

How voters' preferences and policy priorities have shifted ahead of the European elections

The five years since the last European Parliament elections have seen multiple crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine and the related energy crisis.

Lorenzo Codogno and Mara Monti write these shocks have prompted changes in the policy priorities of both the EU's institutions and its citizens. However, while a shift to the right in the European Parliament may not threaten the integration process as in the past, it could still undermine the balance needed to face future challenges.



This article is [part of a series](#) on the 2024 European Parliament elections. The EUROPP blog will also be co-hosting a panel discussion on the elections at [LSE on 6 June](#).

The eminent economist John Maynard Keynes is [sometimes credited with saying](#), “When the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do?” Reality is notoriously stubborn, and so, as Keynes noted, it might be better to change our minds if the situation changes. This is very much what has happened to European institutions and voters over the past five years.

Political priorities have changed since the 2019 European election because of events and how European policymakers responded to them, from the pandemic to the invasion

of Ukraine and the related energy crisis. The increase in energy prices impacted the cost of living, squeezing household purchasing power. It pushed inflation beyond the European Central Bank (ECB) target, forcing the bank to change monetary policy and increase the cost of borrowing.

The U-turn in monetary policy was unexpected. In 2019, inflation was below the ECB target of 2%, and real interest rates were in negative territory, which made for a completely different economic environment. At that time, the Eurosceptic parties played an essential role in criticising European institutions, from Parliament to the central bank. After the vital role played by European institutions in combatting the various crises over the past five years, they have become somewhat less populist and less Eurosceptic. The aim is no longer to exit the EU but rather to change it, following the UK's eye-opening experience.

However, they are embracing more extreme far-right ideas. Recently, the European candidate for the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), Maximilian Krah, [said in an interview](#), "I will never say that anyone who had an SS uniform was automatically a criminal". Eventually, he was excluded by his party from the electoral campaign.

His AfD running mates in the same European political grouping, Identity and Democracy (ID) – the one to which Italy's League and France's Rassemblement National belong – issued a note to announce that they decided "to exclude with immediate effect the German AfD delegation". This was nothing short of a political earthquake amid the ongoing re-alignment of policy priorities at the right end of the political spectrum.

Changing priorities

In 2019, the trademark of Ursula von der Leyen's Commission was climate transition. The pandemic delayed this priority and then the Russian invasion, and now it looks like it has been significantly downplayed. Yet, Brussels' view is that backtracking would be a mistake and a disaster. The problems related to the social and political dimensions of the green transition would have to be flexibly managed in the future to allow delivery, as it has become not only an imperative to save the planet but also a competitiveness issue.

Leaving aside that, the EU focus is gradually shifting towards (1) security/defence and

