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European Parliament Election 2024: A Shift Right?

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With the recent announcement that the next elections to the European Parliament (EP) – the tenth since direct universal suffrage was first used in 1979 – will take place on 6–9 June 2024, the campaign season is slowly stuttering into life. While previous elections have been rather vanilla affairs, with a steady decline in voter interest and turnout in each cycle until a notable upswing in 2019 (breaking the 50% turnout threshold for the first time since 1994), the 2024 election is set to be more consequential. It has the potential to deliver a realignment of the balance of political power within Parliament, with consequences for the EU legislative agenda going forward. The potential impact on key policy areas – such as climate change and the green economy – will have reverberations around the world, including in New Zealand. While the vote is still a year away, it is therefore worth beginning to consider what the outcome may be.

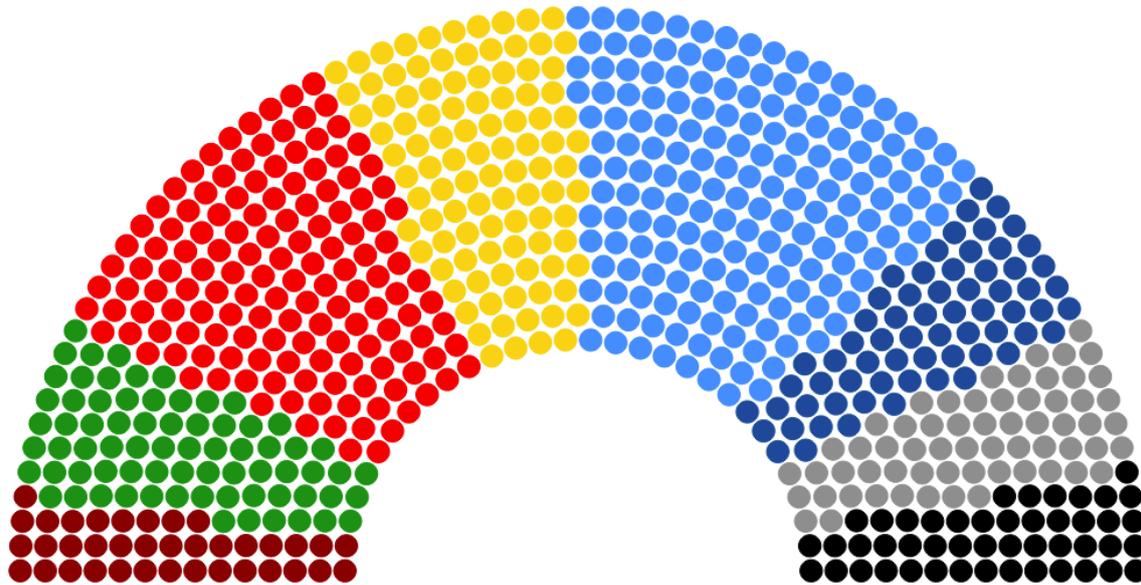
A shift right?

A year out from the election, some trends are becoming evident, signalling a potential shift of the European Parliament to the right. [On current polling](#), the EP's centrist groupings¹ appear to be losing ground – the current Grand Coalition of the centre-right *European People's Party* (EPP), the centre-left *Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats* (S&D), and the liberal centrist *Renew*, that dominates parliamentary affairs, is projected to lose 28 seats in a 705 seat Parliament, with the *Greens–EFA* losing a further 23. As the centre is coming under pressure, the extremes appear to be gaining, with *The Left* group (+14), the right-wing *European Conservatives and Reformists* (ECR, +19), and the far-right *Identity and Democracy* group (ID, +17) all projected to pick up significant numbers of seats.

¹ The European Parliament is organised along into political groupings along ideological lines, with political parties from the EU's Member States joining the political group that most closely matches their outlook. To be recognised, a political group must comprise at least 23 Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), representing at least one-quarter (currently seven) of the Member States. Leading positions within parliament (Committee Chairs etc.) are usually distributed across political groups to reflect their seats held. MEPs who choose not to join a political group are referred to as *Non-Inscrits* (non-attached).

European Parliament: Current and Projected Seats

Current MEPs April 2023 Projection



Party Group	Current MEPs	April 2023 Projection	Seat change
● The Left in the European Parliament – GUE/NGL (LEFT)	37	51	↑ 14
● Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA)	72	49	↓ 23
● Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D)	143	141	↓ 2
● Renew Europe (RE)	101	89	↓ 12
● European People's Party (EPP)	177	163	↓ 14
● European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR)	66	85	↑ 19
● Non-Inscrits (NI)	62	62	0
● Identity and Democracy (ID)	47	64	↑ 17

Source: [Current seats](#), [April projections](#)

Source: <https://public.flourish.studio/visualisation/13942931/>

But polling tells only half of the story. Also evident has been a rightward drift within the political groupings themselves, expressed through two related trends. The first has been the inclusion of parties with roots in the outlying reaches of the political spectrum in more traditionally right-wing parliamentary groupings. This has notably been the case with the *European Conservatives and Reformists* (ECR), with membership changes pulling it further to the right. Prior to the 2019 EP election, the *Sweden Democrats* and the *Brothers of Italy*, both populist, anti-immigrant, Eurosceptic parties with their roots in the far-right (or, in the case of the *Brothers of Italy*, neo-fascism), acceded to ECR. They were soon joined by Spain's *Vox* and the Netherlands' *Forum for Democracy* (which itself subsequently split, with some members remaining in ECR under the *JA21* banner, and the remaining *Forum* members moving further right to join ID). Most recently, the far-right *Finns Party* have also been welcomed to ECR, announcing their move by identifying the grouping as "[united by the uncompromising defense of Western civilization](#)" – not so much a dog whistle as a foghorn. The impact of these accessions to ECR has been exacerbated by the removal of more moderate voices. The more traditionally right-wing British *Conservative Party*, for example, which prior to the post-Brexit

election had been one of the largest factions within ECR, left the grouping when the UK exited the European Union, while the smaller Netherlands' *Christian Union* abandoned the grouping [as a result of its rightward drift](#).

