

BRIEF

22 MAY 2019

#CLIMATE

#ELECTIONS2019

#ENERGYTRANSITION

#ENERGYUNION

CLIMATE CHANGE

AT THE HEART OF A NEW EUROPEAN POLITICAL BALANCE ?



To answer the rise of climate concerns symbolised by Greta Thunberg and build a new coalition for the European Union, climate change policies back by social justice and innovation can become new pillars for the EU and its climate policy.



■ **THOMAS PELLERIN-CARLIN**
Chef du Jacques Delors
Energy Centre

■ **THIERRY CHOPIN**
Special advisor at the
Jacques Delors Institut

■ **GENEVIÈVE PONS**
Director of the Brussels
Office of the Jacques
Delors Institute

Climate change is a defining challenge for Europe and the world. The way we respond –or choose not to respond– to climate change is already shaping our political systems. The recent Yellow Vest movement, youth demonstrations during the #FridaysForFuture and the popularity breakthrough of young Swedish activist Greta Thunberg may be the tip of an iceberg that may impact the political balance in the European Parliament after the 23-26 May 2019 elections.

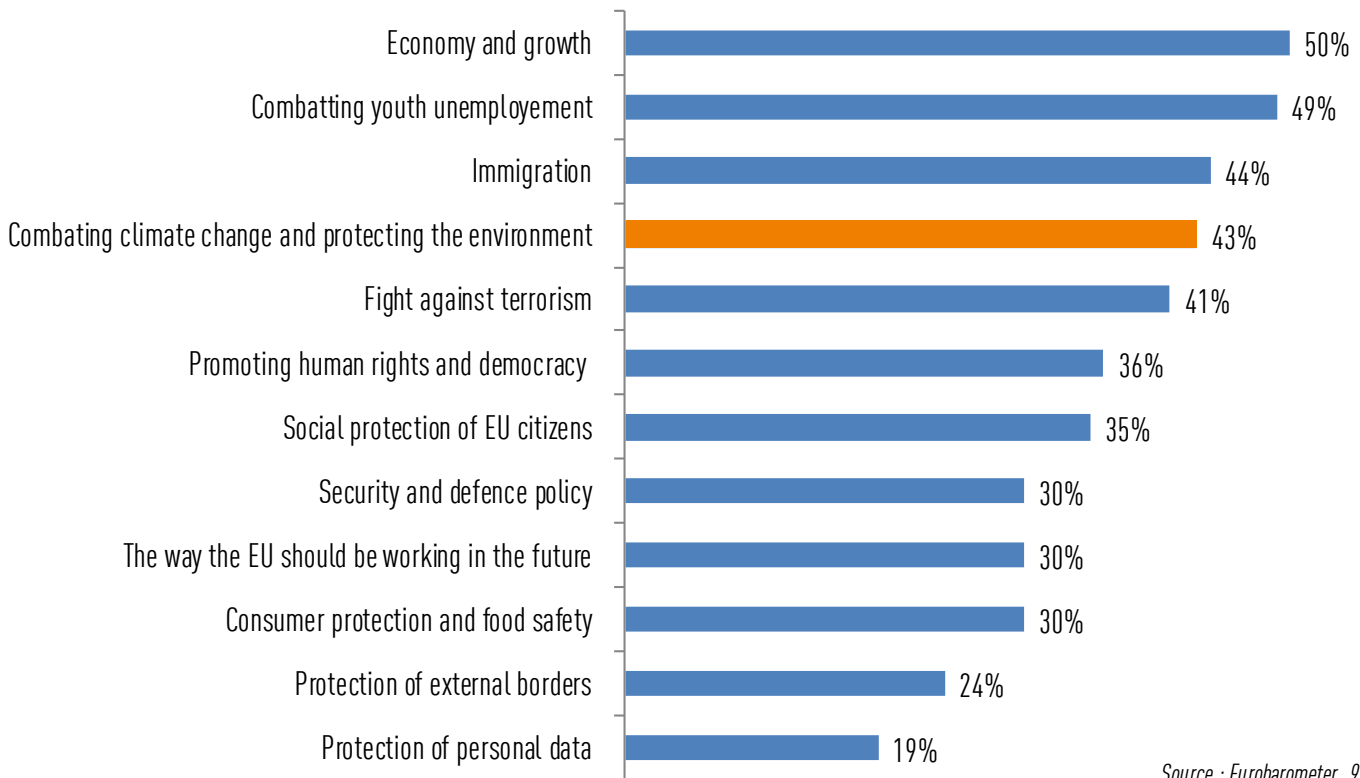
The next European Parliament will be more fragmented. The centre-left (S&D) and the centre-right (EPP) will experience a significant decline in their share of seats and, in contrast to the current situation, will not be able to command a majority together. Out of arithmetic necessity, parties' positioning on European integration is likely to be the key to forming the majority needed for the appointment of the next European Commission and in passing EU legislation. In this policy brief, we focus on (1) the way

