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The Far Right and the 2024 European Elections

This year is the biggest election year in history. Almost half of the global population will be able to cast their vote in more and less democratic elections around the world. The European elections are not even the largest elections in terms of size of electorate this year – that honour belongs to the world's "largest democracy", India. Still, with a combined electorate of over 400 million people, voting across 27 countries, the European elections are both big and important.

As in the previous two European elections, all eyes will be on the far right, which is expected to be the big winner this year. This is, in itself, understandable. Far-right parties are topping the polls in many European countries, including Austria, Belgium, France, Italy, the Netherlands and Poland. Still, it is important to remember that the far right already won in 2014 and 2019 (Manucci, 2021), which means that there is less space for growth. Moreover, for the moment, the far right remains divided, which could keep it in the political margins in Brussels.

In this article, I look forward to the campaign and the expected electoral results of the 2024 European elections. I focus specifically on the far right, which is projected to be the biggest winner in terms of not just votes but also political power. The upcoming elections are expected to further mainstream far-right ideas and parties and pull the European Parliament further to the right. In many ways, this simply means that EU politics will fall more in line with most of its member states, where far-right parties have become largely mainstreamed and normalised (Mondon and Winter, 2020; Mudde, 2019a). That said, the European Parliament is a unique institution, and its internal politics require a short explanation to better understand.

The European Parliament and European elections

The European Parliament (EP) is the legislature of the European Union (EU). Although the Common Assembly of the European Coal and Steel Community, the predecessor of the EU, was founded in 1952, the members of the European Parliament (MEPs) have only been directly elected since 1979. In fact, up to this day, the EP remains "the EU's only directly-elected institution", as its website proudly boasts. The EP has slowly but steadily increased its power within the complex EU structure but remains a *sui generis* institution (Usherwood and Pinder, 2018). Most importantly, unlike in national parliamentary systems, the two EU executives are not dependent upon majority support of the EP. The main executive, the European Council, is completely independent from the EP, consisting of the government leaders of all (currently 27) member states. The European Commission, the day-to-day EU executive, is mostly independent of the EP: Commissioners are chosen by the governments of the member states, but the EP elects the President of the Commission and has the right to approve or dismiss the whole Commission.

The EP is also different from the two executives in terms of its internal workings. Simply stated, the members of the Council represent their individual countries, the members of the Commission represent the EU, and the members of the Parliament represent their party's ideology. Rather than by country, MEPs sit together by political group, which are organised by ideology, at least in theory – in practice, more opportunistic power considerations often play a role, too. Currently, there are seven official groups, which are, ordered by number of seats in the 2019 elections: the right-wing European People's Party (EPP), the center-left Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D), the liberal Renew Europe (Renew), the Group of the Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA), the far-right Identity & Democracy (ID), the "conservative" (but really also far-right) European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), and the far-left Confederal Group of the European United Left – Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL); finally, there is the "non-group" Non-Inscrits (NI), which combines all unaffiliated parties but does not have group privileges. The political groups differ in terms of number of seats, ideological homogeneity and voting discipline.

Just as the EP is not a typical parliament, European elections are not typical elections. In many ways, it is misleading to even speak of (the) "European elections". Although electing representatives for the same legislative body (i.e. MEPs), the European elections are essentially 27 separate national elections, with very different

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national campaigns, parties and even electoral rules. Moreover, the results in the elections in one member state (say Germany) are completely independent of those in another (say Malta). It is therefore always tricky to speak of *European* developments or trends, as most apply only to some EU member states.

The European elections are "second-order elections" because – unlike "first-order elections" – they do not determine the constitution of an executive (Reif and Schmitt, 1980). According to second-order elections theory, people are less interested in these elections and therefore vote less and vote more often "with the boot" (protest) or "the heart" (support) than with "the head" (strategic) (Oppenhuis et al., 1996). Consequently, there is a common perception that governing parties struggle, while small, extreme and opposition parties flourish. It has long been believed that far-right parties do (much) better in European than in national elections, but empirical studies have found this not to be the case, when one focuses on the average rather than the outliers (e.g. Minkenberg and Perrineau, 2007).

