

Would a shift to the right in the elections lead to a change in the central coalition in the European Parliament?

Analysis of cooperation between the EPP and ECR political groups

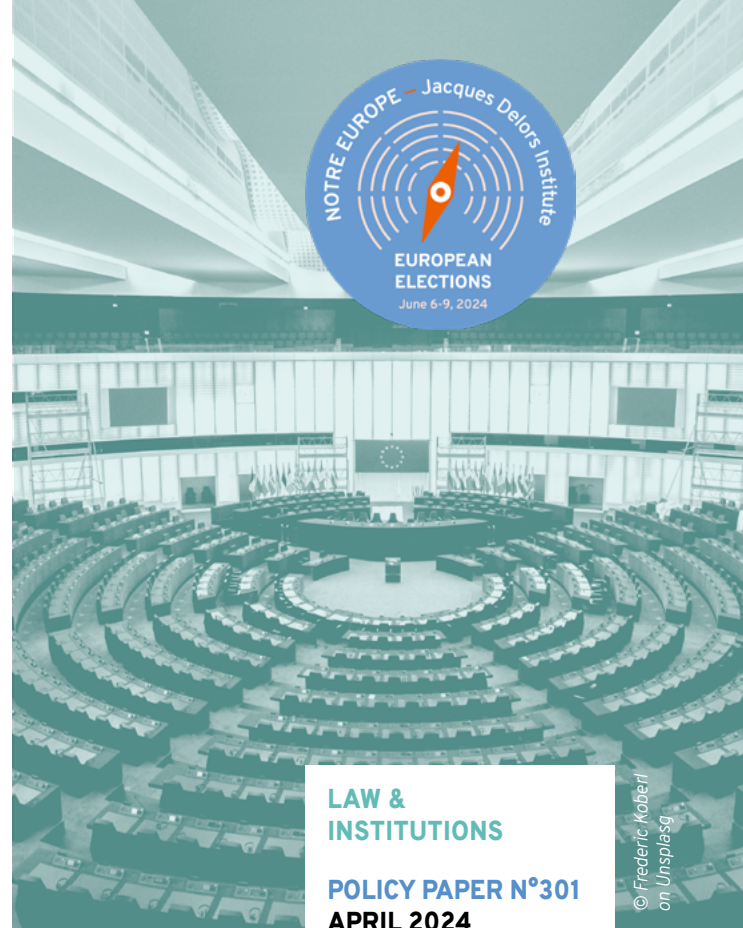
• Foreword

With just a few weeks to go before the European elections in June 2024, many people are wondering whether the political forces in the European Parliament could be reconfigured as a result of a shift towards the right, or even the far right.

What exactly is the situation?

This note analyses the votes taken during the parliamentary term just ending, and in particular the nature of the cooperation over these five years between the EPP (the large centre-right group) and the ECR Group (which includes MEPs from Fratelli d'Italia, the party of Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, and those from the Polish PiS, which was in power in Poland until last autumn). The ECR (national-conservative) group should be distinguished from the far-right group ID (Identity and Democracy), which includes the French Rassemblement National and the German AfD, and whose positions remain very isolated from those of the other groups.

Our study shows that on most legislative issues, the majority pro-European “grand coalition” made up of the three groups EPP, SD (social democrats) and Renew, (centrist-liberals) has, until now, formed the central bloc. It is within this bloc that compromises are made and agreements reached leading to a majority vote. Even if the respective weight of the three groups, in particular SD and Renew, should diminish, this situation is likely to persist after June 2024 according to current polls, which predict a contained shift to the right.



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#EuropeanParliament
#right-wing coalitions
#EPP
#ECR

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However, recent experience also shows that if this grand coalition breaks up, the EPP is more likely to join forces with the national conservative right (ECR) than with the liberal group. This geometry also varies according to whether the issue is the economy, the environment or migration, with the Renew group playing a key role in the absence, during this legislature, of a possible EPP/ECR alliance capable of forming an alternative majority.

This could change after June 2024 if a move to the right could lead the EPP, or at least some of its elected members, to abandon a partnership with Renew on certain issues in favour of an ECR group that is itself anxious to preserve its unity by distinguishing itself from its own right-wing group, the ID group.

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• Summary

The European Parliament (EP) has faced a dual dynamic in the 9^{ème} (2019-2024) legislature: increasing fragmentation of the Assembly, with centre-right and centre-left groups losing their absolute majority, and the consolidation of eurosceptic and nationalist groups. In the run-up to the June 2024 elections, there is much talk of a rapprochement between the European People's Party (EPP) and the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR). With the polls forecasting a weakening of the pro-European 'grand coalition' made up of the centre-right EPP, the Socialists and Social Democrats and the liberal Renew group, which nevertheless still has a majority, as well as the anticipated success of the populist and national-conservative right-wing parties, could such a rapprochement lead to a political reconfiguration within the European Parliament? The aim of this paper is to study the potential rapprochement between the EPP and ECR groups and, more specifically, the nature of their cooperation when it comes to forming coalitions in plenary. To this end, it analyses all roll-call votes in the European Parliament, for the 8^{ème} legislative period (2014-2019) and the 9^{ème} legislative period (2019-2024). For each vote, the majority position within the different political groups is calculated ('for', 'against', or 'abstention'), enabling us to determine whether the EPP and ECR groups have expressed similar or divergent positions.

The note is structured in three parts. Firstly, an analysis of cooperation between the EPP and ECR groups during plenary votes reveals that politics in the EP remains dominated by the grand coalition, made up of the EPP, S&D and Renew groups. These results thus qualify the idea of an institutional rapprochement between the centre-right and the national-conservative group in the EP.

The second part, however, shows that a basis for such cooperation exists and could lead to an alliance between the EPP and ECR groups. In the event of a break-up of the grand coalition, the EPP now seems to associate itself more with the ECR than

with the liberal group, a sign of an evolution in the EPP's parliamentary strategy. However, the frequency of these coalitions involving the EPP and ECR varies according to the public policy concerned. Thus, while most votes on migration policy are adopted by the grand coalition, a greater number of votes on European economic policy are won by these right-wing coalitions. If the grand coalition breaks up, the outcome of the vote will depend mainly on the liberal Renew group, which will have the choice of allying itself with the left-wing groups or with the European right.

Finally, the third part looks in more detail at the cooperation between the national delegations and the EPP and ECR groups. Although the groups in the European Parliament tend to remain united, divisions may arise, with national parties more inclined to work together or to oppose this convergence between the EPP and ECR. We show that during plenary sessions, while the EPP votes cohesively, there are more divisions within the ECR group. Some radical political parties, notably Vox (Spain) and the Sweden Democrats, seem more reluctant to cooperate with the EPP. These divisions could complicate the EPP's strategy for forming winning majorities on the right.

