

INTRODUCTION TO SPECIAL ISSUE

**European Democracy in Action?
The 2024 European Parliament Elections**

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ABSTRACT

The 2024 European Parliament elections occurred in the context of mounting internal and external pressures on the European Union, including democratic backsliding, rising radical right influence and contentious debates over immigration and climate policy. This introductory article sets the stage for the Special Issue on the 2024 European Parliament elections by outlining the background of the vote, analysing the results and summarising key findings from the contributing studies. Drawing on original data from the European Election Study (EES) 2024, this Special Issue explores how growing support for populist radical right parties has reshaped the European political landscape. The articles investigate evolving conflict lines in European electoral politics, from attitudes toward liberal democracy and European integration to climate action and immigration. Together, these studies provide critical insights into the changing dynamics of voter behaviour, party competition and democratic governance in the EU, raising important questions about the Union's capacity to navigate future challenges and sustain deeper integration.

Key words: European Parliament elections; European Election Study; Euroscepticism; Radical right; voting behaviour

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

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In June 2024, European voters participated in one of the world's largest democratic exercises: the tenth elections to the European Parliament (EP). These elections came after a decade in which the European Union (EU) faced multiple crises that deepened divisions both within and between member states, including the refugee crisis, Brexit, the Covid-19 pandemic, the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the ongoing climate emergency. On the one hand, these cross-national challenges have spurred calls for closer European integration. On the other hand, Europe has also witnessed a rise in populist radical right-wing parties that advocate nationalist agendas and oppose deeper European collaboration (e.g. Rooduijn et al. 2023; Van der Brug et al. 2022; Zeitlin et al. 2019).

Against this backdrop, the results of the 2024 EP elections are important for the EU's future. These legislative elections determined the composition of the European Parliament and provided the incumbent centre-right European Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, with a renewed electoral mandate, supported by centrist, pro-European political groups in the EP. However, while the centre continues to have a majority in the European Parliament, the electoral gains of populist and Eurosceptic parties also signify a growing fragmentation and polarization of European politics, also evident in member states (De Vries and Hobolt, 2020). This has potential consequences for the policy agenda of the EU, as it may constrain legislators, especially in areas such as immigration, climate change and action on Russia, where the radical right adopts positions that differ from the mainstream consensus (Hix et al. 2024). While EP elections continue to be regarded by many as 'second-order national elections' (e.g., Reif and Schmitt 1980; Schmitt and Teperoglou 2018), the European Parliament and its elections remain central to the EU's legislative process (Rittberger 2005). Not only do these elections matter to EU policy-making, they also act as an important barometer for the public mood in Europe. Hence, understanding patterns of voting behaviour in the European Parliament elections provides important insights into public opinion and party competition in Europe. It helps us address questions such as: Is there a realignment of electoral politics occurring in Europe? What explains the appeal of the radical right, especially among younger voters and men? Is the rise of the radical right associated with lack of support for liberal democracy? How are attitudes towards climate change action developing? What are the challenges to European integration?

In this Special Issue on the 2024 European Parliament elections, we bring together leading scholars of electoral politics, party competition, political communication and public opinion to address these questions and more in the context of the 2024 elections to the European Parliament. Most studies draw on an original data collection effort—the European Elections Study (EES) 2024—a voter study conducted in all 27 member states immediately after the EP elections (Popa et al. 2024). Some of the articles also incorporate earlier versions of this data collection initiative, which dates back to the first EP elections in 1979. Using original survey data and experimental methods, these studies investigate the drivers of European citizens' political attitudes and behaviours today.

In this introductory article, we set the context for these studies and consider their key insights. First, we reflect on the broader context in which the 2024 European elections took place, with particular attention to the challenges facing the EU. Second, we analyse the election results and the main shifts in the balance of power within the EU. Finally, we discuss key findings from this special issue, the lessons learned, and the implications for the EU's future and outline potential avenues for further research.

The 2024 European Parliament elections in context

The European Union faces numerous internal and external challenges. Given the size of its economy, it has the potential to be a strong player in international politics. However, as demonstrated by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the EU is still a relative weak actor when it comes to taking a leading role in major global conflicts. The EU's limited 'hard power' capabilities, including unified military power, has made it more difficult for the Union to assert itself in internationally conflicts (Raik et al. 2024). A further challenge comes from within, namely the rise of nationalist, populist and Eurosceptic forces in European politics that make it more difficult for the EU to agree on common positions on core issues such as immigration, climate change and responses to Russia. In this article, we focus on four of such challenges that came to the fore in the 2024 European Parliament elections, and which are

addressed by the contributions to this special issue: (1) democratic backsliding in EU member states; (2) the rise of the radical right, (3) the accompanying surge in nationalist and Eurosceptic sentiment, (4) opposition to EU policies aimed at combating climate change.

