

POLICY PAPER

The European Parliament and climate change: past, present and future

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- **The European Parliament has thus far played an important role in steering the European Union in the direction of bolder climate action. Compared to the other governing bodies, especially the European Commission and the European Council, it has often been the most progressive force pushing for higher climate ambitions.**
- **At the same time, climate change is now advancing at an unprecedented speed. The overall concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere has reached its historic maximum and the emissions produced by human activity keep rising every year at an ever-increasing speed.¹ It is necessary to step up global climate action to avoid tipping points after which climate change becomes irreversible and which would cause a temperature rise far beyond the 1,5°C that is considered by scientists to be the safety threshold.**
- **Therefore, the elections in May 2019 were of crucial importance not only for Europe, but also for the whole world, as Europe needs to act as strong global leader in this regard if other countries are to follow.**



Climate record of the finishing European Parliament

As stated above, the European Parliament has been an important force in EU's climate agenda in the past five-year term. For example, when deciding on the targets for emissions reductions by 2030 (as well as renewable energy targets and energy efficiency targets), the European Parliament was calling the highest targets, which in the end had to be toned down to reflect the desire of some of the Member States.

During the trilogue meetings in 2018 (informal negotiations among the Parliament, the Commission and the representatives of Member States), the Parliament was calling for a 35% target on renewable energy as well as a 35% target on energy efficiency. The result was a compromise: 32% for renewables and 32,5% for efficiency. Had it not been for the Parliament raising the stakes, however, the final agreed numbers could have been even lower.

Apart from being an ambitious voice regarding the 2030 targets, the Parliament has also endorsed the long-term strategy presented by the European Commission in November 2018, which calls for net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050.²

Other climate-related legislation that the Parliament voted upon in the past five years included setting stricter emissions standards for vehicles, reducing the impact and banning some types of single-use plastic products and limiting the use of palm oil in biofuels, which has proven harmful to climate as its overuse causes serious deforestation.

In the current parliamentary cycle, most of the decisions about climate-protecting legislation have been either supported by a large coalition of the centrist factions or were taken with a clear left-right divide, where the left (S&D, Greens/EFA, GUE/NGL) were the main driving force behind this legislation. Out of these, the most climate-progressive group was the Greens/EFA.

This is supported also by an analysis of climate voting conducted by CAN Europe³, which shows that the most "climate defending" fraction in the now finishing Parliament are the Greens/European Free Alliance. They supported nearly 85% of all climate-related motions. The second best performing group is the European United Left/Nordic Green Left. The third best "climate defenders" are the Socialists & Democrats.

In the middle tier of "climate delayers" are the eurosceptics from Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy and the liberals from the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE).

In the worst performing tier of "climate dinosaurs" are the right-wing populist MEPs from Europe of Nations and Freedom and European Conservatives and Reformists, as well as the centrist MEPs from European People's Party. The figure below shows how each of the groups voted on average.













¹ BP, "Statistical Review of World Energy", 2019, <https://www.bp.com/content/dam/bp/business-sites/en/global/corporate/pdfs/energy-economics/statistical-review/bp-stats-review-2019-full-report.pdf>

² European Parliament, "European Parliament resolution on the strategy for a long-term reduction in EU greenhouse gas emissions in accordance with the Paris Agreement", 2019,

http://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/B-8-2019-0188_EN.html.

³ CAN Europe, "Defenders, Delayers, Dinosaurs: Ranking of EU political groups & national parties on climate change", 2019, <http://www.caneurope.org/docman/climate-energy-targets/3476-defenders-delayers-dinosaurs-ranking-of-eu-political-groups-and-national-parties-on-climate-change/file>.

Where do EU political groups stand on fighting climate change?

POLITICAL GROUP	AVERAGE GROUP SCORE %	# MEPS	
Greens/EFA Greens-European Free Alliance	 84.9%	52	DEFENDERS 
GUE/NGL European United Left-Nordic Green Left	 66.5%	51	
S&D Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats	 61.3%	188	
EFDD Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy	 40.9%	43	DELAYERS 
ALDE Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe	 38.1%	68	
NA/NI Non-affiliated (no group)	 24.0%	23	DINOSAURS 
ENF Europe of Nations and Freedom	 15.2%	34	
EPP European People's Party	 14.3%	219	
ECR European Conservatives and Reformists	 10.0%	73	

Source: <http://www.caneurope.org/docman/climate-energy-targets/3476-defenders-delayers-dinosaurs-ranking-of-eu-political-groups-and-national-parties-on-climate-change/file>

Climate change as an election topic

Prior to the parliamentary elections in May 2019, climate change has gained a lot of attention and prominence as a topic of public discussion. In some countries, for example Denmark, it was even hailed as the most decisive topic prior to the ballot. In other countries, such as Germany, the level of public interest in the topic took many commentators by surprise as the German Green party became the second strongest in the country and even overtook the established Social Democrats.

