



What will the EU election results mean for Europe?

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The populist right and far right will not dominate the new European Parliament. But the election results will influence the EU's agenda and legislation over the next five years.

The European Parliament election results saw a strong performance by populist right-wing and far-right parties in many EU member-states, propelled by opposition to the Green Deal, anti-migration sentiment and economic insecurity. In France, the far-right Rassemblement National topped the poll, with more than twice as many votes as President Emmanuel Macron's party – leading him to call snap parliamentary elections. In Germany, the Alternative für Deutschland came second, ahead of Chancellor Olaf Scholz's social democrats. Across the EU, the vote share of parties to the right of the conservative European People's Party (EPP) rose from 18 per cent in 2019 to just over 24 per cent if we include hard-right parties currently sitting in the non-attached group.

Yet, despite the headline grabbing results in France and Germany, the much-heralded far-right surge did not fully materialise: the populist right and far right will not dominate the new Parliament. While the Greens and liberal party groups lost votes, the EPP performed well and remains the largest party in the Parliament, with around a quarter of the seats. The centre-left Socialists and Democrats (S&D) were also able to maintain their share of the vote, and will continue to hold just under a fifth of seats. Taken as a whole, the EPP, S&D and the liberal Renew group continue to have a clear majority of MEPs – over 400 out of 720 seats. And the Greens will often work with those centrist parties.

The stronger presence of far-right and populist right-wing MEPs in the new Parliament will, however, influence the EU's agenda and legislation over the next five years, and the election results are bound to leave their mark on European politics more broadly. Below, CER experts provide answers to pressing questions on what the results will mean for EU politics and for individual policy areas.

Do the election results endanger Ursula von der Leyen's chances of winning a second term as European Commission president?

Not much. Von der Leyen is still likely to serve a second five-year-term as Commission president. Her European People's Party (EPP) won the largest number of MEPs, 185 out of a total of 720. And she is its official candidate for the Commission presidency.

The appointment of the president is a two-step process. First, the European Council – as the treaty says, “taking into account” the results of the European elections – must vote by qualified majority to choose its nominee. Hungary's Victor Orbán will certainly vote against von der Leyen, as could one or two other prime ministers. France's Emmanuel Macron has not committed to support her and has floated the idea of Mario Draghi, the former European Central Bank president, as president of either the Commission or the European Council. Macron finds von der Leyen's strong Atlanticism a bit galling, but will probably end up backing the woman whose appointment was originally his idea. He presumably has a price to extract from her – such as the desired portfolio of the next French commissioner.

So von der Leyen will win the vote in the European Council. But then the second step is to win an absolute majority (of 361 votes) in the European Parliament. This may prove difficult, though she will be formally backed by the three centrist groups – the EPP, the centre-left S&D and the liberal Renew, who between them won 402 seats out of 720. However, five years ago, despite having the backing of the same groups, she only scraped through by nine votes, because some of their MEPs refused to support her.

This time those three groups have proportionately fewer MEPs than in 2019. If 10 per cent of their MEPs do not vote for von der Leyen, she may be in trouble. It is true that MEPs from Giorgia Meloni's Brothers of Italy party may be instructed to support von der Leyen – the Italian prime minister and the Commission president get on well. But the latter will have to be careful. Renew and S&D have said they will not back von der Leyen if she makes a pact with any part of the right-wing populist European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group, which includes Meloni's MEPs.

Presumably Renew and S&D would not object to some MEPs in the ECR voting for von der Leyen, as long as she had not made promises or deals with them. In any case, the Greens – though diminished, with only 52 MEPs – seem keen to forge a pact with von der Leyen, in return for her standing by the green commitments of her first mandate.

The difficult geopolitical situation, with Vladimir Putin threatening, and Donald Trump poised for a come-back, will reinforce the case for continuity, stability and a second term for a president who has proved herself competent. Many MEPs would be wary of the EU experiencing a leaderless period if the Parliament rejected von der Leyen, especially since there is no obvious alternative EPP candidate.

Will Macron's decision to call French parliamentary elections prove a disaster for the EU?