Across Europe, radical right parties have steadily gained support over the past three decades (e.g., Rooduijn et al. 2023, 2024). As in previous EP elections, the radical right made further gains in 2024, presenting a major challenge to the European project, as most radical right parties are sceptical of further integration and envision a fundamentally different EU than mainstream centre-right and centre-left political groups. Some radical right parties even challenge the EU's core values of liberal democracy.¹ Specifically, in countries where radical right parties have gained control of government, their actions have occasionally conflicted with these foundational EU principles, which has been a source of fundamental conflict between national political leaders and EU institutions (e.g., Blauburger et al. 2025; , Kelemen 2025; Van der Brug et al. 2021a; Wunsch and Chiru 2025). Policies that clash with the fundamental principles of liberal democracy are part of a worrying trend of democratic backsliding (e.g., Bermeo 2016; Van der Brug et al. 2021b; Kelemen 2023), defined as "the state-led debilitation or elimination of any of the political institutions that sustain an existing democracy" (Bermeo 2016, p.5). Unlike coups, democratic backsliding occurs gradually, through the erosion of democratic norms. This phenomenon has occurred in Poland and Hungary, where radical right parties such as PiS (Poland) and Fidesz (Hungary) have controlled government. While these governments have not abolished elections, they have made them less competitive by restricting opposition campaign activities and limiting access to media (Galston 2018; Krekó and Enyedi 2018). Additionally, they have sought to exert greater influence over judicial appointments, undermining judicial independence. This represents a major departure from the principles of liberal democracy, which relies on the separation of powers to constrain executive authority. These autocratic tendencies have created significant conflicts between the European Commission and European Parliament on one side and the governments of Poland and Hungary on the other. The Polish national

¹ Article 2 of the Treaty on the European Union states: "The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities."

elections of 2023 resulted in a victory for the opposition, which, under the leadership of the former President of the European Council Donald Tusk, has sought to restore liberal democracy. However, reversing the effects of eight years of far-right governance has proven to be a difficult task.

In addition to challenging liberal democratic norms, radical right parties have also fuelled conflict over immigration. A core tenet of their political platform is ethnic nationalism (e.g., Mudde 2010). In Western Europe, this has primarily manifested in demands for stricter immigration policies and increased pressure on immigrants to assimilate into the dominant national cultures (e.g. Clark and Rohrschneider 2021). Immigration became particularly politicized in 2015, when approximately 1.3 million refugees - mainly from Syria and Afghanistan - sought asylum in the EU (Gessler and Hunger 2022). This crisis created tensions not only within member states but also between them. Countries at the EU's external borders, particularly Greece and Italy, called for solidarity from other member states. However, Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries largely refused to accept refugees, and several North-Western European nations were also reluctant to take in large numbers (e.g. Bauböck 2018). Some member states, particularly Sweden and Germany, demonstrated greater solidarity, but the situation strained the Schengen Agreement. Border controls were later reintroduced during the Covid-19 pandemic.

In many EU member states, there is pervasive concern that further European integration threatens national sovereignty (e.g., Hlatky 2023). This sentiment was central to the Brexit campaign, encapsulated in the slogan "Take Back Control," which resonated not only with populist opposition to "Brussels bureaucrats", but also with anti-immigration attitudes (e.g., Hobolt 2016). Due to the EU's freedom of movement of people, many citizens blame the Union for mass immigration. The Mediterranean refugee crisis further fuelled nationalist sentiment among right-wing voters, particularly in countries that received high numbers of asylum seekers (Harteveld et al. 2018; Van der Brug and Harteveld 2021). As a result, in Western Europe, anti-immigration attitudes and nationalist opposition to the EU are closely intertwined. In CEE, the situation differs but follows a similar pattern. Many CEE citizens benefit from the EU's open border policy, allowing them to migrate—temporarily or

permanently—to higher-wage Western European countries. Consequently, there is little opposition to emigration within CEE countries. However, when the European Commission proposed a solidarity mechanism to distribute refugees more evenly among member states, CEE governments strongly opposed the plan (Bauböck 2018). This opposition, coupled with the fact that CEE countries are net recipients of EU subsidies, created significant tensions between them and other member states. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán escalated these tensions into outright hostility, repeatedly likening the EU to Soviet-era occupation (e.g. Innes, 2012). Yet, Hungary has never signalled an intention to leave the EU. In fact, a large majority of Hungarian citizens support EU membership, and the country's reliance on EU subsidies makes leaving economically unfeasible. Immigration remains a highly contentious issue within the EU. In response to rising migration, border controls have been reintroduced in parts of the Schengen Area.

