

The European Elections and Brexit



The **UK** in a
Changing Europe

Foreword



There is a certain irony that the upcoming set of European elections will be the most scrutinized, most keenly watched and most thoroughly dissected ever in the UK. It remains far from certain any of those elected will ever make the journey on the Eurostar from St Pancras to Brussels as members of the European Parliament. However, these elections are undoubtedly significant: for the EU as a whole, and for Brexit and the future of British politics.

This report represents our attempt to explain why and to spell out for those interested what to look out for when the elections take place. In what follows, we bring together some of the best minds working on Brexit and the EU. The report is intended as a guide to the vote later this month, rather than an attempt to predict the outcome of an inherently unpredictable set of elections. I believe it makes an original and timely contribution and I hope you find it both useful and interesting.

It was an absolute pleasure to work with Sara Hobolt in putting this report together. Special thanks to the ever patient, creative, understanding and brilliant Richard Linnett. Matt Bevington, Liam Hill, Alan Wager and John-Paul Salter all proofed and checked the various contributions. Navjot Lehl who coordinated the whole enterprise with her customary efficiency and (sometimes) good humour.

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Hyperlinks to cited material can be found online at www.UKandEU.ac.uk

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Introduction

Anand Menon & Sara B. Hobolt



Who'd have thought it? After some forty years of membership during which hardly any attention was paid to European elections, we finally have one about which people care. Ironically, it's an EU election taking place after we were meant to have left, and potentially soon before we will in fact leave. Nevertheless, it has piqued our interest.

And so, what might the coming vote signify and what might its effects be? In what follows, a range of contributors attempt to answer the most important questions about the elections. Their remit was simple: to provide for all those interested, a guide to what to look out for and what the implications might be.

The answers, as the contributions underline, are many and various. Whilst we in the UK might, understandably, focus on the implications of the vote for our own politics, it is worth remembering that it will have important implications for the EU too. And, of course, in keeping with the complex two-level nature of European integration, these are likely to feed back into the Brexit process itself.

Here in the UK, the fact of having a nationwide election – albeit one held under unique proportional rules – will allow us to take a snapshot, however imperfect, of public opinion. For one thing, we will be reminded (as if we needed it) how divided our country is as different parts of the UK respond in different ways to the questions put to them. For another, we get to take the political temperature, which, as Sunder Katwala explains, has been at fever pitch.

We will also get, again imperfectly, a sense of where the country stands on Brexit. Like it or not, convincingly or not, many people will portray the election as a proxy Brexit referendum. How the votes stack up between Leave- and Remain-supporting parties will be the object of much attention, albeit that the election is far from a perfect cipher for another referendum.

Finally, we may learn more about the health of the traditional parties and the prospects of their newborn challengers. And the European elections represent a particular challenge for incumbents, not only because of the proportional system used, but also because the European issue divides people, as Paula Surridge illustrates, along a value dimension that has so profoundly disrupted our politics over the last few years.

As for the EU itself, the elections will (obviously) have a bearing on the composition of the European Parliament. They will determine the balance of power – between pro-European and nationalist-populist forces, and between left and right – and influence important decisions taken

about key appointments to top EU jobs and the future agenda for Europe. All things being equal, British MEPs will play a part in those debates, even if their tenures do not last much longer than it takes for these initial decisions to be made. We face the prospect of British MEPs tilting the balance of power in a certain direction for long enough to shape key decisions, while giving up their seats before the consequences of those decisions become clear.

This will all feed back into the Brexit process itself. Should, for instance, the Brexit Party gain a large number of seats this may change the incentives of European leaders when deciding about whether to prolong British membership. A more fragmented and polarised Parliament might slow down the process of agreeing any a future trade deal. What is more, a new Parliament composed of a larger number of eurosceptics and critics of globalisation will hardly make the approval of any such deal with the UK any easier.

So there is much to play for. We hope that what follows represents a clear and accessible guide to what to look out for, and what it might mean.

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The Basics



What are the elections for?

The European Parliament elections determine who will represent EU citizens in the Parliament over the next five years. In total, there are 751 members of the European Parliament (MEPs), of which 73 come from the UK.

What do MEPs do?

Much like MPs in the UK, the main job of MEPs is to assess, amend and, ultimately, accept or reject legislation. The European Parliament is one of three EU institutions responsible for legislating. The European Commission brings forward legislation to be debated. The Council of the EU, on which ministers from national governments sit, amends, approves and rejects legislation alongside the European Parliament. The Council and Parliament both have to agree for a piece of legislation to be enacted.

MEPs will also approve by a majority the next president of the European Commission. Should a candidate be approved or rejected by a small margin, British MEPs could be decisive in determining the outcome. This could call into question the legitimacy of both the president and the approval process should Brexit happen and UK MEPs leave the Parliament.

How often do European Parliament elections happen?

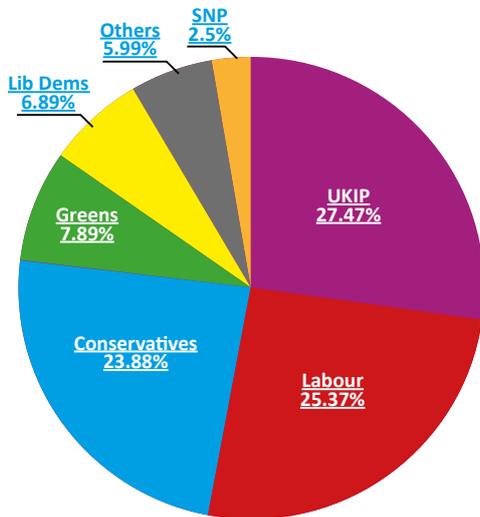
European Parliament elections take place every five years. The term of the next Parliament will run from July 2019 to July 2024. The upcoming Parliament will be the ninth since MEPs were first elected, in 1979. The European Parliament is the only directly-elected body in the EU.

When will they happen?

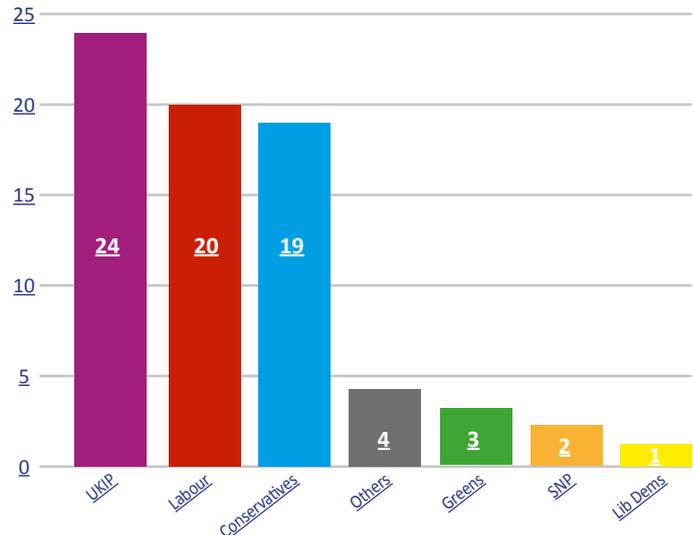
The European Parliament elections will take place over four days from 23 to 26 May. Member states hold their ballots on different days according to domestic election rules. In the UK, the ballot happens on a Thursday, this time on 23 May. Most EU member states hold their elections on Sundays (26 May).

How did the UK vote last time?

2014 European Parliament election: vote share



2014 European Parliament election: seat won by parties



When will the results be announced?

Although voting takes place on different days across member states, none can release its results until all the polls have closed on Sunday 26 May at 10pm UK time. This is so that the results in one country don't influence voting in another. That means, despite the UK and the Netherlands voting on Thursday 23 May, the results will not be announced until the evening of the Sunday.

The votes in the UK can be counted immediately after the close of the polls on 23 May but they must remain a secret until 10pm on the Sunday. It is up to local election officials whether they count immediately or wait until the final day of polling. In the 2014 European Parliament elections, the first results in the UK came in—from the North East, and Yorkshire and the Humber—at about 10.15pm on the Sunday. It is likely that the full results from across the UK will not be known until Monday evening, although most results tend to be announced in the early hours of Monday morning.

Why is the UK taking part?

The UK is taking part in the elections because it will probably still be a member state at the time they are due to take place. Had the government not organised the elections, it would have been in breach of its EU treaty obligations and subject to a legal challenge.

Article 22 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU states that all EU citizens 'have the right to vote and to stand as a candidate in elections to the European Parliament'. Therefore, while the UK remains in the EU, its citizens remain EU citizens and have the right to take part.

The European Council decision on 10 April to extend Article 50 to 31 October reaffirmed that, if the UK has not ratified the Withdrawal Agreement by 22 May, then it has to hold these elections.

If Parliament passed the Withdrawal Agreement and the Withdrawal Agreement Bill before 22 May, the elections could be cancelled. However, a last minute cancellation could leave some EU citizens unable to cast a ballot, and could leave the UK government subject to legal challenge.

Who can vote in these elections?

UK and Commonwealth citizens, and citizens of any EU member state aged 18 or over who are resident in the UK, are eligible to vote in the European Parliament elections. This is different to the franchise for general elections (and the 2016 EU referendum), where citizens of other EU countries who are resident in the UK cannot vote.

EU citizens resident in the UK can decide to cast their ballots for candidates in their home countries according to national rules on overseas voters. A number of states, including Italy, do not allow their citizens to vote abroad and they have to return home in order to do so. Most others allow their citizens to send postal ballots, vote at embassies or allow someone else to vote on their behalf (a proxy vote).

UK citizens resident in other EU countries are entitled to vote in those countries, or are able to vote by post or proxy in the UK as long as they have been a registered voter in the UK within the past 15 years. UK citizens resident outside of the EU are also entitled to vote by post or proxy under these same terms.

