

# Istituto Cattaneo

Research Foundation



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## Towards the European elections

An empirical analysis of the votes cast by individual MEPs shows the alliances that emerged in the European Parliament during the 9<sup>th</sup> Term, what may change after 9 June, why the hypothesis that a stable ‘right-of-centre coalition’ will form is unrealistic, and in which specific areas it might take shape instead.

**Salvatore Vassallo and Catherine Fieschi**

This analysis is the first intermediate product of a broader research project of the Cattaneo Institute directed by Salvatore Vassallo on *The far-right in the EU coalition politics. Chances and threats for the European project*. The research is carried out with the contribution of an international team of experts composed of Wolfgang Schroeder (Germany), Dominique Reynié and Sofia Ventura (France), Edoardo Bressanelli, Margherita de Candia (Italy), Dominika Kasprowicz and Natasza Styczyńska (Poland), Anna Bosco and Pablo Simón (Spain). It is supported by the Open Society Institute in collaboration with Open Society Foundations. Enrico Galli oversaw the integration of the datasets, Matteo Bianchi the recoding of some variables. Michele Scotto di Vettimo provided one of the algorithms for data collection.

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Istituto Cattaneo

### **Carlo Cattaneo Institute Research Foundation**

The Istituto di studi e ricerche Carlo Cattaneo (Carlo Cattaneo Institute for Studies and Research) was established in January 1965, taking over the inheritance of the Carlo Cattaneo Association for Culture and Politics, set up in 1956 on the initiative of the same group of young scholars who in 1951 had founded the journal *il Mulino* and then, in 1954, the publishing company of the same name. On 15 May 1986, by decree of the President of the Republic, it took on the legal status of Foundation and its current name.

The Institute conducts research and analysis on Italian society, public participation and opinion, government institutions and policies that promote individual freedoms, sustainable economic development and social cohesion. Its main commitment is to combine the methodological rigour of the best academic research with the need to provide interpretations of social change that are useful to guide it through conscious choices by public and private actors. In all these fields the Institute is committed to offering original analyses through the joint contribution of specialists from different disciplines: statisticians, jurists, sociologists, political scientists, economists, social psychologists.

Over the last 40 years, Cattaneo has edited over 100 reports for public and private institutions and has published - with continuity over time - an average of 4 research volumes per year, most of them at the *Il Mulino* publishing house. In addition, since 1986 he has produced the yearbook *Politica in Italia - Italian Politics*, published in two editions, Italian and English. Since 1987, it has also promoted the publication of the four-monthly journal *Polis*, placed in the 'A' band by the National Agency for the Evaluation of University Research (Anvur) in the sociological and political fields.

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# Towards the European elections

## An analysis of ‘coalition politics’ in the European Parliament during the 9<sup>a</sup> parliamentary term and what may change after 9 June

### The European project under discussion

The aim of the European project was to create an integrated area of stability and economic growth in Europe, to foster the consolidation of liberal democracy in the founding countries and its development in an ever-widening area through the gradual enlargement of the Union to include all the nations of the continent. And it has indeed been instrumental in protecting peace. But it has also grown by seeking common responses to unforeseen crises, such as natural disasters or other exogenous shocks, by promoting scientific research, exchange programmes for scholars and students, technological progress and sustainable development. It has strengthened the collective position of European countries both to face global challenges and to compete with other major players on the world stage. Imagine the fragility of individual European nation states *without* the European Union.

The long-term development of the European Project, however, was also made possible thanks to a commitment to a compromise dependent on a very specific institutional architecture: a coalition policy between the main European political families that saw the two major groups of centre-right (EPP) and centre-left (PES, later S&D) of the European Parliament (EP) converge on the fundamental objectives and lines of action to be pursued at European level, despite the fact that the parties and leaders belonging to these groups were almost always direct competitors in the national political arenas.

But European politics is changing. After a gradual loosening of the ties voters and *mainstream* parties (that began in the 1970s), the last decade has seen the rise of leaders and parties that have openly and bitterly criticised the European project and the political *compromise on* which it has hitherto been based.

In this current, 9<sup>th</sup> parliamentary term (2019-2024), the share of seats in the European Parliament won by parties belonging to the EPP and S&D groups respectively, fell below 50 per cent; while the European political groups located to the right of the EPP (with more radical positions especially on immigration – and on member state sovereignty) and, to a lesser extent, the groups located to the left of S&D (with more radical positions especially on civil rights and the environment) grew.



Of course, these changes can be seen either as a threat to the dynamics and integrity of the Union or as an opportunity, as an expression of an inherently democratic process that brings otherwise unrepresented preferences and expectations into the European institutions.

This analysis offers an initial response to those questions, in the tradition of the Cattaneo Institute, through empirical data on the concrete voting behaviour of MEPs and European political groups during the 9<sup>a</sup> parliamentary term. What does this behaviour tell us about the significance of the shifts already at play – and what can we anticipate for the next legislature?

## The shifting political centre of gravity of the European project

Here we provide the first results of a study that aims, in particular, to study the impact on European politics of the electoral growth of parties to the right of the European People's Party (**EPP**), i.e. parties currently associated with the **ECR** (European Conservatives and reformists) and **ID** (Identity and Democracy) groups.