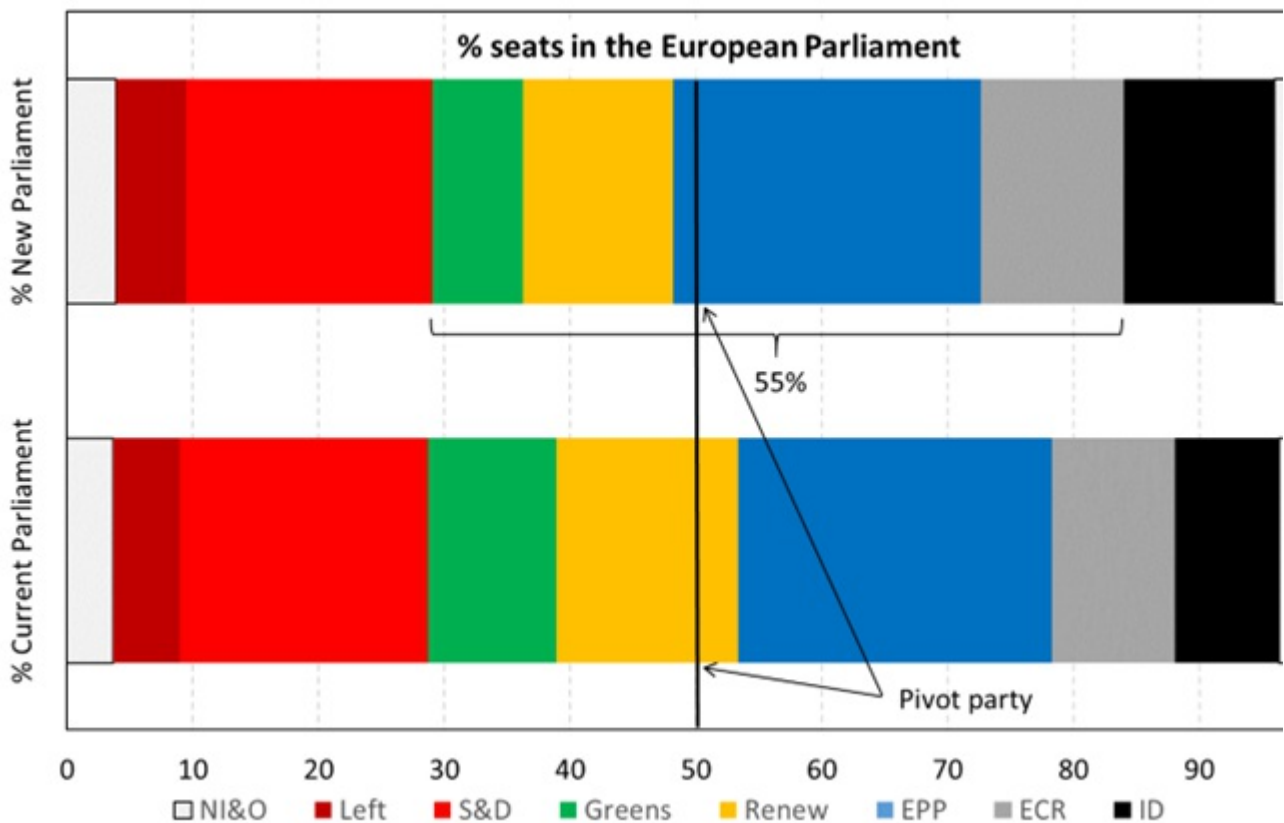
economic security (which also includes industrial policy) and (2) competitiveness (how to address the long-term challenges for the EU economy). Common EU funding is also very much on the potential future agenda if politically supported by the next Commission/European Parliament.

Repeating the [NextGenerationEU](#) plan would be almost impossible legally. Still, there may be common funding for the low-hanging fruit of defence spending, which has become a topical issue in Brussels. It will be at the attention of the new College of Commissioners soon, as the new Commission will have to prepare the debate for the new Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) in mid-2025.

The dramatic change in priorities and attitudes is mainly related to the geopolitical situation, especially in areas where EU scale is an added value and defence/security comes at the top. This could only be amplified by the forthcoming US presidential elections. Finally, geopolitical events have moved enlargement back to the forefront of the EU agenda, including the accession process for Ukraine and Moldova. No accession is expected by 2029, but the process needs to start immediately if the EU wants to bring it forward.

It is hard to believe that the projected shift to the right in the European Parliament (Figure 1) would significantly change the constructive attitude towards European integration and a sort of “closing of ranks” to face global challenges. The traditional Euroscepticism of right-leaning parties has shifted as the geopolitical environment has changed. Yet, there may be some problems.