• Introduction

With the 2024 European elections just a few months away, the game of alliances is on. Many are suggesting that the centre-right and the national-conservative right could come together in the European Parliament (EP).¹ The European People's Party (EPP), a centre-right group that has emerged weakened as it lost its status as the "kingmaker"², seems to be in danger of seeing its position further weakened in the next legislature. According to opinion polls and projections³, although these are subject to change, the EPP group is likely either to suffer a certain loss of seats⁴, or to remain relatively stable. Conversely, a rapprochement between the centre-right and the radical right would strengthen the position of the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), one of the few political groupings (along with the far-right Identity and Democracy group) that should see its number of seats increase significantly after the 2024 European elections.

Discussions about a possible merger between the EPP and ECR groups are evidence of a potential political reconfiguration in the European Parliament. These trends can be seen at the national level, with the success of the far right such as Vox in Spain, Fratelli d'Italia in Italy and the Sweden Democrats.⁵ At the same time, well-established conservative political parties, such as the Law and Justice party (PiS) in Poland, continue to mobilise a substantial share of the electorate. By contrast, many liberal parties in the Renew group have seen their electoral support decline in recent months, such as Ciudadanos in Spain, the Liberal Democratic Party (FDP) in Germany, and Renaissance in France.

1 Virginie Malingre, « A un an des élections européennes, le flirt de la droite avec l'extrême droite menace les équilibres au Parlement de Strasbourg », *Le Monde*, June 2023, https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2023/06/15/a-un-an-des-elections-europeennes-le-flirt-de-la-droite-avec-l-extreme-droite-menace-les-equilibres-au-parlement-de-strasbourg_6177743_3210.html

2 Luca Bertuzzi, "Has Europe's largest political party gone rogue?", *Euractiv*, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/elections/news/has-europes-largest-political-party-gone-rogue/>

3 Mingo Garsha, "EU Parliamentary Projection: Meloni's ECR Close to Becoming 3rd", *Europe Elects*, September 2023, <https://europeelects.eu/2023/09/30/september-2023/>

4 Nicolas Camut, "Right wing set for big gains in 2024 EU election, polling shows", *Politico*, August 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/european-election-2024-polls-right-wing-big-gains/>

5 François Hublet, Mattéo Lanoë, Johannah Schleyer, « Le dilemme de la droite européenne : nouvelle Grande coalition ou majorité national-conservatrice ? », *Groupe d'études géopolitiques*, June 2023, <https://geopolitique.eu/2023/06/19/le-dilemme-de-la-droite-europeenne-nouvelle-grande-coalition-ou-majorite-national-conservatrice/>

At the national level, there is a shift towards the right in a growing number of countries, with the support of the far-right.⁶ In Italy, the right-wing coalition led by Giorgia Meloni and made up of the radical right (Fratelli d'Italia) and the centre-right (Forza Italia) won the elections in 2022 and currently governs the country, along with La Lega. A rapprochement between centre-right and national-conservative forces also exists, formally or informally, within the governments of countries such as Sweden, Finland and the Czech Republic. At local level, the radical right Vox party is now present in the government of several Spanish regions.

Furthermore, although the ECR group is often described as anti-federalist, its position on European integration, while emphasizing national sovereignty, is less radical than that of the far right-wing group ID, making it more acceptable to the EPP. What's more, the ECR group's geopolitical Atlanticist stance and economic liberalism⁷ seem to resonate with the EPP's positions.

In the European Parliament, the idea of a right-wing alliance between the EPP and ECR groups is therefore gaining ground and has influenced the strategies of the parliamentary actors during the current legislature. On a number of key issues, the EPP has recently turned towards the conservative right⁸, although it has not always succeeded in forming an alternative majority to the grand coalition except on certain specific issues. On environmental policy, for example, the EPP has had the support of the Conservatives and the radical right to oppose several elements of the Green Deal defended by the President of the European Commission, who comes from their political family, but also by the Socialist Group (S&D) and the Liberal Group (Renew).⁹ Several discussions also took place between Manfred Weber, leader of the EPP group, and Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Melloni, whose political party is a member of the conservative ECR group. Their aim: to discuss the formation of a right-wing alliance after the 2024 European elections, which would replace the traditional grand coalition between the EPP, S&D and Renew groups.

Nevertheless, this grand coalition, activated during crucial votes such as the election of the European Commission, continues to structure day-to-day parliamentary practices in the EP, as demonstrated by the systematic cooperation between the three groups for the adoption of most legislative texts. These discussions between Manfred Weber and Giorgia Melloni did not fail to elicit a great deal of criticism from the EPP's partners, with the S&D group, for example, calling on the EPP to "stop normalising the extreme right".¹⁰ The Socialist Group also felt that cooperation with the EPP was no longer possible as long as the group was courting populist and conservative voices to its right¹¹. The positions of the Renew group are identical.

6 Suzanne Lynch, "Europe swings right - and reshapes the EU", *Politico*, June 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/far-right-giorgia-meloni-europe-swings-right-and-reshapes-the-eu/>

7 Martin Stevens & Aleks Szczerbiak (2022). « Conservatism and 'Eurorealism' in the European Parliament: the European Conservatives and Reformists under the leadership of Poland's Law and Justice ». *European Politics and Society*, 24(5).

8 Martin Steven & Aleks Szczerbiak (2022) Conservatism and 'Eurorealism' in the European Parliament: the European Conservatives and Reformists under the leadership of Poland's Law and Justice, *European Politics and Society*.

9 Vincent Collen, « La droite européenne part à l'offensive contre le Pacte vert », *Les Echos*, May 2023, <https://www.lesechos.fr/monde/europe/la-droite-europeenne-part-a-loffensive-contre-le-pacte-vert-1941247>

10 S&D press release, "The EPP and Renew must stop normalising the far right in Europe", October 2022, <https://www.socialistsanddemocrats.eu/fr/newsroom/le-ppe-et-renew-doivent-cesser-de-normaliser-lextreme-droite-en-europe>

11 Aleksandra Krzysztozek, Sarantis Michalopoulos and Sonia Otfinowska, "European Parliament: cooperation with the EPP is no longer possible, according to the President of the Socialists and Democrats", *Euractiv*, May 2023, <https://www.euractiv.fr/section/elections/news/parlement-europeen-la-cooperation-avec-le-ppe-nest-plus-possible-selon-la-presidente-des-socialistes-et-democrates/>

Finally, it should be noted that limiting the analysis to votes in plenary session limits the scope of the analysis. These votes cover only one stage of the decision-making process in the European Parliament. They do not take into account the dynamics of cooperation that take place during parliamentary committees or more informal meetings, such as rapporteurs' meetings. In addition, it is not possible to examine the contagion effects of the Conservative group on the EPP group via agenda-setting, framing or the polarisation of debates.¹² Finally, it is also essential to remember that not all votes in plenary sessions are roll-call votes, some being by show of hands¹³.