The French president has certainly taken an enormous risk, given that his own party won only 15 per cent of the votes, against 31 per cent for the Rassemblement National (RN). In a worst-case scenario, Marine Le Pen's RN could win enough parliamentary seats, perhaps in conjunction with far-right and centre-right allies, to form a government.

Macron would then have to enter into *cohabitation* with a party that is sympathetic to Russia, extremely hostile to the US and markedly more protectionist than France's mainstream parties (which are bad

enough on trade). Le Pen says she does not want to leave the EU, but has promised to withhold payments to its budget and disregard those of its laws and court rulings that do not suit France.

Unlike Giorgia Meloni in Italy, Le Pen does not seem to be seeking an accommodation with the EU's mainstream leaders. In a Macron-Le Pen cohabitation, there would be economic disruption (France's financial markets dropped sharply when they heard about the election), while conflict between Brussels and Paris could trigger instability in other places too.

However, Macron's calling an election could yet prove a canny move. He was fed up with the status quo, in which his minority government could not pass legislation. True, he is highly unpopular, while support for the RN has been surging. But turnout in the European elections was only about 50 per cent, compared with the 70 per cent which is normal in national elections. Many of those who stayed at home on June 9th could vote in the parliamentary elections on June 30th and July 7th, to prevent the RN forming a government. There is a tradition in France, as in many EU countries, of people using European elections as an opportunity to kick the government. They may vote differently in a national election that would have much more bearing on their lives.

In any case, France's electoral system, of first-past-the-post combined with two rounds of voting, will create difficulties for the RN. If a candidate secures over 50 per cent of the vote in the first round they are immediately elected. If no candidate reaches that threshold, the top two performers (or more, if more than two win 12.5 per cent of the votes) go through to the final round. This gives voters who support moderate parties the chance to vote tactically for the best-placed candidate to thwart the RN. It is true that the leaders of the Socialists, the centre-right Republicans and the Greens have said "no pacts with Macron". But their voters may still try to prevent far-right candidates winning.

These are some of the reasons why the Eurasia Group estimates the chances of the RN forming a government at only 30 per cent (it gives Macron's Renaissance Party a 10 per cent chance). Another hung parliament is quite likely.

But even if the worst comes to the worst, and Le Pen or her factotum Jordan Bardella forms a government, the French constitution allows the French president to direct foreign, defence and European policy. An RN government would lead on domestic and economic policy. Of course, European and economic policy overlap, so conflict between president and prime minister would be inevitable. But Macron would be able to argue that he was in a position to safeguard France's European orientation, its position in NATO and its aid for Ukraine.

And Macron may be playing a more cynical game. People vote for populists because they are outside the corridors of power and can rail against the establishment. Put populists into office, make them take responsibility for illegal immigration, terrorist attacks and economic dislocation, and they could soon lose popularity. Long before the presidential election of 2027, the RN could become a tarnished brand. But in the meantime, France could force the rest of the EU to take a scary helter-skelter ride.

What do the results mean for democracy and the rule of law?

The election results have brought good and not-so-good news for democracy in the EU. The rising vote share of the far right highlighted a simmering discontent with EU policies and underscored a growing dissatisfaction with the state of democracy: according to recent surveys, less than half of EU citizens are satisfied with the way democracy works in their country.

The glass is both half full and half empty when it comes to turnout. The fact that it stayed essentially the same as in 2019, at 51 per cent, means that citizen engagement has decisively recovered from its low point of 42 per cent a decade ago. But turnout was well below the pre-election prediction of 60 per cent.

In general, the elections showcased the hybrid nature of the European political project – people primarily voted on national issues, with little name recognition for the parties and topics at the European level. Europe was more present than in previous campaigns, but the underdeveloped European public space – the lack of consistent information about the main topics or what parties stand for at the EU level – continued to constrain people's choices in an otherwise democratic election.

The parliament's consensus machinery will continue to sputter along. The rightward shift means that the appetite for a major institutional overhaul, including treaty changes ahead of EU enlargement, or the introduction of transnational candidate lists designed to increase direct participation in future elections, will likely lessen. This means business as usual in terms of EU policy-making, but does little to alleviate concerns about the technocratic nature of EU politics or the lack of meaningful citizen engagement.

