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How will the European elections reshape the political landscape?

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Europeans are being called to ballot between 6 and 9 June 2024, depending on the country, to renew the members of the European Parliament^[1]. They will elect 720 MEPs, fifteen more than in the previous ballot in 2019. Twelve Member States have gained seats because of their demographic situation. Three countries each gain two extra seats: France, which will increase its number of MEPs to 81, Spain to 61 and the Netherlands to 31. Nine countries have gained one seat: Poland (53), Belgium (22), Austria (20), Denmark (15), Finland (15), Slovakia (15), Ireland (14), Slovenia (9) and Latvia (9).

A SECONDARY ELECTION?

The European elections are still too often perceived as having no real immediate political stakes.

Firstly, because the proportional system in force in all the Member States does not give a clear victory to a single party. A coalition has to be built with other parties. And the reality in Europe is that several are needed, at least three now, and not just two as it had been since the first elections by direct universal suffrage in 1979.

Secondly, because the result has little impact on the national political balance within the Member States. The fact that an opposition party comes out ahead in the European elections has no immediate political consequences: the government's political responsibility is not directly or immediately engaged. As a result, some voters take the opportunity to express their anger in the knowledge that this will have little or no impact on the political conduct of national affairs.

Finally, there are others who feel that the European ballot is not decisive and choose to abstain. Turnout improved slightly in 2019, just exceeding the 50% mark (50.66%), but it is still low, under the 40% mark in seven Member States.

In the hope of attracting new voters, some Member States (Germany, Belgium) have lowered the voting

age to 16 for the European elections. But who will these first-time voters choose?

WHAT COALITION IS POSSIBLE IN THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT?

At the last European elections in 2019, voters brought the "duopoly" held by the two largest parties since 1979 to an end. For the first time, the EPP and the PES, and their groups, the EPP and the S&D, did not obtain an absolute majority on their own (336 out of 751 seats). This new political situation forced them to turn to a third force, the Liberals, (102 elected members) to form a majority. Despite this, the candidate for president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, was narrowly elected by 9 votes. It should be remembered that she was not then the candidate of any party and that she had been chosen by the European Council.

What will happen in 2024? Some opinion polls are already predicting a surge in radical, less pro-European parties, based on their results in recent national elections (the Netherlands, Italy, Sweden, Finland, Italy and Hungary). Some of these parties are hoping to upset the balance of power and, as a result, create a new coalition... on the right.

Is this credible? The two main parties, even though they have been in decline for several years, are still stronger than the others (176 and 141 elected members), and this should still be the case after

^[1] This text was originally published in the 'Schuman Report on Europe, the State of the Union 2024', Editions Marie B., April 2024, 296 p.

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the June elections, even if their score may be lower than in 2019. They would need to find an ally to form a solid majority.

Could this once again be Renew? Some doubt about it, given that recent opinion polls show that the Liberals will obtain a worse result than in 2019, due in particular to the electoral setbacks of Ciudadanos in Spain, the FDP in Germany, which is struggling with 3% of voting intentions, and poor polls in France for Renaissance (less than 20%).

On the other hand, this group could see its Polish delegation grow (only one outgoing member) thanks to the Polska 2050 party, which won 14.4% of the vote in the October 2023 parliamentary elections and is now a member of the new government coalition in Warsaw.

Is another coalition possible? To be able to imagine an unprecedented coalition, these three groups would first have to fail to obtain an absolute majority of 361 votes. According to calculations, they would be in a position to obtain more than 400, which would mean they could renew their contract.

This is the only majority coalition possible at this stage.

LIMITED... AMBITIONS

Within two political groups, changes are taking place and manoeuvres are underway. This is notably the case within the European Conservatives and Reformists (CRE/ECR). With 68 elected members its European party is led by the President of the Italian Council, Giorgia Meloni, who would like to see themselves as kingmakers. They would like to upset the current balance and win enough elected representatives to be in a strong position to take part in future negotiations. To do this, they would need to be well ahead of the Liberals, the current third political force. There are a number of weaknesses in this hypothesis however.

