

What voting patterns in the European Parliament say about UK political parties' stance on Europe

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Renaud Thillaye analyses how British MEPs voted during the 2009-14 European Parliament. He finds that each of the four parties (Conservatives, LibDems, Labour and UKIP) had a distinctive attitude in the European Parliament and varying degrees of success. The LibDems are reliable partners, Labour's attitude has been more intricate and ambiguous, the Conservatives can be seen as reluctant, and UKIP, unsurprisingly, stands out as 'dismissive'. The analysis confirms the difficulty for political parties of reconciling engagement at EU level and domestic politics.



Unsurprisingly, the European elections campaign in the UK has so far been dominated by the in-out question. The Clegg-Farage debates may have helped dramatizing the strategic choice faced by Britain in the years to come, but it is doubtful that voters understand now better what the European Parliament decides on and how the UK parties fare in Brussels. This is worrying when, according to the [Eurobarometer](#), 23% of Britons have never heard of the European Parliament and [Euroabstainers](#) are set to be the real winners of the upcoming euro-elections.

In a [Policy Network contribution](#) to a cross-European [project](#) led by Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute and VoteWatch Europe, I have analysed how British MEPs from the four main political parties (Conservatives, LibDems, Labour, UKIP) have voted during the current (2009-2014) parliament. The analysis screens through 18 votes touching on 15 important or particularly controversial issues such as trade agreements, the EU budget, economic governance in the Eurozone, the Single Market's regulation and the European Parliament's seat.

The overall picture of the British presence in the European Parliament is well known. As the table below shows, the LibDems and Labour are well integrated in so far as they are members of groups which are very often parts of 'winning coalitions'. Their loyalty rate to their group is pretty high, thus showing that LibDem and Labour MEPs accept the logic of collective discipline. This contrasts with the Conservatives and UKIP, both of whom belong to much less successful groups, and UKIP's loyalty rate is very low.

Political groups in the EP (number of MEPs)	Participation rate in a winning coalition*	Internal cohesion rate*	Main affiliated British political parties (number of MEPs)	Loyalty rate to group*
European People's Party (274)	89%	92.5%		
Socialists and Democrats (194)	84%	91.5%	Labour Party (13)	89%
Liberals and Democrats (85)	87%	88.5%	Liberal Democrats (14)	96%
Greens (58)	67%	94.5%	Green Party (2) SNP (2)	99% 85%
European Conservative and Reformists (57)	56%	86.5%	Conservatives (23)	97.5%
European United Left (35)	52%	79.5%	Sinn Fein (1)	85%
Europe of freedom and democracy (31)	53%	48.5%	UKIP (10 – down from 13 in 2009)	52.5%

It matters however to look at what actually lies behind these aggregate figures: on which issues did UK parties follow the left-right logic of EU political groups? On which occasion did they 'rebel' against their own groups and vote along seemingly national lines? What does it mean for the LibDems, Labour, Conservatives and UKIP to defend the British interest in the European Parliament? My analysis suggests that each of the four parties has a distinctive attitude in the European Parliament.

The Liberal Democrats can be seen as successful and 'reliable' Europeans. Of 15 cases, British LibDems were on the winning side 12 times, always alongside their group. This does not mean, however, that they compromise with sister parties to the point of forgetting to defend British interests. They backed the 2014-2020 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) in November 2013 contrary to a minority of ALDE members that opposed the overall reduction in EU spending. They were also part of the coalition that blocked, in October 2010, the extension of the minimum full-paid maternity leave from 14 to 20 weeks.

Furthermore, the LibDems, along with their group and other British MEPs, lost when they rejected the launch of an enhanced cooperation on the financial transaction taxes (FTT) in May 2012. They 'rebelled' only once against the ALDE by standing behind the idea of phasing out from nuclear energy, an issue over which they are very close to Continental green parties.

By comparison, Labour's attitude comes across as more intricate and ambiguous. Labour MEPs can certainly claim to be successful players when voting in the same way as their S&D partners. This happened in 10 out of 15 cases. Perhaps the most compelling victory for Labour MEPs was to have the upper hand over a significant minority of S&D MEPs regarding the opening of free-trade negotiations with the US (TTIP).

The Labour delegation, nevertheless, tends to rebel against their own group more than the LibDems do, a choice that put them in the losing camp in 4 cases. This happened on issues that have a strong national dimension, such as the FTT, the CAP budget, and a proposal to increase the EU's 'own resources'. More surprisingly was the rejection, by 7 Labour MEPs (against 3 yes-votes) of the extension of the minimum period of maternity leave. This was a classical left-right issue, whereby most centre-left MEPs saw an opportunity to make social standards converge across Europe. Yet a majority of Labour MEPs sided with their German SPD colleagues, probably wary of over-regulation burdening businesses (especially SMEs) further.

The position of the Conservatives is more comfortable in the sense that they decided to cut off from the EPP's group constraints in 2009 and went their own way to found the European Conservatives and Reformist Group. Looking at the Tories' voting records since 2009, this move seems to reflect real divergences. 8 votes were won with the EPP group, mostly on consensual issues such as TTIP, the deepening of the internal market for services, the MFF, and the creation of the European External Action Service.

However, when they did not join the majority formed around EPP MEPs, UK Conservatives and UKIP MEPs found themselves on the same losers' benches five times. On climate change, for instance, they rejected in July 2013 the proposal to 'backload' CO2 auctions, a solution to the problem of persistently low prices on the EU's carbon market. In fairness, 169 EPP MEPs did the same. However, after pulling out of the centre-right group, Tories may find it more difficult to win a greater number of MEPs over their pro-market and soft-regulation line.

UKIP, finally, stands out as a 'dismissive' player in the European Parliament. For the votes examined in the study, their non-voting rate tops 55%. Detachment is also manifest through the low level of EFD cohesiveness, a fact that testifies for UKIP's unwillingness to lead their group and embrace the logic of coalition-building.

UKIP MEPs voted 'No' 16 times in 18 the votes studied. The only occasion when they put their thumb up was in November 2013 to support the idea of a 'roadmap to a single seat' for the EP 'in order to create long term savings in the EU budget'. UKIP was partly absent when it could have joined forces with other British MEPs to block texts

perceived as going against the national interest such as the FTT enhanced cooperation, and the increase in the EU's own resources. It also rejected measures considered as 'British victories', such as the launch of TTIP talks and the 2014-2020 MFF.

If anything, this analysis confirms the difficulty, for political parties, of reconciling engagement at EU level and domestic politics. UKIP's dismissive stance and the LibDems' EU-friendly attitude might be seen as two extremes, but the mixed fortunes of Labour and the Conservatives says a lot about the fact that there is no gain without pain in EU politics.

Perhaps Labour's caution and ambivalence towards its partners is what the UK has best to offer at the moment. Indeed, Labour needs to be seen both as a reliable partner in Brussels and tough on the EU in London. It must be critical in a constructive way while avoiding putting EU membership into question. Continental partners must understand in this light the reluctance to endorse Martin Schulz as the Socialist candidate for the post of European Commission president.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting. Homepage image credit: [Anca Pandrea](#)

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