On the rule of law, the outgoing Parliament pushed for increased accountability for countries where compliance with democratic norms had deteriorated, and it was active on many issues ranging from gender equality to judicial independence and media freedom. It triggered the Article 7 process against Hungary, launched an investigation into accusations of illegal surveillance in several countries, including Greece and Poland, and raised the budget for programmes to promote citizen engagement and democracy. The key proponents of these initiatives were centre-left and liberal parties. With big losses for the latter, the rule of law may get less airtime and support in the new Parliament – even if it is listed among the EPP's main criteria for co-operating with hard-right parties.

In the end, EU democracy has proved to be resilient at the ballot box – but Europe as a continent continues to struggle with nationalist politics and longstanding, structural issues undermining democracy.

What future for the Green Deal?

In 2019, climate dominated the political agenda. Inspired by Swedish pupil Greta Thunberg, students across Europe skipped school to strike for climate action. In several Western European countries, first and foremost Germany and France, the issue defined the 2019 European election. Green parties achieved their best result to date and the Green group became the fourth biggest political force in the European Parliament.

But it was not just Green parties which picked up the topic. When Ursula von der Leyen was still only a candidate to become Commission president, she put forward one of the signature projects of her Commission: the European Green Deal. This ambitious undertaking was meant to turn Europe into a climate-neutral continent by 2050 and covered all sectors of the economy, including transport, energy and agriculture.

Five years later, the situation looks very different. The 2024 European election campaign was dominated by security and defence, the cost of living crisis and migration. Where climate featured as a topic, it was often negatively – many right-wing parties made a big deal of their opposition to Green policies. The Green group shrank from 10 to 7 per cent of EP seats.

But it would be simplistic to see the elections as a death knell for the Green Deal. First of all, much legislation related to the deal has already been adopted in the last 5 years. The EU and the member-states are now in the process of implementing and enforcing that legislation. It might be weakened, but it is too deeply entrenched to be simply undone. When it comes to introducing new legislation, things indeed look bleak for Green policies. But this cannot be solely attributed to the 2024 election. The EU's climate and environment agenda has been struggling for a while. In recent months, the EPP, von der Leyen's own political group, has increasingly turned against climate legislation. For example, driven by farmers' protests, the EPP watered down the Commission's proposed Nature Restoration Law and then tried to stop it entirely.

Given the election results, the EPP is likely to continue on this course. The rise of far-right and populist right-wing parties will motivate the group to reach further to the right, in the hope of winning disillusioned voters back. This trend is likely to be especially pronounced in the area of climate and environment. Whoever picks up the environment portfolio in the next Commission (Spain's Deputy Prime Minister Teresa Ribera, responsible for ecological transformation, has expressed interest) will have a hard time keeping up the ambition of the last five years.

What will the results mean for security, defence and enlargement?

The European Parliament has relatively limited powers in foreign, security and defence policy, which largely remains in the hands of national governments. However, the Parliament is important in crafting legislation, shaping political debates and allocating financial resources.

The elections results are unlikely to have an immediate impact on European support for Ukraine. Many MEPs within the ECR group are broadly supportive of Ukraine's struggle, at least when it comes to providing Kyiv with greater military assistance. On economic integration, however, the discussion is more complex. For example, populist right-wing parties (and even some on the centre right) are unlikely to favour greater market access for Ukraine if this upsets voters that they consider important, such as farmers. Many right-wing parties are also likely to view additional financial assistance to Ukraine with scepticism, and argue that money would be better spent on supporting EU citizens and businesses instead. Those sceptical about giving Ukraine more assistance are likely to grow even more opposed if Donald Trump is re-elected US president and cuts assistance to Kyiv, both because they would be emboldened and because Europe would need to fill a very large gap.

Progress on enlargement will also be complicated by the fact that many EU leaders have made clear that they think the EU needs to reform at the same time as it enlarges, including by moving to qualified majority voting in sensitive areas such as tax policy and foreign policy. Populist right-wing and far-right parties generally oppose such reforms because they see them as undermining national sovereignty. Looking beyond Ukraine, it is likely that the Parliament will be more prone to viewing relationships with the EU's partners in a transactional manner, deprioritising spending on humanitarian assistance and development and instead directing funding to countries that promise to fight illegal migration.