EU citizens see climate change as a political topic for the EU, while (2) the 2019 European Parliament elections will mark the end of the S&D-EPP coalition that dominated EU policies for the past decades and lead to the creation of a new coalition, potentially with the Greens, (3) which would open a window of opportunity for a coalition agenda centred on climate action, innovation-based competitiveness and social justice.

1. EU citizens see climate change as a defining topic for the EU elections

When it comes to EU elections, Eurobarometer polls show a rising citizen concern vis-à-vis climate change and environmental protection. When asked what are the main issues that they want to see discussed in EU elections, 43% Europeans mention 'combatting climate change and protecting the environment' as one of the six

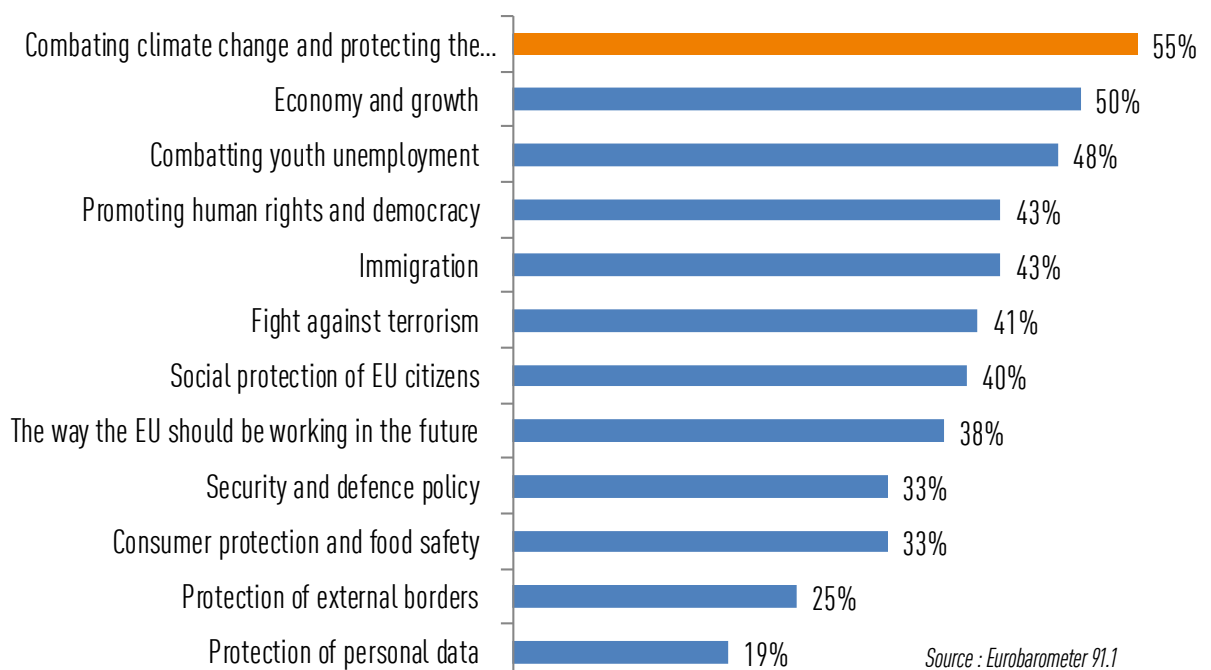
FIGURE 1 ■ Which following themes should be discussed as a matter of priority during the electoral campaign for the next European Parliament elections ? Firstly ? And Then ? (Max 6 answers) (% -EU)