According to estimates provided by [europeelects.eu](http://europeelects.eu), the ECR group will grow mainly thanks to the results of Fratelli d'Italia, while the ID group could grow, despite the parallel decline of the League, thanks to the entry of new members and the successes of the French *Rassemblement National* (RN), *Alternative for Germany* (AfD) and the Dutch *Party for Freedom* (PVV). Respectively, the ECR group is anticipated to increase its seats by circa 15% and ID by circa 30%. These are estimates of course – and do not take into account possible moves in and out of each of these groups post-election.

**S&D** and **EPP**, which, as we have just mentioned, lost their absolute majority in 2019, do not seem likely to regain it, since the small increases in seats credited to the EPP (if any) will only at best compensate for the slight decrease in seats expected for Socialists & Democrats. A comfortable 'pro-European' majority remains only if the seats of the traditional *third* pillar, represented by the Liberal Democrats (now *Renew Europe*, **RE**) are added to those of the EPP and S&D.

But one has to consider that the changes in national party systems (and consequently in the European one) have not only increased (on the left and the right) the number and size of new competitors. In fact, the growth of the radical Left (**L**) and the Greens (**G**)<sup>1</sup> on the one hand, and ECR and ID on the other, have also created tensions and divisions *within the* mainstream parties. The fear of being displaced by their new competitors has pushed mainstream parties to at least partially endorse their rhetoric and some of their positions (particularly on the right of the political spectrum), making 'grand coalition'

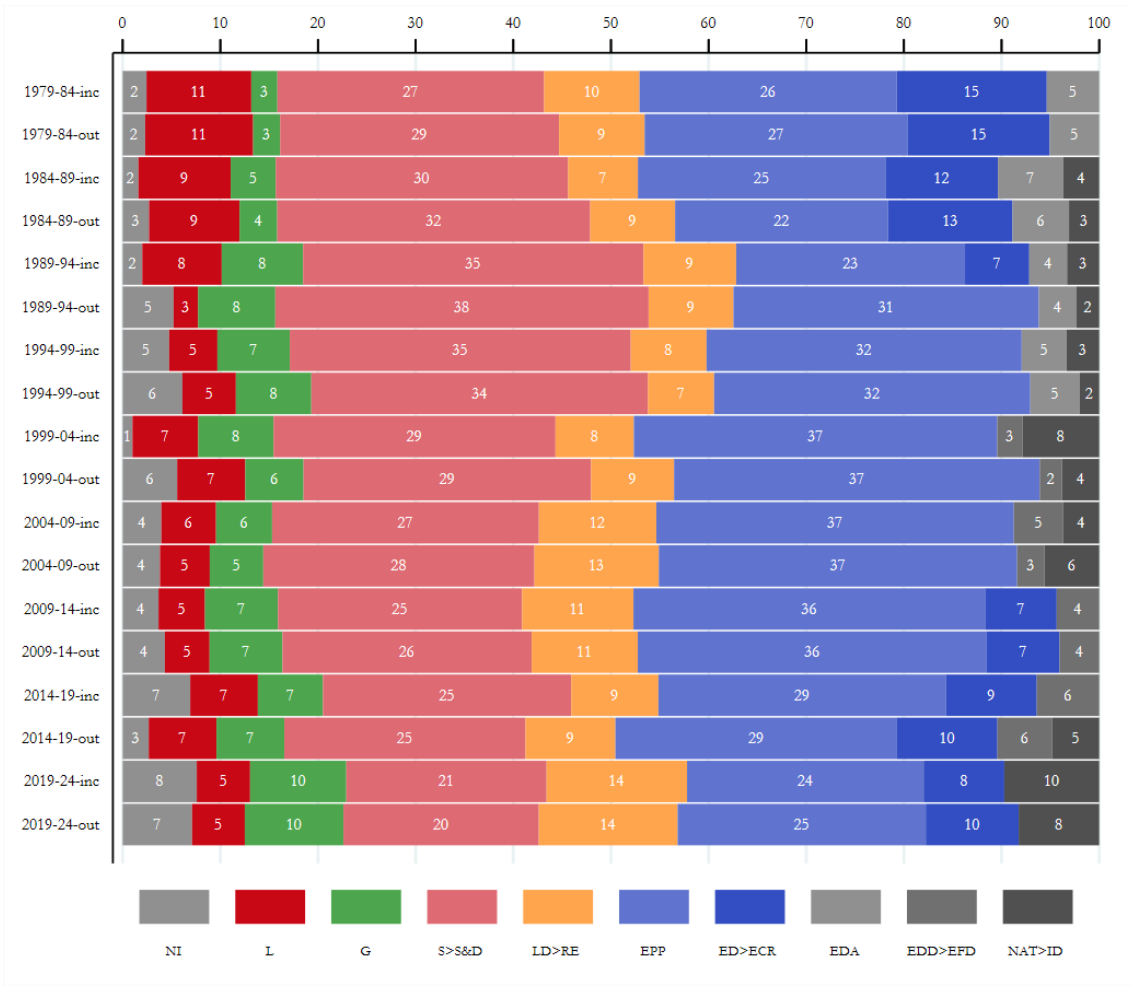
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<sup>1</sup> The current extended name of the group that brings together the radical left parties is *Gauche unitaire européenne/Nordic Green Left* (GUE/NGL), that of the Greens is *Greens-European Free Alliance* (Greens/EFA).



agreements more difficult and unstable as mainstream parties stray from their usual centre of gravity. We will return to this dynamic further down.

