

UK influence in Europe series: British MEPs lose most often in the European Parliament

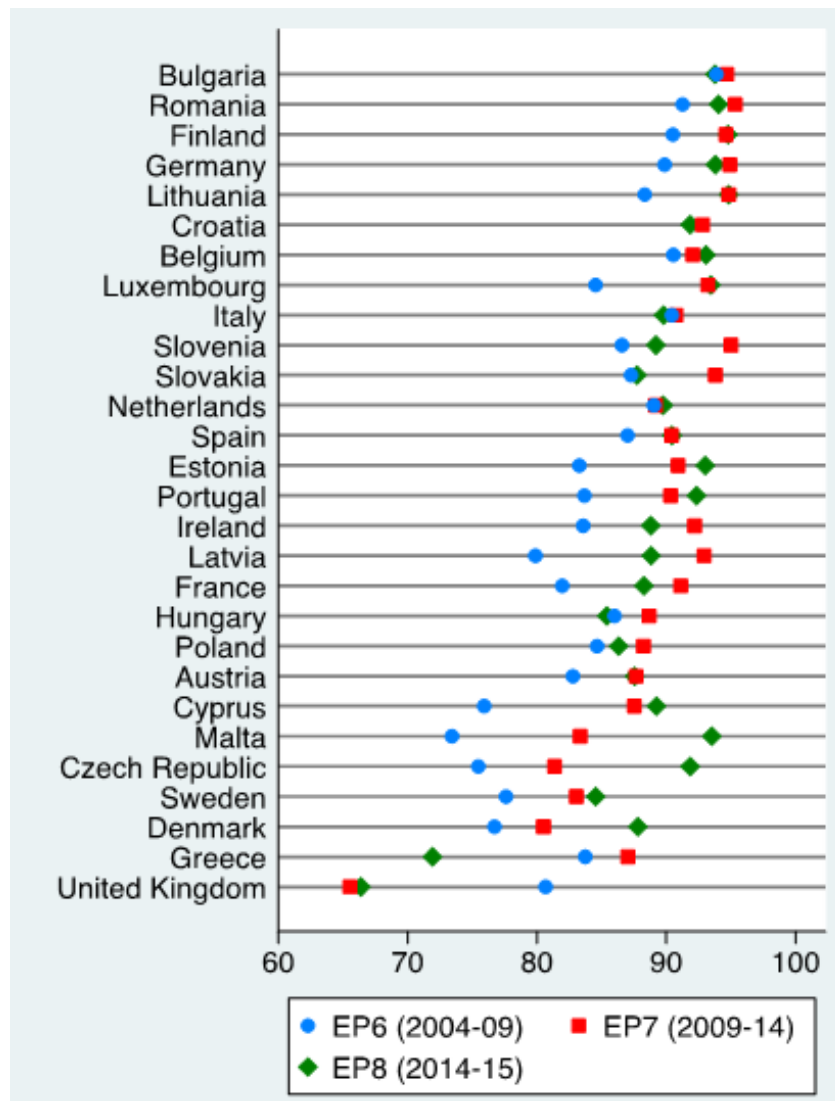
*How do British MEPs fare in the European Parliament? Using detailed voting records from 2004 until 2015, **Simon Hix** illustrates the percentage of times MEPs from different member states, European political groups, and national parties are on the 'winning side' in votes in the European Parliament. The figures indicate that British MEPs do particularly poorly in comparison to those from other member states. This is partly a reflection of the fact that a large number of MEPs from the UK do not sit in the most powerful political groups, while even those parties that do sit in important groups, such as Labour, tend to vote against their own allies' positions more frequently than other MEPs.*



In recent blogs I have looked at [policy outcomes](#), [voting records](#) and [policy-makers' connections](#) to analyse whether the UK is 'marginalised' in the EU Council. But, the Council is only half of the EU's bicameral legislature. The other half is the European Parliament, which now has the power to amend and block EU laws in almost all policy areas. So, are UK Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) marginalised?

A good starting point is MEP voting records (on www.VoteWatch.eu), and there are a lot of them: there were 6,149 such votes in the 2004-09 session (EP6); 6,961 in 2009-14 (EP7); and there have been 2,306 since June 2014 in the current session (EP8). From these records we can see whether UK MEPs and parties tend to be on the winning or losing side in votes, and whether British MEPs and parties vote with or against the European political groups to which they belong.

Figure 1: Percentage of times MEPs are on the 'winning side' in the European Parliament by Member State



Note: A member state’s delegation of MEPs was calculated as being on the ‘winning side’ in a vote if the plurality of the MEPs from the member state voted the same way as the majority of all MEPs in the vote.

