

# Expansion and electoral success: The winning strategy of the EPP

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With the presentation of symbols and lists, the election campaign for the elections to the European Parliament (EP) has now begun. It seems therefore appropriate to engage in an analysis of the protagonists of European politics, the European parties. Although, as noted by Bardi (2002, p. 252), using the famous classification of Katz and Mair (1993) on the three “faces” of parties (party in the territory, party as organization, and party in public offices) one face clearly predominates over the other two—that of the party in the territory—represented by the national parties, the Europarties have greatly strengthened in recent decades, acquiring a status and a major prestige, thanks to the consolidation of the role of the EP in the decision-making process of the EU. In this and subsequent articles, we will dedicate ourselves to the analysis of electoral history and composition of the main political groups within the EP.

The EPP (European People’s Party), since 1999, has the relative majority in the Parliament. In the last European elections, it obtained 265 seats, representing 36% of the EP, neatly outperforming the rivals of the PES (200 seats corresponding to 25% of the EP). The EPP, along with socialists and liberals, is one of the three historical groups within the EP.<sup>2</sup> Even before the direct election of the EP (1979), the representatives of the parties of the Christian-democrat tradition of the six European founding countries (the Italian Christian Democracy, the German CDU-CSU, and the Christian-social and Christian-

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<sup>2</sup> The overlap between the European group and the party is not complete. Some national parties belong to a parliamentary group in the EP even though they are not formally part of the European party. In our analysis, we will consider the political groups.

democrat parties of Benelux) had begun to develop some forms of international coordination. The party itself was created in July 1976 and was initially led by the then Belgian Prime Minister Leo Tindemans. The EPP included the Christian-democrat parties of the six European countries, plus the Irish Fine Gael Party, as Ireland had entered in European community in 1973. Yet, this initial composition, although capable of making the EPP an ideologically coherent and politically solid group,<sup>3</sup> made it weak against rivals PSE so that the EPP lost both the elections of 1979 and those of 1984 (see Figure 1).

Already at the beginning of the 1980s, a heated internal debate was opened within the EPP. The German component had indeed realized that with the entry of Great Britain and Denmark in the community, and especially with the perspective of further enlargements to other countries that were lacking a strong Christian-democrat tradition, the EPP would have weakened substantially with respect to the PES (Delwit, 2001). It was therefore necessary to open the party at the entrance of conservative and liberal forces, that despite not being part of the Christian-democrat tradition, they were however political forces competing against the left in their respective countries. This revolutionary idea was not appreciated by the Benelux parties nor by the Italian Christian Democracy, which used to create alliances with moderate governing parties of the left but systematically refuse to accept alliances with other right-wing parties.

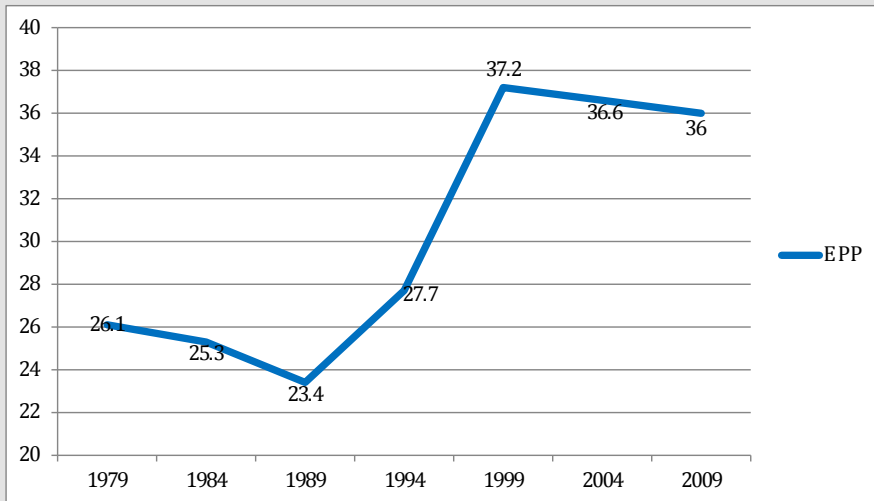
Despite of the internal resistance, the strategy of opening the EPP “to the right” pursued by the CDU-CSU was recognized as necessary to respond to the gradual erosion of support among traditional Christian-democratic forces. The EPP’s political strategy of opening begun in 1981 with the entry of the Greek conservative New Democracy, to continue then at the end of the 1980s with the arrival of the Portuguese conservatives and the Spanish People’s Party, heirs of Franco regime. Despite these inclusions in the Euro-party, the electoral outcome did not improve; in 1989, the EPP reached the lowest point in its history, getting only 23.4% of seats against the 34.7% of the PES.

The beginning of the 1990s was marked by a further strengthening of the enlargement policy; in 1992, the British Tories and the Danish conservatives, openly Eurosceptic parties, were allowed to become part of the Parliamentary Group of the EPP. These new inclusions have the effect of a permanent change in the nature of the party and in its internal balance of power as—due to the disappearance of the Italian Christian Democracy—the Christian Democrat-

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<sup>3</sup> On this point, see the analysis of Hix (2002) regarding the voting behavior of political groups in the EP.