I • The EPP more focused on the grand coalition than on the Conservatives

While from a political point of view, the idea of a rapprochement between the centre-right and the national-conservative right seems to be gaining ground, such a dynamic is not so visible in the European Parliament. During the 9^{ème} legislature, the votes of the EPP and ECR groups in plenary session converged in 63% of cases. In fact, while it is undeniable that the two groups frequently vote together, their positions have diverged in more than one out of three cases.

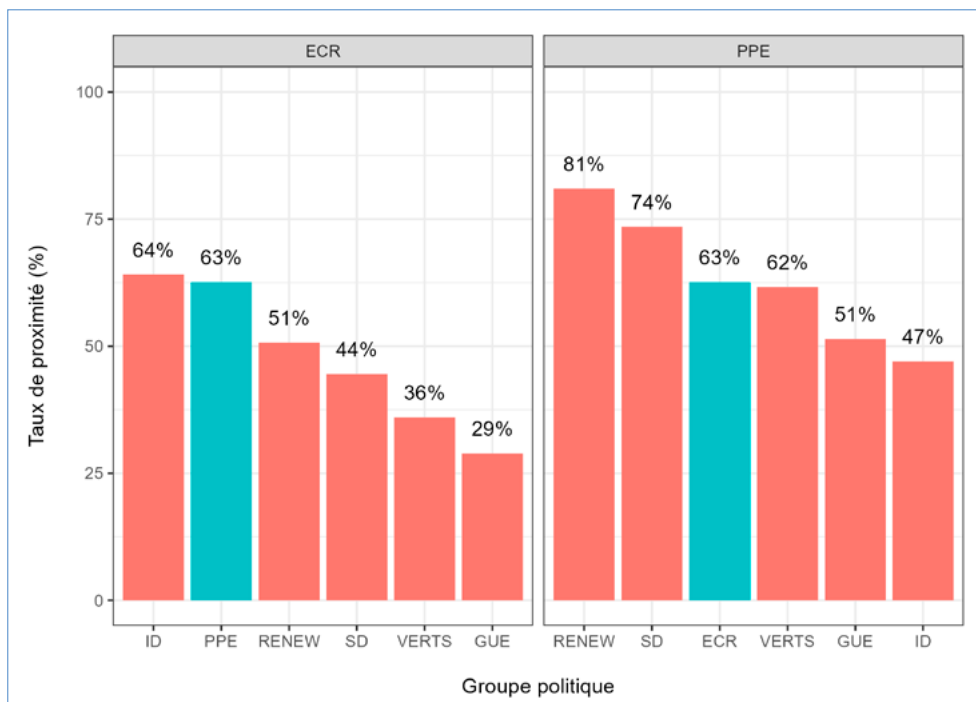
It is also important to note that this convergence does not imply that the EPP and ECR Groups are essential partners for each other. To better assess the extent of this cooperation, we compare it with the closeness of the EPP and ECR groups to the other political groups in the European Parliament (see Figure 1). The results differ for the two groups. On the one hand, the EPP can be considered a strong ally for the Conservatives. Indeed, along with the radical right-wing group Identity and Democracy (ID), the EPP is the political force with which Conservative MEPs vote most frequently. The ECR group can therefore consider the EPP as one of their main partners for forming alliances in plenary. On the other hand, the ECR group is far from being the EPP's preferred partner. Our data shows that the EPP allies itself more with the Renew (82%) and S&D (74%) groups than with the ECR group (63%). In other words, the Liberals and Socialists are the EPP's main allies, underlining the importance of the grand coalition in the European Parliament.¹⁴

¹² In this regard, we refer to recent studies: Bélanger, M., & Wunsch, N. (2022). "From Cohesion to Contagion? Populist Radical Right Contestation of EU Enlargement". *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 60(3), 653-672; Kantola, J., & Lombardo, E. (2021). "Challenges to Democratic Practices and Discourses in the European Parliament: Feminist Perspectives on the Politics of Political Groups". *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*, 28(3), 579-602; Kantola, J., & Miller, C. (2021). "Party Politics and Radical Right Populism in the European Parliament: Analysing Political Groups as Democratic Actors". *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 59(4), 782-801.

¹³ Given that some groups request roll-call votes on strategic texts, the sample of votes available to us may be biased. However, because a larger proportion of votes are now by roll call, these have become more representative of all votes in plenary.

¹⁴ Costa, O., & Marié, A. (2023). "Is There an Alternative to Consensus? The Impact of the 2014 Coalition Deal on Voting Behaviour in the Eighth European Parliament (2014-2019)". *International Journal of Parliamentary Studies*, 3(1), 36-62.

FIGURE 1.



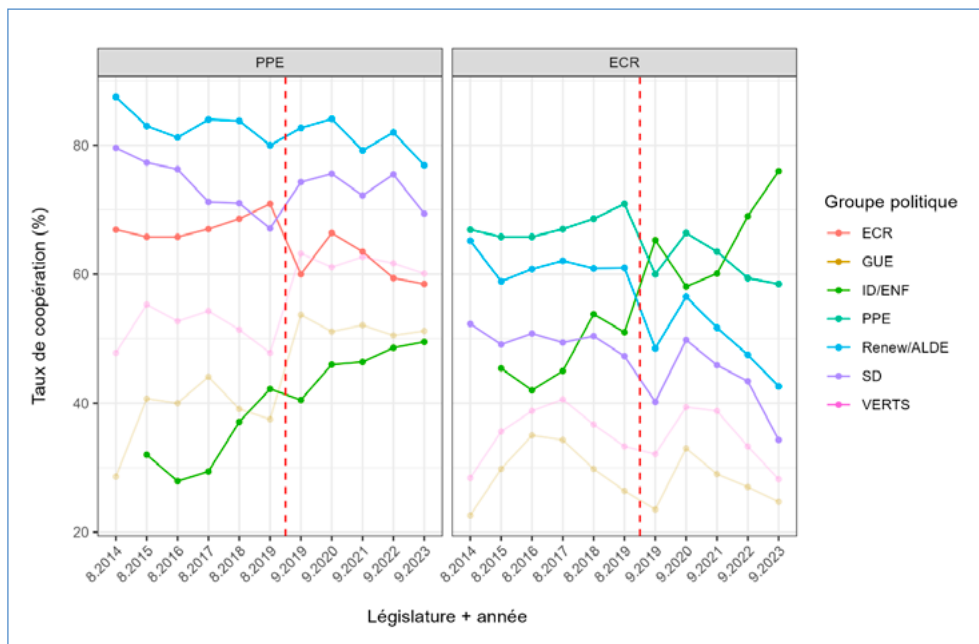
Our data confirms that the formation of coalitions in the EP is ideologically motivated and structured by two main cleavages: the left/right cleavage on the one hand, and the pro/anti-EU cleavage on the other.¹⁵ On the one hand, the left/right cleavage makes the cooperation easier between the EPP and ECR groups, which share ideological affinities. This explains why the Conservative group frequently votes alongside the two groups that are ideologically closest, namely the EPP and ID. On the other hand, the pro-/anti-EU divide limits the convergence between the EPP and ECR groups. In fact, our data shows that the EPP, which adopts pro-European positions, votes more often alongside the Renew and S&D groups, which are also in favour of European integration, than alongside the Conservative group, which defends an anti-federalist and Eurosceptic position. It should be noted that this analysis does not specifically examine the division within the groups and therefore does not address the presence of a national divide. However, several studies indicate that, although the national divide may appear on some texts, it is generally less pronounced than the other two divides mentioned here.¹⁶

