

How Brexit will affect the balance of power in the European Parliament

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Given the UK has one of the largest contingents of MEPs, how will Brexit change the way political parties are aligned in the European Parliament? [Angelos Chrysogelos](#) writes that the effects of removing British MEPs from the Parliament will be wide-ranging, with sovereigntist forces potentially strengthened inside the centre-right EPP, the centre-left S&D becoming more oriented toward an anti-austerity platform, and Eurosceptic forces more likely to consolidate around the ENF group led by Marine Le Pen.



After the decision of the British people to leave the EU, it is time to start assessing how EU politics and the EU's institutions will move forward in the absence of the UK. One area that has not received much attention yet is the European Parliament and the interactions between parliamentary groupings, as well as the politics within and between European party families.

Even though the details and timetable of the EU-UK divorce are still unclear, it should be expected that the European elections in 2019 will not be held in the UK and that the next European Parliament will not contain British MEPs. This does not seem so dramatic in terms of numbers. The UK currently has 73 of the 751 Members of the European Parliament – a bit less than 10% of the total. Yet the way these MEPs are distributed among party groups currently implies some significant changes in the dynamics of the EP after 2019.

The impact on the EPP

For the biggest European party family and EP group, the [centre-right European People's Party \(EPP\)](#), Brexit represents a major blow. Even though the practical impact on the EPP will be minimal, since the British Conservatives had already left the EPP in 2009, Brexit significantly weakens the centre-right agenda in a broad range of issues: completion of the common market, more international trade, a stronger transatlantic link, and a tougher stance against Vladimir Putin's Russia.

Brexit will also complicate the relationships inside the EPP family. A more assertive role of France in a post-Brexit EU will perhaps be mirrored in an equally assertive presence of the [French Gaullists under the leadership of Nicolas Sarkozy](#) who, in attempting his comeback, will be tempted to emphasise his differences with Angela Merkel on issues ranging from the economy to migration. The exit of the UK is a severe blow to the influence of economically liberal parties from post-communist countries, like [the Polish Civic Platform](#), while the populist overtones of the British referendum campaign will embolden nationalist and anti-immigration voices inside the EPP, led by Hungary's Viktor Orban.

A blow for the S&D

For the [socialist and social-democratic party family](#) the departure of the UK will be a blow of immense proportions. Once the source of fresh ideas about the future of social democracy in Europe, the Labour Party will exit the [parliamentary group of the Socialists and Democrats \(S&D\)](#) at a time of severe challenges for the centre-left. Currently Labour has 20 MEPs who make up just 10.5% of S&D's membership. Yet the departure of Labour can have significant consequences for the balance between the different sub-streams of the centre-left in the EP.



The Parliament's hemicycle during a plenary session in Strasbourg. Credits: Diliff / Wikimedia Commons

Today there is a balance between northern and Mediterranean MEPs in the S&D group: 72 from northern countries versus 74 from the Mediterranean (including France). The other 43 MEPs are from the post-communist east. The divide between northern social-democratic and southern socialist parties has historically been a significant one for the centre-left. In the context of the Eurozone crisis, this becomes even more important as it reflects the different sides of the lender/borrower divide with respect to bailouts and austerity.

After Brexit, the camp of northern social democratic parties will lose one of its most important members. An S&D group under the stronger influence of parties from southern countries will be a more difficult partner to the austerity-committed EPP. Given that the grand coalition between the two big party families has historically [provided the backbone](#) of policymaking in the EP, the exit of pro-market and pro-reform Labour may have important implications for the effectiveness of the EP's role in EU governance.

The effect on ALDE

The liberal party family of the [Alliance for Liberals and Democrats for Europe](#) (ALDE) has historically formed the third largest group in the EP. Even though their clout has decreased since the 2004 enlargement, liberals have formed an [integral part](#) of winning coalitions in the EP together with either the EPP or S&D and more usually with both.

For the liberals the loss of the UK will be crippling. The British Liberal Democrats (Lib Dems) have for long been one of the two major parties in the group and the family – the other being the German FDP. [Lib Dem MEPs](#) have over the years taken [leading roles](#) in the group and the EP as a whole. The departure of the Lib Dems will mean a severe loss of political talent for ALDE.

With the Lib Dems out, ALDE's relative strength in European politics and their capacity to act as a bridge between the left and right will further decrease, especially since liberals are weak in most other big EU member-states. The rise of [Ciudadanos](#) in Spain will only partially compensate for the departure of the Lib Dems.

A consolidation of Eurosceptic parties

Finally, Brexit will trigger important developments in the right end of the political spectrum. Currently two of the three groupings to the right of the EPP are vehicles for the agendas of British parties. The [European Conservatives and Reformists](#) (ECR) group was created by the British Conservatives after they left the EPP. Further to the right, the [Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy](#) (EFDD) group has for years served as UKIP's platform. Even though after the EP elections of 2014 UKIP accepted into the EFDD Italy's [Five Star Movement](#) and its large number of MEPs, UKIP still provides half of EFDD MEPs. It is safe to assume that, deprived of their British founders, the ECR and EFDD will not survive after 2019.

With the Conservatives and UKIP out, the Eurosceptic right will be weakened somewhat in the EP. Currently all forces to the right of the EPP occupy 23% of seats, but in a UK-less EP that percentage would fall to 19% (based on the results of the 2014 elections). But the ECR's and EFDD's disappearance leaves the space open for the [Europe of Nations and Freedom \(ENF\)](#) to become the main expression of the Eurosceptic right in the EP.

The ENF is an effort to create an EP group of five of the most prominent populist radical right parties in Europe: the French Front National, the Dutch PVV, the Lega Nord from Italy, the Austrian FPÖ and the Flemish Vlaams Belang. Their attempts to reach the threshold of representation from at least seven member-states required to create an EP group were repeatedly unsuccessful. But in the summer of 2015 they [cleared this threshold](#) by attracting a number of wavering MEPs from other right-wing groups.

With neither the ECR nor the EFDD around, it is almost certain that the ENF will find it easy to attract MEPs from other countries after the 2019 European elections and thus reinforce its group. With the British parties out of the picture there is little to keep the ENF from finally establishing itself as the main force to the right of the EPP. Thus an effect of Brexit will be to consolidate the representation of Euroscepticism in the EP around the populist radical right and facilitate transnational cooperation of the far right, [something it has historically been quite ineffective at](#).

In conclusion, Brexit will upset many finely negotiated compromises in the parliamentary and transnational politics of the EU. It may embolden sovereigntist forces inside the EPP. It can tilt the balance in favour of the southern, anti-austerity contingent of the centre-left, thus pushing the S&D to the left and making cooperation with the EPP more difficult. It will weaken ALDE and its role as a bridge-maker between left and right. Finally, it will facilitate the consolidation of Eurosceptic and nationalist forces to the right of the EPP around Le Pen and Wilders' ENF, a far more radical and authoritarian grouping than the ECR or EFDD. The aggregate effect of these developments is that cooperation within and between party families will be more difficult after 2019, adding further complications to EU policymaking.

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