There are a couple of reasons why the original expectations were wrong or have become less right in recent time. First and foremost, the theory is based on the US "midterm elections", but European elections are not always held at the "midterm" of the national election cycle of (all) member states. As the timing of second-order elections, in terms of the first-order cycle, affects voting behaviour in different ways, and European elections fall into different stages of the national cycle in different countries, the various effects largely wash out at the European level (Wondreys, 2021). Moreover, far-right parties are no longer small, perceived as "extreme", or in opposition, therefore the original theory is less and less fitting (Ehin and Talving, 2020; Wondreys, 2023b).

The 2024 European elections: Campaign and votes

There are several novelties to the 2024 European elections. Probably most importantly, this will be the first election since the finalisation of the UK's exit from the EU and consequently, there will be fewer seats than in the previous elections.[1] These will also be the first elections after several important "crises", which have fundamentally affected politics in the EU and its member states, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the (second) Russian invasion of Ukraine and the most recent conflict in Gaza.

But in other ways, the 2024 elections will be very similar to the previous ones, in particular the 2019 elections (see Mudde, 2019b). Most voters will again see them as "second-order elections", of secondary relevance, and turnout will again be much lower than in national parliamentary elections. Many parties will devote far fewer resources than in national campaigns. And most media (and parties) will primarily focus on national issues (and politicians), largely ignoring European issues such as the enlargement and institutional reform of the EU. Finally, the overarching narrative of the European elections will again be that of a weak democracy challenged by an emboldened far right – which returned with a vengeance after the shocking victory of Geert Wilders in the 2023 Dutch elections.

A recent report predicts "a sharp right turn" in the 2024 European elections (Cunningham et al., 2024). Based on the most recent opinion polls in all 27 member states,[2] the authors warn that "a populist right coalition of Christian democrats, conservatives, and radical right MEPs could emerge with a majority for the first time" in the history of the European Parliament (Cunningham et al., 2024, 1). To be fair, this is not such a huge increase, as the total number of "populist" MEPs was already estimated at almost one-third after the 2019 European elections, the vast majority being of the far right (Manucci, 2021; Mudde, 2019b). Still, as we see increasingly in national politics as well, there is a significant shift within the right-wing block. In more and more countries, far-right parties are now the biggest parties (in the right-wing block), which also means there is a shift from "soft" to "hard" Euroscepticism (Taggart and Szczerbiak, 2004). Indeed, the authors "expect the ECR and ID groups together to account for 25 per cent of MEPs", more than either the EPP or the S&D (Cunningham et al., 2024, 4).

Of course, the report was published before the start of the election campaign, as far as we can speak of a (single) campaign in the context of European elections. Although national issues, including positions on the performance of the national government, will dominate the campaigns for the European elections in most member states, national parties do integrate issues of their political groups into their campaigns. The EPP has chosen to campaign primarily on the issues of immigration and the European Green Deal, largely adopting the negative

1 Although the "Brexit referendum" was held in 2016, the UK officially left the EU only on 31 January 2020, at which time its MEPs, elected in the 2019 European elections, left the European Parliament.

2 It is important to note here that these opinion polls tend to ask how people would vote in national elections, rather than European elections. Although most people do not vote differently in European and national elections, if held on the same day, turnout is much lower in European elections than in national elections, which means that these polling results should be handled with care (as also noted in Cunningham et al., 2024).

framing of the far right. This means that "the" European campaign will be dominated by the frames and issues of the far right as well as the question of the *Koalitionsfähigkeit* (governmentability) of the far right. And as recent elections in Sweden and the Netherlands, as well as decades of academic research have shown (e.g. Krause et al., 2022; May and Czymara, 2023), this usually benefits the far right.

