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## The European Parliament after the elections<sup>1</sup>

### 1 Introduction: Ever more powers or moving towards stalemate?

2019 will be marked by the European Parliament elections (“#ep2019”). EP elections tend to be not only about the elections themselves, they are also steps in the evolution of the Parliament. At the beginning the EP was not even called a ‘parliament’ but an ‘assembly’ and it had limited powers – a ‘Mickey Mouse’ parliament in the eyes of some. Over the past decades, however, it has acquired more and more powers over the expenditure side of the EU budget, as a co-legislator in nearly all EU policy areas, the power to appoint and send home the Commission and (at least in practice) individual Commissioners. Symbolically, it now also sits at the table at the start of a European Council meeting.

By operating strategically, the EP has been able to develop into a body resembling a full-blown parliament – but not quite. It still lacks some crucial powers, such as the power of the purse (taxation). For the coming years, we might expect new ambitions from the European Parliament, for example in the area of the EU’s finances and taxation, and in the direction of general political accountability of national and international

politicians or even global leaders such as Facebook CEO Zuckerberg. However, the general mood towards European integration, and among heads of state where it concerns strengthening the “Political Union”, may equally be moving towards a less friendly environment for the EP. Hence, this paper does more than address some key issues for #ep2019; it maps the field of the interinstitutional battle at stake in the elections.

### 2 Turnout and legitimacy

#### **Voter turnout for the EP is low and has been going down**

The democratic legitimacy of EU decision-making is often questioned by referring to low turnouts in elections for the European Parliament (EP). The critics have a point: turnouts for EP elections are consistently around 20% lower than for national elections, and the numbers have been falling since the first time the EP was elected directly in 1979. A common view is that EP elections are not really about the EU but about national issues: they are “second order” elections, as opposed to “first order” ones which voters think are more important.

#### **But not only because of the EU**

But there is nuance in that. Turnouts in national elections have been falling at the same pace for many years, due to societal changes (younger generations vote less and people are less engaged with politics). There is also a difference between Western Europe, where the downtrend is slowing

<sup>1</sup> This policy brief was produced as a background paper for a seminar on the 2019 European Elections, organised by the Clingendael Institute and held 6 November 2018 in The Hague, The Netherlands.

down, and Eastern Europe, where election turnouts have generally been lower. Turnouts have even picked up in countries like the UK and the Netherlands, and seem to have stabilised just under 40% – well above the low point of 30% in 1999.

### **This time may be different: Voters turn up if there is something to choose**

The increase in turn-out in the UK and The Netherlands happened in parallel with the emergence of strong EU-sceptic parties, after a long period in which European cooperation was not a matter of debate at all between political parties. Research has also shown that the *Spitzenkandidaten* campaigns in 2014, in which Jean-Claude Juncker, Martin Schulz, and Guy Verhofstadt campaigned during the elections to become President of the European Commission, has had a small (1 percentage point) positive effect on overall turnout. The effect was bigger when voters knew one or more of the candidates, or when they lived in a region that was visited by one of them.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, Brexit, migration, climate change, the geopolitical instability created by Trump, Putin and others, Europe's involvement in rule of law issues in its East... It is difficult to pick up a newspaper these days without major political EU issues. Recent years have also seen the emergence of new, successful, EU-sceptic parties in e.g. Germany and the Netherlands, and the consolidation of existing ones (like FN, nowadays Rassemblement National, in France).

This constant EU presence in the news, and the political polarisation around it, are likely to lure voters to the ballot box from either side of the political divide. Therefore, it seems safe to assume higher turnouts for #ep2019. The question is, of course, whether this equates to greater legitimacy or to greater resentment towards the EU project?

## **3 Political groups and coalitions: cohesion and division**

### **Strong cohesion within political groups, despite national differences**

Records of roll call votes show that party discipline tends to be strong within the political groups in the European Parliament, as national party delegations usually follow their European group's line. In fact, voting discipline is almost as high as in many national parliaments, like the UK's House of Commons.<sup>3</sup>

Party discipline varies, however, with the issue at hand for each group.<sup>4</sup> On agriculture, for instance, coherence is strong within the christian-democratic (EPP) group and weak within the social-democratic (S&D) group, because it matters more to voters of the first. The elections may however decrease voting discipline within the large political groups, if strong national parties in their centrist backbone (e.g. CDU in EPP) lose seats which are replaced by others from their fringes (e.g. Fidesz in EPP).

