

# European Parliament elections: a final look at the polls

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*European Parliament elections are being held on 22-25 May. In the first of two articles summarising the European and national campaigns, [Stuart Brown](#) takes a look at the polls with regard to the composition of the next Parliament. He notes that while Eurosceptic parties are predicted to significantly increase their representation, the European People's Party has a narrow lead over the Party of European Socialists in the race to hold the most seats in the new Parliament.*



Predicting the final result of a European Parliament election has always been something of a herculean task. With 28 separate elections taking place across the EU, predictions rest on the accuracy of countless different polling organisations, the nuances of individual electoral systems, and the ability to compensate for the 'second order' effect which has traditionally seen smaller parties gain substantially larger shares of the vote in European elections than they do in national contests.

For the 2014 elections, [Pollwatch2014](#) has provided an admirable attempt to solve these problems, making it possible for the first time to genuinely track how the campaign has evolved at the European level in the run up to the vote. Based on opinion polls in each of the member states, the site has kept a running tab on how the balance of power is shaping up in the next Parliament. Using Pollwatch data, this article takes a final look at the polls in terms of both the composition of the Parliament and what the elections could mean for the EU's legislative agenda over the next five years.

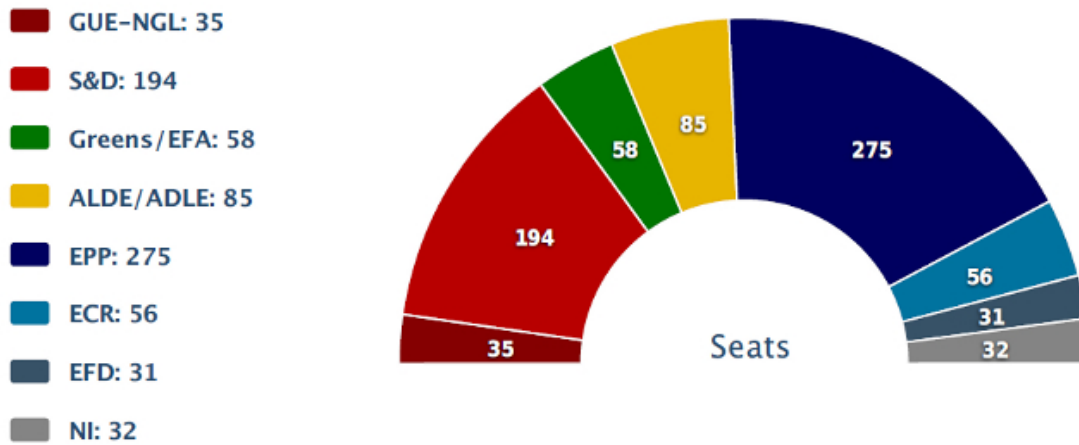
## The current European Parliament

For those unfamiliar with the European Parliament, the basic principle for organising MEPs in the chamber is that they sit in parliamentary groups, usually corresponding with the European political parties that national parties are affiliated to. For instance, the largest group in the current European Parliament is that of the [European People's Party](#) (EPP), which is largely comprised of centre-right parties such as Angela Merkel's [CDU/CSU](#) in Germany, Mariano Rajoy's [People's Party](#) in Spain, and Jean-François Copé's [Union for a Popular Movement](#) in France.

The second largest group in the current Parliament is the [Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats](#) (S&D), which is affiliated to the [Party of European Socialists](#) and is largely composed of centre-left parties. These include Ed Miliband's [Labour Party](#) in the UK, Matteo Renzi's [Democratic Party](#) in Italy, the [Socialist Party](#) of French President François Hollande, and most of the other mainstream centre-left parties across Europe.

Beyond the EPP and S&D, there are five other key groups within the current Parliament: the [Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe](#) (ALDE), comprising centrist and liberal parties; the [European United Left-Nordic Green Left](#) (GUE-NGL) group, containing socialist and communist parties; the [Greens/European Free Alliance](#) (Greens/EFA), composed of green and regionalist parties; the [European Conservatives and Reformists](#) (ECR), containing broadly conservative and Eurosceptic parties, of which the UK's Conservative Party is the largest member; and [Europe of Freedom and Democracy](#) (EFD), a collection of Eurosceptic parties including [UKIP](#) and [Lega Nord](#). Chart 1 below shows the composition of the current European Parliament with respect to the number of seats each group currently holds.