Fig. 1 *Composition of the European Parliament from 1<sup>a</sup> to 9<sup>a</sup> legislature. Size of the main groups as a percentage of total seats. Values recorded at the beginning and end of each legislature.*



Source: Cattaneo Institute elaborations on EP data.

Fig. 1 recalls how the power relations between these groups in the Parliament evolved from the first to the ninth legislature, linking them to their predecessors (variously named). The groups promoted until 1999 by the French Gaullists (EDA) and between 2009 and 2019 by the advocates of Brexit (EDD, EFD) should be added to them, as they are not entirely overlapping.

So what could be the impact of further growth of ECR and ID on the political balance within the Parliament (EP)? How and to what extent might this growth lead to a change in the fundamental directions of EU politics and more generally in the long-term trajectory of the European project?



The attempt by EPP group chairman Manfred Weber in July 2023 to block the proposed *Nature Restoration* Regulation in agreement with ID, ECR and a section of the Liberals (RE) was seen as a dress rehearsal for a completely different coalition strategy. That attempt was defeated (312 votes in favour, 324 against and 12 abstentions)<sup>2</sup> thanks also to votes by EPP MEPs. But if the same vote or a vote on a similar subject were to take place after the 2024 elections, the result would most likely be the opposite. There is a recurring fear a growth of ECR and ID might create the temptation of an enduring rapprochement between them and the EPP.

Are we on the verge of momentous political change?

## The very particular coalition politics of EU institutions

To answer our main question it is important to consider the specificity of European Parliament—and in particular the specificity of its coalition politics that are far more fluid, but also considerably more complicated than in national parliamentary systems. The EU's institutional structure and multi-level governance create a complex web of arrangements, with majorities varying in composition and breadth. And dynamics that differ radically from domestic parliaments.

In the Council, where national governments are represented, decisions usually require a qualified majority (55% of member states representing at least 65% of the EU population), but in some cases unanimity is required. In the Parliament, most decisions are taken by a simple majority, although in some cases an absolute majority of all members and, rarely, a 2/3 majority is required.

There are fundamental differences between the European and national democratic systems (which are all, in Europe, essentially parliamentary in nature).

The Commission is the only body authorised to propose directives and regulations, but The European executive (the Commission), although chosen by the two 'chambers' (Council and Parliament), is rarely subject to votes of no confidence. Not least because a 2/3 majority is required to challenge a commissioner. The parliamentary majority that approves by secret ballot the European Council's proposal for the appointment of the Commission is normally composed of the three traditional political groups (EPP, S&D, Re) plus the other parties represented in the European Council that contribute to the appointment. In 2019 this was the case, for example, for both M5S and PiS expressing the head of government in Italy and Poland. So the Commission is the only one to propose legislation but it does not have to resign if these proposals are rejected.

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<sup>2</sup> During the 9<sup>a</sup> parliamentary term (2019-2024), the traditional core of parliamentary majorities (S&D, LD, EPP) expanded to include the Greens, especially since the adoption of the Green Deal strategy.



Therefore, there is no need for stable coalition pacts between the groups that initially voted in favour of the Commission's appointment. Those same groups are therefore entirely free to approve or reject the Commission's proposals.

This has wider implications than simply forming variable majorities based on specific issues:

When parties are forced to form stable coalition agreements, they are also motivated to replicate the same majority-opposition dynamic on different areas of public policy. Consequently, they try to reproduce the same left-right divide in many areas. Within the European institutions, as we shall see, distinctions between left and right persist, but they are more fluid and vary significantly from one policy area to another, taking on distinct and fairly decipherable formats (patterns).

It is important to take this fluidity into consideration to avoid applying the lens of national governments to a vastly different set of dynamics.

## ECR and ID: A persistent lack of homogeneity

Another necessary set of caveats concerning the role and potential impact of the far right on the European Parliament clusters around the nature of ECR and ID.

First, ECR and ID have somewhat different histories. ECR was created by the British Conservatives under the pro-European leadership of David Cameron, with the intention of partially distancing themselves from the EPP, in order to fend off accusations and paranoia from Brexit supporters--whilst keeping Britain inside the EU. That attempt having failed dramatically, after the British delegation left the European Parliament, the Polish ultraconservatives of PiS became the majority shareholders of the ECR group; as a result, Fdi (although it had a tiny representation at the time) became a key partner as the only party representing one of the large founding countries. ID, on the other hand, is heir to various European parties and groups that are openly Eurosceptic if not anti-European, and which are now crossed with sympathies for the Russian authoritarian regime.