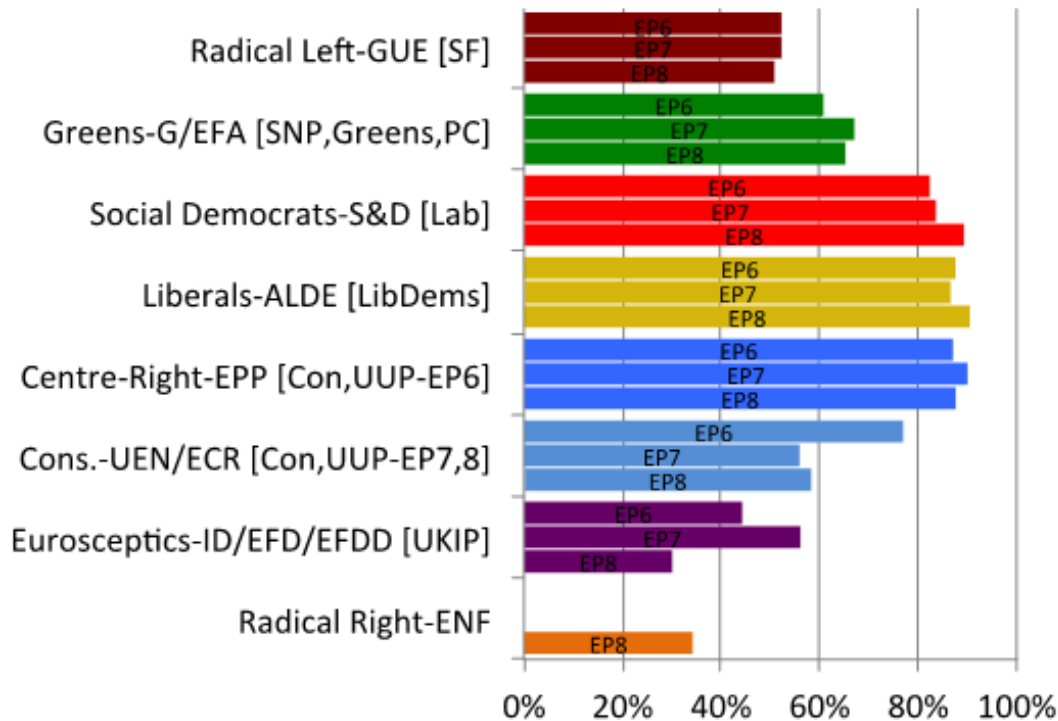
To start with, Figure 1 shows the percentage of times each member state’s MEPs were on the ‘winning side’ in all votes in EP6, EP7 and EP8. The first thing to note is that the average is high: about 85 per cent. This is because many votes are highly consensual. Nevertheless, there is significant variation between the member states: from 93 per cent for Finnish MEPs (and even higher for Bulgarian and Romanian MEPs, who joined in 2007), to only 71 per cent for British MEPs. Also, while British MEPs were reasonably successful in EP6, since 2009 they have been less likely to be on the winning side than the MEPs from any other member state.

But, voting in the European Parliament is mainly along political group lines not national lines, with higher group voting cohesion than the Democrats and the Republicans in the US Congress. Hence, what determines whether an MEP is on the winning or losing side is which political group she belongs to and whether she follows her group’s voting positions.

Figure 2 hence shows the ‘winning rates’ of the political groups, from left to right. Although the Liberals (ALDE) were the third largest group in EP6 and EP7, and are the fourth largest in EP8, they have been on the winning side most frequently because they are pivotal: critical for a winning majority either on the left (with S&D, G/EFA, and GUE) or on the right (with EPP and UEN or ECR). The two largest groups either side of the Liberals (S&D and EPP) also play a

dominant role (on the winning side almost 90 per cent of the time), while the groups further to the left and right are significantly less likely to win votes.

Figure 2: Percentage of times MEPs are on the ‘winning side’ in the European Parliament by political group



Note: EP6 refers to the session of the European Parliament between 2004 and 2009, EP7 refers to the 2009-14 session, and EP8 refers to 2014-15. For more information on the political groups see: [European United Left–Nordic Green Left \(GUE-NGL\)](#); [The Greens–European Free Alliance \(Greens/EFA\)](#); [Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats \(S&D\)](#); [Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe \(ALDE\)](#); [European People’s Party \(EPP\)](#); [European Conservatives and Reformists\(ECR\)](#); [Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy \(EFDD\)](#); [Europe of Nations and Freedom \(ENF\)](#). UK parties are indicated in parentheses (BNP and DUP MEPs have sat as ‘non-attached’ members).

Only the [Labour Party](#) (in S&D) and the [Liberal Democrats](#) (in ALDE) sit in these dominant groups. The [Conservatives](#) left the EPP group in 2009, to form the ECR group. The ECR group was on the winning side only 56 per cent of the time in EP7 and 58 per cent so far in EP8. Also, the Eurosceptic groups (ID, EFD and EFDD), where [UKIP](#) sit, have voted against the majority in most votes since 2004, while G/EFA, where the [Greens](#), [SNP](#) and [Plaid Cymru](#) sit, have won in only 64 per cent of votes since 2004.