While opposition to immigration is not new, environmental protection has recently become a major political flashpoint within the EU. Under the previous European Commission, the EU sought to play a leadership role in global efforts to combat climate change. Commissioner Frans Timmermans introduced the ambitious European Green Deal, which aimed to reduce nitrogen and carbon emissions and redirect agricultural subsidies toward more sustainable farming practices. However, these policies faced significant resistance. Opposition to climate change action has recently been mobilized as a new wedge issue by parties on the radical right (Dickson and Hobolt 2024). Moreover, opposition to far-reaching climate action is also growing amongst the mainstream right. Thus, the political context of the 2024 EP elections was unfavourable both for those advocating deeper European integration and for those pushing for stronger EU climate policies. In the next section, we discuss how the outcome of the 2024 European Parliament elections compares to previous elections.

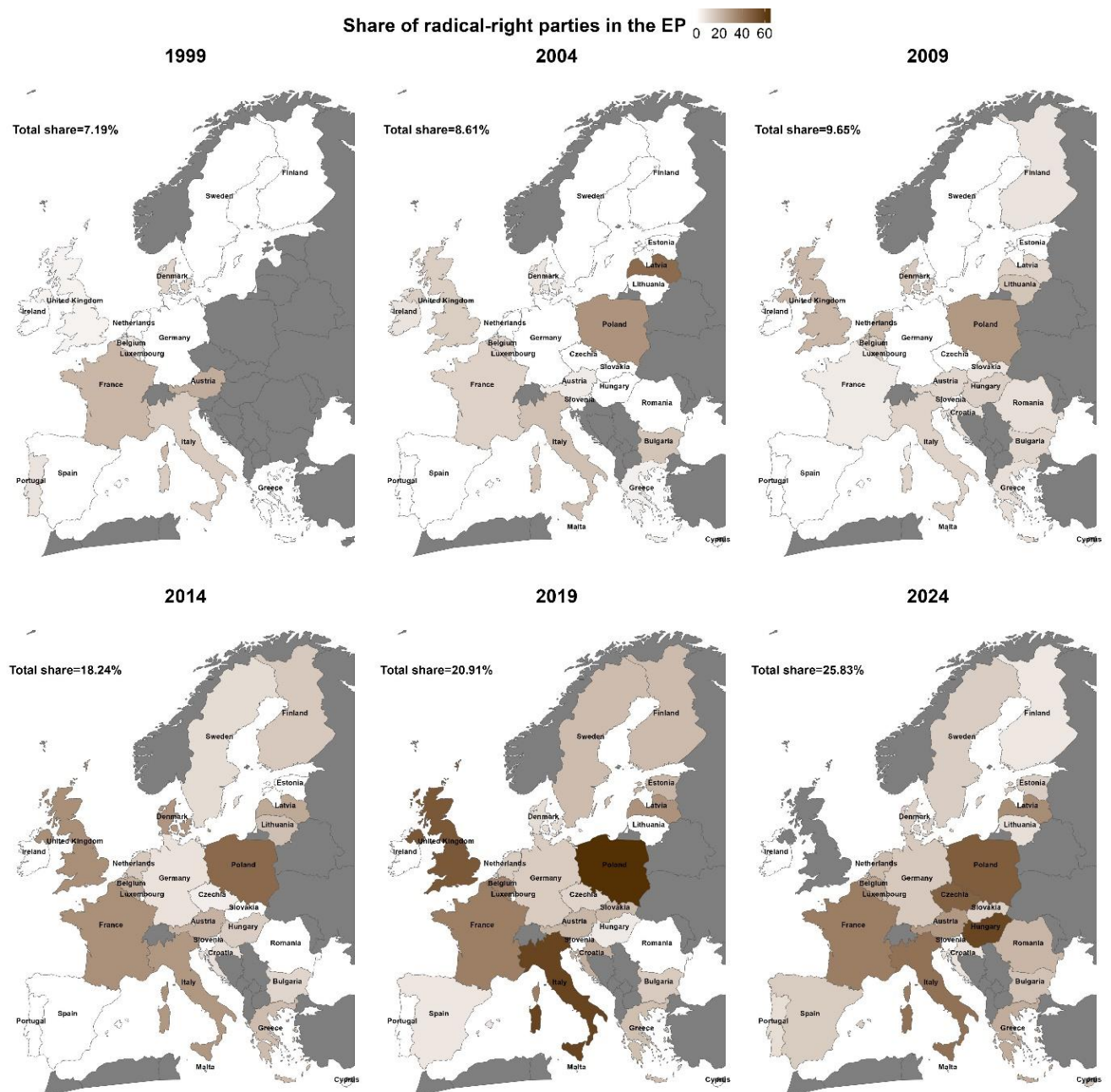
European Parliament elections over time

The most consequential and widely reported outcome of the 2024 EP elections was the ascent of the radical right. Parties classified as radical right now hold slightly more than a quarter of the seats in the European Parliament, enabling them to effectively challenge the political

agenda of the European Commission. Whereas radical right parties had a relatively small and stable share of seats until the 2014 EP elections, the Eurozone crisis served to bolster support for the Eurosceptic far right across Europe in the 2014 contest (Hobolt and Tilley 2018). Since then, the electoral support of the radical right has grown steadily, reaching an unprecedented level in the 2024 elections (see Figure 1).² In addition to their record share of seats, the geographical reach of radical right parties has expanded markedly. Prior to 2004, such parties were present in only a minority of EU member states; however, over time, they have achieved representation across nearly the entire Union.