Second, the parties *belonging to* the ECR and ID share common traits but are not identical – far from it. They almost all emerged as political forces harshly attacking EU institutions and the agreement between the mainstream groups as a conspiracy against the 'real interests of the people'. They have done so by exploiting the negative sentiments generated in national public opinion by the effects of the Great Recession, the sovereign debt crisis and the growing migratory flows, as well as the EU's responses to these crises that appeared unbalanced and ineffective. But the new storms Europe has faced have changed the situation somewhat. The Covid-19 pandemic and, especially, the Russian aggression in Ukraine have made the need for closer cooperation and joint action at European level clear. As a result some of these parties, and this is especially the case for



Fratelli d'Italia, have moderated their anti-establishment rhetoric and taken a much less polemical posture towards the EU.

Finally, the ECR and ID, are internally less homogeneous and cohesive than the EPP, S&D, RE or Green parliamentary groups. Statistical analyses conducted as part of the current research (but which we do not report here) demonstrate this. On several important occasions, they have failed to form a common position and are unlikely to do so again. Moreover, their position is discontinuous over time, not least because they have often been dominated by the demands of one or a few national delegations. ECR originally had the imprint of the British Conservatives, in the current legislature it has been dominated by the PiS Poles, in the next it seems destined to be hegemonised by Fratelli d'Italia. Conversely, ID, which in the current legislature has seen Matteo Salvini's sovereignist League dominate, will pass into the hands of Marine Le Pen (RN) and Alice Weidel (AfD).

Taken together, these characteristics suggest that while these two groups – ECR and ID - may well cooperate on some issues, it is highly unlikely that they will cooperate across the board – thus weakening the idea that they could enter into a meaningful long-term alliance with each other, and with the EPP.

## What do the votes cast by MEPs in the 9<sup>a</sup> Legislature tell us?

To study the positions held by the various political groups in the European Parliament (EPGs), we created a dataset from all the data on votes cast by individual MEPs on all the votes held using the Roll Call Vote procedure during the 9<sup>a</sup> parliamentary term. That is, on the occasion of those votes for which the recording and publication of the vote cast by each individual MP is planned or requested (this is usually about one third of all votes. But the share of deliberations carried out by 'nominal vote' increased considerably during the lockdown years when the EP held sessions with remote voting).

Each individual vote was also classified according to the public policy area to which it (predominantly) relates, identified through the relevant parliamentary committee that preliminarily examined the dossier<sup>3</sup>.

This is a considerable number of votes (18,688), relating to all sittings of the European Parliament held in plenary from 18/7/2019 to 14/3/2024. Approximately two-thirds of these votes (12,233) relate to one of the main public policy areas (we have excluded those referring to minor areas).

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<sup>3</sup> We downloaded the data on individual votes through an automated procedure through which we were able to acquire and compile all the relevant .xlm files made public by the European Parliament. On the other hand, to download the information on the contents of each document submitted to the vote, including the committee of reference, after several other attempts, we used the scRapEU procedure (*An R function to scrape data on EU laws*) created by Michele Scotto di Vettimo, whom we thank for his collaboration.





Since not all members of the same group always vote the same way, the position held by each group on each individual vote is measured with a value ranging from -50 (when all group members cast a vote against) to +50 (when all group members cast a vote in favour). This value is then zero when all group members abstain or when in favour and against are perfectly balanced.

By way of example, Table 1 shows the results of the vote in which the EP rejected the motion supported by EPP group leader Manfred Weber to reject the Commission's proposal on a possible 'Nature Restoration Regulation'. In this case, several groups are completely united, but others, in particular RE and EPP, are not. Our indicator takes these differentiations into account and measures the position held by the group by averaging the values attributed to votes against (-50), abstention (0), in favour (+50).

As a result, the groups' positions can be summarised as in the graph in Fig. 2. The first line at the top shows the groups' "positions" with regard to the "Weber proposal" to reject the regulation drafted by the European Commission. The next rows (below and all the way to the line 21) show the groups' evolving positions in the subsequent votes on the content of the regulation (amendments and final vote).

In almost all cases the positions of the Greens, Left and S&D on the one hand, and EPP, ECR and ID on the other, are polarised along a left/right pattern, with the Liberals dividing internally between 27 in favour, 7 abstaining and 64 against. But, this configuration, with such a stark left/right dividing line, has been quite unusual so far in the European Parliament. The question is whether the new EP composition creates more opportunities for such configurations.

Different statistical models can be applied to illustrate the coalition configurations in EP during the 9<sup>a</sup> parliamentary term, across policy areas. Table 2 summarises the correlation coefficients between the positions held by each group with respect to all the others. In practice, these values indicate how closely each group's position matched those of all the others for each policy area. These values range from -1 to +1. A coefficient value of +1 would indicate that the two groups in question always voted the same way, while -1 would mean that they always voted the opposite way (these would obviously be two extreme -theoretical - cases that are never occur in reality).

We shaded negative values (contrasting positions) in red, and positive values (positions more or less aligned) in blue.