Source : Eurobarometer 91.1

Key for political parties, **climate change is the most prioritised topic among polled EU citizens that are likely to vote in the upcoming European elections** (see figure 2).

FIGURE 2 ■ Which following themes should be discussed as a matter of priority during the electoral campaign for the next European Parliament elections ? Firstly ? And Then ? (Max 6 answers) (% of polled EU citizens who also said they were likely to vote)



Source : Eurobarometer 91.1

main topics. Climate change is thus in the top 5 of topics that get an answer between 40% and 50% (i.e. Economy and Growth (50%), Combatting youth unemployment (49%), immigration (44%), Climate change (43%) and Terrorism (41%), see figure 1).

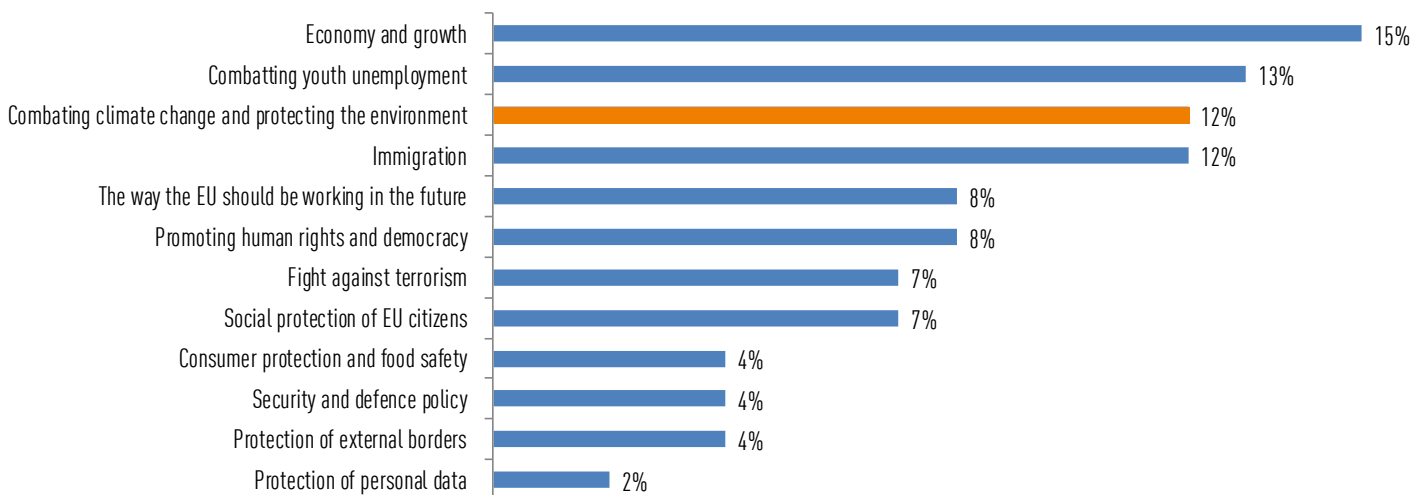
Looking at what polled EU citizens identify as the **single most important** issue to be discussed during the European Parliament elections, climate change remains in the top 5, at an ex-aequo 3rd place (economy and growth (15%), youth unemployment (13%), climate change (12%), immigration (12%).