### **Pro/anti integration now more important than left/right division**

Political groups vote more cohesively when they are united around a shared ideological goal (i.e. when stakeholders are spread evenly over the member states). Cohesiveness is easier on socio-economic issues, but less so on issues where member states disagree, or when the question is whether the EU should be involved at all. Yet, these are the issues that have gained prominence in the public debate.

Pro/anti EU integration is now the main consideration dividing parties when they vote in the EP, with left/right taking only second

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2 Schmitt, H. and Popa, S.A., Turnout in the EP elections 2014, A comparative study of the EU Member States, SIEPS 2016:8. [http://www.sieps.se/en/publications/2016/turnout-in-the-ep-elections-2014-a-comparative-study-of-the-eu-member-states-20168/Sieps\\_2016\\_8](http://www.sieps.se/en/publications/2016/turnout-in-the-ep-elections-2014-a-comparative-study-of-the-eu-member-states-20168/Sieps_2016_8).

3 Hix, 2016: <http://ukandeu.ac.uk/explainers/the-european-parliament/>.

4 Frantescu, 2013: <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2013/10/24/the-balance-of-power-in-the-current-european-parliament-is-crucial-for-understanding-the-issues-at-stake-in-the-2014-european-elections/>.

place.<sup>5</sup> Hence, developments in the EP echo those at the national level, where the left/right-cleavage is being replaced by a new pro-/anti-globalisation cleavage.

This means that the EP does respond to changing voter preferences across the EU. On the other hand, it also means that political differences within the EP are more difficult to solve, because the new cleavage reflects fundamentally different views on the direction of European integration. Some MEPs may want more policies to be decided at the EU level, some may be happy with the existing degree of integration, whereas others may want to abolish the EU altogether.

### **Grand Coalition is losing ground**

For many years, the EP's main political groups (the christian-democratic EPP and the social-democratic S&D) have been large enough to form a "grand coalition" commanding 50-70% of the seats. This coalition often cooperated for the election of powerful positions within Parliament itself (e.g. the EP Presidency). In 2014, it also managed to push through the election of "*Spitzenkandidat*" Jean-Claude Juncker as President of the European Commission, against the wish of the national governments in the Council. As part of the deal between the two parties, S&D leader Martin Schulz could remain President of the European Parliament.

Like in most member states, however, a weakening of centrist parties is also visible in the European Parliament. Initial EU-wide polls<sup>6</sup> suggest that EPP and especially S&D will lose seats. For the first time, the "Grand Coalition" is likely to lose its absolute majority. Although EPP and S&D will still be required in any coalition, ALDE may end up becoming the kingmaker because it is the most likely third party for a majority (see Table 1 at the end of this paper).

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5 Hix et al., Changing political cleavages in advanced democracies: evidence from the European Parliament, 2018: <https://wc2018.ipsa.org/sites/default/files/ipsa-events/wc2018/papers/paper-103050-2018-07-05t060414-0400.pdf>.

6 See for instance Politico's poll of polls: <https://www.politico.eu/2019-european-elections/>.

### **Polls do not predict a strong EU-sceptic block in the EP**

Polls indicate a doubling of the extreme right ENF group, which contains parties like PVV, Vlaams Belang, Front National, Lega Nord and FPÖ. But with around 8.4% of the seats and strong internal divisions (Steve Bannon tried, but failed, to unite them), its influence will remain modest.

The same is true for the anti-EU EFDD group, which will probably see its AfD membership increase from 1 to 16, but also the departure of 20 (former) UKIP members.

The mixed EU critical and conservative ECR group (which contains Dutch CU and SGP and Flemish N-VA, but also the Sweden Democrats and Polish PiS) will see its 18 British Conservatives leave as well. Even if it continues to exist as a formal group, its internal divisions remain big.

All in all, even if these three right wing groups unite behind the single viewpoint they have in common (which is to oppose further EU integration), they are still predicted to have only 117 seats in the European Parliament: 16.6% of the total number. Even the addition of EU critical left-wing GUE, which increases from 6.8 to 8.5% of the seats, does not change this picture fundamentally.

### **The Macron effect?**

French President Emmanuel Macron has launched an attack on the rise of Euroscepticism all over the EU by creating a broad, centrist and integrationist group around his own party La République en Marche (LREM, named 'L'Europe en Marche' for the occasion). So far, he is likely to have the support of liberal ALDE and a number of parties in S&D and PPE. The expectation is that this will result, after the elections, in a new political group, or an alliance of parties consisting of ALDE and Macron's LREM, as well as several parties currently in the S&D and EPP groups.