² We classify a party as radical right if it belongs to one the following EP Groups: NI (1999 to 2024), ECR (2009 to 2024), ESN (2024), PfiE (2024), ID (2019), EFDD (2014), EFF (2009), IND (2004), UEN(1999 and 2004), EDD (1999) and TDI (1999) *and* is coded as far-right by the *PopuList3.0* dataset.

Figure 1 Share of radical right parties in EP elections, 1999-2024



Source: Share of parties available at <https://results.elections.europa.eu/en/breakdown-national-parties-political-group/2019-2024/constitutive-session/Countries>. Seat share is based on the constitutive session of the EP

As of 2024, only three relatively small EU countries—Malta, Slovenia, and Ireland—lack radical right representation in the EP. Furthermore, these parties have consistently consolidated their seat shares across member states. A comparison between the 2024 and 2019 EP elections reveals that radical right parties registered electoral gains across multiple regions,

significantly increasing their seat share in Western European countries (e.g., Austria, the Netherlands, Germany), Southern Europe and Central and Eastern Europe, where substantial gains were observed in Romania and Czechia. The sole deviation from this upward trend occurred in Northern Europe, where their seat share has remained largely unchanged since 2019.³

While the radical right was the main winner in the 2024 EP elections, the most notable losers were parties in the liberal group, Renew Europe. Its share of seats declined by 3.7%, causing it to drop from the third-largest group to the fifth-largest. Renew suffered its most significant losses in France, where domestic challenges faced by Macron and Renaissance (RE) led to a 40% decline in the group's share of seats. Additional losses occurred in Romania and Czechia, which were also significant at the national level. However, Renew's performance varied across the EU. In some countries, its members made substantial gains—for instance, *Fianna Fáil* in Ireland and *Progresívne Slovensko* in Slovakia more than doubled their seat shares.

Other notable losers in the elections were the Greens, whose overall share of EP seats dropped from 9.8% in 2019 to 7.3% in 2024. These parties suffered significant setbacks, particularly in Germany and France. However, they gained seats in Denmark, Spain, and Italy and were part of the coalition that secured the plurality vote in the Netherlands. The centre-left group, Socialists & Democrats (S&D), had a mixed performance. Its overall share of seats in the EP declined slightly from 20.5% to 19%. However, unlike Renew and the Greens, none of its members experienced substantial seat losses. Some even saw significant gains compared to 2019, such as the Socialist Party (PS) in France

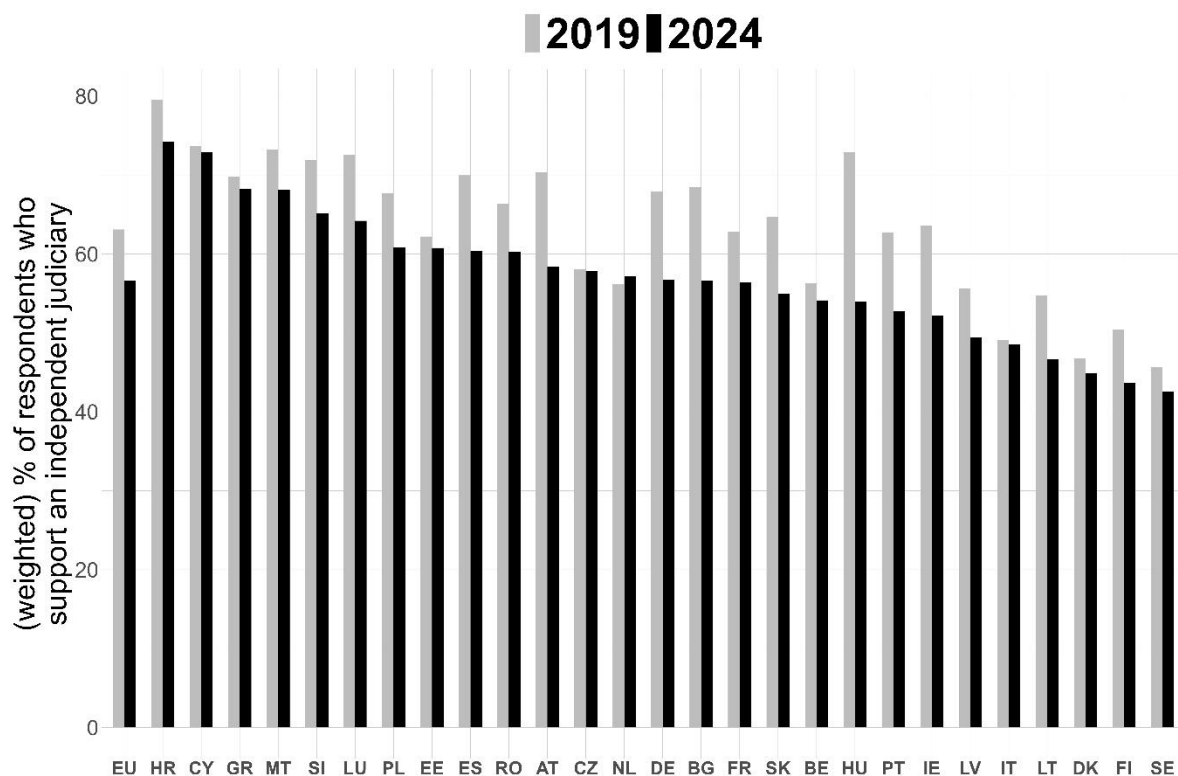
What is clear is that the rise of the radical right has significantly altered the power dynamic in the European Parliament, decisively shifting the balance toward the right (i.e. EPP and groups to its right now hold more than 50% of the seats in the EP). While the pro-European centre retains its majority, this right-wing shift could nonetheless have implications for future