Political parties did notice this rise of citizens' climate concerns. Liberals and social democrats beefed-up the climate components of their programmes. The greens hope to ride this tide while, On the right side of the political spectrum, after months of silence on climate change, the right-wing's European Popular Party candidate for the European Commission, Manfred Weber, now wants the EU to become carbon-neutral by

2050 –an objective more ambitious than what was included in earlier versions of the EPP platform.¹

Behind this EU average, we notice deep national differences (cf. graph). In brief, North/Western European peoples give a greater importance to climate than South/Eastern Europeans. For both EU and national politicians, this means that climate must be one of their key priorities to answer the call of many Europeans, especially in the North-West of Europe. It also means that the climate priority must be articulated with other issues, such as youth unemployment and poverty, which can echo the priorities of other Europeans, especially in the South and the East of the Union.²

FIGURE 3 ■ Which of the following themes should be discussed as a matter of priority during the electoral campaign for the next European Parliament elections ? Firstly ?



1. European Popular Party, *EPP Manifesto*, April 2019.

2. One policy proposal that does articulate all those element could be to renovate all the European dwellings where poor people live, so they can live better while consuming much less energy, whilst this renovation would create thousands of local jobs for Europeans, especially young Europeans.

2. The EU political balance will shift with the European Parliament elections: a window of opportunity for renewed climate policy

The new European Parliament following the elections of 23-26 May 2019 will likely be a more fragmented and less pro-European parliament, and will contain an increasing number of anti-establishment right-wing members (ECR, ENF and EFDD, also including a number of currently non-affiliated parties)³. Importantly, this does not depend on European Parliament Elections in the UK, and Brexit will have little-to-no impact on this new balance of power in the European Parliament.

Based on current polls⁴, the centre-left (S&D) and the centre-right (EPP) will lose many seats as well as the capacity to maintain their current coalition. Indeed, together they would hold less than 50% of all seats, losing their absolute majority for the first time since 1979.

In addition, alliances based on ideological similarities would not have enough MEPs to get a majority, such as centre-left (GUE, S&D, ALDE and Greens), centre-right (ALDE and EPP) or a right wing (EPP and anti-establishment right) coalitions. The consequence is that majorities will be more difficult to build. The only possible majority would thus be between EPP and S&D, together with the support of ALDE's liberals and/or the Greens. ALDE could be strengthened should it receive the support of newcomers Macron's LREM. On the left, members of GUE and other new left parties could make marginal electoral gains. Likewise for the Greens after recent upsurges

by Green parties in some EU Member States, especially Germany.

