

The election of Antonio Tajani as EP President: A backroom deal that creates clarity

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On 17 January, Antonio Tajani took over as the new President of the European Parliament. **Christophe Crombez** argues that while Tajani's election has been portrayed by some observers as another EU backroom deal, the developments that led to his appointment lay the groundwork for more clearly defined policy choices to be presented to voters at the 2019 European Parliament elections.



Antonio Tajani at the European Parliament. Credits: [Pietro Naj-Oleari](#) / European Parliament (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

Last week Antonio Tajani, an Italian Member of the European Parliament from the centre-right group of the European People's Party (EPP), and former spokesman of then Prime Minister Berlusconi, was elected President of the European Parliament (EP), as a result of a deal struck between the EPP and the centrist group of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE).

This election has been presented as an uninspiring choice that resulted from an old-style backroom deal among out-of-touch politicians. The picture of power-hungry politicians more concerned with their own political careers and their own parties' shares of parliamentary leadership positions, rather than EU policies and the future of Europe, was further completed by the [failed attempt](#) of the ALDE leadership, otherwise arguably the most pro-EU and anti-populist group, to attract Italy's populist and Eurosceptic Five Star Movement as its newest member party. This led the Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D) to refer to the events as 'Verhofstadt's new somersault, from Grillo to Berlusconi in one week.'

I have a more positive view of the events of last week. First, the breakup of the grand coalition of the two main groups, the EPP and the S&D, allows the EP to make clear policy choices rather than seek compromises between the two main groups. Second, as a result, voters will be presented with better-defined policy choices at the 2019 EP elections. Third, this offers opportunities for the further development of the EU institutions into a parliamentary system of government. Finally, the different party groups may benefit as well. The S&D may use this as an opportunity to reposition itself and regain electoral strength. The ALDE group may become even more important as a power broker in the EP.

The two largest groups have typically cooperated in the EP and beyond to divide important positions and set policies together, often with the additional support of ALDE. This cooperation made it possible for the EU to function relatively smoothly in spite of the high majority thresholds in the EP and Council. However, it required major policy compromise. The breakup of the power-sharing arrangement in the EP allows for clearer policy choices, provided that one of the two largest groups is able to set policy without the other. This may not always be straightforward, because it requires votes from more extreme parties, whether on the left or right. Currently the EPP-ALDE coalition is 17 votes short of a majority in the EP, even if it relies on the votes of the European Conservatives and Reformists group.

Another drawback of the grand coalition was that voters seemed to be left with little choice as far as the direction of EU policy was concerned. They could vote for one of the three traditional groups, perceived as a pro-European elite, or they could turn to Eurosceptic anti-establishment parties. The relative strength of the three traditional parties in the EP merely determined the share of the spoils they received. To the extent that there were differences in policies they were mainly the result of one or the other group being stronger in the Council. With the clearer choice for voters also comes the opportunity to hold the coalition parties accountable for the policies they set, reward them by re-electing them, or punish them by bringing the other side of the political spectrum to power, as is the case in parliamentary democracies.

That brings me to the third effect of the demise of the grand coalition: its consequences for the functioning of the EU institutions. Until the 1980s, decisions required unanimity in the Council. Since then majority voting has gradually become the standard. In addition, the Council started using majority voting to appoint the Commission as a result of the 2001 Nice Treaty. This evolution toward majority voting has created a government-opposition dynamic and raised the possibility that certain member states find themselves in the minority during a Commission's term and feel that they no longer benefit from EU policy making. The 2014 agreement amongst EP political groups that the largest group get the Commission Presidency further contributed to this evolution. The end of the grand coalition may reinforce it even more. The possibility that different party political majorities dominate in the Council and the EP, may complicate that picture somewhat, both with respect to the appointment of the Commission and policy making.

Finally, the end of the grand coalition offers new opportunities for the political groups involved. At first it seemed that the EPP was the main beneficiary of the new arrangement, since it managed to regain control of the EP Presidency. However, the S&D rather than the EPP terminated the grand coalition and it is doubtful that the S&D did not realise that the most likely outcome would be that the EPP take the Presidency. For the S&D losing the Presidency and ending the grand coalition offers the group an opportunity to reposition itself. In recent years the S&D has lost the support of many of its core voters, to the centre-right, radical right and radical left, both at the EU and national levels. The current situation may allow the S&D to re-define what it stands for and re-connect with its voters. It may result in the S&D moving to the left and forging closer ties with the Greens and radical left.

To the extent that the grand coalition is gone for good, or at least for the foreseeable future, the main beneficiary in party politics is undoubtedly the ALDE group. Whether the S&D or EPP win elections in the future, it is doubtful that they will be able to form a coalition without ALDE. Thus ALDE may have extended the role of kingmaker which it has already played in EP policy making in the past.

While the S&D's decision to terminate the grand coalition thus offers voters a clearer choice, creates more of

government-opposition dynamic in the EU, and allows itself to move to the left, the group that made deals with the followers of Grillo and Berlusconi in less than one week may be the big winner.

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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.

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