³ It is also worth noting that the radical right lost seats in only two member states—Finland and Italy—both of which have far-right parties in government; however, these losses were minimal, amounting to just one seat in each case.

legislation, particularly in areas such as EU migration and asylum policies and environmental regulations (Cunningham et al., 2024).

Along with challenges to the EP power dynamics, the rise of the radical right is intrinsically linked to democratic backsliding in the Union. As previously discussed, one key concern is that the radical right often opposes core liberal democratic norms (e.g., Van der Brug et al. 2022; 2025). In this context, it is worrisome that the rise of these parties in 2024 coincides with a substantive decrease in commitment to liberal democratic values such as an independent judiciary, as shown in Figure 2. However, we still need to note that a substantial majority of European citizens support the principle that an independent judiciary could overturn decisions, even if they are supported by a majority.

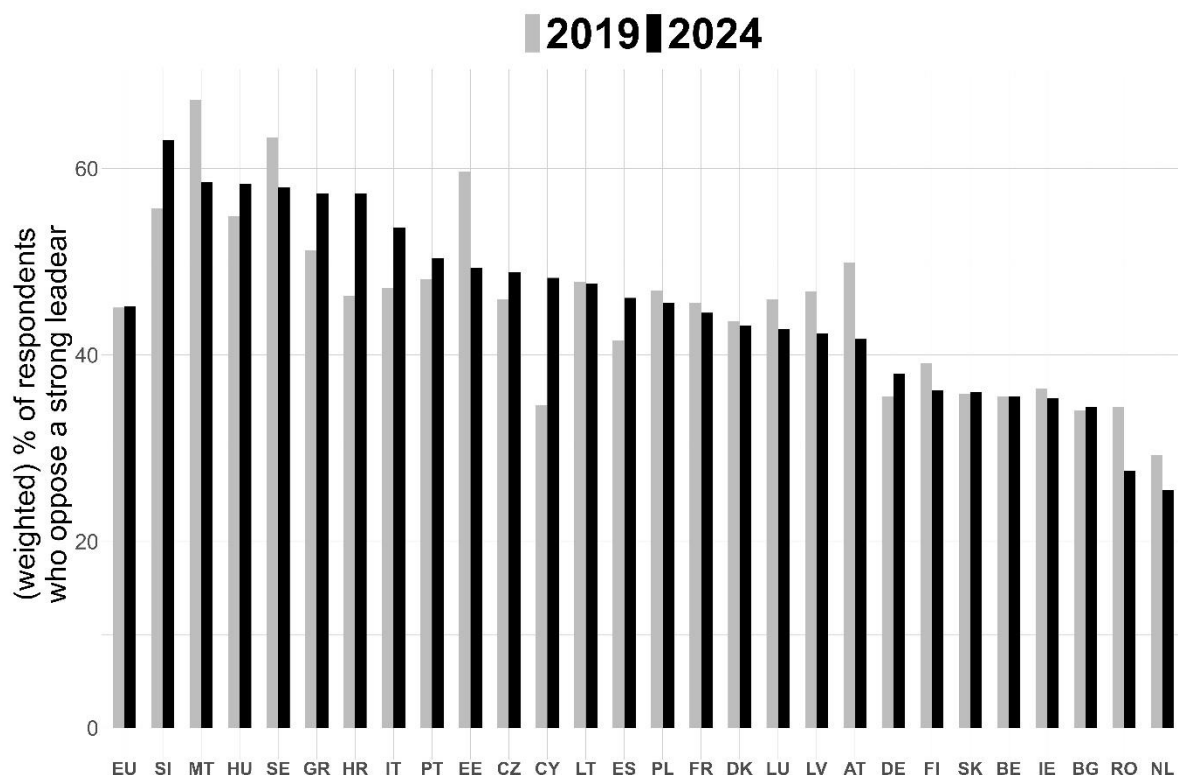
Figure 2 Support for an independent judiciary