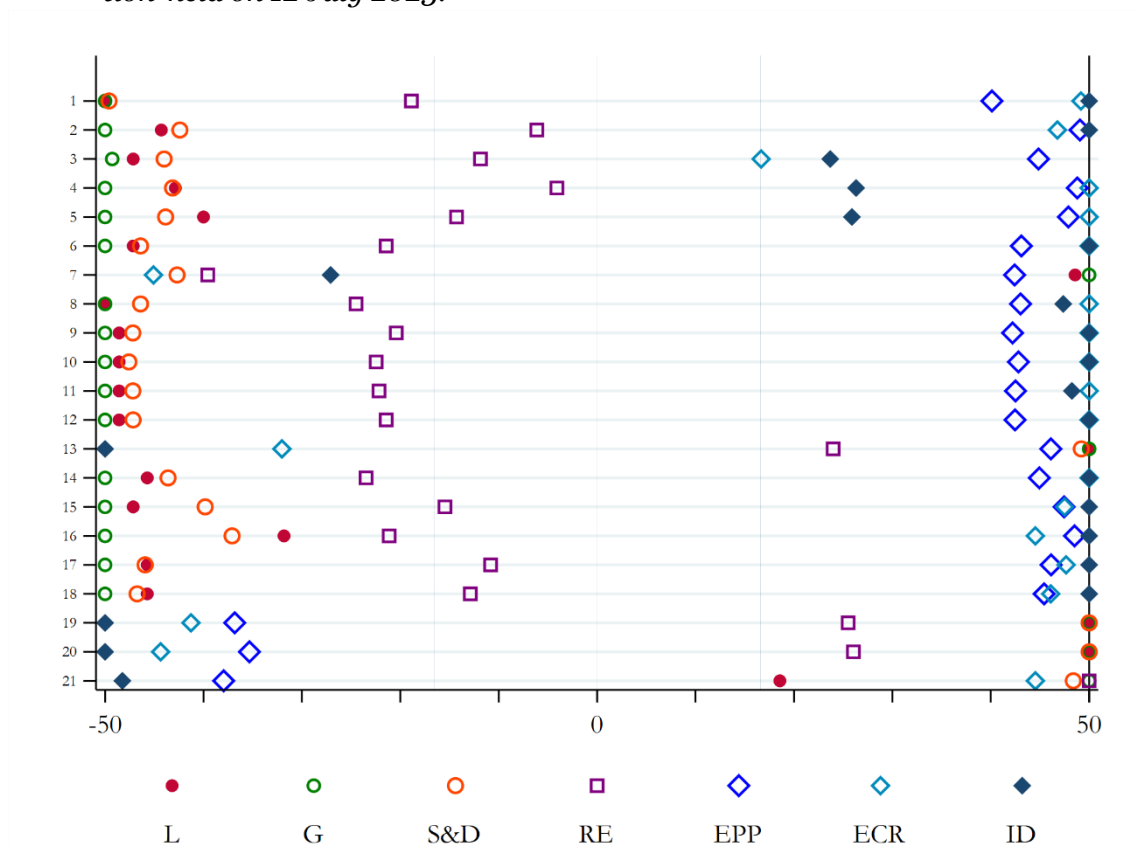
From this indicator one begins to see how ECR and ID held positions that were close to, and tended to contrast with, those of the other parties on: culture and education; gender balance; legal and constitutional affairs; civil liberties, justice and home affairs. Conversely, Left (L) and Greens (G) held positions close to each other and tending to contrast with those of the other parties on Fisheries and Agriculture. Other detailed aspects can be explored through the analytical reading of the coefficients.



Tab. 1 Results of the vote on rejecting the Commission's proposal for a possible 'Nature Restoration Regulation' (12 July 2023).