Figure 1 – Evolution of the electoral outcomes of the EPP. Percentage of seats in the EP (1979–2009)



ic parties become minority<sup>4</sup> with respect to the other “right-located” parties (Hix, 2002). From the point of view of the electoral outcome, the 1994 European elections mark a reversal in the trend, as the EPP rises up to 27.7% of the seats, although still far from the 34.9% of the PES. During the 1994–1999 legislative term, the EPP takes the decisive step to bridge the historic gap against the rivals PSE: the Italian representation—which had lost the Christian-democratic components—is strengthened by the entry of *Forza Italia*. At the same time, also the main centre-right parties of Portugal and France, namely the Portuguese social democrats and the French Gaullist Party (RPR, then UMP) join in the European group. The enlargement of Austria, Sweden, and Finland finally allowed the inclusion of the Austrian Christian-democrats of the ÖVP, the Swedish conservatives of *Moderata* and the Finnish KOK.

Armed with this powerful strategy of inclusion, the EPP manages to win the 1999 elections, winning 233 seats against the 180 of the PES and reaching the historic maximum (37.2%). The victory was made possible by the extraordinary growth of the group in some key states (see Table 1). These countries include Italy, in which the members of the EPP increased from 13.9% to 38.1%

<sup>4</sup> To be precise, the “overtaking” takes place only during the legislature with the entry of the deputies of *Forza Italia* as reported in Van Hecke (2003).

Table 1 – Electoral results of EPP in the member states (1979–2009)

Paese	% Totale di voti dei partiti membri del PPE						
	1979	1984	1989	1994	1999	2004	2009
Austria				29.7*	30.7	32.7	30
Belgium	37.7	27.4	29.2	24.2	18.7	23.1	19.5
Bulgaria						30.8*	32.3
Cyprus						28.2	35.6
Croatia							36.8**
Czech Republic						39.6	7.7
Denmark	0	6.6	8	18.9	14.9	12.6	12.7
Estonia						10.5	12.2
Finland				23*	27.7	23.7	27.4
France	8.9	9.4	7.8	12.8	22.1	16.6	27.9
Germany	49.1	46	37.7	38.8	48.7	44.5	37.9
Greece	31.3*	38	40.5	32.7	36	43	32.3
Hungary						52.7	56.4
Ireland	33.1	32.2	21.6	24.3	24.6	27.8	29.1
Italy	37.1	33.5	33.4	13.9	38.1	29.7	41.8
Latvia						26.4	33.7
Lithuania						15.3	26.2
Luxembourg	36.1	34.9	34.9	31.5	31.7	37.1	31.3
Malta						35.5	37.3
Netherlands	35.6	33	34.6	30.8	26.9	24.4	20.1
Poland						30.4	51.4
Portugal		11.8*	14.2	12.5	31.1	25.9	40.1
Romania						34.3*	38.6
Slovakia						46.6	39.2
Slovenia						41.2	46.8
Spain		26.9*	23.7	42.6	41.9	41.2	42.7
Sweden				27.1*	28.4	23.9	23.5
United Kingdom	0	0	0	27	35.8	26.7	0

\* Elections held during the legislative term, due to the entry of the country in the EC

\*\* Elections held in 2013

of the vote share; France (from 12.8% to 22.1%); the United Kingdom (from 27% to 35.8%); and Germany (from 38.8% to 48.7%). This pattern of growth was also favoured by the general retreat of incumbent political forces in these countries, all socialist-led, consistently with the predictions of the “second

order elections” theory (Reif and Schmitt, 1980). The victory, however, happens at a price of paradoxical ideological contradictions, as in the emblematic Italian case, in which parties competing in rival domestic political poles, like Forward Italy and the Italian Popular Party, were both members of the EPP.

Since 1999, the EPP has pursued a policy aimed at consolidating its leadership within the EP, proceeding forward on the road of the inclusion of conservative forces of the right and preferring the electoral success at the expense of the internal coherence of the group.<sup>5</sup> With the sizable eastward enlargement of the community (2004), the EPP parliamentary group in the EP includes parties from all the states of the new Europe-25, eager to become part of the EPP for the powerful democratic legitimacy deriving from it internationally. In particular, to the political forces already present in the group will be added the conservative or liberal parties from Hungary, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, and the Christian-democratic parties of Slovakia and Slovenia. Stronger for this expansion and leveraging on the substantial absence of a social-democratic tradition in Eastern Europe, the EPP triumphs it to the EP elections getting 268 seats (36.6%) compared to the 200 of the socialists. With the exception of small countries as Estonia and Malta, the EPP outperforms the socialists in all the new member states, resulting in nearly 53% of the vote in Hungary and percentages equal to or greater than 40% in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Slovenia.

In 2009, finally, the entry of Romanian and Bulgarian delegations compensates the loss of seats in the UK, due to the leakage of the British Conservatives, incompatible with the group for their growing Euroscepticism.<sup>6</sup> The EPP remained essentially unchanged at 36% of the seats (265), further widening the gap with respect to the PSE (25%) and reconfirming as president of the Commission Barroso.