Source: European Elections Study 2019 (Schmitt et al., 2019). European Elections Study 2019 (Popa et al., 2024). Question wording: “To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements? Independent judges should be able to overrule the decisions of a democratically elected government if the decisions violate the rights of individuals or groups in society.” Countries ordered by the level of support for the statement in 2024 (with the EU average in the first column).

What is perhaps more concerning is that support for strong authoritarian leaders is relatively high, as shown in Figure 3. What is noteworthy is that support for a strong leader has decreased quite substantially in two of the countries where radical right parties are in power, Italy and Hungary.

Figure 3 Opposition to a strong leader who bends the rules

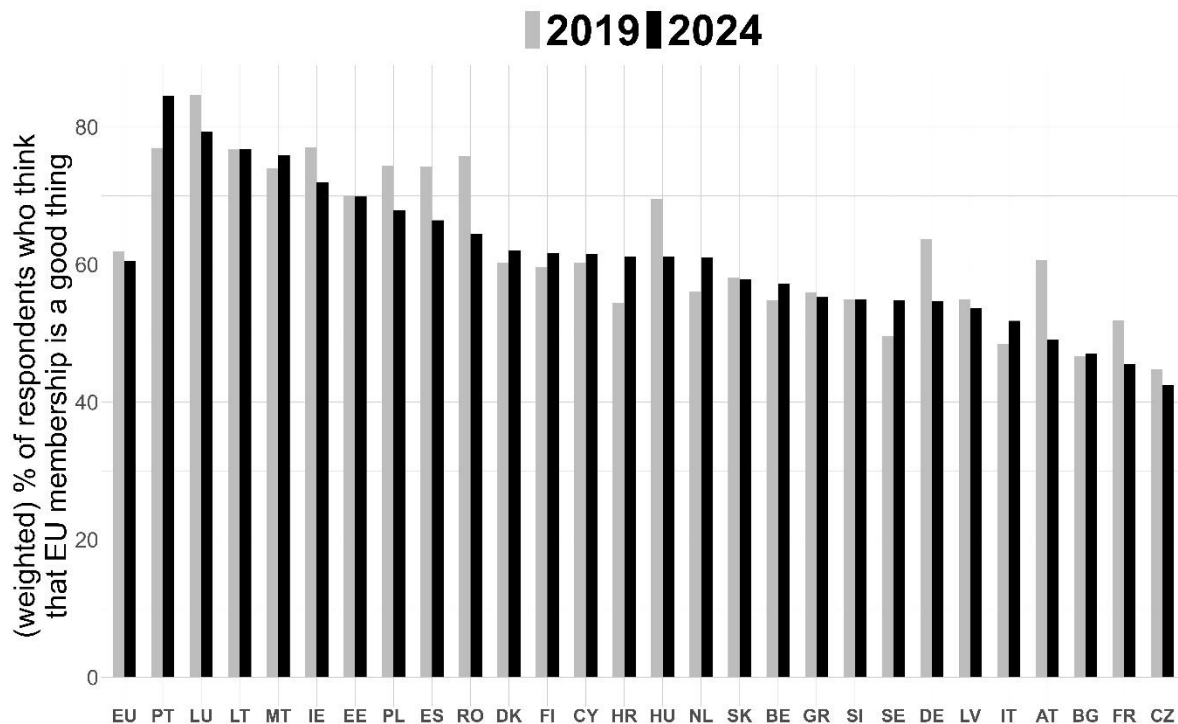


Source: European Elections Study 2019 (Schmitt et al., 2019). European Elections Study 2019 (Popa et al., 2024). Question wording: “To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements? Having a strong leader in government is good for [country] even if the leader bends the rules to get things done.” Countries are ordered by the level of opposition to the statement in 2024 (with the EU average in the first column).

Another core concern raised by the radical right is opposition to further European integration, which is portrayed as a threat to national sovereignty (e.g., Hlatky 2023). Hence, in Figure 4, we show popular support for EU membership in 2019 and 2024. At first glance, the rise of the radical right does not seem connected to a decrease in support for the EU, as this remained relatively constant between the times of the 2019 and 2024 EP elections. However, we do note a drop in support for the EU in some CEE member states, such as Hungary and Poland, and

countries where the radical right gained substantial support in the 2024 EP elections, e.g. Romania and Czechia. Furthermore, a decrease in support for the EU can also be noted in other European countries where the radical right gained seats (i.e. Austria, Germany, and Spain).