How do the elections work?

Great Britain uses a list system and divides the country into 12 electoral regions, with voters casting a single vote for their preferred party. Northern Ireland uses the Single Transferable Vote (STV) system for its three MEPs, where voters can choose their second and third preferences.

Political parties produce lists of candidates for each region and rank the candidates. The 'closed list system' used in the UK means that voters simply cast one vote for the party that they wish to support, and the parties decide in what order their candidates are listed.

As parties win seats, those at the top of the lists gain them first. The party with the most votes wins the first seat available. Once a party has been given a seat, its votes are halved (i.e. divided by the number of seats it has, plus one) and whoever has the most votes after that gets the next seat. The number of seats each party receives is calculated using the d'Hondt method of proportional representation.

Do the elections work the same way everywhere in the EU?

No. Although the electoral systems used must be proportional, member states can use different proportional systems. The 'closed list system' used in the UK means that voters simply cast one vote for the party that they wish to support, and the parties decide in what order their candidates are listed. However, a majority of EU countries use a 'preferential list system', allowing voters to

cast ballots for both parties and individual candidates. Ireland and Malta use the same 'single transferable vote system' which is used in Northern Ireland.

In most member states (eg Spain), MEPs are elected to a single, nation-wide constituency. In others, such as the UK, MEPs represent constituencies (one of 12 regions). Minimum age requirements, electoral thresholds, requirements for standing for election, differ across the EU. In some member states, voting is compulsory.

The European Council has set out how the UK's seats will be redistributed among other member states should it leave the EU. Of the 73, 27 will be reallocated, reducing the European Parliament to 705 MEPs in total. The fact Brexit hasn't happened complicates the elections for those states earmarked to receive extra MEPs. Ireland, for instance, currently elects 11 MEPs, but when the UK leaves it will gain a further two seats. If the UK takes part this time but leaves during the Parliament's term, Ireland will have to fill these seats. As a result, Ireland is electing 'reserve' candidates, who will take up the extra seats should the UK leave.

How are parties organised in the European Parliament?

MEPs sit in cross-national groups which their national parties are affiliated with. For instance, the Conservatives sit with the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group and Labour sit with the Socialists and Democrats (S&D) group. These groups tend to vote in blocs in much the same way as political parties do in Westminster.

Although most groups persist from one Parliament to the next, new groupings tend to be formed in each five-year term. A group must have at least 25 MEPs from at least seven member states. There were eight political groups in the 2014-19 Parliament running across the full spectrum from far-left to far-right (see the piece in this report by Simon Hix). No single group is even close to a majority of seats in the Parliament, so coalition-building is part and parcel of how the Parliament works.

The election and UK politics



Values and voting in the European elections – Paula Surridge

It has become almost a truism that the binary choice of the ‘in-out’ referendum has divided the electorate into two polarised camps. Research has suggested that Leave and Remain are becoming ‘strong and stable’ [political identities for voters](#). However, with multiple choices for both sets of voters in the upcoming European Parliament elections, a simple Leave/Remain divide will not be enough to explain vote choices. Despite being touted as a [‘soft referendum’](#) by some of the pro-Remain camp, the choices voters face are more complex than any new referendum would be.

One way to understand voters’ positioning in these elections is to look at the ‘core values’ of the voters for each of the parties in previous European elections. Whilst these are only indicative, given the relatively low turnout at previous elections, they nonetheless show us how voters are positioned and where distances between parties in this value space suggest possible patterns of vote switching and new alliances.

The core values of the electorate align along two key dimensions. The first is an economic dimension, which closely resembles our common sense understanding of the terms ‘left’ and ‘right’. It is concerned with issues of economic justice, economic inequality and economic organisation. The second is a social dimension, variously referred to as liberal-authoritarian, open vs. closed and the social liberalism dimension.

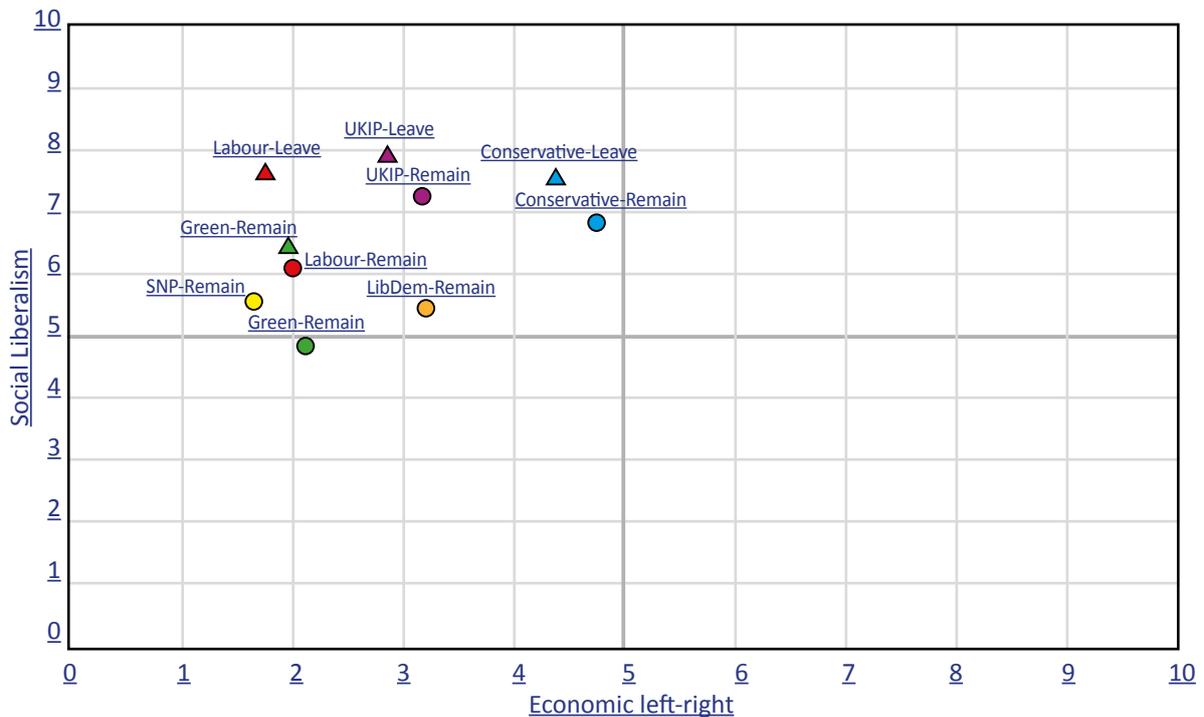
Using data from the British Election Internet Panel Study, we can go back to 2014 and measure the core values of voters for each party in the 2014 European Parliament elections. The items used to measure each dimension [can be found here](#). They include attitudes to redistribution and big business on the economic dimension and attitudes to the death penalty, traditional values and censorship on the social liberalism dimension.

In each case, people are asked to choose from five options, ranging from ‘strongly agree’ to ‘strongly disagree’. These responses are aggregated and scaled so that each dimension runs from 0 to 10, with low values representing the ‘left’ and ‘liberal’ positions respectively.

Each group of voters can be represented by their position in a two-dimensional value space. As shown [elsewhere](#), votes in the EU referendum were not related to the economic left-right dimension but were strongly related to the social liberalism dimension.

As with EU referendum vote patterns, we can see that within each party those who voted Leave or Remain are not very different on the economic (left-right) dimension. The largest difference here is between 2014 Conservative Leave and Remain supporters, with those who voted Conservative in 2014 and then Leave in the referendum being a little less right-wing on economics than those went on to vote Remain.

Average position on economic left-right and social liberalism scales of voters in 2014 European parliament elections



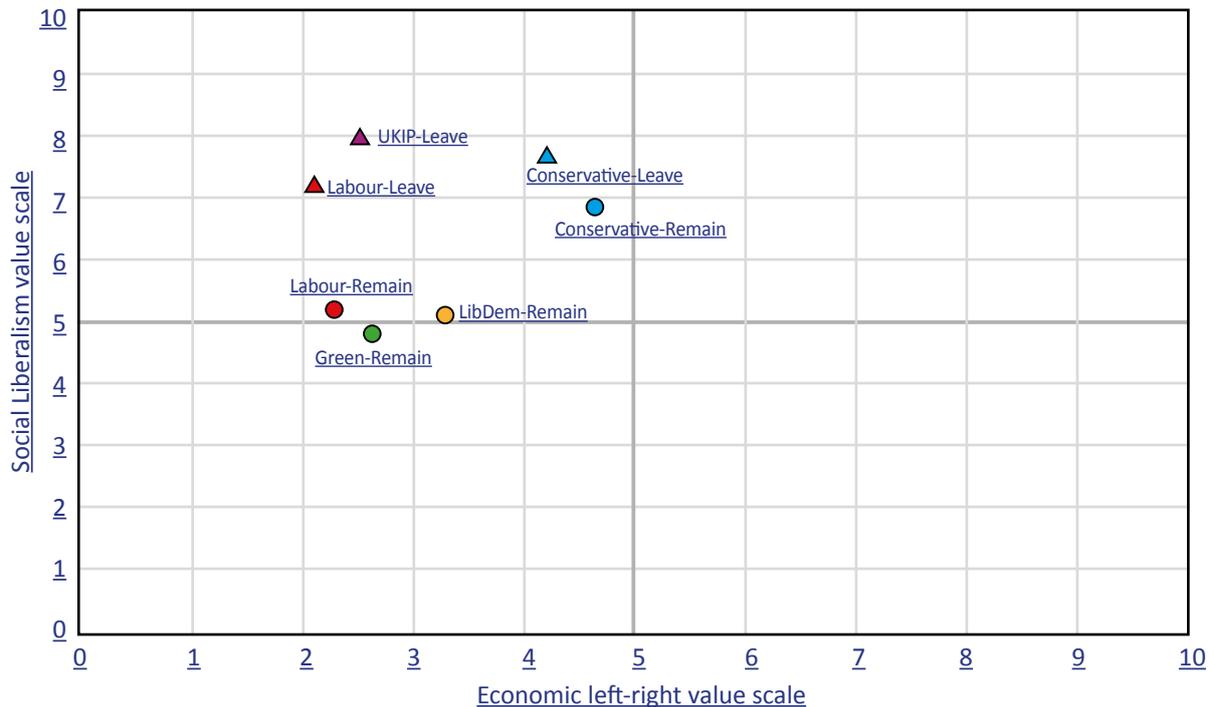
If we consider the social liberalism (vertical) dimension, those who voted Labour in 2014 and Leave in the referendum are little different to those who voted Conservative in 2014 and Leave (or indeed from those who voted UKIP in 2014 and Leave).