In short, the far right will almost certainly be the biggest winner in the 2024 European elections, but whether it will be able to translate the electoral success into political influence is far from certain. While far-right parties have become largely mainstreamed and normalised in the national politics of most EU member states, they are still facing marginalisation in Brussels – although this is more relevant for the ID group than for the ECR and has been weakened significantly in the past decade.

Group formation

The expectation is that the right-wing EPP and the centre-left S&D will remain the two biggest groups in the new EP, with the EPP slightly increasing its margin, while the far-right ID will be third and the "conservative" ECR fifth. All "progressive" groups will lose, with Renew Europe and the Greens expected to lose between 20% and 30% of their seats. In most cases, these shifts are not Europe-wide but caused by drastic changes in one or two parties in big countries – such as the expected big win for the ID member Alternative for Germany (AfD) and big loss for the Greens in Germany and the expected big loss for the Renew member Ensemble (party of President Emmanuel Macron) in France. Still, these predictions should be treated with a lot of caution, not just because the elections are still several months away, but also because there will be new, not (yet) affiliated parties entering the EP (see also Cunningham et al., 2024).

More importantly, the character, membership and number of groups can change. This is particularly important for the far right, which has a history of changing groups and memberships (e.g. Manucci, 2021; McDonnell and Werner, 2019). The traditional far-right group is the ID, which includes well-known far-right parties like Marine Le Pen's National Rally (RN), Matteo Salvini's Lega, Geert Wilders' Party for Freedom (PVV), Herbert Kickl's Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) and the AfD. The ECR was founded by the British Conservative Party (Steven, 2020) and is still often referred to as "conservative" or "national conservative", the latter an ill-defined euphemism for far right. But in the 2010s, that group became almost exclusively far right, as conservative parties like Law and Justice (PiS) radicalised and far-right parties like the Sweden Democrats and Vox joined (Manucci, 2021). Consequently, there is increasing ideological overlap between the ID and ECR, while the "respectability gap" is also shrinking – most ECR parties were already considered *koalitionsfähig* at the national level, while this now also applies to more and more ID parties, as *cordons sanitaires* in Western Europe are weakening or even disappearing.

One of the remaining dividers is believed to be Russia, with the PiS-dominated ECR fiercely anti-Russian and the (traditionally) RN-dominated ID considered more pro-Russian. However, in the wake of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, most ID parties have changed their pro-Russian position (Wondreys, 2023a).[3] In the shadow of the ECR-ID division is another issue, the position of Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party, which was de facto kicked out of the EPP in 2021 and has been looking for a new group since. Despite active courting by the ID, Orbán recently stated that Fidesz will join the ECR, possibly even before the European elections. This move has been officially supported by high-ranking representatives of the two biggest ECR parties, former Polish Premier Mateusz Morawiecki (PiS) and Italian Premier Giorgia Meloni (Brothers of Italy, FdI), but some smaller member parties have expressed doubt or even rejection – notably the Sweden Democrats (SD) and the Czech Civic Democratic Party (ODS), one of the few remaining truly conservative parties in the ECR, although the party is deeply divided over collaboration with Orbán.

If Fidesz joins the ECR, the group would move even further right. This should facilitate closer collaboration with the ID, and possibly even lead to one big far-right group or some of the bigger ID parties joining the ECR (like the FPÖ and PVV). But it could also shake up the EP, and European politics more generally, even further, as some of Orbán's regional allies might follow suit. Andrej Babiš's ANO in Czechia, Janez Janša's SDS in Slovenia and Robert Fico's Smer in Slovakia are all facing pressure within their current political groups – Renew, the EPP and S&D, respectively – and have become increasingly Eurosceptic and close to Orbán. If this were to happen, the new far-right group could not just become the biggest group in the new EP, it could become a major player in the European Council and (possibly) Commission, too. But there is a risk.

3 This notwithstanding, the Finns Party left the ID for the ECR last year, citing the "radical change in Finland's security policy" as the key reason. But earlier this year, that same "anti-Russian" ECR admitted an MEP from the small French far-right party Reconquest, whose leader Eric Zemmour has been more openly pro-Putin than RN's Marine Le Pen.