A survey conducted by Ipsos MORI and the European Climate Foundation⁴ has shown that climate was a priority election topic for 77% of potential voters across

where the impacts of climate change are already the most visible, as well as west and north European countries, where the recent waves of public mobilisation calling for bolder climate policies have been the most prolific.

Central and eastern Europeans did not consider climate to be the highest priority topic (for example, only 69% of Czechs view it as their top concern), even though they place a lot of importance on related topics such as air quality, sustainability of agriculture and general protection of nature and wildlife. This is true also for the average European – environmental protection is seen as an important topic for 82% of all Europeans taking part in the survey.

⁴ European Climate Foundation, "2019 European Parliament Elections Study of Potential Voters", April 2019, [https://europeanclimate.org/wp-](https://europeanclimate.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/European-Parliament-Study-Media-EU.pdf)

[content/uploads/2019/04/European-Parliament-Study-Media-EU.pdf](https://europeanclimate.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/European-Parliament-Study-Media-EU.pdf).

Outlook for the new European Parliament

The east-west divide is, however, visible also in the election results. While the "Green Wave" has swept across most of the EU with significant gains for the Green parties in Germany, France, Spain, Belgium, the UK, as well as Finland, Sweden and Denmark, it has left the post-communist countries of central and eastern Europe largely untouched. The one exception was Lithuania, where the Green Party finished third after the Christian Democrats and Social Democrats.

Within the Visegrad Four, no Green party member made it to the European Parliament, but there are several climate-conscious MEPs elected for other parties, which might prove to be strong proponents of more ambitious climate legislation in the groups like EPP, S&D or ALDE.

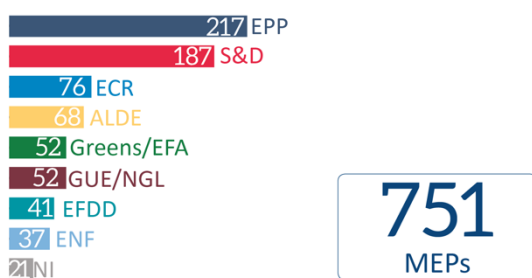
In the Czech Republic, the Pirate Party came third, gaining three seats in the Parliament. They were considering joining the ALDE group, but due to the presence of the ANO party of Andrej Babiš in the group, they eventually dropped this option. Eventually, after negotiations they decided to join the Greens/EFA group, saying they constitute "the highest potential for fulfilling their program"⁵.

Thanks to this move by the Pirate Party and some other minor European parties joining the Greens/EFA group, it is now the fourth largest fraction in the Parliament after EPP, S&D and ALDE (now called Renew Europe). Compared with the previous term, the Greens/EFA gained 23 new MEPs (rising from 52 to 75 seats), as the two figures below show. They can now play a crucial coalition-building role in making or breaking many deals, which gives them a strong leverage and poses a hope for the future climate legislation of the EU.

European Parliament, 2014-19

Size of the political groups

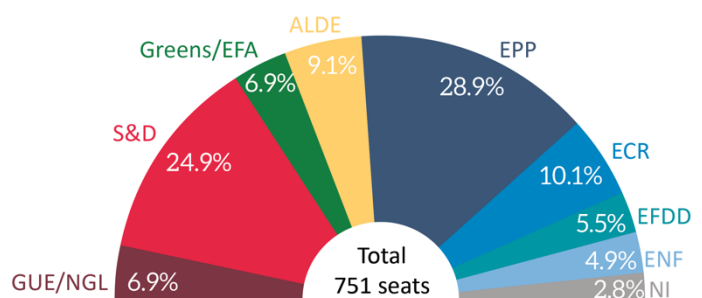
Number of MEPs in each political group as of 29 March 2019.



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Proportion of Members in each political group