These patterns reveal pathways between parties that voters may take depending on the priority they attach to each value dimension and different sets of salient issues. Of course, the political landscape has changed since 2014. In the space of one European Parliament, the UK electorate has voted in two general elections, local elections and a referendum. This may well have shaken this political space.

The positions of voters at the 2017 general election look remarkably like those of the 2014 European Parliament elections, though a slight drift of the Remain groups is discernible here as described [elsewhere](#). Of course, there are far more voters represented here and the proportion of the votes won has changed considerably (most notably for UKIP with 27.5% in 2014 and just 1.8% in 2017). But the key features of how voters are positioned are the same. In both cases, Conservative voters are to the right of all the other parties on the left-right divide.

For voters on the economic right, for whom economics is the key issue, there are few choices. A cluster of 'liberal' Remain voters spread across Labour, the Greens and the Liberal Democrats. These pro-Remain voters may find it relatively easy to move between these parties (the BES

Average position on economic left-right and social liberalism scales of 2017 voters by EU ref vote.



data suggests that around six in ten of those who voted Green in 2014 voted Labour at the 2017 general election). Conservative Remain voters stand out here as not being close to any other party on either dimension; these could be a key target group for Change UK, particularly as they position themselves towards the centre of the economic dimension and have attracted MPs who had previously been in both the Conservative and Labour parties.

Exactly how other pro-Remain voters will decide between the array of pro-EU parties is unclear, and much may depend on the campaign itself and perceptions of who can win in the unfamiliar proportional system of the European elections. However, in terms of their value positions, Remain voters would be equally at home with Labour or the Greens, and perhaps even the Liberal Democrats.

Given the sharp decline in UKIP support, the positions of their voters in 2014 is likely to be more informative than that in 2017. The party was led by Nigel Farage in 2014 and it is likely that his new venture – the Brexit Party – will be seeking to gather most of those voters. On the social liberalism dimension, there is little to differentiate Labour, Conservative and UKIP Leave voters. This may mean that a pathway between either of the main parties and the Brexit Party exists where core appeals to voters are made on this social dimension.

[As Leave and Remain identities have strengthened](#) since the referendum, it seems likely that these faint pathways between parties have also become more solid. [Current polling](#) suggests a very large proportion of Leave voters could well support the Brexit Party or UKIP in these elections. By considering values in two dimensions, we can see that for both Leave and Remain supporters, moving between parties on issues related to the social dimension may only be a small step compared with the much larger strides needed to move along the older economic divides.

The public debate, civility and extremism – Sunder Katwala

Can British democracy handle holding the European elections? It seems a strange question, when the traditional problem has been how to interest voters in electing MEPs. Yet these unusual, unanticipated elections are not just a contest between political parties but raise questions about the health of our democracy too.

Part of the political polarisation around Brexit involves clashing accounts of what those dangers are. Is it the failure of parliamentarians to enact the referendum result that risks destroying public trust in democracy? Or is it a backlash against MPs doing their jobs in our representative democracy that is stoking an illiberal authoritarianism?

Has the post-referendum climate given expressions of racism and prejudice new oxygen? Or was the lesson of the referendum result that the political classes have been too quick to close down democratic debates about issues of identity and immigration?

The questions are many, but the debate about the polarised political climate can conflate several distinct issues: trust in democracy; the drivers of extremism; and how the tone of political discourse influences social norms against prejudice, hate crime or political violence. When these issues are contested, it becomes more challenging to identify the essential boundaries for democratic politics – and how to practically protect them during an election campaign.

So which boundaries are foundational? Civility towards opponents is valuable but cannot be mandatory. Anger has a place in democratic politics too: voters can vow never to trust a particular party ever again. But politics, which exists to resolve differences peacefully, should not promote, legitimise or excuse violence. The rising number of death threats against MPs shows how escalating political rhetoric – against ‘traitors’ or ‘enemies of the people’ – heightens an atmosphere where those unable to distinguish between political argument and calls to violence could feel legitimised to act.

But political polarisation need not be a bad thing in itself. Democratic participation can rise when the stakes are high, as both the 2014 Scottish independence referendum and the Brexit referendum showed. What was on the ballot paper seemed bigger than in a periodic election. Yet these European elections may prove equally polarising precisely because the stakes are lower. The contest will make a poor proxy referendum, even if it feels like one to many participants. That is because only half as many voters are likely to take part. Parties can top the European polls in the UK with around five million votes, not the 13 million votes it may take to win a general election. The incentive is to mobilise a core vote rather than to reach out to a broader coalition of support, as when a referendum has a 50% winning post. On polarised social issues, speaking to one side of the argument may be enough.

Extremism and prejudice

That may also affect how arguments about extremism feature in these elections, at a moment when almost every party faces challenges over their commitments to root out prejudice.

Though UKIP won the 2014 European elections, all but three of the 24 MEPs elected then have

since left the party. Their charge that leader Gerard Batten has turned UKIP into an extreme party has three main themes. Batten's courting of ex-English Defence League leader Tommy Robinson, whom he has appointed as a personal adviser, was the occasion for the largest exodus. That Batten has focused more on the threat from Islam – which he describes as a 'death cult' – than Brexit has repelled those who joined a eurosceptic party, not an anti-Muslim one.

Finally, the party has consciously recruited a group of online controversialists, who can help it to reach new audiences. The candidacy of Carl Benjamin, known online as 'Sargon of Akkad', cost UKIP [its final three female MEPs](#) after he defended tweeting that he "wouldn't even rape" Labour MP Jess Phillips.

The pressure group Hope Not Hate says that UKIP is now "an unambiguously far right party", but it is former leader Nigel Farage's description of UKIP as "the new BNP" that may prove an especially influential message with past UKIP voters. In disassociating from UKIP over its swing to the far right, Nigel Farage will expect to entrench his own credentials as a populist, polarising but mainstream politician. Farage's pledge that his new Brexit Party will be "deeply intolerant of intolerance" will be scrutinised by those sceptical of his past interventions on immigration.

It is worth recalling that it was the Sun newspaper which challenged Farage over racist language most effectively during the 2014 campaign, in an editorial stressing that, while it is not racist to debate immigration, his comments 'smearing Romanians for being Romanian' were racist. Both the messenger and the message were rather more likely to land this point with audiences considering supporting his party than another attack on UKIP in the Guardian.

Meanwhile, Labour and the Conservatives continue to struggle to show that they are tackling anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim prejudice effectively. Change UK, for its part, lost two candidates in the 48 hours after they were announced as racially prejudiced social media posts were revealed, showing that problems with vetting candidates span the party spectrum.

Parties can legitimately challenge their opponents over allegations of prejudice. But they do little to uphold anti-prejudice norms if this turns into an exercise in competitive 'whataboutery'. Parties who are quick to challenge their opponents need to demonstrate that they uphold similar standards when it comes to putting their own house in order.

Government ministers have been warning that holding the elections may spark extremism and disorder – not least for tactical political reason of attempting to pass the Brexit deal. That approach will now need to shift to a tone of vigilance without alarmism. Non-partisan voices in civic society will also be concerned less with the political outcome than the impact on community relations.

The challenge is to show that Britain can handle a democratic election in polarised times, while maintaining boundaries against violence and prejudice. This current political crisis is not just about how the Brexit stand-off is resolved. These European elections may also illuminate how far one of the central values of democratic politics – understanding that those who we disagree with have a right to their voice too – risks being eroded, or can endure.

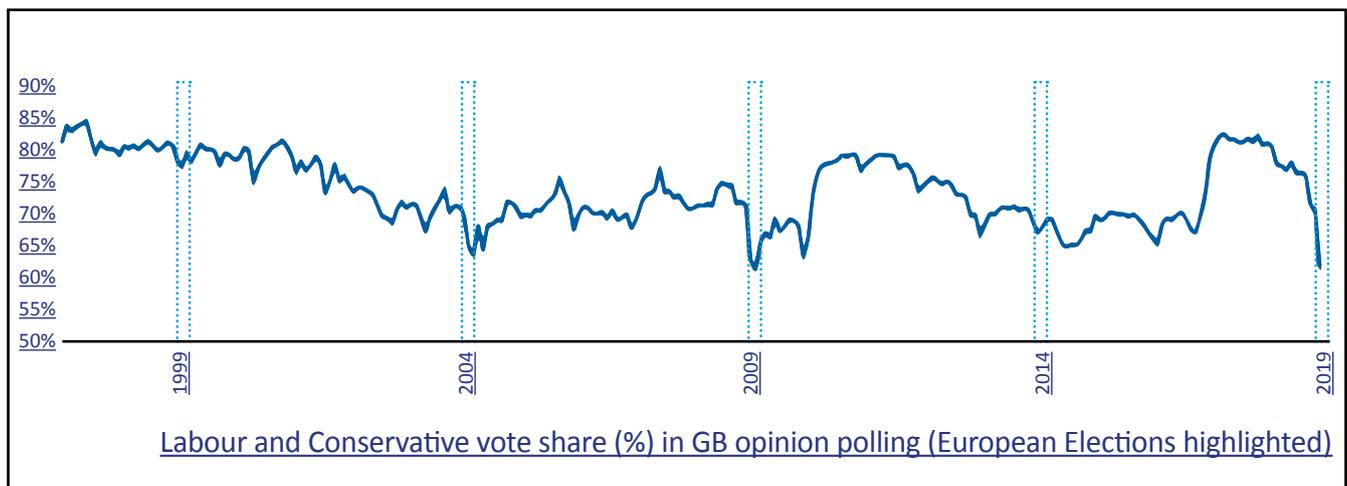
The parties and the party system – Anand Menon and Alan Wager

The last time European elections were fought in the UK, Nigel Farage was buoyant. UKIP became the first party other than Labour and the Conservatives to top a national poll in a UK-wide election in 98 years. Nigel Farage proclaimed that ‘the UKIP fox is in the Westminster hen house’.