How has the closeness between the EPP and ECR groups evolved? Although the two groups say they want to move closer together, particularly in view of the European elections in 2024, this convergence does not seem to be reflected in the votes cast in plenary. In the medium term, cooperation between the two groups even declined slightly between the 8th and 9th parliamentary terms, from 67% to 63%. Figure 2 shows the evolution of the closeness rate between the EPP and ECR groups and the other political groups in the European Parliament.

¹⁵ Otjes, S., & Van Der Veer, H. (2016). The Eurozone crisis and the European Parliament's changing lines of conflict. *European Union Politics*, 17(2), 242-261; Hix, S., Noury, A., & Roland, G. (2006). Dimensions of politics in the European Parliament. *American Journal of Political Science*, 50(2), 494-520.

¹⁶ Simon Hix, Abdul G. Noury, Gérard Roland (2007). *Democratic Politics in the European Parliament*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

FIGURE 2.



As far as the EPP is concerned, the data confirm a gradual decline in its closeness to the Conservative group, particularly since the start of the 9^{ème} legislature in 2019. Thus, despite the idea of convergence between the two political forces, their cooperation in the EP was only 58.5% in 2023, marking a historically low level since 2014. The graph also illustrates the importance of the grand coalition. The high level of cooperation between the EPP and the S&D and ALDE/Renew groups has remained stable throughout the 9th legislature. The predominance of the pro-EU bloc is also reflected in the gradual increase in cooperation between the EPP and the Greens. The Green group has become a secondary partner of the EPP within the grand coalition, and this cooperation has even become more frequent than that between the EPP and ECR from 2021 onwards.

With regard to the ECR group, our data reveals a strategy of increasingly marked by conflictualisation over the course of the 9th legislature. Indeed, while the closeness between ECR and EPP MPs has decreased significantly since 2020, the ECR group has strengthened its links with the ID. It should be noted that the ID group is the only group with which the ECR has become progressively closer during the 9th legislature.

An analysis of votes in plenary sessions between 2014 and 2023¹⁷ shows a reconfiguration within the European Parliament that does not reflect the right-wing shift nature of European politics or the normalisation of the radical right. On the one hand, the EPP group has gradually distanced itself from the conservative MEPs, underlining and reinforcing its participation in the grand coalition. On the other hand, the Conservative group, while sometimes voting alongside the EPP and the other pro-European groups, gradually moved closer to the radical right during the 9th legislature.

17 The analysis presented here concerns cooperation on all plenary votes. However, differences may emerge depending on the procedures and types of vote. There are variations in coalition dynamics, with a significantly higher level of consensus during votes on legislative texts and during final votes. However, looking separately at the different procedures and types of vote, our data confirms the fall in cooperation between the EPP and ECR groups since the start of the 9th legislature.

This reconfiguration can be explained by two main factors. Firstly, the strengthening of the grand coalition during the 9th legislature is the result of the increasing fragmentation of the European Parliament. In order to pass legislation without having to rely on the support of radical and eurosceptic forces, the traditional groups (EPP, S&D and Renew) have intensified their cooperation.¹⁸ Secondly, the decrease in cooperation between the EPP and ECR is also the result of internal changes within these two groups. On the EPP side, the withdrawal of Viktor Orban's Fidesz may have strengthened the EPP's pro-EU outlook, distancing itself from Eurosceptic forces. For the ECR group, the Brexit and the departure of the British Conservatives, who had less radical positions, may have pushed the Conservative group to the right, further distancing it from the EPP and the pro-European centre.

II • Break-up of the grand coalition and shift to the right of the EPP

In the European Parliament, a large majority of votes (72% during the 9th parliamentary term) are passed thanks to the grand coalition, made up of the EPP, S&D and Renew groups. This coalition, which has dominated the European decision-making process for several decades, was strengthened in 2014 to counter the rise of Eurosceptic forces.¹⁹ This cooperation enables the pro-European groups to lock in the decision-making process and thus limit the potential influence of radical and Eurosceptic forces. The grand coalition is almost systematically used to adopt legislative reports (95% during the 9th legislature), but it is also formed to obtain majorities on less important votes, such as those on non-legislative reports and amendments.

Despite the importance of the grand coalition, some of the votes in plenary are adopted by alternative coalitions, whether on the right or the left. If the EPP wants to win a vote without the help of the grand coalition, the support of conservative MEPs is arithmetically essential. Our data confirms the importance of EPP-ECR cooperation when the centre-right group tries to form an alternative coalition on the right. Indeed, if the grand coalition breaks up, the EPP receives the support of the ECR group in 78% of cases, the ID group in 73% of cases, and the liberal Renew group in only 38% of cases. Thus, during the 9th legislature, when the grand coalition is not activated, the EPP is more inclined to cooperate with the conservative and radical right-wing groups (ECR and ID) than to form a centre-right coalition with the liberal Renew group.