Giorgia Meloni won the Italian parliamentary elections in September 2022 at the head of a surprising coalition, not replicated elsewhere, comprising both Forza Italia (EPP) and the Lega (ID). But its Polish counterparts in the PiS lost power in the parliamentary elections of October 2023.

The new prime minister, Donald Tusk, former president of the EPP and former president of the European Council, has formed an alliance with the Liberals of Polska 2050 and the New Left, a replica of the current majority in the European Parliament.

While Giorgia Meloni has said she would like to draw closer to "big" parties like the EPP, this does not seem to be the case - far from it - for the Poles (PiS), who currently make up the largest delegation in the ECR group (27 elected members). Relations are extremely tense, not to say abysmal, between Donald Tusk's government, President Andrzej Duda, who is close to PiS, and the former leaders, now in the opposition.

And what about the Swedish Democrats, who are talking about a possible Swedish exit from the European Union? Provocation or self-delusion? It is not at all certain that this line is shared by the other members of the ECR group, who would rather "normalise" the image of their parties, begin a process of respectability and ensure that they are no longer systematically ostracised. Giorgia Meloni has also decided to stand as a candidate in her own country in order to have a greater influence on this election. Her party, Fratelli d'Italia, is polling at 28.5%. Will this be enough to shake up the established European order?

In the same vein, the Identity and Democracy (ID) group (59 elected members) is counting on improved results, to the point of hoping to overtake the ECR and even the Liberals. The recent success of the PVV in the Netherlands and the favourable polls for the RN in France (over 30%) and the FPÖ in Austria (25-26%) suggest that the results in 2024 will be better than in 2019. But where will the long-awaited gains come from?

Not from the Lega in Italy, which is currently the largest delegation in this group with 23 elected members and which is likely to suffer the biggest loss if the polls are confirmed (under 10%). Not the RN in France (18 elected members), which performed well in 2019 (23.34%) and would only gain a few more seats, according to the current polls. This is unlikely to be the case for the PVV (none of whom have been elected), whose success in the November 2023 general election looks very unlikely to become a reality.

That leaves the Germans of the AfD (9 elected members). But the polls in favour of this party are much worse than expected a few months ago. So will the expected gains in France, the Netherlands, Germany and Austria be enough to offset the Lega's losses in Italy? If the number of elected members in this group increases slightly, will it be enough to overtake ECR, which has more outgoing members? Probably not.

A NEW MAJORITY?

For some analysts, ECR and ID will be the only two groups with many more elected members than in 2019, and they could therefore join forces and form a new majority. But that seems to be rushing things a bit: the great fragility of this calculation stems from the fact that these radical parties do not appear to be in a position to form a single group. They do not always have the same electoral affinities or the same positions, particularly regarding Ukraine and Russia. And this subject remains a real factor of deep divisions two years after the start of the Russian war in Ukraine. How can anyone imagine those who support Ukraine sharing anything with Putin's henchmen?

Their divisions are much stronger than they appear, and it seems illusory at present to see them uniting on any programme. For a long time, the members of the ID group have acted as a deterrent, an excuse for the others (the Swedish Democrats, the True Finns and the Belgian NVA) not to sit with them. And their leaders themselves have had little to say about each other. It would be an understatement to say that the mood is not ideal for unity.

A right-wing coalition, apart from appearing highly implausible in terms of its programme, institutional collaboration and above all its political line, would not, according to calculations, be able to achieve an absolute majority!

THE HUNGARIAN "UNKNOWN"

What will Viktor Orban do? Elected in 2019 within the ranks of the EPP, from which they withdrew in 2021, the 13 Hungarian Fidesz MEPs have since sat as non-attached members. This would make a significant contribution to the group they choose to join. But which one? ECR or ID?

