium-term, we might thus see a Council no longer dominated by pro-European governments of the centre-left and centre-right but with a very significant populist radical right faction.

While the 2024 European elections have produced a parliament not radically different to the last one, they nonetheless signify a real challenge to the dominance of pro-EU centrist forces in European politics.

Note: This article was first published on June 14 on the blog of the academic think tank UK in a Changing Europe.

Reference: [“The 2024 European Parliament elections”, Sara B. Hobolt, UK in a Changing Europe \(June 2024\)](#)

Picture: [unsplash.com](#)