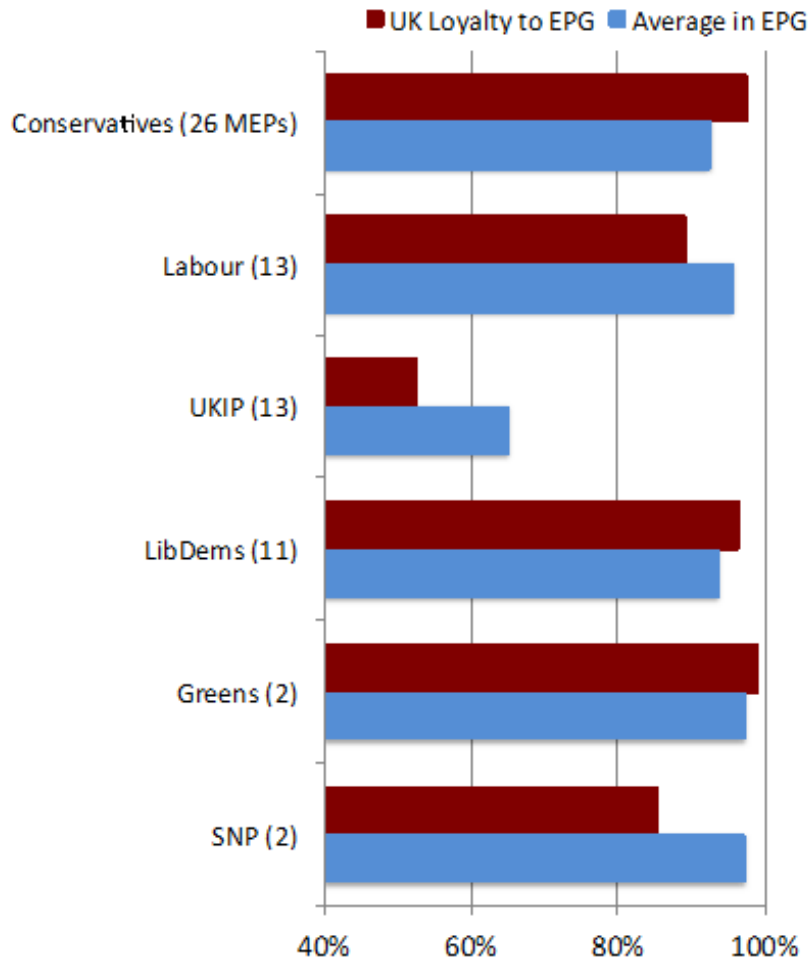
In addition, Labour and Lib Dem MEPs have lost seats while the Conservatives and UKIP have won seats. As a result, the number of UK MEPs in the three main groups (EPP, S&D and ALDE) has fallen from 31 out of 75 MEPs (41 per cent) in 2004 to 21 out of 73 (29 per cent) in 2015. Not surprisingly, then, UK MEPs are more marginalised than they were before.

Then, within their political groups, UK MEPs often vote against their groups’ positions. As Figure 3 shows, in 2009-14 the Conservatives, who dominated the ECR group, voted with the group majority in almost every vote. In 2004-09, though, when the Conservatives were in the EPP group, they only voted with the EPP majority 74 per cent of the time. It is unclear whether being the dominant party in a marginalised group (ECR) is any better than being a marginalised

party in a dominant group (EPP).

Meanwhile, in 2009-14, Labour MEPs often voted against the S&D position, as did UKIP in the EFD group, and the SNP in the G/EFA group. Only the Lib Dems and Greens were more likely to follow group instructions than the average member of their groups.

Figure 3: UK MEPs' 'loyalty' to their European Parliament political groups (2009-14)