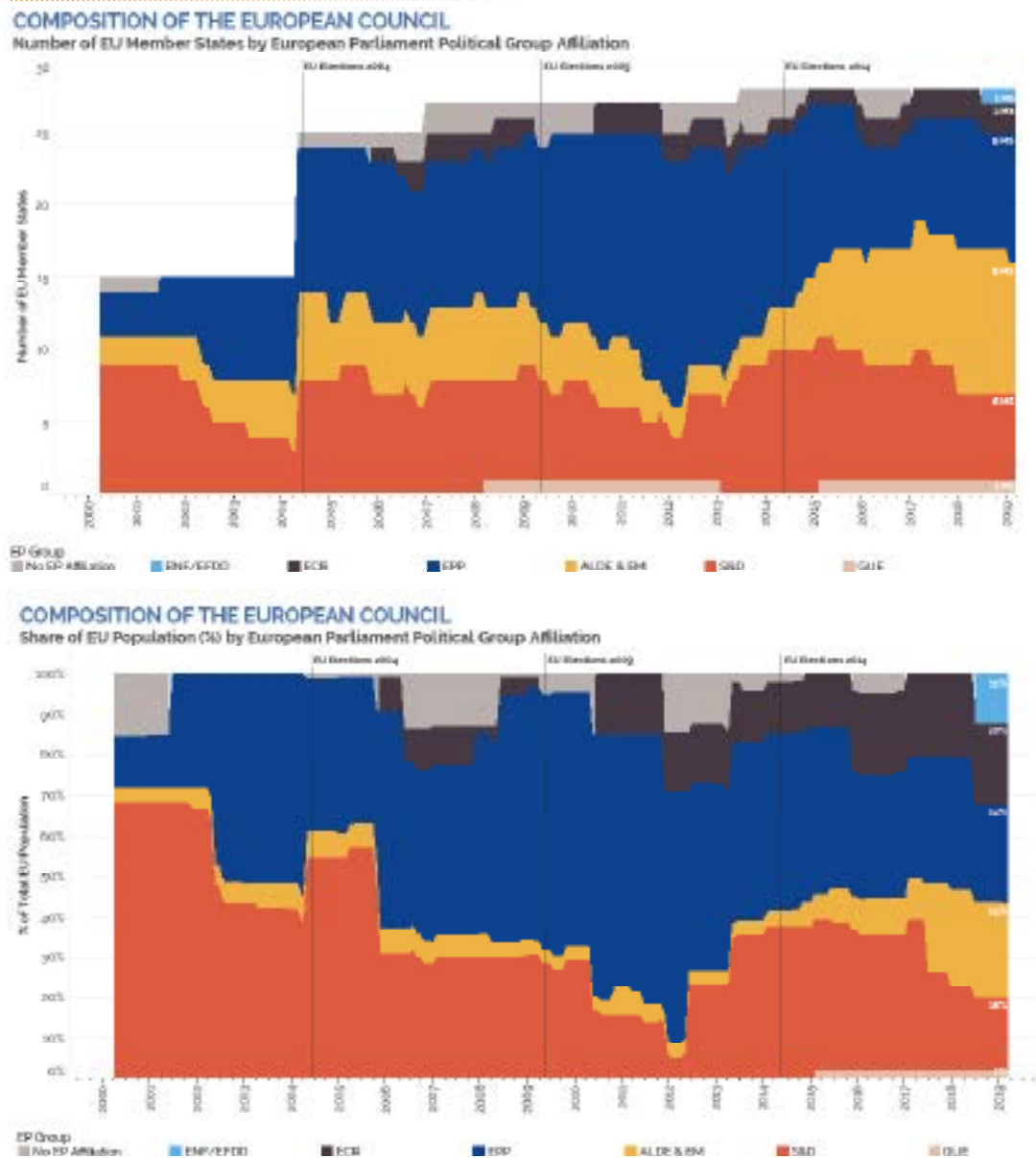
Among the MEPs that will seek to bring climate on the agenda, Green MEPs are not alone. Many MEPs indeed consider climate change to be of paramount importance, and many of them are affiliated in the S&D, ALDE, EPP, as well as other political groups.

To fully assess the new political balance of power in the EU, we must also take into account the current balance in the European Council, where S&D, EPP and the centrists/liberals (ALDE/LREM) also hold a qualified majority. Based on the party affiliation of each Member State's head of state or government in the Council, it is possible to compare the political balance in the Council with the one in the European Parliament. As of May 2019, EU Member States had leaders affiliated to EPP (9), ALDE (9), S&D (6), GUE/NGL (1), ECR (2), ENF/ EFDD (1) (see figure X). Despite electoral victories by some anti-establishment parties, for example in Italy, the representatives affiliated to pro-European groups (S&D, EPP, ALDE and LREM) still make up above 55% of the Members representing at least 65% of the EU population, which are the requirements to reach a qualified majority in the Council. In this context, the support of ALDE and LREM in the Council and its swing role as part of the coalition in the parliament will be key for the appointment of the new Commission.

3. Thierry Chopin, Nicolò Fraccaroli, Nils HERNSBORG, Jean-François JAMET, « *The Battle for Europe's Future: Political Cleavages and the Balance of Power Ahead of the European Parliament Elections* », *Policy Paper n°237*, Jacques Delors Institute, 24 April 2019. See also Lamy, P. et alii (2018), "European Parliament 2019: The Parliament and Europe to Come", *Policy Brief*, Jacques Delors Institute, 25 October 2018.

4. « *Prochain Parlement européen (UE28) : nouvelle projection en sièges* », *Actualité*, Parlement européen, 18 avril 2019.