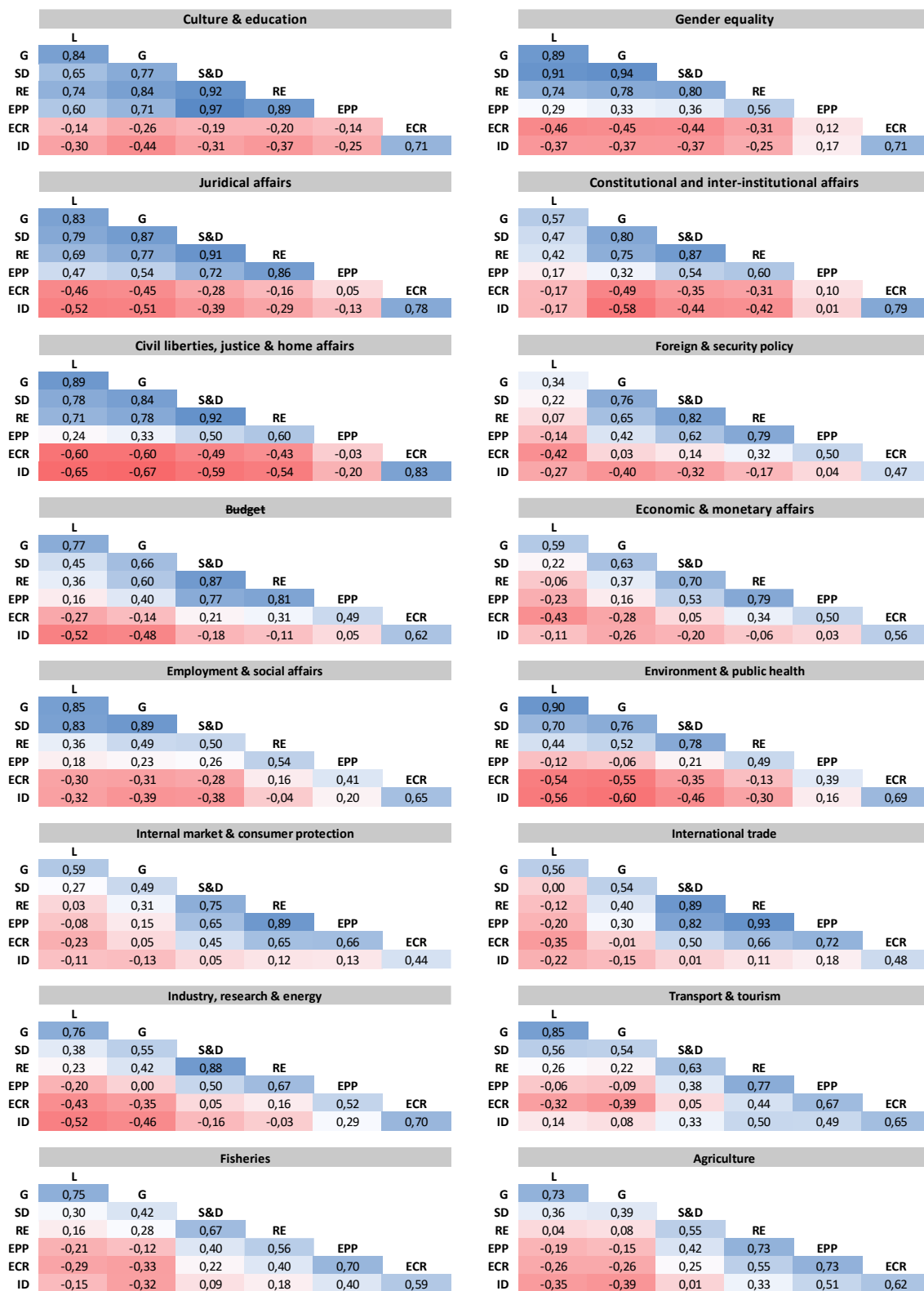
	Against	Abstained	In favour	Total
L	34	0	0	34
G	69	0	0	69
SD	124	1	0	125
RE	64	7	27	98
EPP	15	3	149	167
ECR	0	1	59	60
ID	0	0	56	56
NI	18	0	21	39
Total	324	12	312	648

Fig. 2 The groups' position in all votes on the proposed 'Nature Restoration Regulation' held on 12 July 2023.





Tab. 2 *Matrices of correlations between the positions held by the various groups in the 9<sup>a</sup> legislative term (2019-2024) in the main policy areas.*



Source: Elaborations by Salvatore Vassallo (Cattaneo Institute) on EP data. Plenary sessions from 18/7/2019 to 14/3/2024.



## The specific role of the EPP

Table 3 provides a simplified overview that makes the main results of our analysis clearer. It reports the average distance of the positions held by each of the other groups compared to the positions held by the EPP. In practice, it reports the average between ‘distances’ such as those depicted in Figure 2. Recall that these averages are calculated on all votes held by ‘roll call’ from the beginning of the legislature (July 2019) until mid-March 2024.

We decided to consider the distances of the other groups from the EPP, because the latter occupied a central role in the 9<sup>a</sup> legislature: a role that it seems likely to maintain after the 2024 elections. More to the point, the key question today concerns whether a growth of the groups to the right of the EPP (the ECR and ID) could change the political balance in the EU. But this is obviously *less likely* in those policy areas and on those issues where the distance between their positions and those of EPP is large and on which EPP has positions close to the other groups, while it is *more likely* where the opposite is the case.

The areas shaded in darker blue are those of greater proximity, while those shaded in light grey indicate considerable distance. This shows that there are areas where ECR and ID are very far from EPP (and thus from the core of the EP where majorities typically form); areas where ECR is much closer to the core; and even policy areas where ID tends to converge with EPP positions. The reverse happens for the Left and the Greens.

Tab 3 *Average distance between the positions expressed by the EPP Group and those expressed by the other main groups*

9th EP Term	N vot	EPP_L	EPP_G	EPP_S&D	EPP_RE	EPP_ECR	EPP_ID
CULT Culture & education	135	16	11	3	6	50	55
FEMM Gender equality	693	30	29	29	24	44	40
JURI Juridical affairs	327	28	26	18	12	44	49
AFCO Constitutional and inter-institutional affairs	691	35	40	28	25	41	45
LIBE Civil liberties, justice & home affairs	1.164	38	35	27	22	46	54
AFET Foreign & security policy	1.818	52	29	20	13	27	46
BUDG Budget	524	43	35	16	13	30	45
REGI Regional development	119	36	35	12	10	26	36
ECON Economic & monetary affairs	801	57	43	27	14	29	47
EMPL Employment & social affairs	1.065	36	36	35	24	34	40
ENVI Environment & public health	2.251	49	49	37	26	32	41
IMCO Internal market & consumer protection	376	48	41	20	11	22	41
INTA International trade	219	52	34	13	7	19	41
ITRE Industry, research & energy	445	53	46	25	19	27	37
TRAN Transport & tourism	376	50	51	29	18	19	32
PECH Fisheries	254	45	47	25	20	18	31
AGRI Agriculture	975	54	54	29	17	22	29
TOT Total	18.688	46	38	27	19	31	43

Source: Elaborations by Salvatore Vassallo (Cattaneo Institute) on EP data. Plenary sessions from 18/7/2019 to 14/3/2024.