This trend became more pronounced between the 8th and 9th parliamentary terms. Figure 3 illustrates the evolution of the cooperation between the EPP and the ECR, ID and Renew groups²⁰ in the event of a break-up of the grand coalition. Our data indicate that, while EPP-ECR cooperation has remained stable between the two legislatures, the EPP group has increasingly relied on the support of the radical right (from 48% during the 8ème legislature to 73% during the 9ème legislature). At the same time, the EPP gradually distanced itself from the Liberal Group, whose support fell from 54% to 38%. Thus, in the absence of the grand coalition, the EPP has gradually moved to the right of the political spectrum, while the Renew group seems to have moved closer to the Socialists. This configuration has increased the

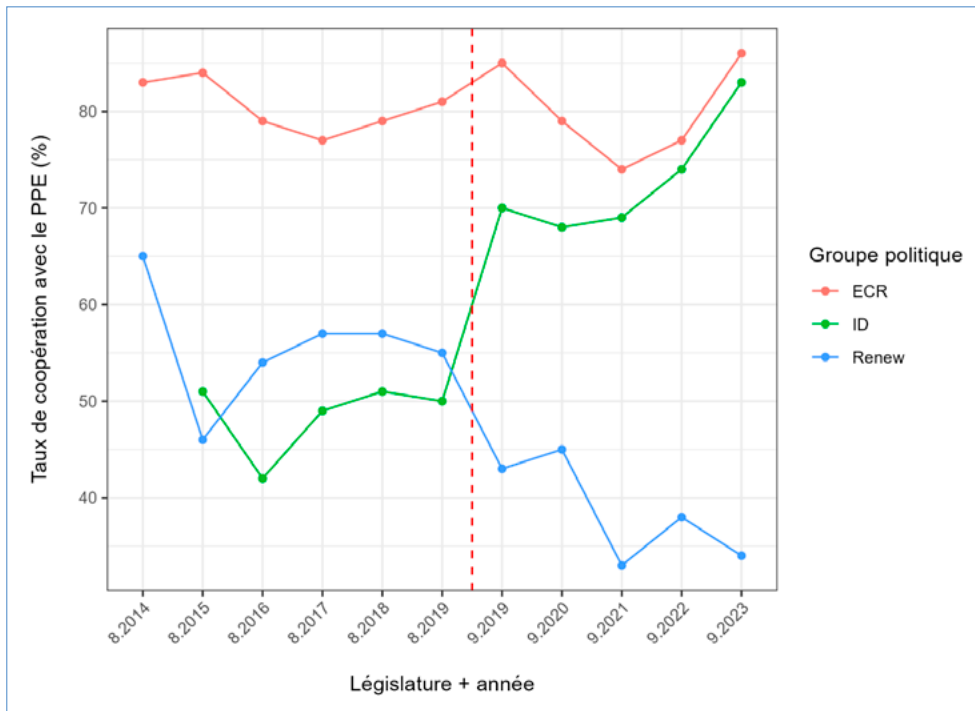
18 Novak, S., Rozenberg, O., and Bendjaballah, S. (2021). "Enduring consensus: why the EU legislative process stays the same". *Journal of European Integration* 43(4), pp. 475-483.

19 Costa, O., & Marié, A. (2023). "Is There an Alternative to Consensus? The Impact of the 2014 Coalition Deal on Voting Behaviour in the Eighth European Parliament (2014-2019)". *International Journal of Parliamentary Studies*, 3(1), 36-62.

20 For the ID and Renew groups, the data for the 8th legislature are those of the ENF and ALDE groups respectively.

closeness between the EPP and ECR groups, and strengthened the position of the Conservative group, which now plays a mediating role between the EPP and ID in the event of a breakdown in the grand coalition.

FIGURE 3.



However, although the EPP Group appears to be moving more towards the far right groups, this does not necessarily guarantee the success of that coalition. In fact, our data shows that between the 8th and 9th legislature, alternative right-wing coalitions led by the EPP were less successful than left-wing coalitions formed by the Socialists. Indeed, although the grand coalition continues to dominate the decision-making process (72% of votes during the 8th and 9th legislature), right-wing coalitions have decreased slightly, from 12% to 11%, while the frequency of left-wing coalitions has increased from 14% to 15%.

Do these dynamics of coalition and rapprochement between the EPP and ECR depend on areas of public policy? To illustrate these variations, we analyse three particularly salient public policy areas: economic, migration and environmental policy.²¹ To ensure a sufficient number of votes to analyse, and to examine votes with legislative significance, we focus on votes concerning amendments to legislative reports.

²¹ For votes on economic policy, we analyse the reports drawn up by the Committee on Economic and Monetary Affairs (ECON). For votes on migration policy, we take into account all votes categorised by the European Parliament services as relating to “Free movement and integration of third-country nationals” (subject 7.10). Finally, for votes on environmental policy, we take into account the votes categorised by the European Parliament services as relating to “Environmental policy” (subject 3.70).

I ECONOMIC POLICY

Firstly, the majority of votes on **economic policy** are adopted thanks to the grand coalition. During the 9th legislature, 58% of legislative amendments in plenary were adopted thanks to a coalition between the EPP, S&D and Renew groups. If this grand coalition broke up, most legislative amendments were adopted thanks to a right-wing coalition led by the EPP (38%) rather than a left-wing coalition (5%). Moreover, these right-wing coalition was much more frequent during the 9th legislature than during the previous legislature (+10 points). Thus, as far as economic policy is concerned, we can see both the persistence of the grand coalition and the strengthening of the EPP group in the most divisive votes.

In the event of a break-up of the grand coalition on economic policy, the EPP allies itself above all with the ECR group (in 100% of cases) and with the Renew group (93%). Radical right-wing MEPs support this right-wing coalition in 39% of cases. Thus, in terms of economic policy, the break-up of the grand coalition is extremely favourable to the EPP, which manages to form winning right-wing majorities thanks to the support of the Renew and ECR groups. In this context, it should be noted that the ECR group seems to be an essential support for the EPP to be able to form winning right-wing majorities. Indeed, in the event of disagreement between the centre-right and the national-conservative right, the EPP would not be able to muster a sufficient majority of votes to adopt or reject legislative amendments.

During the 9th parliamentary term, the EPP succeeded in having the report amending the Markets in Financial Instruments Directive adopted in plenary session, with the aim of supporting the post-Covid-19 economic recovery.²² The text was adopted by a right-wing coalition without the support of the Socialist Group. The aim of the report was to simplify administrative formalities in order to alleviate the economic difficulties linked to the pandemic. The S&D group opposed the text, which in its view used the pandemic as a pretext for further deregulation of the financial sector.²³

I MIGRATION POLICY

Secondly, as far as migration policy is concerned, the grand coalition largely dominates the adoption of legislative amendments, with a frequency of 88%, compared to 58% for economic policy. The importance of the grand coalition made up of the EPP, S&D and Renew groups in migration policy is also evident in the adoption of non-legislative amendments (88%) and increased between the 8th and 9th legislative periods (+4 points).