Figure 1: Current and projected composition of the European Parliament



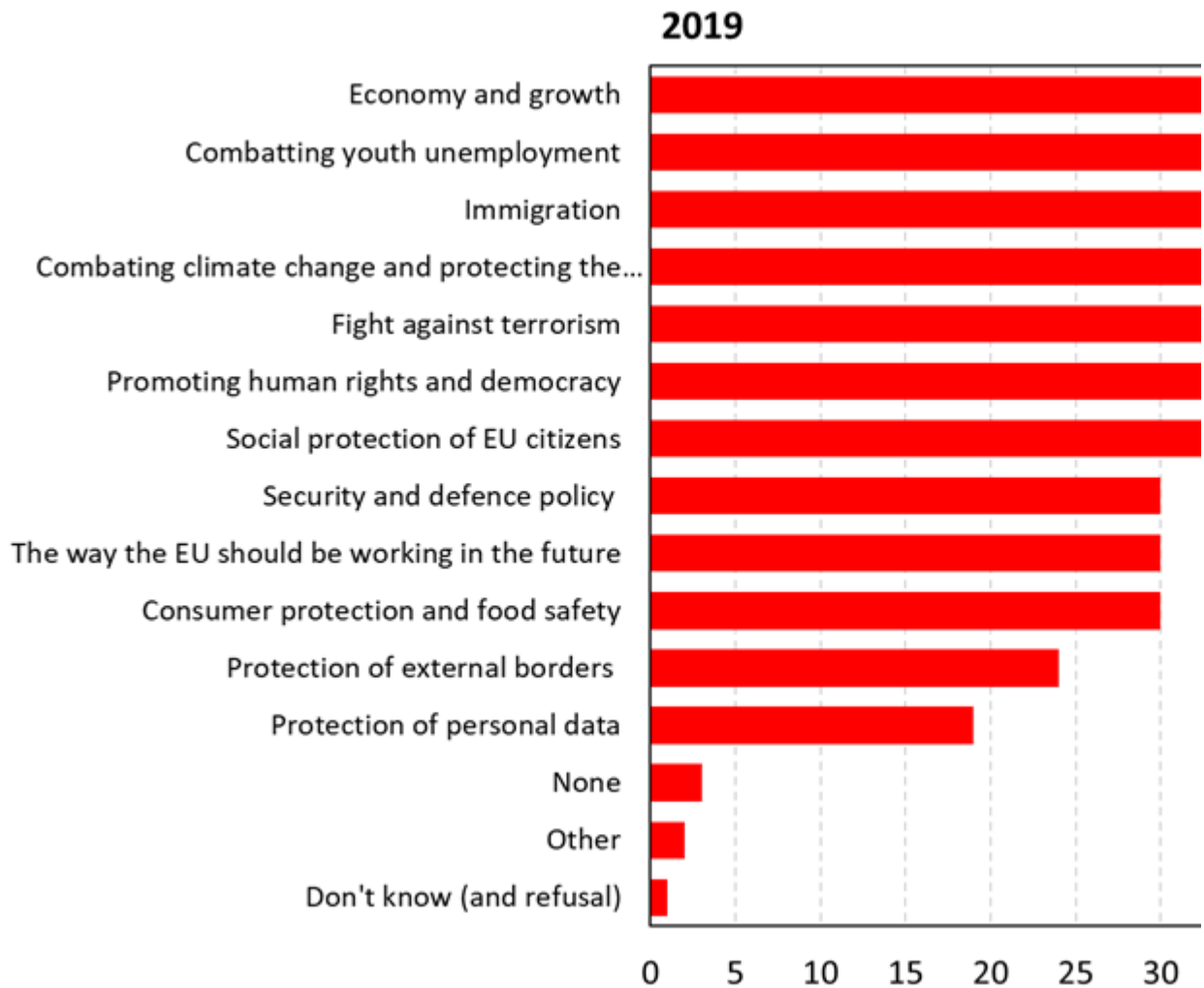
Source: European Parliament, Wiki, authors' calculations. Average of the latest six opinion polls.

Given that coalitions are variable geometries in the European Parliament depending on the issue, a shift of the pivotal party from Renew Europe to the European People's Party (Figure 1) and a more critical role played by the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) may well have consequences for the policies traditionally supported by the Social Democrats, the Greens, and Renew Europe, such as climate transition, migration policies and the single market, which are crucial for economic integration.

Voters are also calling for a shift in focus

Policies are not the only thing that has changed: voters' priorities have also shifted and probably for the same reasons. After the pandemic, public health became one of the main issues for Europeans, as well as support for the economy and job creation. The fight against poverty and exclusion has also gained importance over the past five years (Figures 2 and 3).

Figure 2: Policy priorities ahead of the 2019 elections



Source: Eurobarometer, authors' calculations.

Figure 3: Policy priorities ahead of the 2024 elections



Source: Eurobarometer, authors' calculations.

Support for the economy

The Eurobarometer [Countdown to the European Elections](#) (Spring 2024) showed that the most significant concern for European citizens was the “fight against poverty and social exclusion”, followed by “public health” and “the EU’s defence and security”.

Concerns about poverty and social exclusion are closely linked to the cost of living crisis experienced in the recent past, as a [previous Eurobarometer survey in the EU regions](#) indicated. In fact, the energy crisis and the related ECB rate rises, which affected mortgages and bank loans, substantially impacted voters’ priorities.