## Chart 1: The current composition of the European Parliament (2009-2014)



**Note:** Reproduced from [Pollwatch2014](#). For more information on the parliamentary groups see: [European United Left–Nordic Green Left \(GUE-NGL\)](#); [Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats \(S&D\)](#); [The Greens–European Free Alliance \(Greens/EFA\)](#); [Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe \(ALDE\)](#); [European People’s Party \(EPP\)](#); [European Conservatives and Reformists \(ECR\)](#); [Europe of Freedom and Democracy \(EFD\)](#). NI refers to MEPs which are not attached to any group.

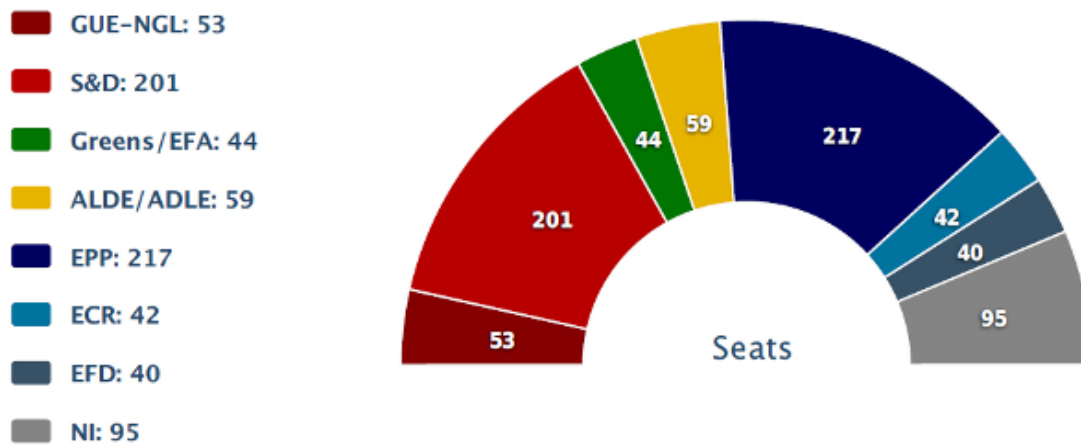
### The 2014 elections

Although these groups can at times lack the level of [cohesion](#) common to parties in national parliaments, this framework is nevertheless key to structuring the votes which take place in the Parliament. The number of MEPs each group holds is also crucial for the selection of the next President of the European Commission. While national governments in the Council retain the right to nominate the next Commission President, this candidate must be approved by a majority of MEPs in the Parliament.

For the 2014 elections, the link between the results of the European Parliament elections and the new Commission President has been further strengthened. The [Treaty of Lisbon](#), which came into force at the end of 2009, states that the Council must make its proposal after “taking into account the elections to the European Parliament”. There is still a great deal of confusion over what this will mean in practice, but there is a general expectation that whichever group is the largest in the new Parliament is likely to have a candidate of their choosing put forward. To this end, several of the European parties have put forward formal [candidates](#), with the EPP selecting Luxembourg’s former Prime Minister Jean-Claude Juncker, and the Party of European Socialists opting for the current President of the European Parliament, Martin Schulz.

With all this stated, where do the parties/groups stand in the polling? Chart 2 below provides the latest Pollwatch prediction from polls up until 20 May.

**Chart 2: Latest prediction for distribution of seats in the 2014 European Parliament elections (20 May)**



**Note: Reproduced from [Pollwatch2014](#). The total number of seats in the new parliament will be 751.**

While previous polls showed the EPP and S&D separated by only a few seats, the last poll before the election has given the EPP a lead of 16 seats. This should nevertheless be treated cautiously, however, given the margin for error in this estimate and the potential for support to change in the final days of the campaign.

