

The new European Parliament: Workable but impaired?

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The ongoing selection of the next President of the European Commission has underscored the growing importance of the European Parliament in EU decision-making and in promoting democratic legitimacy at EU level. Strikingly, the new Parliament will be more Eurosceptical, radical and fragmented than ever before, which, among other things, will constrain the building of majorities to pass legislation and adopt decisions. The close relationship between the outcome of the EP elections and the governability of the EP should prompt a serious debate on the matter.

A more Eurosceptic, radical and fragmented legislature

The elections to the European Parliament substantially modified the political landscape of the EU legislature. With only a 30-seats difference between them, the Socialists & Democrats (S&D) came much closer to the European People's Party group (EPP), whose representation decreased from 273 to 221 seats. Liberals and Greens also lost ground in favour of the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), which have become the third-largest political group in Parliament. Despite the poor show of its leading partner, the British Conservative Party, ECR has successfully negotiated with other parties across Europe to increase its membership up to 70 MEPs, which will translate into a higher number of vice-presidencies and committee chairs in the new Parliament. Its Polish partner, Law and Justice, fared very well in the elections and is now together with the Conservative Party the leading national delegation with 19 MEP seats, followed by the anti-euro German AfD (7), the Belgium N-VA (4) and the Eurosceptic Dansk Folkeparti (4).

More radical groups both to the right (European Freedom and Democracy - EFD) and the left (Greens/EFA) have become much stronger in the new Parliament. The European Left's staunch opposition to EU austerity measures and fiscal discipline during the election campaign struck a responsive chord with the electorate and the GUE-NGL increased its representation from 35 to 52 seats. The slight loss of the German Die Linke was well compensated by the good showing of Syriza in Greece (which won the elections in that country and got 6 seats) and the Spanish traditional IU (5) and new movement Podemos (5). To the right, UKIP won the elections in the UK and increased its participation in the EP from 8 to 24 seats. Despite desertions of Lega Nord, the Finns and the Danish People's parties, the decision of the 17 Italian MEPs from the 5-Star Movement to join has allowed the Eurosceptic

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right-wing group to increase its size up to 48 seats.¹ However, its already weak internal cohesion is likely to come under further pressure. The non-attached bench will also grow and host the 39 MEPs from the Le Pen-Wilder's unsuccessful alliance.²

Distribution of seats in the 6th, 7th and 8th terms of the European Parliament

	6th EP : June 2009	7th EP : May 2014	8th EP
EPP	265	273	221
S&D	184	196	191
ALDE/ADLE	84	83	67
Greens/EFA	55	57	50
ECR	54	57	70
GUE-NGL	35	35	52
EFD	32	31	48
NI	27	33	52
TOTAL	736	765	751

A smaller grand coalition

In addition to the higher presence and visibility of radical Eurosceptic parties, the results will have important consequences for the formation of majorities to pass legislation and adopt decisions. The grand coalition between the EPP and the S&D will become a 'must' and, with only 412 seats, will require stronger internal discipline and support from the Liberals (and the Greens when possible). Alternative right or left coalitions will no longer be feasible. With 358 seats, the right coalition made up of the EPP, ALDE and ECR MEPs will be insufficient where a majority of the component members (376) is required and very weak vis-à-vis the

¹ The EFD will now be called EFDD, for Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy, and the 5-Star Movement will have freedom of vote on environmental and climate issues. Other members of the group will be the Dutch CU, the Lithuanian TT, the Czech Svobodní, the Sweden Democrats and a dissident from Front National.

² The new alliance managed to draw in 39 MEPs from six different member states, namely, French Front National, Austrian FPÖ, Dutch PVV, Italian Lega Nord, Vlaams Belang and Polish KPN, and thus finished short by one in meeting the requirement to obtain representation in seven different member states in order to form a political group.

Council when it is not.³ With 360 seats, a left coalition made up of S&D, ALDE, Greens and GUE/NL would face the same problem. Moreover, the possibilities available to the grand coalition to expand beyond the Liberals and the Greens with the aim of reinforcing its position in the negotiations with the Council will diminish as a result of the growing divide with the ECR and GUE/NL groups.

In the 2009-14 legislative term, the ECR matched the EPP in 59% of the roll call votes and was part of a winning majority in 55.75% of the cases, most times also including the S&D.⁴ The common understanding reached between the EPP and the ECR was substantial in policy areas such as international trade, internal market and industry, research and energy. ECR took part in 81.16% of all roll call votes, its member parties voted together in 86.65% of the cases, and its MEPs drafted 120 reports and 143 opinions. They also had a (highly reputed) committee chair. In the incoming Parliament, the ECR will be more powerful but predictably less cooperative. The number of committee chairs and rapporteurs will increase substantially whereas the new affiliations will weaken the group's internal cohesion. The British Conservatives have reduced their weight in the group from 47% to below 30% and more radical Eurosceptic members have gained ground. The Polish Law & Justice party has also shored up its nationalist approach as a strategy to defeat the conservative government party. Moreover, the proposed nomination of Jean-Claude Juncker for the position of Commission President has reignited the fury of the Tories, who will now adopt a more critical attitude towards the EU in view of the national debate on UK membership and the (possible) referendum. All of this will make ECR's participation in a grand coalition more complicated and unlikely, despite the stronger power that the group will wield in the Parliament.

In the last five years, GUE/NGL took part in 83.01% of the total of roll call votes and its member parties voted together in 79.37% of the cases. Members of the group drafted 51 reports and 64 opinions. GUE/NLE matched the S&D in 59.72% of the votes (20.03% excluding the EPP) and was part of a winning majority in 51.9% of the cases.⁵ Cooperation with the socialists was especially strong in the area of gender equality, development, and environment and public health. Despite its stronger position in the incoming Parliament, the group's increasingly critical attitude towards the EU and its radical leftist discourse will complicate its engagement in a grand coalition.

Although the mainstream political groups can be counted on to increase their cooperation to ensure that decision-making does not come to a deadlock, these elections have brought radical parties to the forefront, shoving the governability of the EP against the ropes. Taking into account the growing role of the EP in EU law- and decision-making and its responsibility to ensure democratic legitimacy at EU level, the grave situation warrants at least a serious debate on citizens' increasing disenchantment with 'politics as usual' and the

³ A majority vote by its component members is required in order for the EP to take the following political actions: to elect the President of the Commission and carry out a motion of censure against the Commission, to modify the electoral law, to adopt an own-initiative legislative report, to revoke delegating powers and to object to delegated acts in the second reading of the OLP and in the budgetary procedures. A majority vote in the EP is also required to allow the European Council to move from unanimity to qualified majority or from a special to the ordinary legislative procedure in a specific area, and to approve the accession of new members.

⁴ In only 20.72% of the occasions in which ECR and EPP voted together did the S&D absent itself from the coalition. Data source: Votewatch EU (www.votewatch.eu/).

⁵ Data source: Votewatch EU (www.votewatch.eu/).

need of a common electoral law that promotes – as is the case at national level – governability and democratic standards.