

How the departure of British MEPs has changed the European Parliament

British MEPs have left the European Parliament. Doru Frantescu and Davide Ferrari (VoteWatch EU) look at how their departure will affect the balance of power there.

The departure of British MEPs brings further changes to the balance of power in the European Parliament, only a few months after the EP landscape was redrawn by the elections held in May 2019. This generates further confusion at a time when stakeholders are already struggling to engage with an apparently more unpredictable cohort of policymakers.



MEPs vote on the EU-Uk Withdrawal Agreement, 29 January 2020. Photo: [European Parliament](#). CC-BY-4.0: © European Union 2020 – Source: EP.

The difficult election process of the new Commission featured a tit-for-tat combat between the main political groups (EPP, S&D and Renew Europe), which led to the rejection of three Commissioners, as well as the narrow approval of President von der Leyen in the first place. Our measurements indicate that cooperation between the three main political groups is holding up, as efforts are clearly being made to find compromises between their different positions. However, this is not always the case, in particular as the pressure from the fringes is on the rise, making any sort of compromise more politically costly for the parts involved.

Preliminary trends also indicate that the Greens/EFA group is increasingly part of majority-building in the Parliament, showing that the overall balance of power in the European Parliament is shifting towards the left as the right-wing fringes become more isolated. This points towards stronger support among MEPs for a progressive agenda which involves further regulation of the economy compared to the past, when there was a stronger focus on de-regulation as a way to achieve economic growth.

The rising influence of the Greens and far left is not only visible in environmental issues, but also in other policy areas, such as civil liberties and home affairs and even economic affairs. In particular, initial trends show that the current balance of power in the EP is favourable towards the European Commission's push to increase the EU role on taxation policy, as it can count on the support of a broad centre-left coalition of MEPs (which also includes most of the EPP). These political forces are expected to increase the pressure on the most reticent national governments to lift their reservations on EU tax harmonisation proposals.

However, on other policy areas, centre-right coalitions arrangements tend to be more common. Importantly, initial trends show that centre-right wing forces are often on the winning side when voting on budgetary issues, with ECR playing a more central role in supporting the reshaping of EU financial capacity than in the past. This was made possible by the gradual transformation of the ECR group from a British-dominated 'small-government' eurocritical force to a Polish-dominated social-conservative bastion.

Brexit is set to affect the balance of power between the political groups, throwing a lifeline to the ailing EPP, whose lead in S&D is set to increase substantially following the departure of the British. Gains are also expected for right-wing ID group, which will overtake the Greens/EFA as the fourth largest group in the EP. However, the departure of the big Brexit Party delegation will clearly weaken the nationalist opposition to the Commission headed by von der Leyen, shifting the balance of power in favour of the more moderate forces. The current Commission was supported by only 52% of British MEPs (while the level of support in the plenary as a whole was 65%).

Although the Brexit Party's ID group is set to overtake the Greens/EFA as the fourth largest group in the European Parliament after British MEPs depart, our measurements show that its bigger numbers are not translating into stronger influence in the EP. This group is most often on the minority side, as the centrist forces refuse to cooperate with it and formed a *cordon sanitaire* to prevent it from getting any leadership positions in the Parliament. Additionally, its lack of cohesion still makes it difficult for the group to speak as one on many issues, including the economy and environment.

The groups on the centre-left of the political spectrum will miss the British the most, as their size will shrink significantly after Brexit. The Greens/EFA and Renew Europe groups will lose about 10% of their current seats, while S&D losses will be proportionally more limited, albeit still significant. From a policymaking perspective, the main impact of Brexit will be to strengthen the hand of the EPP in the negotiations with its main coalition partners, possibly compensating the current left-ward shift in the balance of power in the EP. However, Brexit will affect the geographical balance in the EP, as nearly half of the new seats will go to French, Italian and Spanish policymakers – therefore boosting the presence of the 'South' in Brussels. This also has legislative implications, as these three national groups tend to share similar policy preferences (such as an overall protectionist and interventionist economic orientation).

The internal balance of powers within the political groups will change as well – in particular in those groups where the British delegation is quite large, as in the case of Renew Europe.

The EPP is set to be the main beneficiary from the changes following the departure of British MEPs, as the group will not lose any MEPs and will gain five additional seats. Once a mighty force, the weight of the Social Democratic family has been steadily decreasing over time. However, the initial trends from the new parliamentary term indicate that the influence of the Social Democrats is holding up, due to their relatively high cohesion and the strengthening of S&D's relations with their most immediate partners, namely the Greens and the Renew Europe group.

These parties are expected to benefit the most from the upcoming changes in the composition of the EP, as the departure of British Labour MEPs will deprive the more dissident members (in particular, those from Central and Eastern Europe) of a key counterweight to the increasing power of the Southern delegations.

On the one hand, the 2019 elections boosted the size of the centrist political family, further consolidating its role as the main kingmaker in the European Parliament. On the other, there are concerns about the increasing heterogeneity of the group – in particular the disagreements between the traditional Northern (Hanseatic) members and the French newcomers over the political direction of a group that already suffered from lower cohesion.

So far, the smaller parties from Northern Europe have managed to contain the rising French influence (also thanks to the positive electoral performance of the British Liberal Democrats). Since the French have been the farthest away from the Liberal Democrats in terms of voting behaviour within Renew Europe, they will be the main beneficiaries of the upcoming changes to the internal balance of power. Conversely, the parties that tend to agree with the British the most, such as the two Swedish parties, followed by other Nordic and Baltic parties, are set to lose the most from the British departure. The departure of the British will further cement the French grip on the centrist group: Emmanuel Macron's delegation will gain 2 additional MEPs from the redistribution of seats after Brexit.

While the size of the Greens/EFA group increased substantially after the past elections, the group managed to remain the most cohesive in the European Parliament. The Greens/EFA are on the winning side of votes substantially more often than during the previous term. Despite this, the group is set to be among the main losers due the departure of British MEPs. Greens/EFA are expected to lose 7 seats (almost 10% of its current size). This is likely to weaken their negotiating position.

Meanwhile, the case of ECR clearly shows how the departure of the British substantially impacts EP politics. Although the European Conservatives and Reformists group was founded by the British Conservative Party, British MEPs' influence is now all but absent from the parliamentary group (the British agreed with their group only 59.60% during the current legislative term). This began with the 2016 Brexit vote and culminated with their disastrous 2019 EP election results, which won the party only four seats. This development was hugely beneficial to the Polish Law and Justice party. ECR is becoming more conservative on climate, migration and gender, but more supportive of the Western Balkan enlargement and of a bigger EU budget, as it mirrors CEE preferences. The growing Southern branch of the group (Vox and Brothers of Italy) are also set to benefit.

This post represents the views of the authors and not those of the Brexit blog, nor LSE. It is an edited version of a longer post that appeared at [VoteWatch Europe](#).