This time, Farage, as well as parties on the Remain wing of British politics, are promising to blow the whole house down. Interpretations of the results of these elections are likely to rest on the degree to which the ascendant bubble of two-party politics – perhaps the key political fact of the 2017 general election – has burst.

These elections are the only UK-wide political contests fought under a proportional system, and potentially the last for the foreseeable future. This is vital to understanding how they have worked in the past, and why they are important to British politics now. Since they became proportional contests in 1999, European elections have always, as the figure below shows, led to a small decline in support for the big two parties. These dips sustain themselves for a brief period, before the majority of voters drift back to their existing tribes. This time, these elections are seen as a tool and an opportunity to entrench a sharp decline already underway and due, in no small part, to the Brexit process.

Two-party vote share in opinion polling (monthly, aggregated): May 1997-May 2019



Each party has their eyes on their own interests and, specifically, on the prospect of a further general election in 2019. This has coloured the behaviour of the Remain parties in particular. Electoral rules and the Electoral Commission provided a complex but surmountable hurdle to the creation of a genuine ‘Remain Alliance’. Yet the fact is there were good reasons for the individual parties to avoid any formal ‘remain coalition’. After all, when it comes to normal elections, they will be in competition.

Not only that, but it is not necessarily the case, as those who have criticised the absence of a ‘remain alliance’ have claimed, that having Remain-oriented parties in competition will be a bad thing for the cause. While not necessarily pursuing the optimal strategy to win seats, by providing a slew of different anti-Brexit options they could well be maximising their chances of a high vote share. It is far from clear, for example, that a Lib Dem-Green-Change UK joint ticket

would be more successful at attracting Conservative, Remain-inclined voters than these parties acting independently. And in an election whose significance lies as much in what it tells us about the state of opinion on Brexit as what it does in terms of sending MEPs to Brussels, that matters.

Moreover, it is worth bearing in mind that winning European parliamentary elections – which in British politics, despite the electoral system, tends to mean finishing first past the post – is not a panacea for all political ills. William Hague, whose Conservative party topped the poll by 7% when the current voting system was used for the first time in 1999, can attest to that fact. As can David Cameron who, a decade ago, topped the poll with 26 seats, double the 13 of UKIP and Labour. A year later, he did not manage to translate this strength into a working majority. Even Farage in 2014 hoped that his success in electing MEPs would translate into seats in the House of Commons – which it did not.

These elections will be written up not just as an electoral test for party politics, but also as a proxy for a second referendum. The ability to test which areas of the country currently have the highest levels of relative enthusiasm – measured in turnout – will provide a useful indication of which voters would show up in another national poll on EU membership. Five of the ten local counting areas which saw the biggest increase in turnout between the 2015 local elections and the 2016 referendum – Boston, South Holland, Mansfield, Fenland and Bolsover – were also in the top ten areas that voted most heavily for Leave. If, in these elections, the biggest jumps in voter turnout between 2014 and 2019 are in areas that voted disproportionately Remain, that would suggest the opposite effect: a relative enthusiasm among Remain voters. This is important, not least as the drift to Remain in opinion polling is largely predicated on voters who did not turn out in 2016.

Finally, of course, the European election might serve as a warning shot to incumbent MPs. Success for the Brexit Party in Leave-voting Labour marginal areas might prompt some soul searching as to whether backing the Prime Minister's deal might be the lesser of two evils, should the alternative be losing a seat due to the impact of Farage. Higher than expected losses to insurgent Remain parties will have the opposite effect. As always with these elections, expectations management will be key. It is just that, this time, it is not only the political parties but also the campaigning groups on both sides of the Brexit debate who will be massaging the figures and the message that politicians have received from the electorate.

So there is much to play for, albeit that the actual point of the elections – sending MEPs to Brussels – might be somewhat lost from sight.

How might the UK vote?



Scotland – John Curtice

Brexit has a particular edge in Scotland. In sharp contrast to the UK as a whole, the country voted decisively by 62% to 38% in favour of remaining in the EU. This had the effect of re-opening the debate about Scottish independence, against which the country had voted relatively narrowly by 55% to 45% just two years previously. For over a quarter of a century, the SNP's vision of independence has been one in which Scotland would be a constituent nation of the EU. In line with that stance, the party indicated in the Scottish Parliament election held just over a month before the EU referendum, that it might seek to hold another independence ballot should Scotland find itself heading for an exit from the EU against its wishes.

It was thus little surprise that, shortly after the outcome of the EU referendum was announced, the First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, indicated that another independence referendum was back 'on the table'. In the event, the path towards holding another ballot has proven far from straightforward. Concerned that the UK government was seeking a much harder Brexit than it regarded as acceptable, in March 2017 the Scottish government made a formal request to the that the UK Parliament should grant the Scottish Parliament the legal authority it needed to be able to hold a repeat of the ballot held in 2014. That request was rebuffed. Then, after the SNP lost 21 seats in the general election in June, the request was effectively put on hold by the First Minister until such time as the outcome of the Brexit process was clearer.

That clarity has, of course, so far not been forthcoming. Nevertheless, shortly after Easter Ms Sturgeon announced that, assuming Brexit does eventually go ahead, she wanted to hold an independence referendum before the next Scottish Parliament election due to be held in May 2021. To that end, she was now going to introduce legislation into the Scottish Parliament that would establish the rules for a second referendum, in the hope that by the time it had reached the statute book the UK Government had either changed or been persuaded to change its mind.

These developments will ensure that the European Parliament election has a distinctive character north of the border. The debate will not only be about how Brexit should now be progressed, but also about whether Scotland should be able to seek its own solution by holding an independence referendum that might pave the way for the country to remain part of the EU even if the UK leaves. Those in Scotland who would like to remain part of the EU therefore not only have an opportunity to vote for parties such as the Liberal Democrats and Change UK – who want the UK to hold a second EU referendum – but also to back parties such as the SNP and the Greens that – as well as supporting that move – also want Scotland to have the ability to decide the issue for itself via an independence referendum.

Early polling of how people in Scotland will vote in the European Parliament elections suggests that in practice it is the SNP that will emerge as by far the most popular choice among Remain voters. Around half of those who voted Remain in 2016 say they intend to vote for the SNP, much as they indicate they would in a Westminster or Holyrood election. This means that Labour, with only around one-fifth of the vote among Remainers, is – unlike in England – only modestly stronger among those opposed to EU membership than it is among those who voted to Leave. Meanwhile, in common with the position south of the border, neither the Liberal Democrats nor Change UK seem able to make a major claim on the Remain vote.

Meanwhile on the other side of the Brexit divide, the picture is more fragmented. True, early polling indicates that, as south of the border, many of those Leave voters who would still vote Conservative in a Westminster or a Scottish Parliament election are inclined to back the Brexit Party in the euro-ballot. As a result, the Brexit Party already seems on course to be the most popular choice among Leave voters, albeit perhaps not to the same extent as in England. Even though the body of Leave voters is much smaller than in England and Wales, its performance could well be sufficient for the party to claim one of Scotland's six seats.

Thereafter, however, the Leave vote appears fragmented. While at the beginning of the campaign at least around one in five seem set to vote Conservative, a similar proportion are inclined to back the SNP. As was evident in the EU referendum, despite the party's pro-EU stance, there has always been a segment of nationalist support that favours weakening ties with Brussels as well as London. Meanwhile, one in eight seem inclined to back Labour.

There would seem, then, little doubt that thanks to its ability to appeal to a broad coalition of Remainers and supporters of independence, these elections are likely to affirm the SNP's position as the dominant party of Scottish politics, with some 40% or so of the vote. In contrast, the forces of unionism look set to be scattered to the four winds. The recent revival in Conservative fortunes north of the border seems, for the time being at least to have stopped in its tracks thanks to the Brexit Party incursion, while Labour and the Liberal Democrats remain becalmed. None of this will guarantee that Ms Sturgeon eventually secures her second independence referendum, let alone necessarily indicate majority popular support for independence. However, it will hardly make the task of those who wish to keep Scotland in the UK any easier.

Wales – Roger Awan-Scully

Wales is a nation whose elections have long been lop-sided, marked by sustained one-party dominance. After the rapid decline of the once-hegemonic Liberals in the years following World War I, the Labour party soon became the dominant force in Welsh political life – a status that it has retained to the present day.