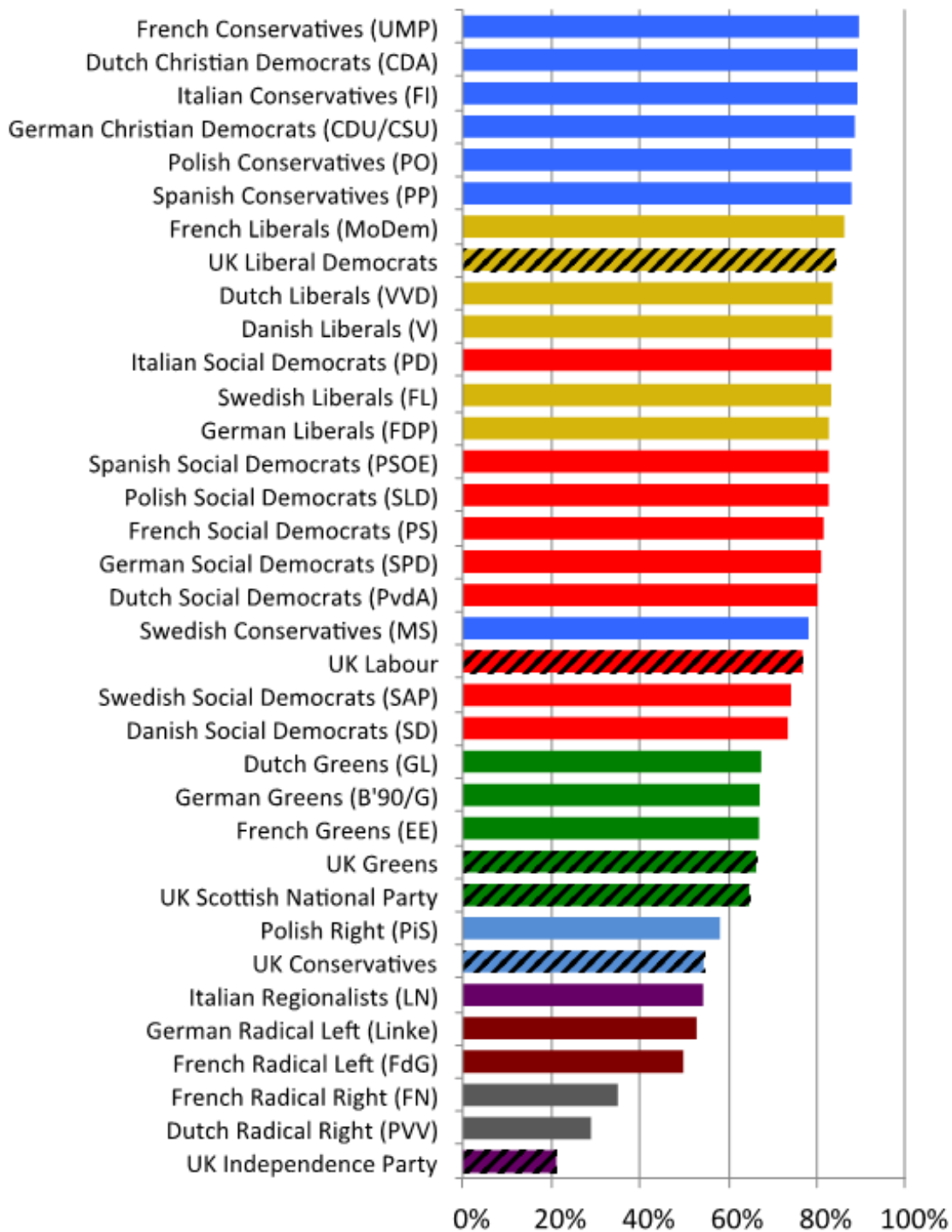
Note: This figure only shows MEPs from parties that had at least 2 MEPs in the 2009-14 session and were members of a political group. In addition to these MEPs, there was 1 MEP from Plaid Cymru (in G/EFA), 1 UUP (in ECR), 1 Sinn Fein (in GUE), and 2 BNP representatives and 1 DUP (who sat as non-attached members).

Another way to see the challenge for British parties is to compare them to parties from the other large countries plus some of the UK's allies in the Council (Netherlands, Sweden, and Denmark), as shown in Figure 4 below. The combination of sitting in a marginalised group (ECR and EFDD) plus voting against the position of the majority of a group (Labour in S&D) means that UK parties are considerably less likely to be on the winning side than other national parties.

The only exception is the Lib Dems, who were an influential party in the pivotal group before they lost all but one of their MEPs in 2014. Interestingly, though, some parties from the UK's allies are also relatively marginalised. The [Swedish Conservatives](#) are less likely to win votes than any other major party in the EPP group, while the [Danish](#) and

Swedish Social Democrats are even less likely to win votes than Labour.

Figure 4: Percentage of times MEPs are on the 'winning side' in the European Parliament by national party



Note: A national party was calculated as being on the 'winning side' in a vote if the plurality of the MEPs from the party voted the same way as the majority of all MEPs in the vote. The parties are coloured according to their political group membership. UK parties are indicated with stripes.

Overall, European Parliament voting records suggest that the UK is in a weak position in this branch of the EU's

legislative system. Most British MEPs do not sit in the groups that dominate the European Parliament agenda. And even when they do sit in these groups – such as the Conservatives in the EPP group before 2009, and Labour in the S&D group – British MEPs are often opposed to the majority positions of these groups. As a result, British MEPs often find themselves on the losing side in key votes.

Nevertheless, these roll-call voting patterns do not tell the full story. How much do these patterns vary by policy area? And do UK MEPs capture some of the key agenda-setting positions in the European Parliament, such as committee chairs or rapporteurships? I will address these questions in the next two blogs.

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