FIGURE 3 & 4 ■ Political balance in the European Council at EU28



3. Squaring the climate policy circle: climate action, innovation-based competitiveness and social justice

EU politicians now understand that they need to speak ambitious words on climate change if they want to be elected. This was clear in the pan-EU debate that gathered the leaders of the six main EU political

families⁵. To retain their credibility, those politicians who form the forthcoming EU coalition, with likely EPP, S&D, ALDE and/or Green, will need to deliver.

As we have seen in Section 1, EU citizens also have other priorities, many of which are luckily fully compatible with climate change. There are also politicians in both the forthcoming European Parliament and in the current Council that give a strong focus on other topics than climate. There is therefore the opportunity to build a new coalition that articulates together three

5. Debate of the candidates for the presidency of the European Commission – EU Elections 2019, EBU, 15 May 2019.

topics within a single package deal: climate action, innovation-based competitiveness, and social justice.

3.1. Ambitious Climate Action

As a first act, this policy brief recommends the next European Parliament and the next European Commission to make the fight against climate change a top priority for their mandates.

This should be reflected in the strategic speeches of the next President of the European Commission, and in his pick for a Vice-President in charge of climate action. It should also lead the new European Parliament and European Commission to effectively convince National Governments to adopt a decision to highlight a new objective for EU climate policy: climate neutrality by 2050 (i.e. reducing greenhouse gas emissions to a minimum, and offset those remaining emissions by capturing the same quantity of emissions).

3.2. Innovation-based competitiveness

Many politicians worry that the transition to a climate neutral economy may harm the competitiveness of businesses. This worry is especially present among ALDE and EPP members. To answer their legitimate concerns, and effectively ensure that this transition strengthens the competitiveness of the segments of the EU economy that can make this transition a reality, the EU needs to invest better and more into innovation. Innovation is indeed a vital ingredient to the political and real-life success of the transition.

To foster the competitiveness of EU businesses through innovation, the EU must invest more in innovation⁶, develop the European Innovation Council and build-up 'Research and Innovation Missions' able to mobilise businesses, local communities and innovators alike to make the transition a reality, starting by making 100 EU cities carbon-neutral by 2030⁷.

3.3. Social Justice – towards a socially fair transition

Ensuring a socially fair energy transition is key to make the European energy transition *politically* sustainable⁸. Without social justice, many politicians, from the radical left (GUE) to the centre-left (S&D) as well as many central-eastern European MEPs and Governments, are unlikely to fully support a climate action agenda. Without social justice, popular backlashes will unfold as they already did in Bulgaria in 2013 and in France in 2018.

To paraphrase the European Commission, social implications of the energy transition must be a part of the policy process from the outset, and not simply be an afterthought⁹. For that, the Jacques Delors Institute recommends the next EU decision makers to elaborate a European 'Social Pact for the Energy Transition'¹⁰ that accompanies energy workers, creates jobs, fights air pollution and eradicates energy poverty.

Managing Editor: Sébastien Maillard ■ The document may be reproduced in part or in full on the dual condition that its meaning is not distorted and that the source is mentioned ■ The views expressed are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the publisher ■ The Jacques Delors Institute cannot be held responsible for the use which any third party may make of the document ■ Original version ■ © Jacques Delors Institute

6. Eulalia Rubio, Fabian Zuleeg, Emilie Magdalinski, Thomas Pellerin-Carlin, Marta Pilati, Philipp Ständer, 'Mainstreaming Innovation Funding in the EU Budget', European Parliament, April 2019.

7. Thomas Pellerin-Carlin, 'Invest in the clean energy future we want', *Brief*, Jacques Delors Institute, January 2019.

8. Sofia Fernandes, Thomas Pellerin-Carlin, 'Making the European Energy Transition Socially Sustainable', *Brief*, Jacques Delors Institute, May 2019.

9. European Commission, *Fourth State of the Energy Union*, April 2019.

10. Jacques Delors, Sofia Fernandes, Thomas Pellerin-Carlin, 'Europe Needs a Social Pact for the Energy Transition', *Brief*, Jacques Delors Institute, January 2018.