The importance of the grand coalition on migration policy can be explained by two factors. Firstly, there appear to be divergences within the right-wing bloc. While the EPP, ECR and Renew groups have converging economic positions, their positions seem to be further apart on migration. Building a right-wing coalition between Renew and ECR, two groups that are ideologically far apart on these issues, is therefore proving complex, prompting the EPP to seek an alliance with the Socialists in order to preserve its influence. Secondly, most of the texts on European migration

²² [https://oeil.secure.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/popups/ficheprocedure.do?reference=2020/0152\(CO-D\)&l=en](https://oeil.secure.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/popups/ficheprocedure.do?reference=2020/0152(CO-D)&l=en)

²³ https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2020-11-23-ITM-017_EN.html & <https://www.socialistsanddemocrats.eu/newsroom/markets-financial-instruments-directive-we-dont-want-quick-fix-tries-exploit-covid-19>

policy were treated as a joint “package”,²⁴ being the subject of a compromise agreement between the EPP, S&D and Renew. This package was in the interests of all the groups: for S&D and Renew, it prevented the emergence of a right-wing coalition on these sensitive issues and, for the EPP, it enabled it to maintain its influence on the decision-making process.

I ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY

Finally, when it comes to environmental policy, the grand coalition is most frequently used to adopt legislative amendments (63%), a trend that has increased since the 8th legislature (54%). If this coalition breaks up, it is the left-wing alliance led by the Socialists that most frequently succeeds in adopting or rejecting amendments (20% vs. 16% for the right-wing alliance).

The EPP group wins fewer votes on environmental policy because, unlike economic policy, it does not systematically receive the support of the Renew group. In fact, if the grand coalition breaks up, the EPP receives support from the Conservatives in 90% of cases, from the ID group in 92% of cases, and from the Renew group in only 25% of cases. In other words, in the event of disagreement within the grand coalition, the Socialist group more often succeeds in forming an alternative majority because it manages to form an alliance with the Liberals.

Several examples during the 9th legislature illustrate these dynamics. Firstly, the report on reducing CO2 emissions from new cars²⁵ was adopted in February 2023 by an S&D-Renew-Greens-The Left coalition. Secondly, the report on corporate sustainability due diligence,²⁶ adopted in June 2023, was also agreed by the centre-left and without the EPP. Finally, the report on nature restoration²⁷ was also voted through thanks to an S&D-Renew coalition and despite opposition from the EPP group.

Although the EPP seems to be losing out more on environmental policy, it has nonetheless won some victories, notably on the report on the use of pesticides.²⁸ The EPP succeeded in reducing the scope of the report by pushing through a number of amendments with the help of the Conservative group and despite the opposition of the Socialist and Green MEPs.²⁹ At the plenary session in November 2023, 51% of the amendments were adopted by a right-wing coalition led by the EPP with the support of the ECR and the ID groups, compared with only 33% by a left-wing coalition and 16% by the grand coalition. While an alliance ranging from the Renew group to the radical left has until now managed to lock in the decision-making process on environmental policy, the dynamics of this report show that an EPP-ECR alliance can also be influential on these issues.

24 “Migration and Asylum: Roadmap on way forward agreed between European Parliament and rotating Presidencies”, European Parliament, September 2022, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20220905IPR39714/migration-and-asylum-roadmap-on-way-forward-agreed>

25 [https://oeil.secure.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/popups/ficheprocedure.do?reference=2021/0197\(COD\)&l=en](https://oeil.secure.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/popups/ficheprocedure.do?reference=2021/0197(COD)&l=en)

26 [https://oeil.secure.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/popups/ficheprocedure.do?lang=en&reference=2022/0051\(COD\)](https://oeil.secure.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/popups/ficheprocedure.do?lang=en&reference=2022/0051(COD))

27 [https://oeil.secure.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/popups/ficheprocedure.do?reference=2022%2F0195\(COD\)&l=fr](https://oeil.secure.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/popups/ficheprocedure.do?reference=2022%2F0195(COD)&l=fr)

28 [https://oeil.secure.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/popups/ficheprocedure.do?reference=2022%2F0196\(COD\)&l=fr](https://oeil.secure.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/popups/ficheprocedure.do?reference=2022%2F0196(COD)&l=fr)

29 https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2023/11/22/le-parlement-europeen-rejette-un-texte-cle-du-pacte-vert-sur-l-usage-des-pesticides_6201782_3210.html

For most of the amendments on this report, the EPP group managed to form right-wing majorities without the support of the Renew group. Indeed, while the EPP was able to count on the support of the Conservatives in 100% of cases to form a right-wing coalition, the Liberal group only lent its support in 16% of cases. How then can we explain the fact that many amendments were won by the EPP without the support of the Liberal Group, traditionally considered to be the pivotal group? It was the internal division within many groups, particularly within Renew, that favoured the EPP. While the majority of Renew MEPs continued to vote with the Socialists in the event of a right-wing majority (on average 69% of MEPs), a significant number of MEPs (on average 31%), notably the German and Czech Liberals, preferred to align themselves with the positions of the EPP Group. In addition, the EPP also benefited from the support of some Socialist MEPs who did not hesitate to defect from their group. On average, in the event of the victory of a right-wing coalition, 19% of S&D MEPs aligned themselves with the positions of the EPP, particularly the Romanian Socialist MEPs.

These divisions have enabled the EPP Group to form right-wing coalitions with the Conservatives and the radical right, without depending on the official support of the Liberal Group. This example shows that the EPP Group, by seeking rapprochement with the Conservatives on these issues, can benefit from the growing division within the S&D and Renew groups on environmental issues, divisions which can become more pronounced as elections approach.

III • Analysis of national parties: Vox and Sweden's Democrats put the brakes on EPP-ECR cooperation

In this final section, we examine the cooperation between the EPP and ECR groups at the level of national parties in the European Parliament. In other words, we seek to identify the political parties that are members of the EPP and ECR groups that are most inclined to cooperate with the other political group, as well as those that appear to hinder such cooperation. Our study is limited to national parties with a minimum number of MEPs,³⁰ and focuses exclusively on the 9th legislature. The table below shows the levels of proximity between each national political party and the opposing group. These levels of proximity are calculated on the basis of all public votes in plenary sessions.

30 We have kept only political parties with more than 3 members for ECR and 4 members for EPP.

EPP political parties		Political parties ECR	
Political party	Proximity to the ECR Group (%)	Political parties	Proximity to the PPE group (%)
GERB (Bulgaria)	63	ODS (Czech Republic)	65
HDZ (Croatia)	63	NVA (Belgium)	64
FI (Italy)	63	PiS (Poland)	61
PO (Poland)	63	FDL (Italy)	60
NLP (Romania)	63	VOX (Spain)	57
PP (Spain)	63	SD (Sweden)	48
CDU (Germany)	62		
CSU (Germany)	62		
PSD (Portugal)	62		
M (Sweden)	62		
LR (France)	61		
ND (Greece)	61		
CDA (Netherlands)	61		
FG (Ireland)	56		

As far as the EPP member parties are concerned, there is little variation in terms of convergence with the Conservatives, with most parties having a closeness rate close to 62%. In other words, the EPP group shows strong cohesion in plenary votes, and all its member parties show similar levels of closeness to the ECR group. The exception appears to be the Irish party Fine Gael, which votes less frequently alongside Conservative MEPs than the other EPP parties.