On the eve of the forthcoming elections of May 22 to 25, the EPP can count on 52 parties from 27 member countries, 10 of which is in charge a prime minister or a president adhering to EPP (Table 2). The only exception consists of the United Kingdom, the only state without representation in the EPP, while even the new member Croatia is represented in the group of the People’s Party with two parties (HDZ and HSS).

The elections of 2014 are full of risks for the EPP, presenting the Luxembourgish Jean-Claude Juncker as a candidate for president of the Commis-

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<sup>5</sup> About the transformation of the EPP’s policy platform, see Hanley (2002); on the declining cohesion within the parliamentary group, see Bardi (2002) and Hix (2002).

<sup>6</sup> Since 2009, the British Conservatives have formed the group of the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR).

Table 2 – List of the members of the EPP on the eve of the 2014 European elections

Country	Members of the EPP
Austria	<i>Österreichische Volkspartei (ÖVP)</i>
Belgium	<i>Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams (CD&amp;V); Centre Démocrate Humaniste (CDH)</i>
Bulgaria	<i>Grazdani za Evropeisko Razvitienu Balgarija (GERB); Demokrati za silna Bulgaria (DSB); Sajuz Na Demokratichnite Sili (SDS); Demokraticheska Partija (DP)</i>
Croatia	<i>Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica (HDZ); Hrvatska Seljacka Stranka (HSS)</i>
Cyprus	<b><i>Dimokratikos Synagermos (DISY)</i></b>
Czech Republic	<i>Top 09; Křesťanská a demokratická unie-Československá stranalidová (KDU-ČSL)</i>
Denmark	<i>Det Konservative Folkeparti (C); Kristendemokraterne (KD)</i>
Estonia	<i>Isamaa ja Res Publica Liit (IRL)</i>
Finland	<b><i>Kansallinen Kokoomus (KOK); Kristillisdemokraatit (KD)</i></b>
France	<i>Union pour un Mouvement Populaire (UMP)</i>
Germany	<b><i>Christlich Demokratische Union (CDU); Christlich-Soziale Union in Bayern (CSU)</i></b>
Greece	<b><i>Nea Demokratia (ND)</i></b>
Hungary	<b><i>Fidesz-Magyar Polgari Szovetseg (FIDESZ); Kereszténydemokrata Néppárt (KDNP)</i></b>
Ireland	<b><i>Fine Gael (FG)</i></b>
Italy	<i>Forza Italia (FI); Nuovo centrodestra-UDC (Ncd-Udc); Südtiroler Volkspartei (SVP)</i>
Latvia	<i>Vienotība (V)</i>
Lithuania	<i>Tėvynės sąjunga-Lietuvos krikščionys demokratai (TS-LKD)</i>
Luxembourg	<i>Chrëschtlech Sozial Vollekspartei (CSV)</i>
Malta	<i>Partit Nazzjonalista (PN)</i>
Netherlands	<i>Christen Democratisch Appel (CDA)</i>
Poland	<b><i>Platforma Obywatelska (PO); Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe (PSL)</i></b>
Portugal	<b><i>Partido Social Democrata (PSD); Centro Democrático e Social-Partido Popular (CDS-PP)</i></b>
Romania	<i>Partidul Democrat Liberal (PDL); Români ai Magyari Demokrata Szövetség/Uniunea Democrată Maghiară din România (RMDSZ/UDMR); Partidul Național Țărănesc Creștin Democrat (PNȚCD)</i>

Country	Members of the EPP
Slovakia	<i>Kresťanskodemokratické hnutie (KDH); Most-Híd; Slovenskádemokratická a kresťanská únia-Demokratická strana (SDKÚ-DS); Strana Maďarskej Komunity/Magyar Közösség Pártja (SMK/MKP)</i>
Slovenia	<i>Slovenska demokratska stranka (SDS); Slovenska ljudska stranka (SLS); Nova Slovenija-Krščanski demokrati (N.Si)</i>
Spain	<b>Partido Popular (PP)</b> ; <i>Unió Democràtica de Catalunya (UDC)</i>
Sweden	<b>Moderata samlingspartiet (MD)</b> ; <i>Kristdemokraterna (KD)</i>
United Kingdom	

Note: Parties reported in bold font are those in which the leader of the party is also in charge as PM (or president in Cyprus).

sion. Will the EPP be able to maintain a relative majority in the EP as it has been for the last 15 years? On the one hand, the neat success obtained in the last two elections in Central Eastern Europe and the simultaneous weakness of the PES in the new member states would suggest that the electoral advantage has become structural and can hardly be affected. On the other hand, one cannot underestimate the fact that the EPP is now perceived more than any other political force as the governing party in the EU as well as the political force that is responsible for the policies of fiscal rigor and austerity in the public accounts pursued in recent years by the EU, especially due to the hegemony on rest of the group exercised by the CDU led by the Chancellor Merkel. Being perceived as an incumbent in a time of a harsh economic crisis could have a negative impact on the election results of the EPP, threatened to the right-wing by the growth of the anti-European parties group led by the National Front of Marine Le Pen.

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