Voter support for Macron in France however appears to be fading, so it remains to be seen what strength Macron will add to the new combination. If he succeeds, the effect would be stronger opposition to the forces

in the EP that are less ambitious or even EU-sceptic. Another effect would also be stronger ties between the ALDE alliance in the EP and the corresponding heads of government in the Council (where ALDE currently holds eight of the 27 seats, the same number as the EPP). This ALDE affiliated group in the Council could act as a counterbalance against Germany's hold on the EPP and on the distribution of EU top jobs after the election.

#### 4 Spitzen nicht Spitze?

##### **Spitzenkandidaten, politicisation and the interinstitutional balance**

One of the major questions concerning the position of the European Parliament relates to its interaction with the European Commission. The Commission traditionally operates at the interface between the technocratic level (as an independent executive and guardian of the Treaty) and the political level (Council of Ministers and European Parliament). Has the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure contributed to a shift in the interinstitutional balance, e.g. by strengthening the link between the EP and the Commission at the expense of the influence of the Council? Alternatively, has the Commission become more political? The Netherlands in particular has usually had a preference for the Commission as the defender of the general European interest and as a safeguard against the dominance of the larger countries.

This Parliament- Commission interaction is evidently influenced by personalities (Delors operated in a different way than Barroso), the general requirements of the times (the 1980s posed different challenges and opportunities compared to the post-2007 crises years), and political preferences (Northern and Southern countries differ in terms of administrative preferences). The jury is still out as regards the ways in which the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure has influenced the behaviour of the Commission Juncker. One complicating factor is that not only the EP may have strengthened its influence in 2014. The European Council as well has started to issue Strategic Guidelines partly under

the influence of the Dutch government (Timmermans 2013<sup>7</sup>).

##### **A very political Commission**

It seems realistic to assume that the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure contributed to President Juncker opting for a more political profile. Juncker as the first president 'elected' by the EP stated in his first State of the Union that he wants the Commission to be a "very" political body that "should politicise everything". For instance, as regards the supervision of the EU Semester, Barroso and the then Commissioner for the EU Semester, Olli Rehn, had tried to create an independent position for DG EcFin.<sup>8</sup> But their successors Juncker and Moscovici opted for a political profile as e.g. underlined by Juncker's statement about fiscal leeway for France: 'because it is France'.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, Juncker aimed for an EU that protects also in view of employment and promoting investment, amongst others through the creation of the large scale investment fund (EFSI, better known as the Juncker Fund: it was an election promise) that was first announced as a fund of €315 billion and which was subsequently doubled.<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, this Commission presented ambitious plans for deepening the Eurozone, among others by proposing a European Minister of Finance, a European Monetary Fund and a Eurozone budget.<sup>11</sup>

7 <https://www.ft.com/content/346f4ff4-4c82-11e3-923d-00144feabdc0>.

8 Schout, A. & A. Mijis (2015) 'The Independent Commissioner: An Administrative Analysis', in: E. Ongaro, Multi-Level Governance: The Missing Linkages, Bingley: Emerald.

9 <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-eu-deficit-france/eu-gives-budget-leeway-to-france-because-it-is-france-juncker-idUKKCN0YM1N0>.

10 Schout, A. (2018) 'Deepening EU integration and the Netherlands' EU narrative', in: Eriksson J. (ed), The Future of the Economic and Monetary Union: Reform Perspectives in France, Germany, Italy and the Netherlands, Stockholm: Sieps.

Also published at: <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/deepening-eu-integration-and-netherlands-eu-narrative>.

11 [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_IP-17-5005\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-17-5005_en.htm).

Also Commission proposals for e.g. a plastic tax, a ban on plastic straws, and tax harmonisation (not accompanied by impact assessments) may well be related to the politicisation partly triggered by the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure. His suggestion to merge the Commission President and the President of the European Council to stimulate a “union of citizens”<sup>12</sup> suggests a broadening of the implications of the elections and of the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure.

### **The EP grabbed power in 2014, but the Council is not in for a repetition**

Until 2009, the Council was firmly in charge of the process to select a new President of the European Commission. This meant that government leaders selected a single candidate, which was subsequently presented to the European Parliament for confirmation on a take-it-or-leave-it basis.