As far as the political parties that are members of the ECR group are concerned, the dynamics are different. The conservative political parties do not all have the same degree of closeness to the EPP. There seem to be more internal divisions within the ECR group. On the one hand, the ODS (Czech Republic) and N-VA (Belgium) parties vote more frequently alongside the EPP than the average. On the other hand, Swedish MEPs from the Sweden Democrats (SD) and, to a lesser extent, Spanish MEPs from Vox are more frequently opposed to closer ties with the EPP. Between these two poles are two of the main parties of the group, namely the Polish Law and Justice party (PiS) and the Italian Fratelli d'Italia.

These data reveal two important aspects. Firstly, ideology plays a crucial role in the voting strategies of national political parties. For example, in the EPP, Fine Gael's more centrist positions on certain public policies and on European integration may explain their reluctance to cooperate with the ECR group.³¹ Conversely, the reluctance of the parties Vox and SD to cooperate with the EPP seems to be motivated by their more radical positions. On the other hand, the median position of the political parties that dominate the ECR group, such as PiS and Fratelli d'Italia, could

³¹ Cormac McQuinn, "Fine Gael MEP criticises EU parliamentary group for leaving talks on nature restoration law", Irish Times, June 2023, <https://www.irishtimes.com/politics/2023/06/04/fine-gael-meeps-want-their-epp-group-to-return-to-talks-on-nature-restoration-law/>; Reidy, Theresa (2009) Blissful Union? Fine Gael and the European Union, Irish Political Studies, 24:4, 511-525.

also help the EPP in the next legislature to move closer to the ECR on certain texts. In addition, although the Swedish Democratic Party (SD) seems more reluctant to cooperate with the centre-right, its recent support since 2022 for Ulf Kristersson's government could temper certain positions in the European Parliament in the next legislature, thus facilitating a rapprochement between the ECR Group and the EPP.

On the other hand, our data also highlights the difference in cohesion between the EPP and ECR groups,³² raising questions about the possibility of these two groups forming a stable cooperation. The EPP group, like the S&D and Renew groups, is characterised by strong unity and a common strategy among the different national delegations, thus facilitating the creation of broad coalitions between these three groups within the grand coalition. However, for the EPP, collaborating with a less disciplined and more divided group such as the ECR, comprising political parties with affinities to the far right and which may be less inclined to collaborate with the centre-right, let alone with the Renew group, appears to be more complex and risky.

• **Conclusion:** **What coalitions will emerge after the 2024 European elections?**

Our analysis provides a mixed picture of the cooperation between the EPP and ECR groups in the European Parliament. Firstly, our data indicates that during the 9th legislature, the EPP has favoured the grand coalition, comprising S&D and Renew, over the Conservative group in plenary votes. This grand coalition has been crucial for the adoption of legislative and non-legislative texts due to the EP current fragmentation. Indeed, the decline of the mainstream groups and the success of the far right may have encouraged pro-European groups to cooperate more to limit the influence of Eurosceptic and radical groups. Secondly, our data contradicts the idea of a rapprochement between the EPP and the ECR, showing on the contrary a gradual distancing during plenary votes. At the same time, ECR MEPs have moved closer to the radical right during this legislature. Thirdly, if the grand coalition breaks up, our data shows that the ECR group remains the EPP's main ally, to the detriment of the Renew group, which has moved more towards the Socialists. These dynamics have strengthened the S&D group's ability to form left-wing majorities during this legislature, thereby reducing the EPP's influence. However, it should be noted that these dynamics vary according to the public policy field. Right-wing majorities (EPP, Renew, ECR) predominate in economic policy, while environmental policy is more dominated by the centre-left in the European Parliament.

The results of our study highlight the dilemma faced by the EPP Group since the start of the 9th legislature. The group's main objective is to maintain a significant influence on decision-making, which is why it is strengthening its cooperation with the S&D and Renew groups within the grand coalition. As a result, the EPP remains a key player in the European decision-making process. However, the centre-right group must avoid being dragged too far to the left by the grand coalition, a significant risk, particularly in areas where convergence between socialists and liberals is more marked, such as environmental policy. In this context, the only option for the EPP is to withdraw from the grand coalition and oppose it alongside the ECR and Identity and Democracy, thereby giving up any direct influence on the decisions taken.

32 Agreement index of S. Hix for the 9th legislature. EPP: 0.90 and ECR: 0.79.

What will the situation be like after the June 2024 European elections? According to the opinion polls (whose projections should be treated with the usual caution), the weight of the traditional groups (EPP and S&D) should continue to decline. At the same time, a political shift to the right is taking shape, with the success of the ECR and ID and the Renew and Green groups losing seats. According to the study by Cunningham and Hix (2024), the big winners in the elections would be the ECR and ID groups, which together would hold 25% of the seats.³³ To conclude, we examine the implications of these European elections for the three types of coalition in the European Parliament: the grand coalition, right-wing coalitions and left-wing coalitions.

Firstly, as far as the grand coalition is concerned, a reversal of the trend after the 2024 elections seems unlikely. Indeed, as the weight of the EPP and S&D groups continues to diminish, and given the increasing fragmentation of the EP, the need to cooperate within the grand coalition will become even more pressing. As a result, it is likely that the two traditional groups (EPP and S&D) will continue to position themselves as defenders of a pro-European bloc, seeking to limit the influence of Eurosceptic forces. This dynamic could particularly occur in areas where the left and right blocs are divided, such as European migration policy and foreign policy. Moreover, the formation of alternative coalitions of the left or right would require an additional effort, as these coalitions would break with the practices and norms of cooperation between the EPP and S&D that are firmly anchored in the minds of parliamentarians.³⁴ The grand coalition, firmly rooted in the EP institutional memory, is therefore likely to continue to dominate the decision-making process after the 2024 elections, thus limiting convergence between the EPP and ECR groups. However, while the grand coalition is likely to continue after the 2024 elections, it could be affected by the EPP's greater unpredictability. Some recent votes show that the centre-right group does not hesitate to withdraw from negotiations with the Socialists in order to move to the right of the hemicycle. Although this unpredictability could further weaken the EPP's leadership, it could also strengthen its pivotal position in the next legislature, to the detriment of the grand coalition.