In that context, the 2009 European Parliament election was an historic event. It remains the only Wales-wide electoral contest in the last century that Labour have not won. At the lowest point in Gordon Brown's fortunes as Prime Minister his party finished narrowly behind the Conservatives in Wales. Prior to that we have to go back to Lloyd George's triumph in the December 1918 general election to find an election where anyone other than Labour came first in Wales.

In 2014 a strong Labour performance was widely expected. In opposition to the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition since 2010 at Westminster, the party had secured their best ever devolved election result in May 2011, and produced a very strong performance in Welsh local elections in 2012. Meanwhile, UKIP had little track record in Wales: it had been their second or third worst 'region' in Britain in the three previous European Parliament elections. It was therefore a considerable shock to much of the Welsh political elite – and a blow to their progressive image of Wales – when a late surge in support saw UKIP almost defeat Labour. In retrospect, this was but the prelude to the much greater shock of Wales voting for Leave in the June 2016 EU referendum.

Wales has four seats in the EP. In practice this means that for a party to win two of those four seats they have to win more than twice the vote of the party coming fourth. In both 2009 and 2014 the Welsh electorate split their vote so evenly that one seat was won by each of the four leading parties: Labour, the Conservatives, Plaid Cymru and UKIP.

So what might happen in 2019? Recent elections and opinion polls provide some guidance. In the 2017 general election, Wales mirrored England in producing a resurgence in two-party politics after Labour's support surged during the campaign. Over the last 18 months, however, Labour support has slowly drained away. Meanwhile, Welsh voters have been every bit as unimpressed as those elsewhere by how Theresa May's divided government has handled the Brexit process. The most recent Welsh [poll](#) suggested the revival of two-party dominance rapidly going into reverse.

Only one opinion poll in Wales has thus far asked about European Parliament election voting intentions. The Welsh Political Barometer [poll](#), conducted in early April, reported the following levels of support for the parties:

Labour: 30%

Conservative: 16%

Plaid Cymru: 15%

UKIP: 11%

Brexit Party: 10%

Change UK: 8%

Liberal Democrats: 6%

Greens: 5%

Others: 1%

If such figures were reproduced in the European Parliament election, Labour would win two seats with the Conservatives and Plaid Cymru each retaining their current one MEP. But it would be foolhardy to predict an election outcome from a poll conducted some seven weeks previously.

One feature of this poll was the very even split in support between UKIP and Nigel Farage's new Brexit Party. UKIP have had a presence in the Welsh Assembly since May 2016, but their delegation has mainly been notable for splits and internal arguments. The party performed dreadfully in the 2017 general election, and has failed to make any mark in recent local government by-elections in Wales. However, they did record a strong third place in the recent Newport West parliamentary by-election. While it is not impossible that both UKIP and the Brexit Party win seats in Wales, it is more likely that whichever emerges as the main vehicle for pro-Leave sentiment will win a Welsh EP seat – and might even top the poll.

The pro-Remain forces are even more divided. Sentiment in Welsh Labour is clearly heavily against Brexit. In addition, Plaid Cymru, the Liberal Democrats and the Greens, plus the new force of Change UK, take a similar position. But with approximately 15 percent of the vote needed to win a seat in Wales, many of these parties might easily miss out.

Two things are certain. One is that the EP election will be a first, and unplanned for, electoral test for the new Welsh First Minister, Mark Drakeford, elected by Welsh Labour members last year. He has the unenviable task of following in the wake of Carwyn Jones, a formidably effective campaigner. Drakeford is a widely respected figure, but not one most obviously at home on campaign trail. A poor campaign, and poor result, will prompt some Welsh Labour worries about their prospects for the May 2021 devolved election.

Second, we can be sure that at least two Welsh MEPs will be new. Both Derek Vaughan of Labour and the Conservatives' Kay Swinburne are standing down; meanwhile, one of the others (Nathan Gill) will be standing for a different party – having won election as a UKIP candidate in 2014, he will stand for the Brexit Party this time.

There are a lot of 'known unknowns' about the 2019 European Parliament elections. We don't yet know, for instance, how the political context of Brexit will shape voting behaviour. Nor do we yet know what political implications may follow from the polls. But in a nation where the Labour party have come first in 38 of the last 39 Wales-wide electoral contests, anything other than a first place finish for Labour would certainly be a major political event.

England – John Curtice

England did not vote as one in the EU Referendum. Whereas, outside the capital, a majority in each region voted to leave the EU, in London Remain was preferred over Leave by almost three to two. As a result, it seems likely that England will also vote differently in European elections that seem set to be dominated by the Brexit debate.

So far as the formal rules of the European election are concerned, England will certainly not vote as a whole. Under the regional party list system used to elect members of the European Parliament (MEPs), England is divided into nine separate ‘government regions’. The number of MEPs elected in each region is proportional to the electorate of that region – the biggest, the South East region (an area to the south and west of London), elects ten MEPs whereas the smallest, the North East, elects just three. London itself is a region with eight seats.

Initial polling of how people propose to vote in the European elections suggests that how people vote will typically reflect how they voted in the EU referendum. Four polls conducted just after Easter on average found that (across Britain as a whole) three-fifths (60%) of those who voted Leave anticipated voting for either UKIP or the Brexit Party, both of which are campaigning on the basis that the UK should have left the EU on 29 March without a deal.

Conversely, nearly three-quarters (72%) of those who voted Remain said they would either vote Labour, who have been arguing for a softer Brexit than that envisaged by the government, while not ruling out the possibility of a second referendum, or for one of the three parties in England that are wholly in favour of a second referendum: Change UK, the Greens, and the Liberal Democrats.

These patterns mean that it is almost inevitable that London will vote differently from the rest of England. The initial polling data suggest that only around one in four Londoners are currently inclined to vote for either UKIP or the Brexit Party, whereas elsewhere the two eurosceptic parties are heading for a third or more of the vote.

In contrast, around three-fifths of the capital’s voters (59%) were backing one of Labour, Change UK, the Greens, or the Liberal Democrats. For the three explicitly pro-second referendum parties, London looks as though it could be their most fruitful hunting ground. Meanwhile, although Labour may well still profit from traditional loyalties in the north of England, in the south and midlands the four Remain-inclined parties were seemingly heading for rather less than half of the vote.

However, there is a crucial difference between the character of support for the ‘Remain-inclined’ parties and that for the eurosceptic parties. At the outset of the campaign, at least, the former is scattered across four different parties, whereas the latter has rapidly come to be concentrated largely in one party – the Brexit Party. While Labour is the single most popular party among Remain voters, it still only commands the support of around two-fifths of those who voted Remain. The rest of the vote for Remain-inclined parties is scattered relatively evenly between Change UK, the Greens, and the Liberal Democrats.

Because England will not be voting as one, this fragmentation of the vote for Remain-inclined parties matters. Although the election is being conducted using a system of proportional representation, seats will be allocated separately in each of the country's nine regions using a system (the d'Hondt rule) that tends to reward large parties more generously than smaller ones. This has the effect of creating a high de facto threshold before a party wins a seat.

Even in the largest region, the South East, a party has to win just over one-eleventh of the vote to be sure of winning a seat – anything less than that means its fate depends on the extent to which the vote is scattered across even less successful parties. In every other region, the threshold is even higher, rising to as much as quarter of the vote in the North East.

None of the initial polls suggest that any of the Remain-inclined parties, apart from Labour, is set to win much more than 10% of the vote across England as a whole – with the risk that, outside London at least, none of them will achieve more than winning the odd seat here and there. Of course, if Britain does leave the EU sooner rather than later, the newly elected MEPs will not be in post for long and thus the outcome in seats might be thought not to matter. However, such a result would hardly lend momentum to those parties' attempts to advance the case for a second EU referendum.

In contrast, although the Brexit Party and UKIP are competing with each other for the support of those who voted Leave, it appears that within days of its launch, most of the Leave vote had swung behind the new Brexit Party, formed by the charismatic former UKIP leader, Nigel Farage. For every one person saying that they would vote UKIP, five were indicating that they would back the Brexit Party – enough to give Mr Farage's grouping the support of around a half of all those who voted Leave, and a platform from which, in England outside London at least, the party could present itself as the voice of Leave voters.

This surge in support for eurosceptic parties means the Conservative party finds itself at risk of being left high and dry. Support for the party among Leave voters has evaporated in the wake of the government's failure to deliver Brexit. As a result, it starts the campaign barely any more popular among Leave voters than Remain supporters. Indeed, it is the only party which is clearly not markedly stronger among those on one side of the Brexit debate than the other. As a result, so far as winning seats is concerned, the party could find itself highly dependent on the remnants of its support in its traditional strongholds in the southern half of England. It is little wonder that much of the party is wishing that these elections were not happening at all.

Northern Ireland – John Garry

Two of the seats in the upcoming European Parliament elections in the Northern Ireland three-seat constituency look predictable. Martina Anderson of Sinn Féin topped the poll last time and looks set to be returned, along with another incumbent – Diane Dodds of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP).

But an exciting tussle is looming for the final seat. Jim Nicholson, the sitting MEP of the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), has decided not to contest the election and the party is running former member of the Northern Ireland Assembly Danny Kennedy as its candidate. Kennedy will face stiff competition from Colum Eastwood, the leader of the moderate nationalist Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), as well as Naomi Long, leader of the cross-community Alliance party. Two other party leaders are also running in this heavyweight contest – Jim Alister of Traditional Unionist Voice (TUV) and Claire Bailey of the Greens.

Figure 1: Successful candidates in European Parliament elections

Year	DUP	UUP	SDLP	Sinn Féin
1979	Paisley	Taylor	Hume	--
1984	Paisley	Taylor	Hume	--
1989	Paisley	Nicholson	Hume	--
1994	Paisley	Nicholson	Hume	--
1999	Paisley	Nicholson	Hume	--
2004	Alister*	Nicholson	de Brún	de Brún
2009	Dodds	Nicholson	--	de Brún
2014	Dodds	Nicholson	--	Anderson
2019	Dodds?	Kennedy?	Eastwood?	Anderson?