Table 4 summarises the main results of our analysis.

On the basis of the concrete behaviour of MEPs during the 9<sup>a</sup> parliamentary term, we can identify a first group of **policy areas in which, unless they dramatically change their positions, it is very likely that both ECR and ID will tend to remain isolated**. In these areas, they will perhaps be able to exercise veto power in the Council on decisions for which unanimity is required if and as long as their members hold government positions at the national level.

Tab. 4 *Coalition policy in the 9<sup>a</sup> legislature and possible ECR/ID strategies*

Public policy areas	Area within which majorities have tended to form majorities in the 9 <sup>a</sup> legislature	Positioning and possible strategies of right-wing groups
Culture and education. Equality gender equality. Legal Affairs	The Erasmus majority [L-G-S&D-RE-EPP]	Isolation of ECR and ID
Constitutional and Interinstitutional Affairs Civil Liberties, Justice, Home Affairs	The perimeter of the rule of law [S&D-RE-EPP]	Isolation of ECR and ID
Foreign and Security Policy	The Atlantic Consensus [G-S&D-RE-EPP-ECR].	ECR Convergence Isolation ID
Economic and Monetary Policy	The pro-stability core [S&D-RE-EPP-ECR]	Possible ECR convergence Insulation ID
Market, trade, industry	The Alliance for Growth [S&D-RE-EPP-ERC]	Possible ECR convergence Insulation ID
Employment, environment and health	Majority Ursula or Weber? (L-G-S&D (RE) EPP-ECR-ID)	Possible Sin/Des polarisation
Agriculture and Fisheries	In defence of the primary sector [RE-EPP-ERC-ID].	Possible Sin/Des polarisation

**Then there are areas where ECR might converge even more often than it has done so far towards the traditional ‘Grand Coalition’** of the three historical groups S&D-RE-EPP (from which the Greens and the Left might in the meantime distance themselves), with the aim of making their votes and views count in a closer relationship with EPP. These are **policy areas where the distance between ID and EPP seems unbridgeable and where ID parties are likely to remain isolated**.

Then there are **areas in which a frontal opposition between left and right might emerge** more often than has happened so far. **These are areas in which, as on the ‘Restoration of Nature’ Law, ECR and ID can form a common front with EPP (or rather with the internal majority of EPP) and with part of RE, in direct and open contrast to the positions of the environmentalist component of RE, S&D, L, and G.**



On foreign and security policy, finally, ECR has already held positions in the 9<sup>a</sup> legislature that are very close to those of EPP and has often placed itself within the 'Atlanticist' majority in which the Greens are also included. As is well known, the latter, in Germany and almost all other European countries, are clearly aligned in support of the Ukrainian resistance against Russian military aggression, unlike in Italy, where the positions of the radical left and the Greens are indistinguishable. As can be seen, foreign and defence policy is the area in which the Left and ID are equally distant from the EPP and on the whole isolated.

## Conclusion: So what should we expect?

Our analysis demonstrates, in short, unequivocally that the talk of the possible formation of a 'new centre-right majority' that should resemble those present within some member states, including Italy, is completely unfounded, as it presupposes a homogeneity of positions between the EPP, ECR, and ID groups that has no correspondence in reality, except in some specific areas of public policy. On the other hand, it is likely that the ID parties, in particular, will try to activate a conflict dynamic putting left and right against each other in those policy areas where this is plausible. In particular, on all interventions related to the Green Deal and policies of transition towards sustainability, with particular regard to those that impact on the already most fragile and hitherto protected economic sectors such as agriculture and fishing.

The question of ECR and ID's influence has been framed chiefly around the possibility of alliances (however ad hoc) between these two groups and the EPP. Most likely, the best they can do is sometimes join forces with or support what is likely to be the largest party in the European Parliament. Our analysis shows that their influence will be real, but that it is likely to be circumscribed to some specific issues.