Just as important is the predicted rise in the number of MEPs from outside of the mainstream groups. Since the campaign began, there has been an [expectation](#) that populist and Eurosceptic parties would drastically increase their support from the 2009 elections. In the case of the EFD, this is clearly apparent, with the group expected to gain 9 MEPs from its current total. This rise is largely attributable to UKIP, which is predicted to increase its seats from the 13 it won in 2009, to 24.

The biggest increase is the almost threefold rise in MEPs who are not attached to any of the existing groups. Here it should be noted that the Front National and Geert Wilders' Party for Freedom have already announced their intention to form a 'Eurosceptic alliance' after the elections. This alliance is also expected to include the Flemish nationalist party [Vlaams Belang](#), the [Freedom Party of Austria](#), the [Sweden Democrats](#), the [Slovak National Party](#), and [Lega Nord](#). Under the latest prediction, these parties would achieve 38 seats. Nigel Farage has so far been extremely reluctant to involve UKIP in this new alliance, however if both Eurosceptic groups were taken together they would hold 78 MEPs and be the third largest group in the Parliament.

These outwardly Eurosceptic parties are nevertheless only one part of the story. In addition there are a number of other parties who range from either Eurosceptic to broadly anti-federalist, anti-free market or otherwise 'anti-European'. Of the remaining non-aligned parties, Beppe Grillo's [Five Star Movement](#) in Italy is arguably the most significant, with a current prediction of 19 seats. Indeed a great many of all of the parties outside of the four centrist groups – the EPP, S&D, ALDE and the Greens – fall into this bracket. Combined, these parties could hold well over 200 seats in the new Parliament, over a quarter of the total.

### Legislative blockage?

Under these circumstances, the challenge facing the two main groups in securing support for their Commission President candidate cannot be overstated. With 751 MEPs in the chamber in total, the 'winning post' of 376 seats will be exceptionally difficult to achieve for either the EPP or S&D [unless](#) they can count on each other for support.

In 2009, a coalition between the EPP, ALDE and ECR was enough to secure a majority of MEPs, however under the current prediction such an alliance would fall notably short of a majority. It would be difficult, if not impossible, for either Juncker or Schulz to rely on support from GUE-NGL, EFD, the Le Pen/Wilders Eurosceptic alliance and most of the non-aligned parties such as the Five Star Movement. With this taken on board, the only way for either the

EPP or S&D to command a majority would be to rely on each other's support – something which did not happen in 2009, when the S&D opposed José Manuel Barroso's second term as President. This could ultimately provide an opening for national governments to opt for a different candidate altogether.

The sizeable number of populist MEPs in the new Parliament could, however, have much wider ramifications beyond simply the election of the President of the Commission. Where these parties have a common viewpoint they could form a powerful opposition bloc to key policies over the next five years.

As LSE's Simon Hix has recently stated, one example is the much vaunted Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) deal between the EU and the United States. GUE-NGL have been strongly [critical](#) of TTIP and have suggested the negotiations should be immediately suspended. Taken alongside existing opposition to TTIP from Eurosceptic parties, and even among members of the 'centre', such as the [Greens](#), there are legitimate questions over whether the deal could gain majority backing in the new Parliament.

Admittedly, the fact that the EPP and S&D would still command a majority if they worked together might minimise this effect in many cases. Indeed, both groups have supported each other's position on a remarkably high percentage of issues: just under [74 per cent](#) during the 2009-2014 term. The two Eurosceptic groups and, to a lesser extent, GUE-NGL, can also be expected to have notably less cohesion than the groups in the centre. As Doru Frantescu has previously [shown](#), between 2009 and 2014 the EFD group was, by some distance, the least cohesive group in the Parliament, ensuring that its 'actual power' in terms of realising its aims was substantially reduced.

While the overall influence of populist parties may therefore be more limited than it would appear from the raw number of seats they possess, the potential to play a substantive role in individual negotiations will nevertheless be far greater in the next Parliament than it was in the previous term. Ultimately, although the issue of the new Commission President has received most of the coverage so far in the campaign, the actual impact the elections will have on the EU's legislative agenda over the next five years could turn out to be far more significant.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: © European Union 2014 – European Parliament (CC-BY-SA-NC-ND-3.0)*

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## About the author

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