The difficulties in which the party appears to be mired following the resignation of Katalin Novák, president of the Hungarian Republic, from its ranks and its head of list for the European elections in June, Judit Varga, bode ill for the future. The appearance of Peter Magyar, the aptly-named, former husband of Judit Varga, whose polls predict a high score, may disrupted the illiberal system built up by Viktor Orban since 2010. There is no guarantee that the Fidesz will achieve the same score as in 2019. Nor does it mean that it has already decided who it will join and whether it will do so. Indeed, a party that has been a member of the largest group (EPP) in the European Parliament since it joined the European Union can hardly be satisfied with being "downgraded" or even "relegated". Viktor Orban's outspoken and original positions have not won him just friends, and it is difficult to pin him down with any certainty to one group rather than another. What if he decides to go it alone?

WILL THE CURRENT MAJORITY BE RE-ELECTED?

In all likelihood, the two parties of the centre-right (EPP) and centre-left (S&D) could lose a few seats each in this tenth European election, but they would still have well over a hundred MEPs each, which no other group seems able to achieve. Unlike 2019, when Renew managed to cross this threshold.

At the same time, some groups could gain ground, notably ECR, in which the Italian delegation is likely to increase by around twenty seats (26-28 seats) and could even constitute the main delegation of this group at the expense of the Polish representation. Conversely, the expected surge in the ID group would not come from Italy (which would lose nearly 20 elected members) and the main delegation in this group would be that of the French RN.

These two groups also appear to be in direct competition to be one ahead of the other at the finish line. The arbiter could be the Hungarian Fidesz, whose 13 elected members have been sitting on the non-attached benches since they left the EPP in 2021.

Lastly, some other groups might see their numbers dwindle. This could concern the Radical Left group. More

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unexpectedly, it could also be the case for the Greens, at a time when the ecological transition is a central issue. The tensions and concerns that this raises would not be unrelated to a poor result.

Then there is the case of the liberal group, Renew, which is currently the third largest political force in the European Parliament and a member of the current majority coalition. As this position of third force is hotly contested, its result will be particularly closely scrutinised. To date, most of the forces in this group seem to be in relative difficulty in the polls, as the campaign enters its final stretch.

Ultimately, the political balance may not undergo the profound upheaval so eagerly awaited by some. Its three current components, even if reduced by around twenty seats, could still form a majority with more than 400 of the 720 seats. In fact, it is the only coalition capable of reaching this threshold. But for how long?

In any case, the European elections in June 2024 will be a warning to the traditional political parties, but also to the European institutions, whose policies and governance cannot ignore the upsurge of doubt and dissent in most Member States. Ursula von der Leyen, a candidate for a new term at the head of the Commission, with the support of her party, the CDU, and therefore of the EPP this time, has already understood this when it comes to agricultural issues. If she wants to be re-elected next July, she will have to "get her act together" and campaign actively.

Given the current crises and the challenges to be met, including that of foreign interference and online disinformation, which is taking on greater importance, as several parliamentary reports and recent studies, such as that by Viginum, have indicated, to prevent the electoral campaign from being distorted or altered, the real issue at stake in the ballot is choosing good representatives. Whatever their political hue, they must be committed to ensuring that Europe moves forward and continues to build on the successes of the past 74 years. And not, out of anger or frustration, indulge in an experiment they might bitterly regret. The political parties will therefore have to present a solid, clear, credible programme, especially if it is intended to be alternative, and state clearly what they will be doing in Strasbourg, the seat of the European Parliament. Finally, it is up to the electorate to take a close look at the votes cast by party representatives during the term of office that is coming to an end, and for which they would like to vote. They may well be in for some unpleasant surprises when they read them, as it is true that alongside the major European political families, within which there are quality, informed, hard-working legislators, the extremist and populist parties have not particularly shone in terms of their contribution to the work of the European Parliament!

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