When it comes to defence, Parliament will be important in determining the degree of EU funding for common defence tools such as the European Defence Fund, and in shaping the planned European Defence Industrial Programme. In general, right-wing forces will favour greater EU-level funding for defence, particularly if they come from member-states with a sizeable defence industry that can benefit from such funding. Some are also likely to favour defence bonds – though not the delegations from the

more fiscally hawkish member-states, which tend to mirror their traditional national positions. Finally, right-wing forces will oppose what they see as EU regulatory overreach in defence planning, for example when it comes to sharing sensitive information with the Commission.

What do the results mean for the EU's economic policies and its budget?

The success of the far-right, and in particular the backlash against landmark EU policies like the Green Deal, illustrates a growing disconnect between EU law-makers' priorities and those of many Europeans facing cost-of-living pressures. Consequently, more centrist parties have started to take more seriously the question of how to increase Europe's sluggish economic growth and make Europe a more attractive destination for investment. In the final year of her current term, for example, von der Leyen promised to cut business reporting requirements by 25 per cent. The idea that the EU should slow down its frenetic pace of law-making, and instead focus on implementation and enforcement, has become widely accepted among MEPs – and not just far-right eurosceptics, who instinctively oppose more intervention by Brussels.

However, to lift economic growth over the long run will require more than just abstaining from more regulation. One key reason for Europe's poor economic performance is low productivity, caused by the reluctance of European businesses to take full advantage of new technologies, the lack of financing available for high-potential, high-risk businesses, and the barriers to innovative European firms building scale across the Union.

Populist and far-right parties are likely to be a hindrance to many of these steps. Few far-right parties paid much attention to digitalisation in their manifestos, or to helping the European economy become more innovative and agile – preferring to focus instead on protecting traditional industries. Nor will right-wing parties support former Italian prime minister Enrico Letta's sensible push for a capital markets union to channel more European savings into high-risk, high-potential business ideas – helping Europe build superstar tech firms like those in the US – or to deepen the single market in areas such as telecoms. These reforms would require member-states to relinquish much-valued national competences, and would entail less support for incumbent industries and businesses which are large employers today. Given the growing consensus about the need for Europe to boost its economic growth, centrist MEPs will probably increase pressure for the EU to advance much-needed reforms like the capital markets union, regardless of the views of right-wing MEPs. But member-state governments under domestic pressure from populists and the far-right, and protective of their national competences, will probably prove more of a sticking point.

A right-leaning Parliament might also support ill-conceived or counter-productive economic measures. For example, some populist and far-right parties would welcome more use of subsidies at a national level, to protect domestic industry and national champions. They may also support Letta's more dubious proposals, such as his suggestion to allow more mergers in sectors like telecoms, which might produce more powerful national champions by undermining the EU's competition laws. The far-right also seem sympathetic to the EU's turn towards a more protectionist trade policy. Such measures might produce some short-term results by protecting incumbent companies and industries, but are unlikely to solve the EU's long-term growth problem – which requires a more open, agile and innovative economy.

The growing influence of populists and the far-right will also harm the EU's prospects for reforming its budget. The current seven-year multi-annual financial framework (MFF) runs until 2027, and the next Commission will probably prepare the first draft for the subsequent MFF in May next year. The Council

and an absolute majority of MEPs both need to agree on the MFF, and wrangling over the budget will be an important part of Parliament's agenda. Some degree of reform will be essential. The current EU budget is barely 1 per cent of the Union's GDP, far less than the US federal budget of around 23 per cent of GDP, and the EU still has few dedicated sources of revenue. However, the centre-right and far-right might align on a program aimed at sidelining Brussels and resisting handing the Commission a 'power to tax'. An alternative program, aimed at ensuring the EU has sufficient resources and powers to tackle its growing challenges, might struggle to get agreement from the centre-right, liberals and Greens, whose spending priorities differ.

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