Before the EP elections of 2014 however, the European Parliament succeeded to grab the initiative when most of the political groups proposed their own candidate (“*Spitzenkandidat*”) for the Commission Presidency, and committed themselves to not supporting any non-*Spitzenkandidat* proposed by the Council. During the campaign several public debates were organised between the *Spitzenkandidaten* of the political groups, and the whole procedure was designed to mimic parliamentary elections and the subsequent selection of a prime minister at the national level, with the explicit aim of improving the political legitimacy of the process.<sup>13</sup>

Despite strong reluctance and only thanks to the tenacity of the EP, the Council in the end accepted to propose Jean-Claude Juncker, *Spitzenkandidat* for the largest group EPP (without however even being on the ballot list for Luxembourg), for the Commission Presidency, but without ever committing to the *Spitzenkandidaten* process as such.

### **Does even the EP still want *Spitzenkandidaten*?**

It does not look like the *Spitzenkandidaten* process will be equally successful in 2019. The EPP is still the strongest supporter of the process. This makes sense because, as the largest political group, any *Spitzenkandidat* appointed to the Commission Presidency would likely come from this group. The Greens, and to a lesser extent S&D, still support it as well, although none of their candidates seems likely to win.

But ALDE, which was an enthusiastic supporter of the process in 2014, no longer is – and its support is required for a majority behind any likely candidate from the political centre. Both ALDE, and their ally Macron, say they are against the *Spitzenkandidaten* process in its current form, because voters in most countries cannot vote for any of them. This would require transnational party lists, but the EP itself has voted down this change of the election system in February 2018.

Support for the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure is probably a Machiavellian as much as an ideological issue: Macron is not in favour because it takes away influence from the European Council of which he is a member. ALDE is not in favour because it wants to keep Macron’s party on board in the EP. And both may see better chances for their candidates if they circumvent the EPP- (and German-) dominated *Spitzenkandidaten* process.

### **The EPP is split between pro- and anti-Orbán**

The current EPP leader in the European Parliament, Manfred Weber (CSU), has put himself forward as a candidate and so far enjoys the support of all national EPP leaders, including Angela Merkel (CDU) and Dutch CDA, but also Victor Orbán.<sup>14</sup> The EPP seems intent on keeping its position as the largest group in the EP even if that means keeping controversial figures on its right wing, like Mr Orbán, on board.

12 <https://www.politico.eu/article/junckers-union-vision-for-europe/>.

13 More information on the 2014 process: <http://webjcli.org/article/view/325/431>.

14 Politico 18 October 2018: <https://www.politico.eu/article/viktor-orban-backs-manfred-weber-as-lead-candidate-in-european-election/>.



The risk of that strategy however, is that as a consequence the EPP loses majority support for its candidate for the Commission Presidency, since not only the political left but also many parties in the centre (including Macron and ALDE) are outspoken adversaries of Orbán. Weber, who opposes moves to throw Orbán's Fidesz party out of the EPP but who did support the EP vote to start an "article 7 procedure" against Hungary over rule-of-law concerns, is walking a thin line.

The other official candidate to be EPP *Spitzenkandidat*, Alexander Stubb from Finland, represents the EPP's liberal wing and is a strong opponent of Orbán. He would more easily gain the support of other groups, and as a former Minister and Prime Minister, also fulfils one of the informal requirements of the job, namely to have experience in the (European) Council, which Mr Weber has not.

### The S&D has Timmermans

Two candidates have put their names forward to become *Spitzenkandidat* for S&D: the current Commission Vice-President and European Commissioner for Energy Union, Maroš Šefčovič (Slovakia), as well as the First Vice-President of the European Commission, the Netherlands' own Frans Timmermans.

The latter is by far the most outspoken and political one of the two. But Šefčovič, who was largely successful in delivering the Energy Union, has the advantage of being from one of the Central and Eastern European Countries (CEEC). "Geographical diversity" is another factor that has to be taken into account during the selection process.

Neither of the two seems likely to win the Commission Presidency through the *Spitzenkandidaten* process however, and the likely goal for both is to become "*incontournable*" for another interesting post. In that case they would still need the support of their own government, however, which for Timmermans would mean that his nomination should not interfere with whatever European ambitions Mark Rutte denies to have.

### The Borgen scenario, or Barnier?

The outcome of all this could be that the Council succeeds in taking back the initiative from the European Parliament, especially if it comes up with a candidate that is more acceptable to a wide range of the EP than the largest party's own *Spitzenkandidat*, i.e. Weber.