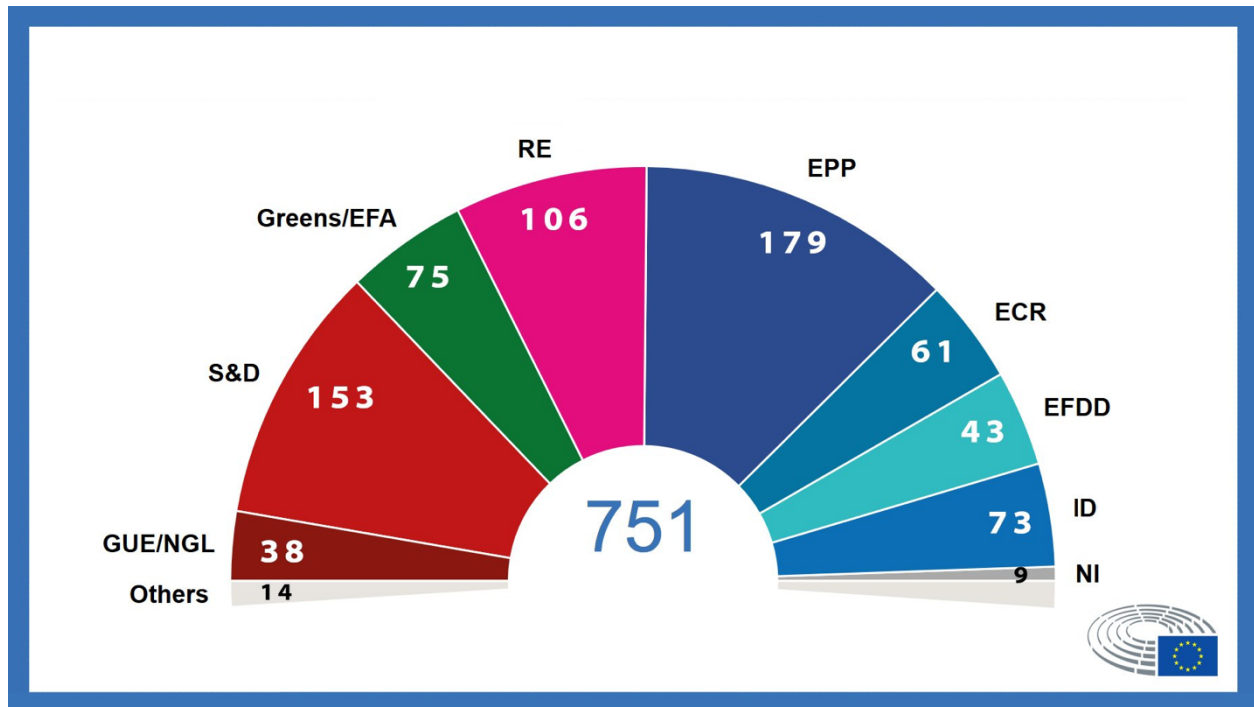
Share of each political group in the total 751 seats in the Parliament.



Source: <https://epthinktank.eu/2014/11/26/european-parliament-facts-and-figures/1-ep-size-and-proportion-of-political-groups-2/>

⁵ Pirátská strana, "Evropští Piráti se zúčastnili zasedání politické skupiny Evropského parlamentu Greens/Evropská

svobodná aliance", 29. 05. 2019, <https://www.pirati.cz/tiskove-zpravy/evropsti-pirati-greens-evropska-svobodna-aliance.html>.



Source: <https://vysledky-voleb.eu/>

Conclusion

The next five years will be critical in terms of climate policy. According to the IPCC – a UN scientific body – our climate actions in the upcoming decade will decide whether we will manage to keep the global temperature rise at the relatively safe 1,5°C, or whether we will face an uncharted territory of tipping points and feedback loops, which might create a dangerous mix of unpredictable climate impacts.

The EU will be discussing two major climate targets – for 2030 and 2050. As the consensus on the 2030 target has been reached quite recently by all the member states, there is a reluctance to re-open this folder once again. However, the current emissions reduction target of 40% is not in line with the Paris Agreement and not sufficient to ward off the increase of temperature beyond 1,5°C. As a result, there have been calls, including by the

European Parliament, to increase this EU-wide target in order to meet the Paris pledges.

The second big part of the climate debate will revolve around the target for 2050. In November last year, the European Commission unveiled its long-term strategic vision for climate-neutral EU⁶ by 2050 and soon after the European Parliament has endorsed this vision. The target of net-zero emissions by 2050 has since been debated by the member states and the support for it has been steadily growing. At this point, 22 out of the EU28 countries have voiced their support for this goal. This leaves only the Czech Republic, Poland, Lithuania, Estonia, Romania and Croatia opposing the climate neutrality.⁷ This might, however, change at the upcoming European Council meeting (20 – 21 June 2019), where it is supposed to be one of the main points on the agenda.

Another important strand of policy, which will be on the table for the new parliament and which will have an impact on the EU's climate performance will be the new set-

⁶ Climate neutrality means that the EU will balance out the greenhouse gas emissions it emits into the atmosphere with those it sequesters, e.g. through afforestation or carbon capture and storage technology.

⁷ CAN Europe, "Four new EU countries announce support for reaching net zero emissions by 2050", 18. 6. 2019, <http://www.caneurope.org/publications/press-releases/1789-four-new-eu-countries-announce-support-for-reaching-net-zero-emissions-by-2050>.

up of the Multiannual Financial Framework. The European Commission has suggested the so-called climate mainstreaming where 25% of the new EU budget would be devoted to actions contributing to climate mitigation. Similarly, other financial instruments of the EU, such as the Cohesion Funds, or the newly proposed Modernisation Fund should respect the principle of climate mainstreaming and they should not fund further carbon-intensive projects such as new fossil fuel infrastructure, which would lock-in the EU

in these industries for years to come, instead of facilitating the transition to zero carbon economy.

The European Parliament will thus play an important role in shaping the future of the EU climate policy not only for its five-year term, but also for the long-term future. Given the urgency of the climate crisis, the new MEPs must keep the question of climate change in mind when deciding on the new legislation.

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