Secondly, the consolidation of the far right after the 2024 elections could increase the frequency of right-wing coalitions formed by the EPP and ECR groups. However, in order to obtain a sufficient majority, these two groups will need to receive the support of the Liberals or ID. The first option (EPP-ECR-Renew) is uncertain, as the level of cooperation between the Liberals and the Conservatives remains low on certain policies, notably the environment, and some Liberal parties are opposed to an alliance with the Conservatives. The Vienna Declaration adopted by Renew in September 2023 excludes any cooperation with radical and populist parties.³⁵ Renew MEPs reiterated their commitment to cooperation with the EPP and S&D within the grand coalition.³⁶ The second option (EPP-ECR-ID) is not guaranteed either, because despite fears of its weakening, the cordon sanitaire in the European Parliament remains in place to exclude the radical right, as our voting data show (the ID group remains the group with which the EPP votes least often).

33 Kevin Cunningham and Simon Hix, "A sharp right turn: A forecast for the 2024 European Parliament elections", European Council on Foreign Relations, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/a-sharp-right-turn-a-forecast-for-the-2024-european-parliament-elections/>

34 Novak, S., Rozenberg, O., and Bendjaballah, S. (2021). "Enduring consensus: why the EU legislative process stays the same". *Journal of European Integration* 43(4), pp. 475-483.

35 Renew Europe, "Renew Europe adopts the "Vienna Declaration" and proposes a centrist counter-narrative in the run-up to the European elections", September 2023, <https://www.reneweuropegroup.eu/fr/news/2023-09-06/renew-europe-adopts-vienna-declaration-pushes-centrist-counter-narrative-ahead-of-key-european-elections>

36 Roberto Castaldi, "EU liberals seek to drag EPP away from Meloni's 'extreme right'", *Euractiv*, June 2023, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/eu-liberals-seek-to-drag-epp-away-from-melonis-extreme-right/>

The formation of right-wing coalitions during the next legislature will depend on a number of factors. Firstly, ideological congruence will play a key role: such coalitions will be more likely when the positions between the EPP, Renew and ECR groups are similar, as is the case on economic policy. However, on other issues such as migration or environmental policy³⁷, the differences are too great for a stable coalition to be formed after the European elections. Secondly, the formation of right-wing coalitions will depend on the strategies adopted by the parliamentary actors themselves. For example, a weakening of the Liberal group could push it closer to the right-wing pole made up of the EPP and ECR, thus facilitating the creation of winning majorities on the right. The strategy of certain national delegations could also be decisive. For example, the formation of right-wing coalitions will have to overcome the division of certain competing parties at national level, such as Law and Justice (PiS) and the Civic Platform (PO) in Poland. The weight of the German delegation within the EPP, but also the strategies adopted by the CDU and CSU, will also be decisive, given the influence of these two political parties on the entire centre-right group in the European Parliament. Finally, the internal composition of certain groups, notably the Conservative group, could have an impact on EPP-ECR cooperation. A strengthening of radical right parties seeking to normalise themselves on the European political scene, such as the Italian party Fratelli d'Italia, would thus facilitate rapprochement with the EPP. However, a strengthening of more radical parties (such as Vox or the Sweden Democrats) would give rise to more mistrust within the EPP, particularly on the CDU side, and at Renew, thus complicating the formation of a stable alliance on the right.

Finally, the success of the nationalist and conservative right in 2024 is likely to complicate the formation of **left-wing coalitions** during the next legislature. However, it is essential to bear in mind that coalitions in the European Parliament are often formed on a text-by-text basis. In certain areas, the Renew group could continue to ally itself with the Socialists, thereby outvoting the EPP-ECR alliance. This could particularly be the case with environmental policy, where the majority of the Renew group seems closer to the positions of the S&D group than those of the Conservative group. However, this trend could be put to the test if there are too many divisions within the Liberal group, as illustrated by the recent example of the report on the use of pesticides.

³⁷ Roberto Castaldi, "EU liberals seek to drag EPP away from Meloni's 'extreme right'", Euractiv, June 2023, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/eu-liberals-seek-to-drag-epp-away-from-melonis-extreme-right/>

• Appendices

I COMPOSITION OF THE EPP POLITICAL GROUP (NATIONAL PARTIES)

Germany	Christian Democratic Union of Germany (23); Christian Social Union in Bavaria (6); Family Party of Germany (1)
Austria	Austrian People's Party (7)
Belgium	Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams (2); Les Engagés (1); Christlich Soziale Partei (1)
Bulgaria	Citizens for Bulgaria's European Development (5); Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria (1); Union of Democratic Forces (1)
Cyprus	Rassemblement démocrate (2)
Croatia	Croatian Democratic Union (4)
Denmark	Conservative People's Party (1)
Spain	People's Party (13)
Estonia	Union de la patrie et Res Publica (1)
Finland	National Coalition Party (3)
France	Les Républicains (7); Les Centristes (1)
Greece	New Democracy (6)
Hungary	Christian Democratic People's Party (1)
Ireland	Fine Gael (5)
Italy	Forza Italia (10); Parti populaire sud-tyrolien (1); Independents (1)
Latvia	Unit (3)
Lithuania	Union of the Fatherland - Lithuanian Christian Democrats (4);
Luxembourg	Christian Social People's Party (2)
Malta	Nationalist Party (2)
Netherlands	Christian Democratic Appeal (5); Christian Union (1)
Poland	Civic Platform (11); Polish Peasant Party (3); Independents (2)
Portugal	Social Democratic Party (6); CDS - People's Party (1)
Romania	National Liberal Party (10) : Magyar Democratic Union of Romania (2); People's Movement Party (2)
Slovakia	Mouvement chrétien-démocrate (2); Les Gens ordinaires et personnalités indépendantes (1); Ensemble-Démocratie civique (1)
Slovenia	Slovenian Democratic Party (2); New Slovenia (1); Slovenian People's Party (1)

Sweden	Moderates (4); Christian Democrats (2)
Czech Republic	Christian Democratic Union - Czechoslovak People's Party (2); TOP 09 (2); Mayors and Independents (1)

▲ Source: EPP official website

I COMPOSITION OF ECR POLITICAL GROUP (NATIONAL PARTIES)

Germany	Bündnis Deutschland (1)
Belgium	Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (3)
Bulgaria	Bulgarian National Movement (2)
Croatia	Croatian Sovereignists (1)
Spain	Vox (4)
France	Reconquest (1)
Greece	Greek solution (1)
Italy	Frères d'Italie (8) ; Independent (1)
Latvia	Alliance nationale (1)
Lithuania	Polish electoral action in Lithuania (1)
Netherlands	Reformed political party (1); JA21 (1); More direct democracy (1) ; Independents (2)
Poland	Droit et justice (24); Pologne solidaire (2); Les Républicains (1)
Romania	Christian Democratic National Farmers' Party (1)
Slovakia	Freedom and solidarity (1)
Sweden	Sweden Democrats (2); Independent (1)
Czech Republic	Civic Democratic Party (4)

▲ Source: Official ECR website

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