*established a new party, Traditional Unionist Voice (TUV), in 2007

That two of the three seats are likely to be retained by incumbents reflects the general tendency in European Parliament elections in Northern Ireland to be characterised by continuity, both in terms of parties and personnel. Remarkably, 16 of the 24 contested seats – in the eight elections for the three Northern Ireland seats between 1979 and 2014 – have been won by just three people (Figure 1). The Reverend Ian Paisley served for the DUP between 1979 and 2004, as did John Hume for the SDLP in the same period. And Nicholson was the UUP’s MEP between 1989 and 2019.

The 2004 election did inject some novelty, as Sinn Féin won a seat at the expense of the SDLP, a result that replicated the former’s eclipsing of the latter in the 2003 Assembly election as the leading nationalist party. And Jim Alister took on the Paisley mantle as successful DUP candidate in 2004, but dramatically left the party to establish a new one in 2007 – Traditional Unionist Voice (TUV) in protest against the DUP entry into a power-sharing executive with Sinn Féin.

Alister failed to retain the seat for the TUV in 2009, however, as Diane Dodds stood successfully

for the DUP and also held the seat in 2014. Bairbre de Brún smoothly handed the Sinn Féin baton to Anderson, who won in 2014.

If Dodds and Anderson are elected in 2019 they will represent clearly opposed positions on both the constitutional and the Brexit question. Dodds' views – which combine a hardline Brexit and a unionist position – are not dissimilar to those of her husband and DUP leader at Westminster, Nigel Dodds. In contrast, Sinn Féin's Anderson holds a staunchly anti-Brexit and pro-united Ireland position. So, whoever wins the third and final seat could swing the interpretation of the overall Northern Ireland result.

The UUP's Kennedy voted Remain in 2016 and seeks support from Remain unionists, while being committed to following through on the result of the referendum. Such a soft-ish Brexit message is more in tune with UUP voters than DUP voters – the former being less keen on a hard Brexit than the latter.

The SDLP combine a long-standing commitment to constitutional nationalism with enthusiastic Europeanism, and if Eastwood wins a seat it would illustrate anti-Brexit nationalist electoral success. Eastwood argues that “this European election should be a referendum – the North's People's Vote”. His campaign message is to see the vote as an opportunity to voice a reaction against the poor state of governance in both Northern Ireland and the UK.

Alliance is ‘cross-community’ on the constitutional question, declaring as neither unionist nor nationalist, but is unambiguously pro-EU, and a victory for Long would buttress the pro-Remain majority in Northern Ireland. Long advocates a further referendum to deal with the ongoing Brexit crisis and to facilitate a potential reversal of the decision to leave.

The election will be held using the single transferable vote system – in contrast to the rest of the UK—in which voters rank order their preferences, meaning that seeking to attract second and third preferences is a crucial part of campaigning. Whether significant numbers of pro-Remain voters from a Protestant community background will give an influential preference vote to the strongly pro-EU SDLP and contribute to its election will be an intriguing aspect of the contest. The SDLP narrowly missed taking the third seat last time out.

The European Parliament election is significant in terms of providing an electoral signal of Northern Irish views on the issue of Brexit. Will two of the three seats be won by staunchly anti-Brexit parties? If so, this will likely be read as a buttressing of the pro-Remain position of Northern Ireland, further manifesting the distinctive position of this part of the United Kingdom, and contributing to the picture of a UK whose component parts are pointing in different directions.

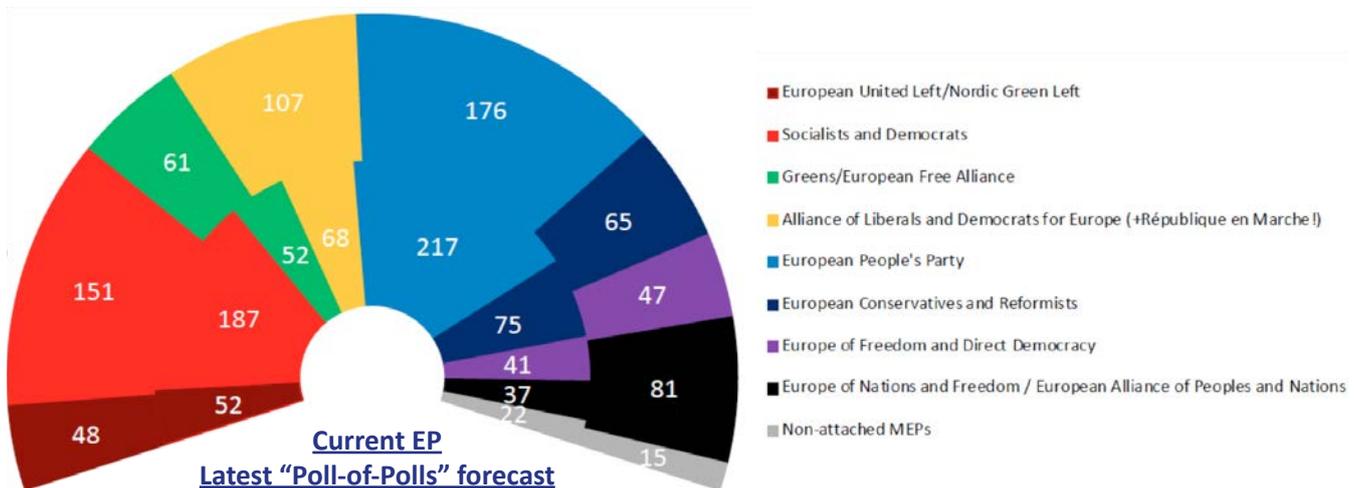
The election is also an important indicator of the state of Northern Ireland's politics. The election will take place in the challenging context of the continued absence of a power-sharing government in Northern Ireland, as the two main parties mutual distrust and acrimonious disputes continue and they focus on wider issues – Brexit at Westminster for the DUP and Irish unity for Sinn Féin. Will there be a consequent reaction among voters, in terms of increased support for broadly middle-ground parties and a decline in the overall DUP/Sinn Féin vote share? If so, this may be read as a protest against the perceived dysfunctionality of the non-functioning executive.

What might happen in the EU?



Why the elections matter for the EU – Simon Hix

The European Parliament elections will shape the direction of the EU for the next five years, and potentially for much longer. Here is the current political make-up of the European Parliament and the likely make-up of the next Parliament, after the elections in May, based on current national [opinion polls](#).



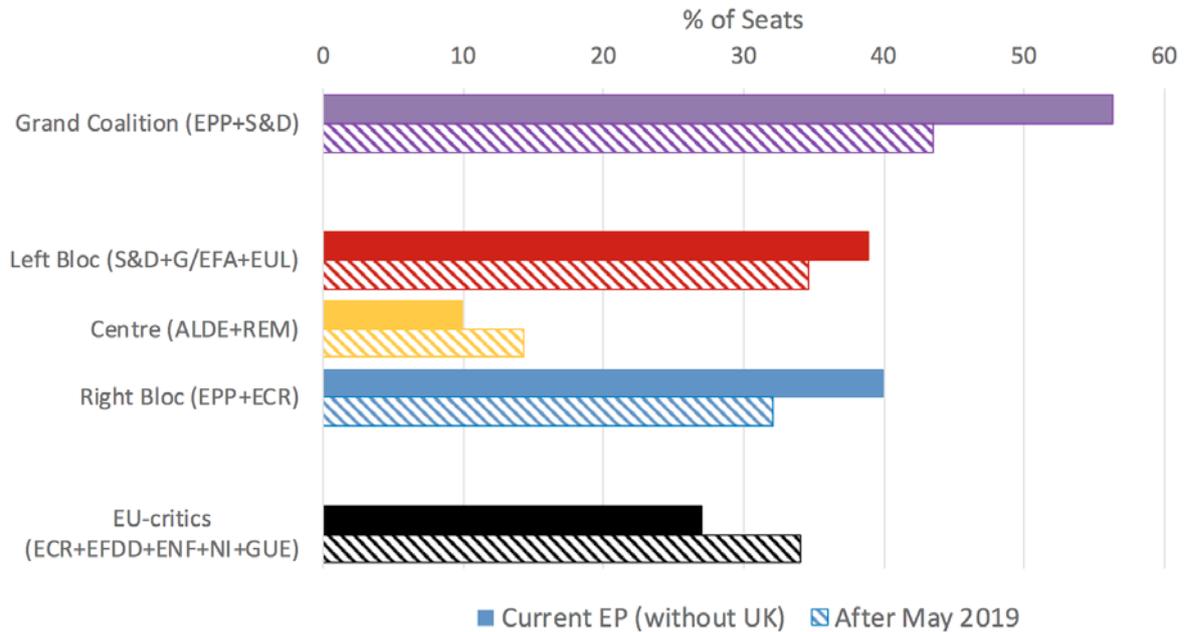
The overall balance of power between the left and right is unlikely to change very much. But the size of the political groups, and the potential coalitions that will form, are likely to change quite dramatically. The centre-left Socialists and Democrats (S&D) group will be considerably smaller, while the centrist Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) is likely to be larger, especially if President Macron's La République en Marche! party joins that alliance.

The centre-right European People's Party (EPP) is also likely to lose seats, although it should remain the largest group in the Parliament. Meanwhile, the populist parties to the right of the EPP are likely to be considerably stronger, particularly the new European Alliance of Peoples and Nations (EAPN) group, recently formed by Matteo Salvini and Marine Le Pen.

The next figure shows the likely changes in the sizes of the key coalitions.