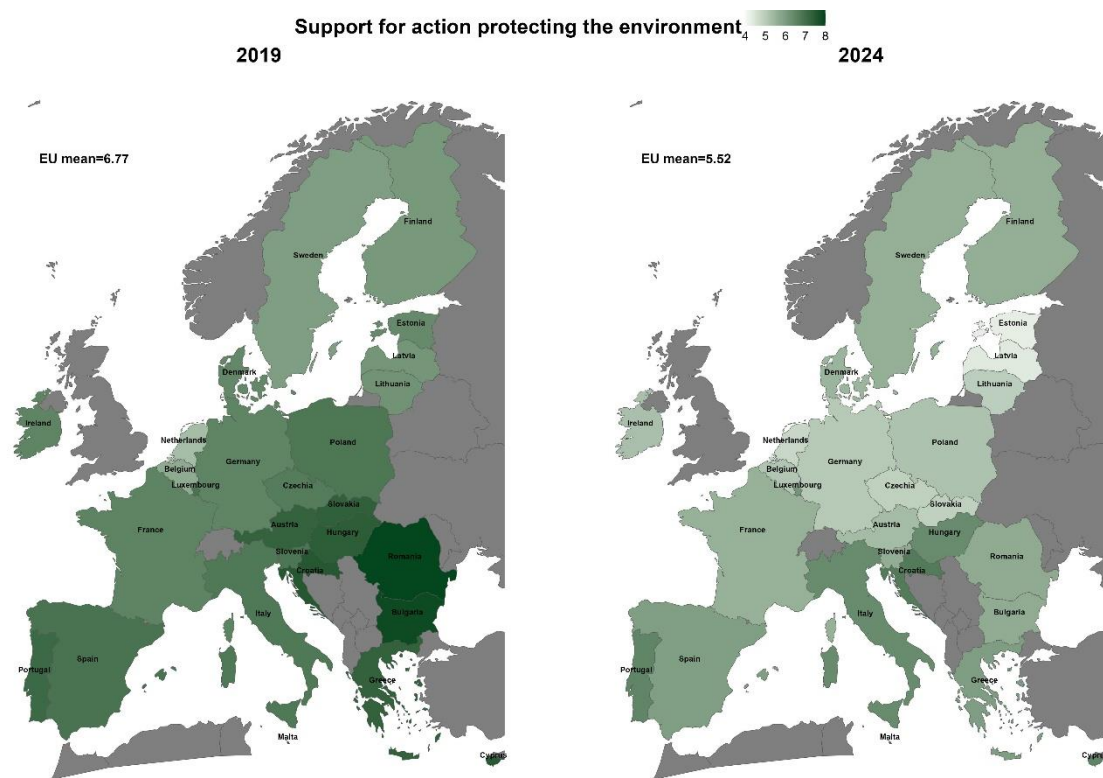
Figure 4 Support for the EU membership



Source: European Elections Study 2019 (Schmitt et al., 2019). European Elections Study 2019 (Popa et al., 2024). Question wording: “Generally speaking, do you think that [country] membership of the European Union is..?”. Countries are ordered by the level support for the EU in 2024 (with the EU average in the first column).

Finally, the decrease in popular support for green policies, shown in Figure 5, is another factor that has recently become a core issue to radical right parties (Dickson and Hobolt 2024). While most respondents in both EES 2019 and EES 2024 prioritised climate change action over economic growth, there was a stark decrease in support for such policies in 2024 across all EU countries. This again could be a potential factor that explains the success of the far-right in 2024 (e.g. Toygur and Sojka 2025), and it explains why mainstream parties (i.e. some EPP members) now partially incorporated the agenda of the radical right when it comes to environmental protection.

Figure 5 Support for green policies, 2019 and 2024



Source: European Elections Study 2019 (Schmitt et al., 2019). European Elections Study 2019 (Popa et al., 2024). 2019 Question wording “Environmental protection should take priority even at the cost of economic growth”; 2024 Question wording “Limiting climate change should take priority even at the cost of economic growth”

Our descriptive analysis illustrates the aggregate patterns of electoral behaviour and political attitudes in the 2024 elections compared to previous elections. As discussed in the next section, key findings from this Special Issue shed further light on these trends and their implications for the future of European governance.

Key findings and implications

The studies in this Special Issue use original EES survey data, and survey embedded experiments from across the EU, to make sense of these trends in the attitudes and voting behaviours of Europeans. The findings highlight the growing impact of radical right-wing parties in European politics, and the linkages between nationalism and Euroscepticism, opposition to EU climate policies, and the challenges of democratic backsliding.