It has driven renewed demands by many Europeans for more autonomy for the EU in the fields of industry and energy. Europe created the [REPowerEU initiative](#) to accelerate the transition to sustainable and cheaper energy and reduce dependency on Russia. According to the same report, 35% said the plan was “fairly effective”, while 13% said it was “very effective”. However, about as many respondents were unimpressed with REPowerEU, with 30% saying it was “not very effective” and 15% saying it was “not at all effective”.

Security and defence

Significant variations occurred across the EU regions in security and defence. In the south of Europe, countries like Italy, Spain, Portugal and Greece chose the economic situation and unemployment as the most important topics. In the regions closer to the EU’s more sensitive external borders – countries like Denmark, the Czech Republic, Germany, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands, Finland and Sweden – the top priority was given to the EU’s security and defence policy.

Public health and the COVID-19 crisis

The issue of “public health”, a priority for many citizens after the COVID-19 crisis, was selected by the largest share of respondents, and it is the top-ranking issue in Ireland, Greece, Spain, Portugal, France, Italy, Hungary, Slovakia and Slovenia.

The EU set up [a recovery plan](#) (NextGenerationEU) to respond to the economic effects of the pandemic and modernise the EU’s economy by investing over €800 billion (of which about €450 billion will likely be used). Almost half of those responding said the plan was effective in helping to tackle the challenges, with 10% seeing it as “very effective” and 39% “fairly effective”. The proportion doubting its effectiveness was somewhat lower in comparison, with 28% saying the plan was “not very effective” and 13% that it is “not at all effective”.

Climate change

The fight against poverty and social exclusion came top in France, Croatia, Bulgaria, Greece, Spain, Portugal, Latvia and Lithuania, with other important issues such as

“climate change” scoring (27%), “migration” (24%), “democracy and the rule of law” (23%). Climate change issues were at the top of the ranking in Denmark, France, the Netherlands, Austria, Finland and Sweden. Still, compared to the previous election, it has slipped from 43% last time to 27% as a priority for European citizens.

Europe’s answer to the climate crisis was [the European Green Deal](#), which aimed to tackle climate change and transform the EU into a competitive, clean and climate-neutral economy by 2050. However, according to the Eurobarometer, only one in ten respondents across the EU said that the European Green Deal was “very effective” in helping to tackle the challenges faced by the EU, though 34% described the plan as “fairly effective”. However, a greater number were dissatisfied with its impact: 17% judged it “not at all effective”, and 33% said it was “not very effective” in their responses.

Migration

The next issues are “democracy and rule of law” (23%) and “migration” (24%): the latter, in particular, has moved down the ranking, implying many Europeans are a little more relaxed about the subject or that other issues have become more critical. In comparison, 44% placed the issue at the top in 2019.

However, the number of countries that rank it at the top remains large: Germany, Belgium, Denmark, the Czech Republic, Ireland, Cyprus, Malta, Netherlands, Austria and Finland. The countries where it has dropped down the agenda as a concern are Italy, Hungary, Greece and Spain.

Better safe than sorry?

In this year’s European Parliament elections, citizens from 27 EU countries will vote to shape the bloc’s policies on climate and energy, defence and security, migration and many other areas. The composition of the European Parliament will shape institutions and determine programmes and policies.

The EU has made substantial steps in integration during the current parliament (NextGenerationEU, but also the joint purchase of vaccines, a platform for joint purchase of gas and other actions). Other areas where the EU needs scale could be the next frontier for integration. Priority goes to security and defence in parallel with economics,

but it is unclear whether concrete new initiatives will develop soon.

A coherent policy mix to address all the issues simultaneously and have everything moving in the same direction at a certain speed remains the target. Ideally, the new focus on defence and security should come along with the domain of economic integration and social cohesion, and a high-level compromise should address the current political divisions.

But there are many stumbling blocks along the road. A more fragmented European Parliament and a shift of its pivotal point towards the right may not threaten the integration process, as used to happen in the past. Still, it may undermine the blend between defence/security priorities and economic/social cohesion necessary to face future challenges.

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [Alexandros Michailidis / Shutterstock.com](#)