The 'grand coalition', between the EPP and S&D, which has traditionally dominated the Parliament, is likely to fall below a majority of seats for the first time: down to about 44%. A centre-left bloc and a centre-right bloc will also be down considerably. Meanwhile, the 'EU critics', of the groups to the right of the EPP, as well as the radical left European United Left/Nordic Green Left (EUL/NGL), are likely to win just over one-third of the seats.

The European Elections and Brexit



These changes will have immediate effects on the way the EU works. The first action of the newly elected European Parliament will be to 'elect' the next Commission president. Although the EU governments in the European Council formally propose a candidate for Commission president, the convention is that that candidate hails from the largest political group in the newly elected Parliament – as they did with the most recent two presidents (José Manuel Barroso and Jean-Claude Juncker). If the Parliament rejects the nominee of the European Council, leaders must propose a new candidate.

The problem for the governments is that the traditional grand coalition between the EPP and Socialists (S&D) will need to be expanded to include the Liberals (ALDE) as well as the Greens (G/EFA). This will be an unwieldy alliance. And the EPP candidate for Commission president, the German politician Manfred Weber, is unlikely to be supported by the Socialists or the Greens.

Most commentators are now expecting a compromise candidate to be chosen, as part of a wider package deal for all the key new offices in the EU: the presidents of the Commission, Council, European Central Bank and Parliament, and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs. There are enough offices to share between these four political groups. But, expect the newly emboldened populists in the Parliament, led by Salvini and Le Pen's MEPs, to oppose this 'grand stitch up'.

The outcome of the election, with smaller traditional coalitions and a much more fragmented chamber, will also shape the EU legislative agenda in the coming years. This is because EU legislation in almost all policy areas now requires the majority support of MEPs for it to pass. Legislative coalitions in the Parliament have traditionally been formed issue-by-issue, with different coalitions being dominant in different policy areas. In the 2014-19 Parliament, a centre-right coalition – between the EPP, ALDE, and the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) – has tended to win on legislation relating to regulation of the single market (such as financial services regulation), reform of the eurozone and international trade agreements.

Meanwhile, a centre-left coalition – between the Socialists, ALDE, the Greens, and the Left (EUL/NGL) – has tended to win on legislation relating to justice and home affairs (such as the free movement of people, and policies towards refugees), environmental standards and international development issues (such as EU spending on development aid).

With the newly fragmented Parliament, each of these coalitions will be smaller and majorities will be more difficult to form. As a result, populist EU-critical MEPs, particularly on the right, will be able to shape the policy agenda. Populist EU-critical MEPs are also likely to be able to win key policy-making positions in the Parliament, such as committee chairs and legislative report-writing roles (rapporteurships). With this new influence, expect these MEPs to demand more restrictive refugee and asylum policies, more spending on EU external border controls, more powers for national governments to run deficits in the Eurozone, and more protectionist trade policies.

The headlines across Europe following the elections in May are likely to focus on the electoral gains of the populist eurosceptics across Europe, at the expense of the centrist pro-Europeans. And these gains will matter. The new Parliament will be a difficult partner for the governments and the Commission, who will not be able to rely on a stable coalition. The result could be policy gridlock in the EU in the coming years, which could further encourage anti-European sentiments in many countries.

Do the elections matter for Brexit? – Anand Menon and Matthew Bevington

At the risk of being overly parochial about Europe-wide elections that, as the other contributions to this collection show, will have myriad implications for the EU and its member states, it's also worth considering what, if anything, they might mean for Brexit itself. Clearly, the vote will have implications for politics throughout the UK. They could also, however, weigh more directly on the Brexit process itself.

In the first place, of course, the election will shape how MPs feel about Brexit and its relationship to electoral politics. Should the Brexit Party score heavily, more Conservative MPs might join the band of those willing to countenance – or at least give the appearance of countenancing – a no deal outcome. Conversely, should Nigel Farage win significant vote share in Leave-supporting Labour seats, might this prove sufficient to persuade reluctant Labour MPs to back the Withdrawal Agreement? And if parties supporting another referendum score well, might this shift parliamentary opinion in that direction?

But imagine – if you can – that the outcome is that the Withdrawal Agreement miraculously receives majority support in Parliament. At that point, it will also need to be approved by a new set of MEPs. And this is potentially important given that, in the current European Parliament, there is a stable majority – centred around the Brexit Steering Group of five political groupings – that supported the Commission's approach and, ultimately, the Withdrawal Agreement itself. As Simon Hix illustrates, these groupings look likely to keep their stable majority after the elections, but its composition will shift. If nothing else, the European Parliament will become a more unpredictable body, especially in the short term, as parties form groupings and determine their policy positions. What has so far been a relatively comfortable consensus on Brexit could come under pressure from a more sizeable eurosceptic presence on the right, with more MEPs sympathetic to the arguments of British eurosceptic politicians.

And of course the European Parliament will play a role in the selection of a new European Commission. Since the introduction of the Lisbon Treaty in 2007, the European Parliament has to approve the president of the Commission by an absolute majority. Whoever heads the Commission will have a large bearing on UK-EU relations and any talks on both the Withdrawal Agreement and the future relationship. It is, after all, the Commission which will be the UK's main interlocutor in talks on the future relationship, as it has been in the withdrawal negotiations.

That the traditional 'grand coalition' groups look set to lose their overall majority for the first time. This introduces uncertainty, both in terms of who the next Commission president will be but also about the process involved in selecting them. If, as looks likely, the two largest groupings – the S&D and EPP – have to rely on the liberal group (ALDE) to form a stable majority for deciding on major posts, this will have a substantive impact.

To take one hypothetical example. A Commission led by Michel Barnier – a far from implausible outcome should the Spitzenkandidaten process fail to deliver a candidate who can win majority support in the Parliament – could be expected to cleave closely to the approach adopted by the Article 50 Task Force to date. A different Commission president might, by contrast, take issue

with that approach (we have already seen signs of tension between Barnier and Juncker over Brexit).

And, of course, the new Parliament will play a significant role when it comes to agreeing a future relationship between the UK and the EU. Warning signs are there already. The European Parliament, for instance, rejected a motion offering tentative support to limited trade talks with the US. It did so because a coalition of the Socialists, Greens and far-right groupings insisted on conditions for such talks. They demanded that the existing negotiating directives for EU-US (TTIP) trade negotiations be revoked, and inserted several conditions on any further talks with the US: first, that aluminium and steel tariffs be lifted; second, that the agreement be subject to a carbon impact assessment; and, third, that it includes cars but excludes agriculture.

This hints at some of the problems that might confront the UK with a more divided and polarised European Parliament. The EU's talks with the US are now highly politicised following the TTIP saga. The Brexit process to date has raised suspicions concerning the UK's intentions in Brussels. It is easy to imagine a similar shopping list of preconditions – on climate change, minimum regulatory standards, inter alia, to be drawn up by MEPs.

The US example shows that the concerns of EU politicians of both left and right can easily align when it comes to trade matters. If, as looks likely, the combined size of the political extremes increases after these elections, the UK could face both protectionist impulses from the right, coupled with environmental and social demands from the left.

Beyond the direct implications of the elections, there will also be more indirect effects, most notably in terms of the nature of EU legislation. Arguments for a more 'protective' EU are gaining ground not just on the fringes of EU politics but among leading figures such as the centre-right lead candidate for the Commission presidency, [Manfred Weber](#), French president [Emmanuel Macron](#) and even recently by Michel Barnier himself. These impulses will only be bolstered by a more eurosceptic and nationalist body of MEPs. And this of course comes at a time, perhaps not coincidentally, when one of the EU's more liberal member states is leaving the bloc, shifting the balance of power in the EU institutions.

Britain is, of course, still a member of the European Union and hence still subject to its laws. Even after Brexit, however, should this take the form of a managed departure with a Withdrawal Agreement in place, the transition period will see the UK remain a rule taker but without a say. It is then that the implications of parliamentary influence over the legislative process will really be felt.

The European Parliament elections are about far more than Brexit. Even here in the UK, they are, in part, about the rules that might govern us for some years to come. Nonetheless, their outcome will also weigh significantly on the way the UK leaves the EU and on UK-EU relations in the years ahead.

The impact of UK MEPs on the European Parliament – Simon Usherwood

One of the paradoxes of extending the Article 50 deadline has been that more attention has been paid to the consequences of British MEPs being absent from the European Parliament than to their presence. But with the distinct likelihood that they will not only be elected but also will take up their posts from July, what impact might they have?

Since the shift to direct elections in 1979, the European Parliament has become progressively more important in the EU's institutional architecture. That is particularly evident in the period following European elections.

The first step is the formation of the new Parliament itself. By the time of its first sitting on 2 July, the various national party groups of MEPs will have made choices about which political groups in the Parliament they will sit with. These bring together parties with similar ideological backgrounds and, crucially, are central to the operation of the Parliament itself. The size of a group determines not only its weight in plenary votes, but also the number of official posts it can have within the Parliament. These include committee chairs, rapporteurs (who write reports) and members of the bureau, who handle the administration of the institution. Bigger groups also get more speaking time in debates, plus they receive more funding to support their day-to-day work.

In short, being in a group matters and being in a bigger group brings additional benefits. Having British MEPs available thus makes a difference at this early stage.

In the 2014-19 Parliament, British MEPs from UKIP were essential in getting the Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD) group over the line of the minimum numbers of members required (25 MEPs), while Tory MEPs form the largest single party within the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR).

The dilemma for MEPs from other member states will be whether to make use of their British counterparts to get access to those roles and opportunities, when they might find they lose them when the UK leaves, possibly very shortly afterwards.

This matters beyond the Parliament itself because, once formed, it becomes the Parliament's role to select the new European Commission.