The second trend has been the firming of alliances between more traditional centre-right and right-wing parties with their far-right counterparts at the national political level. Consequently, a number of Member State governing coalitions span centre-right to far-right political groupings within the European Parliament, creating organic linkages between these sections of the political spectrum. The government of Giorgia Meloni in Italy, for example, comprises the *Brothers of Italy* (ECR grouping), *Forza Italia* (EPP grouping) and *Lega* (ID grouping). The minority government of Ulf Kristersson in Sweden includes the *Moderate Party* and *Christian Democrats* (both EPP), *Liberals* (Renew), and relies on the support of the far-right *Sweden Democrats* (ECR). In Finland, following the election in April, talks are underway to establish a coalition government involving the *National Coalition Party* and *Christian Democrats* (both EPP), the *Swedish People's Party* (Renew) and the *Finns Party* (recently joined ECR from ID).

Shifting Alliances?

Should these trends hold, or indeed strengthen over the coming year, the implications for Parliament could be significant. Already a fraying of the longstanding centrist EPP–S&D Grand Coalition is being discussed. Since the 1980s, the significant majority wielded by the EPP–S&D alliance has allowed them to dominate the work of the EP, enabling them to substantially determine the distribution of the top jobs in the institution, including rotating the position of President of the European Parliament between them (aside from 1999–2004 when the EPP came to a separate agreement with the Liberals). Decisions taken within the Parliament have been heavily shaped by compromises achieved between the EPP, S&D and the liberal grouping now known as *Renew* (which effectively joined the coalition in 2019 when the share of seats held by the EPP and S&D slipped below the level necessary to maintain a majority). Importantly, this majority EPP–S&D coalition has also allowed the maintenance of the so-called *cordon sanitaire*, designed to exclude far-right political parties from senior positions within the Parliament, and in recent years particularly targeting the ID group.

The decline of the centre, on which the Grand Coalition is built, and the rise of the farther reaches of the political spectrum [raises the prospect of a new coalition, with the EPP turning to the ECR](#) – an idea [strongly supported by the EPP's leader Manfred Weber](#). A significant shift in seats at the election would nevertheless be required to provide such a coalition with a usable majority in the EP, otherwise making it necessary to find additional support further to the right, or with the liberal *Renew* grouping. *Renew* has, however, formally [ruled out working with the political extremes](#) – ostensibly ID and ECR. [While Weber has made similar statements in recent weeks](#), it is not clear that his definition of the 'extremes' is quite so rigid, having previously warmly welcomed the formation of governments in Italy and Sweden dependent for their existence on the far-right.

This realignment also has potential implications for the *cordon sanitaire*. The overall rightward shift, the spread of parties from further right along the political spectrum to groupings such as ECR, and the national-level alliances that establish links between centre-right, right-wing and far-right parties within the political groupings, complicates the continuing exclusion of parties of the political extreme.

Shifting Policy?

The more immediate implication of a rightward shift in the European Parliament, however, is to be found in policy and legislative decision-taking. Already we are beginning to see a move away from the centre, a trend that is likely to strengthen. Migration policy is a case in point. The European Parliament is gradually shifting from its more left-leaning orientation on the issue. The EPP grouping, led by Manfred Weber, has undertaken a notable shift in policy tone in recent years. Weber's advocacy of fences and border walls, and the off-shoring of asylum to stem the flow of migration, recently led to a [tongue-in-cheek declaration by far-right MEPs that he was the poster boy for their policies](#). It would be wrong, however, to confine this shift on migration to centre-right parties alone, with [S&D and Renew having also voted to support stricter border protection in recent months](#).

Also likely to be significantly impacted by any realignment in parliament is environmental policy. The European Green Deal, a foundation stone of European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen's agenda, and central to the European Union's international climate and biodiversity commitments, is increasingly coming under challenge within parliament. The EPP, with an eye to the 2024 election, is positioning itself as a champion of farmers, and therefore in opposition to aspects of the Green Deal likely to impact this sector. It has consequently pushed back firmly against new rules on pesticides or nature restoration (aimed at reversing the decline of pollinating insects). This moves them further into the territory occupied by the more climate sceptical groupings – ECR and ID. Again, the EPP is not alone in this, with S&D and *Renew* internally split over climate policy. If the rightward shift is consolidated at the 2024 election, it is likely that pressure to water down green commitments will increase, providing a significant additional challenge to the European Union's green ambitions.

A consequential election

The 2024 elections to the European Parliament, then, are set to have significant implications for the European Union. The realignment toward the right which has been increasingly evident in recent years, will potentially be solidified next June, though the extent to which this is the case remains to be seen. Certainly, public opinion polling currently has the parties of the extremes on an upward trajectory, suggesting the potential to gain further ground. Even if they do not progress more than current projections suggest, however, the internal membership and policy shifts that have taken place within the existing EP groupings indicate a broad reframing of political priorities and interests toward the right. With Commission

President von der Leyen beginning to [send out signals that she is interested in renewing her mandate for a further five-year term](#), she may find that this rightward shift poses significant challenges to her core agenda, not least around climate change and the European Green Deal. Any undermining of EU measures in this area will have potentially significant repercussions for global efforts to combat climate change, being felt as far away as New Zealand and the Pacific.