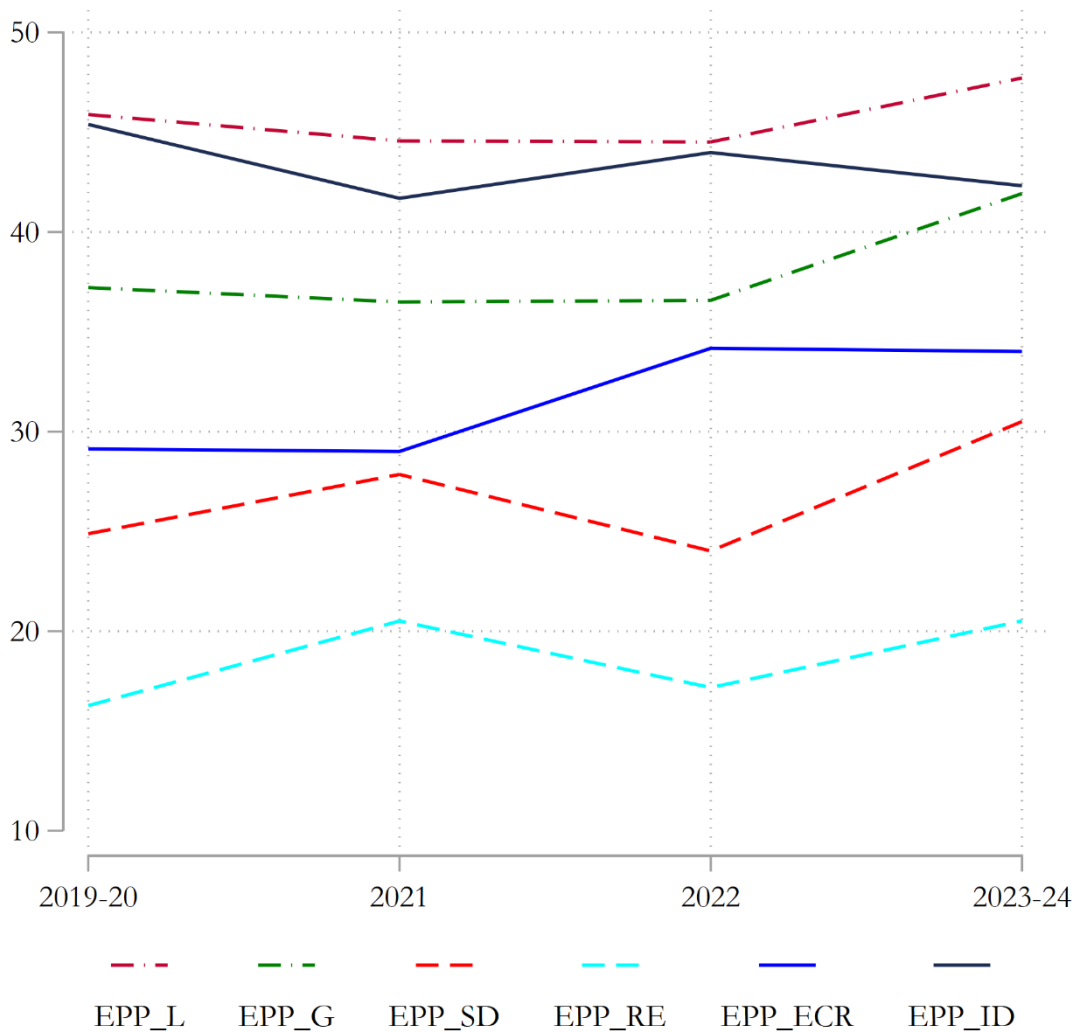
Of course, one might wonder whether, after their eventual success in the June elections, a general rapprochement between the EPP and the groups on its right might take place and the EPP might be increasingly inclined to cooperate with them. In all likelihood, this will depend on the development of relations between the national parties in the various national contexts. From this point of view, for example, the Italian situation appears very different at the moment from the French, German or Polish ones. In Italy, the three parties EPP, ECR and ID are part of the same government coalition. In Germany, AfD (ID) continues to appear completely isolated, and is held at arm's length by CDU and CSU, although it has risen strongly in the polls. In France, Rassemblement National (ID) has brought the Republicans to their knees and it is difficult to imagine relations becoming friendly in the future. In Poland, EPP members are the direct opponents of PiS (ECR). Even the data at our disposal do not give a clear indication in this respect.

In order to highlight any changes over time in the proximity/distance between the positions of the other groups in relation to the EPP, Figure 3 shows the 'average distance'



recorded over four fairly long periods of the 9th parliamentary term. The votes held in the last months of 2019 have been aggregated to the votes held in 2020, while those held in the first months of 2024 have been aggregated to those held in 2023. This is because if shorter periods are taken into account, there is a risk of giving importance to random factors, such as the fact that in a given quarter, issues on which there is a special understanding between the EPP and the parties to its right or with those to its left have gone to the floor.

Fig 3 *Average distance from EPP by year (all votes cast by roll-call voting procedure)*



Source: Elaborations by Salvatore Vassallo (Cattaneo Institute) on EP data. Plenary sessions from 18/7/2019 to 14/3/2024.

As can be seen from Fig. 3, contrary to what one might think, considering the attempted blocking of the Nature Restoration Act, during the latter part of the current EP legisla-



ture, on the whole, the positions of the EPP, ECR and ID came only slightly closer together. In the case of ECR, in particular, they were still further apart than they had been in the first part of the legislature, until 2021. On the other hand, it is clear that, from 2023 onwards, the distance between the EPP and the groups to its left (S&D, G, L) has increased. This could be due to a normal pre-election cycle or something deeper.

Indeed, as we have already pointed out, the growing appeal of the radical left and the Greens on centre left voters, and of radical right on the other side, could push mainstream parties (on one side and the other) to take more extreme positions and to move away from the traditional centre of gravity of the 'grand coalition'.

Thus, while the data show that on a large number of political issues the centrist coalition will hold, we might expect that, over time, occasional alliances with a numerically stronger right wing might create a hitherto unknown polarisation in what is the most consensual of institutions. Of course, whether a strategy oriented towards polarisation and confrontation between the traditional 'political pillars' of the European project will take hold will depend on the strategies that both protagonists, S&D and EPP, decide to pursue.