In 2014, the groups put forward individuals to be their nominee to become Commission president, the so-called Spitzenkandidaten: they committed that the nominee of whichever group received the most MEPs would be the Parliament's only acceptable person for that post (the Parliament having to sign off the choice of the member states). This led to Jean-Claude Juncker's election that summer.

While there is less certainty that this process will happen again this time around, the possibility remains. So British MEPs could become important once more. Here it will be Labour MEPs who matter most, because they belong to the centre-left Socialists & Democrats (S&D), which might become the largest group if Labour stick with them. Unlike the Parliament's internal allocations,

which can be revised with changes in group sizes, a Commission president, once elected, is there for a whole term, until 2024, so this really matters. This is true particularly because the president then gets to be closely involved in choosing the rest of the commissioners, ahead of parliamentary hearings and approval.

As a result, British MEPs could have an impact on the institutional make-up of both the Parliament and the Commission long past their departure. Even if party groups don't want to have British MEPs in their ranks, their votes will still count and may swing results.

All of this comes well before we even start to consider the more mundane effect of British MEPs on the work of the Parliament, in day-to-day voting.

Whether or not they are part of groups, the votes of the 73 MEPs will matter on issues both big and small. In most cases, that will be shaped by ideological positions, but there may be votes that produce alignment along national lines. Most obviously, there may be legislation that will have a material impact on a post-membership UK: do British MEPs then vote based on what is best for the EU or on how it might affect the future relationship between the EU and the UK? Do they seek to make that relationship more or less problematic?

This will likely be more of a problem than in previous Parliaments because of the changing composition of MEPs, as noted in Simon Hix's contribution to this report. The long-dominant centre-right and centre-left groups will be less able to command the robust majorities of the past, even with more collaboration with the liberal grouping. The composition and the attitude of British members will count for a lot in this calculation.

Behind all of this is a more basic tension for the EU. In demanding British participation in the European elections, they have stressed the importance of fulfilling treaty obligations and the value of participative democracy for all. To deprive British voters of their vote and their representatives cannot be defended in democratic terms. The flip side of this, however, is that those representatives have to be able to exercise their normal powers: to make decisions and represent their voters' opinions and interests. As the EU will see through this year – and beyond – that means having to accept that there will be difficult moments and hard choices.

How will Brexit affect the elections in the EU27? – Sara Hagemann

When voters go to the ballot box in the EU27 countries on 23-26 May, Brexit will not be an issue that directly affects how they choose to cast their votes. The domestic political context and perceptions of the EU's value to their respective countries will determine their political choices on the day. This will particularly be the case for issues such as how the economy is doing, whether immigration is a problem and whether the EU is seen as a solution or part of the problem when it comes to the challenges confronting their country.

But while Brexit is unlikely to be a key determinant of people's vote choice we can still expect it to influence the outcome in two ways. First, the Brexit process has played a part in moderating public debates and led (most) governments and mainstream parties to take an explicitly pro-EU stance. Brexit has made it clear that leaving the Union comes with significant economic and political costs.

As a consequence, at a time where the EU collectively and its member states individually are faced with a whole battery of significant political and economic challenges, Brexit has moderated the position of political representatives in the remaining member states. The case for staying in the Union is compelling in the light of Brexit, particularly when Europeans face a number of pressing challenges, including looming global trade wars, climate change, security threats, illiberal politics, energy policy disputes, Eurozone woes and migration pressures.

We should bear in mind, however, that Brexit hasn't actually happened yet, and the final outcome is far from clear even now. This may cause difficulties for mainstream parties, and representatives from governing parties in particular: eurosceptic candidates and parties across Europe are still keeping a close eye on the Brexit process to see if there are any benefits from the negotiations which they may wish to follow. In particular, what will be the UK's policy on migration from within and outside the EU, and which kind of arrangement – if any – will the UK have with the EU's single market in the end? As the answers to these questions are not yet clear, eurosceptic parties may have some traction with arguments that alternatives to EU membership are still possible, and unlikely to result in the immediate doomsday scenarios predicted by pro-EU representatives. Governments will worry about how these debates might influence domestic political opinion, particularly in countries where local elections are held at the same time (Ireland, Spain and Greece) or where regional or general elections are within sight (Poland, Finland, Portugal, Belgium, Denmark, Bulgaria, Latvia and Greece all have elections in 2019).

The second way that Brexit will affect the elections in EU27 is the way in which it will impact the European Parliament as a political and legislative institution going forward. The newly elected UK MEPs may only be taking up office temporarily, which means that coalition building between the party groups could end up taking place in the shadow of Brexit. This matters to the EU27 for the obvious reason that the European Parliament is an important body in the European political landscape: it is on equal footing with the EU governments in deciding most EU policies, and has a say on the EU budget and in the appointment of the EU Commission. But it will also matter as the overall power balance in the EU is changing: there have been important changes in government in a number of key member states in the last two years (including recently in Spain), and France

and Germany sought to revive their leadership in Europe through announcements of common plans and visions for the EU (but questions remain for the policies to go with them).

The European Parliament has played an important role in policy making during this time and will continue to do so, but often finds itself marginalised when it comes to big political topics and crisis situations. In the EU27 there will be a worry that a more fragmented European Parliament, including a number of (temporary) British MEPs elected on pro- and anti-Brexit platforms, will find it more difficult to act as a co-legislator to the governments and enact its parliamentary role in the EU system.

The EU27 have a lot at stake in the European elections and will be concerned about the results and their impact on their own domestic politics and the overall power balance in the EU. It is in this context that Brexit plays a part in considerations of what comes next, and in particular what is ahead for the European Parliament during its next five-year term. But it is also clear to governments, parliaments and voters in the EU27 that Brexit is only one part of a changing European political landscape.

How will the EU change over the next five years? – Christopher Bickerton

Amidst the morass of commentary by ‘Brexperts’, we can find at least two very different views about the future of the EU. One – popular in the immediate aftermath of the UK’s vote to leave the EU in June 2016 but less popular now – is that Brexit is the beginning of an unravelling of the European project as a whole.

For a time, there was frenzied discussion about the next member state to march out of the EU door. Marine Le Pen – in an ill-fated move during the 2017 French Presidential election – flirted with the notion of ‘Frexit’, only to lose to a staunchly pro-European Emmanuel Macron. At the time of the Italian elections of 2018, there was some talk of Italy’s exit, at least from the Eurozone, talk which has since faded. This vision of Brexit as part of a great undoing of the EU project coincided with two great crises for the EU: the eurozone crisis and near-exit of Greece from the single currency, and the migration and asylum crisis of 2015 and 2016. The effect was to fuel public commentary on the end of the EU – from Ivan Krastev’s *After Europe* to John Gillingham’s *The EU: An Obituary*.

The opposite view is what we might call the Jean Quatremer view of the future of the EU. Writing a day after the UK referendum result, the French journalist penned a column for the newspaper *Libération*, entitled ‘My English friends, thank you for your sacrifice’. His argument, Gaullist to the core, was that ever since it joined in 1973 the UK had held the EU back. With the UK out, the EU would finally be able to embrace its federalist destiny and make great strides towards ‘ever closer union’. This view has survived better than its opposite, not least because the EU27 have managed up until now to remain united in the course of the negotiations on the UK’s exit from the EU.

The next five years are likely to tell us that both the doomsayers and the optimists were wrong. What will prevail is something much more complex – an internal transformation of the EU, driven by changes in the relations between voters and politicians at the national level. In the language of Albert O. Hirschman, the EU will be shaped mainly by the shifting balance between voice and loyalty and not so much by the power of exit. Most important will be voice.

Simon Kuper, writing in the *Financial Times*, rightly remarked that the challenge for the EU in the next few years will not come from Brexiteers. It will come from “Eurosceptic Remainers” – those powerful eurosceptic voices that seek to change the EU from within and have no serious wish to leave the Union. Leading the charge are the likes of Matteo Salvini, the leader of the Lega Nord party in Italy, and Jean-Luc Mélenchon in France. Salvini’s aim is to build a pan-European political grouping of right-wing parties and movements, stretching from the True Finns in Finland to the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in Germany, and the Danish People’s Party. For his part, Mélenchon has coined the term ‘*fédération populaire*’ to mobilize the European left around its own vision of European supranationalism. Far from promulgating an exit from the EU, these figures are articulating their own distinctive accounts of how European politics and governance should work.

We are not witnessing a populist insurrection against the rules of Brussels-based experts – it is far more complicated than that. The EU’s own institutions, independent and non-majoritarian, are breathing in some of the populist air. In a speech in March 2019, Ignazio Angeloni, a member of the Supervisory Board of the European Central Bank, argued that populists were wrong to imagine there was any conflict between national sovereignty and a supranational banking supervisory body. In fact, he argued, the ECB’s supervisory structure is an expression of the will of the people, if ‘the people’ are to be defined as “the combined populations of bank depositors and tax-payers”. Whilst populist forces promise a fundamental redefinition of supranational EU institutions, so do technocrats offer a redefinition of what populists hold most dear, namely ‘the will of the people’.

In the years to come, this complex articulation of populist and technocratic claims to public support and legitimacy – appeals to the authority of the people and the authority of expertise – will be the political space within which EU integration will develop. We should not presume that populists will seek to weaken the EU whilst technocrats seek the opposite. Transnational mobilisation of populist parties and movements will generate new patterns of cooperation within the EU and possibly new institutions. The authority of rules, experts and knowledge will be deployed in new ways, in the manner of Salvini’s “Europe of common sense”.

What we can say with most certainty is that in five years’ time the EU will still be around, no mean feat given the doubts swirling around in recent years. But what purpose the Union will serve and what will be the animating forces of pan-European cooperation? The answer to these questions is much less clear.



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