Matsunaga and van Spanje (2025) explore the stigma surrounding radical right parties, showing that while these parties continue to face reputational barriers in some countries, they

have succeeded in normalising their positions in others. Crucially, perceived stigma negatively affects the likelihood of voting for both mainstream and far-right parties. Relatedly, Milosav et al. (2025) find that there is a gender gap in youth support for the radical right, with young men being more likely than young women to support these parties, a trend that has become more pronounced over time. Van der Brug et al. (2025) also demonstrate generational differences in attitudes towards liberal democratic values and the radical right, with lower support for liberal democratic norms and a higher propensity to vote for the radical right among the younger generations. These findings suggest that the radical right is not only gaining ground electorally but that its appeal is also normalised, especially among younger voters. This may also push traditional centre-right parties to adopt more nationalist and restrictive stances on immigration and sovereignty issues (Steenbergen et al. 2025; Valentim 2024).

Another key takeaway from the special issue is the increasing connection between the radical right, Euroscepticism and opposition to EU climate policies and the dominance of a new political cleavage in European politics. Toygur and Sojka (2025) examine how the backlash against the European Green Deal has fuelled Euroscepticism, particularly among rural voters and economic sectors affected by the transition to greener policies. Their findings indicate that while public support for climate action remains high, resistance to specific policies - especially those perceived as costly or disruptive - has been successfully leveraged by Eurosceptic parties. Kollberg et al. (2025) further demonstrate that public attitudes towards the Green Deal are shaped by concerns not only about fiscal redistribution, but also about the cost of deeper European integration. Citizens generally favour green investments in disadvantaged regions and worker retraining but respond sceptically to policies that involve redistribution at the EU level, highlighting the challenges facing the EU's Green Deal agenda.

Katsanidou and Jungmann (2025) argue that these divides reflect broader shifts in the European political space, where modernisation and globalisation have created new political cleavages. Analysing the cross-national survey data, this study reveals that attitudes on issues like gender, climate and redistribution cluster along a modernisation dimension, while immigration consistently anchors a distinct globalisation dimension. Meanwhile, Giebler et

al. (2025) explore how citizens are mobilised on issues such as immigration and climate change, finding that political participation is increasingly driven by issue-based grievances rather than traditional party loyalties. According to Steenbergen et al. (2025) European party competition is dominated by a new political cleavage – a universality divide - rooted not only in the educational cleavage but also in competing collective identities. They show that universalist identity - strongest among the tertiary-educated and linked to cosmopolitan and inclusive values - is a key driver of support for progressive parties and a major factor distinguishing them from far-right alternatives across Europe. These findings suggest that the European Union ability to implement ambitious climate policies and deepen European integration further will be constrained by growing opposition from both the radical right and segments of mainstream conservative parties.

Finally, several studies in this special issue focus on democratic backsliding and its implications for the future of European governance. Van der Brug and co-authors (2025) show that younger voters are less committed to protecting liberal democratic constraints on the executive and instead favour a “strong leader” and vote for the radical right in higher numbers. Gattermann et al. (2025) find that the electoral success of far-right parties has heightened public concerns about disinformation, contributing to an increasingly polarised and distrustful political environment. Sorace (2025) presents evidence that despite these challenges, European public opinion is gradually converging on economic and environmental issues, suggesting that the EU’s policymaking process may still find areas of consensus over time and the potential emergence of a European political demos.

These studies collectively highlight the complex dynamics shaping the European political landscape: while radical right and Eurosceptic parties are gaining influence, there remains a strong underlying public demand for collective European solutions. Future research should further investigate whether the normalisation of radical right narratives will lead to long-term structural shifts in EU policymaking, how economic anxieties shape attitudes towards European integration, and what role democratic institutions can play in countering authoritarian tendencies within member states.

The implications of these findings are significant for the future of European governance. The growing electoral influence of radical right and Eurosceptic parties will likely challenge the EU's ability to advance integrationist policies, particularly on climate action, immigration, and rule-of-law enforcement. The mainstream centre-right's adoption of more nationalist positions suggests that opposition to deeper EU cooperation is no longer confined to the political fringes, potentially reshaping coalition dynamics within the European Parliament and the Council. The election results also highlight the EU's struggle to manage its internal divisions effectively. While some member states remain committed to upholding democratic norms and ambitious climate goals, others are increasingly resistant to supranational oversight. This fragmentation complicates efforts to respond to transnational crises, such as climate change and migration, in a unified manner.

Looking ahead, future research should explore how these electoral shifts translate into concrete policymaking outcomes, whether the EU's institutional mechanisms can withstand growing nationalist and Eurosceptic pressures, and how political mobilisation around key issues such as climate change and democratic backsliding will evolve in the coming years. Additionally, further investigation into generational and gender-based political divides could provide valuable insights into the long-term trajectory of European electoral politics and the sustainability of the European project.

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