Since its foundation, the Parliament has been governed by an alliance of the EPP and S&D. Since the two groups lost their majority in 2019, they have been collaborating mainly with Renew Europe, despite a growing number of EPP members expressing (soft) Euroscepticism and working with ECR and ID parties at the (sub)national level. In the run-up to the elections, the EPP has been openly flirting with the ECR, whose positions on some key issues – notably immigration and the European Green Deal – it has largely copied. Collaborating with Orbán, or key (former) ID members like the RN, could risk closer collaboration with the EPP – also because of the historical and deeply personal animosities between Orbán and some EPP leaders (like group leader Manfred Weber).

Conclusions

In mere electoral terms, the 2024 European elections will simply reflect the trend of the previous two European elections, i.e. an increase in MEPs from right-wing Eurosceptic and far-right parties. But in terms of political power, the upcoming elections could be a game changer. For the first time in its history, the EP could have a right-wing majority. How this majority will play out politically, i.e. in terms of alliances and collaboration, remains to be seen. The key player will probably be neither the "mainstream-right" EPP nor the far-right ID, but rather the "hybrid" ECR. Predicted to be only the fifth-largest group in the new Parliament, the internally divided group has an important choice to make. It could choose to significantly increase its size by winning over new parties, including current ID parties and Orbán's Fidesz. While this would increase its political weight within the new Parliament, it could decrease the ECR's political influence by risking its alliance with the EPP.

Given the history of far-right collaboration in the EP, and its many ideological and personal divisions, a far-right "super group" remains an unlikely scenario – at least for the next legislature. Rather than enabling a political coalition of "mainstream right" (EPP) and "far-right" (ECR plus), the next Parliament will probably lead to a weak "mainstream" coalition that is held hostage by the right wing of the EPP, which can block any unwanted policies by threatening to ally with the far right. Given the policy overlap between the mainstream right (EPP) and the far right (ECR and ID), we can expect even tighter immigration policies as well as further weakening of the European Green Deal (see also Cunningham et al., 2024). We can also expect less enthusiasm for the protection of minority rights and the sanctioning of illiberal governments within the EU.

Regarding the direction of European integration, including the issues of EU enlargement and institutional reform, previous research found that "(o)nly when Eurosceptics meet a divided Europhile camp is there a potential for them to alter the course of European integration through influencing legislative output" (Börzel et al., 2023, 1114). Given the increasing (soft) Euroscepticism of parties within the three big mainstream groups – such as the Dutch New Social Contract (NSC) and Slovenian SDS in the EPP or the Czech ANO and the Dutch People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) in the Renew group – such division is highly likely. That said, right-wing Eurosceptics are also far from united over many of these issues. For instance, while the Dutch PVV is vehemently opposed to further enlargement, Hungarian Fidesz is a strong supporter of the accession of the Western Balkans – which would bring some powerful allies into the EU, such as Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić.

Of course, it will also affect the role of the EU in international politics. First and foremost, it will create an even less decisive EU, not just with regard to regions where it is already divided and weak (e.g. the Middle East), but also closer to home. Given the strong pro-Ukrainian position of most ECR parties, and the significantly softer pro-Russia position of most ID parties, a fundamental change in the EU position on Russia and Ukraine is unlikely. However, combined with increasing "Ukraine fatigue", EU support will probably become more contested and modest. And substantial new initiatives, such as (some form of) European defence, high on the EPP agenda, will probably face significant opposition from the far right (and the far left).

Which leads us to the elephant in the room: Donald Trump. Should the former president return to the White House, the EU will largely have to go it alone. Trump holds strong anti-EU and anti-NATO views and has made it crystal clear that he wants the US to be more isolationist and self-centred in international politics. A direct consequence of such a radical shift, particularly after the passionate transatlanticist Joe Biden, is that the EU will be forced to play a much larger role in achieving its foreign and military objectives at a time when it will be more divided than ever over more and closer European collaboration.

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