It is interesting in this respect that Macron has indicated enthusiasm for the Danish Competition Commissioner Margrethe Vestager (ALDE) as a future Commission President.<sup>15</sup> The similarities are clear: they have similar political views on Europe and on the importance of reconciling economic liberalism with social protection, and both are relative outsiders to their countries' political establishments. She is also a woman, which would be an advantage as a sign of renewal, and she has experience as a former Minister and deputy Prime Minister. Vestager becoming Commission President would be the European Borgen scenario, after the Danish political TV series in which the female leader of a small political party succeeds in becoming Prime Minister in a coalition with two larger parties.

Meanwhile, an outcome with Barnier (who declined to stand as *Spitzenkandidat* because he has a Brexit job to finish) is not at all unlikely either. And he is a member of EPP, which could make it more palatable to them as well.

## 5 Europe and the new world order: what will the EP do?

The changing (if not: crumbling) world order and the need to define Europe's role accordingly will be one of the main challenges for the EU's decision-makers in the years to come. Much of that will be related to trade, considering the new relationship with the UK and Trump's protectionist tendencies on the world stage.

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15 Politico, 14 November 2017: <https://www.politico.eu/article/emmanuel-macron-margrethe-vestager-european-commission-president/>.

But Trump is not the only reason why the EU needs to reconsider its role in the world: Europe's and the US's interests have been drifting apart for some time, and even under Obama it was clear that the US was shifting priorities towards the Pacific, in terms of trade and in term of security relations. The German government in particular has been pointing this out for some time.

In terms of trade, even though the European Parliament may become more polarised, the pro-free-trade camp will probably gain seats. This is because the loss of EPP seats will be compensated by an increase of seats in the centre, mainly ALDE/Europe en Marche. Even on the right (ECR is mostly free-trade), and in the anti-establishment block (Italian 5 Star Movement and German AfD) there is much support for free trade. On the centre left (S&D) there is at least moderate support as long as free trade deals fulfil certain conditions.

## **6 Towards a more visible EP?**

The internal divisions of the EP, with a smaller centre and larger, but internally divided, fringes, will be visible in many issues after the elections. The question is whether the EP will succeed in drawing public interest by holding more debates that matter to voters. Its performance during the financial and euro-crisis was not great in that respect, with most debates taking place in national parliaments. In more recent years, debates in the EP have become more agenda-setting, with examples like the public hearing of Mark Zuckerberg, high profile speeches and debates with government leaders (Rutte, Macron, Orbán), and reports that have made an impact (Sargentini on Hungary). So perhaps it is beginning to learn the trick.

On the other hand, the internal divisions of many of the EP groups on EU integration may weaken the EP and strengthen the Council. Moreover, the politicisation of the Commission and the evolution of the European Parliament triggers a strengthening of intergovernmental preferences in the Council and a search for new instruments outside the traditional Community Method.

**Table 1** Polls show that the most likely majority after the elections will be EPP and S&D, plus ALDE. A majority requires 353 seats from 2019, it required 376 seats before 2019. Data for current and predicted EP composition as of 16.11.2018<sup>16</sup>

GroKo	2019	2014	GroKo+ ALDE/ EM	2019	2014	GroKo+ ALDE/ EM+ VERTS	2019	2014
EPP	182	217	EPP	182	217	EPP	182	217
S&D	136	187	S&D	136	187	S&D	136	187
			ALDE	71	68	ALDE	71	68
			EM	21	0	EM	21	0
						VERTS	42	52
	<b>318</b>	404		<b>410</b>	472		<b>452</b>	524

GroKo+ VERTS	2019	2014	GroKo+ VERTS+ GUE	2019	2014	GroKo+ ECR	2019	2014
EPP	182	217	EPP	182	217	EPP	182	217
S&D	136	187	S&D	136	187	S&D	136	187
VERTS	42	52	VERTS	42	52	ECR	47	72
			GUE/NGL	60	52			
	<b>360</b>	456		<b>420</b>	508		<b>365</b>	476

EPP+ new right	2019	2014	Left	2019	2014	S&D+ VERTS+ ALDE/ EM	2019	2014
EPP	182	217	S&D	136	187	S&D	136	187
ENF	59	34	VERTS	42	52	ALDE	71	68
EFDD	50	43	GUE/NGL	60	52	EM	21	0
ECR	47	72				VERTS	42	52
	<b>338</b>	366		<b>238</b>	291		<b>270</b>	307




16 Sources: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meps/en/home> and <https://www.politico.eu/interactive/european-elections-2019-poll-of-polls/>.



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