

# EUROPEAN ELECTIONS: WHAT FORM OF COHABITATION BETWEEN FRANCE AND THE EU?

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**T**his Tribune by Yves Bertoncini explains that the result of the European elections in France and in Europe on 22-25 May teaches us three major lessons at both the national and the Community level. This Tribune has been published in the French edition of the [Huffington Post](#).

## 1. The Right in government has lost ground and the Left in government is treading water, both in France and in Europe as a whole, to the benefit of eurosceptic and europhobic parties.

Lesson one: the Right in government has lost ground, dropping from 55% to approximately 42.5% of the total number of seats. The European People's Party (EPP) group, of which the French UMP is a member, is still first but it has lost about sixty seats (28 percent of the total, as opposed to 36% hitherto); the Liberal Democrats are still third, but they have dropped from 12% to 8.5% of seats; and lastly, the "Conservative and Reformist" group, which includes David Cameron's supporters and allies, has also lost ground (dropping from 7.3% to 6% of seats).

Lesson two: the left-wing parties in government are treading water, standing at around 32% of the total number of seats. The Socialists and Democrats (S&D) group is still second, with around 25% of seats, while the Greens account for approximately 7% of seats

Lesson three: the eurosceptic and europhobic parties have gained ground partly on the Left but more especially on the Right, garnering roughly 25% of seats. The radical Left, which has come first in Greece alone (where Syriza has garnered 26% of the vote) has only gained an additional 1 point at the European level (5.6% of seats, as opposed to 4.8 percent in the previous European Parliament). The europhobic Right led by the British UKIP separatists should only have garnered a few additional seats, the number depending on how many other parties it attracts to the group. The far-Right europhobic parties have garnered just over 1 point in terms of seats at this stage of the game, while numerous as yet unaffiliated protest parties account for 8.5% of seats, including Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement (17 seats) and "Alternative für Deutschland"(7 seats).

The new European Parliament's final political geography will be determined by the decisions made by one or the other of these "diverse" parties to forge alliances, yet all in all it is likely to reflect the geography that the 25 May vote result now allows us to sketch.

## 2. The National Front's lead singles France out and weakens it in Europe.

The europhobic Right or far-Right is ahead in only three of the EU's 28 member states, namely Denmark, France and the United Kingdom. It has also gained ground in some countries (such as Austria and Greece), it has lost ground in yet others (the Netherlands, Slovakia and Romania) and it is quite simply absent in most of the other countries. Its score in France is the most striking, because the United Kingdom and Denmark are not founder-members of the European construction project and do not play as central a role in the project. Moreover, the fact that both the UKIP and the Danish People's Party have stated on more than one occasion that they consider the French National Front (FN) to be unsavoury, faulting it in particular for its "anti-Semitism", may be considered an aggravating circumstance.

Thus France emerges from this vote with its image battered, which is tantamount to a battering for its influence in Europe too. Paris is going to be eyed for some time as the capital of a country that is not doing at all well from an economic and social standpoint, in terms of its identity, or even from a political point of view because its two major government parties account for only one-third of votes (and for less than half of France's seats in Strasbourg) while government parties in most other EU member states account for well over 50% of seats.

And there is worse yet: France is once again going to be seen as a country tempted to blame all of its woes,

especially its economic and social woes, on “Europe”, when the extremely varied unemployment, growth, commercial balance and public deficit levels in the EU tell us that **most of the crucial problems, and their solutions, originate primarily at the national level**<sup>1</sup>. In fact, this is one of the few pieces of encouraging news to come out of this election, whose results demand more strongly than ever that “France be set back on track”, but at the same time they hardly make it any easier to “rekey Europe” to reflect Paris’s wishes.

### 3. The new European Parliament’s decisions will continue to rest on the variable-geometry majorities set in motion by the conservatives and the socialists and democrats under the europhobes’ gaze.

The effect of the one-round proportional vote is not simply to reward the smaller parties, including the extremist groups. It also prevents a single large party from predominating and thus makes it incumbent upon all of the parties to resort to **coalitions forged on the initiative of the main groups**<sup>2</sup> on a case-by-case basis according to the issues MEPs are called to vote on.

Reflecting the votes of an overwhelming majority of Europeans, the EPP and S&D groups are always going to account for over half of the seats in the European Parliament between now and 2019, even if they will enjoy less of a dominant position than before (53% of the total as opposed to 61% from 2009 to 2014). Adding the seats held by the Liberals would allow this majority coalition to achieve a 62% threshold, or even a total of 69% if we add the Greens’ seats as well. Most of the new European Parliament’s decisions, starting with the election of its speaker but also the investiture of the candidate to the presidency of the Commission proposed by the European Council, are likely to be the result of negotiations between these two, three or four groups of parties.

From a strictly institutional point of view, the europhobic drive is likely to have a fairly limited impact, especially because it involves party forces which are very different from one another and which are likely to be sitting in three or four different groups (the radical Left, the separatist Right along UKIP lines, the far Right if the FN manages to re-form such a group, and the “non-attached”). Thus in effect the French people have just given some twenty National Front executives the right to “go on an Erasmus programme”: these executives will be able to discover Europe, which is no bad thing in itself, but they will not be able to have much more of an impact than their predecessors on negotiations in Brussels or in Strasbourg, whose achievements they will be able to continue to fault or to hail on a case-by-case basis.

It is on the political level that the impact of the europhobic drive is more uncertain, both in France and in Europe. While fairly marginal in terms of seats, the europhobic parties can sometimes influence the order in which government parties address issues and formulate solutions. The FN and the europhobic parties are not heeded by government parties when they call for quitting the euro or when they voice their support for Putin. But they can be far more influential, and heeded, when, for instance, they claim that internal and external migration is the European Union’s central problem, as shown by David Cameron’s drift in that direction (while he is far less outspoken regarding, say, the damage done by unbridled “mad” finance...).

So all in all, the European election has opened up an era of cohabitation not only between majority pro-European forces and minority europhobic forces, but also between France and the other members of the EU in areas extending well beyond the mere arena of the European Parliament.

1. Yves Bertoncini, “The EU and its legislation: prison of peoples or chicken coops?”, *Policy Paper No. 112*, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, May 2014.

2. Yves Bertoncini and Thierry Chopin, “Faces on divides: the May 2014 European elections”, *Studies & Reports No. 104*, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, April 2014.

