

The Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe Group: Towards an inevitable decline?

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The Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe Group (from now on, ALDE Group) is the third most numerous group within the European Parliament, after the European People's Party group and the Party of European Socialists group. The ALDE group is made up by Members of the European Parliament (from now on, MEPs) coming from two different European parties, i.e., the European Democratic Party and the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe Party.

The liberal democratic group² has had a very interesting historical development. In the 1960s, after the exit of the Gaullist MEPs, the liberal group formed within the Common Assembly of the European Coal and Steel Community started a long path of change and inclusion of new members as the European integration went on. Analysing the history of the liberal democratic group also means analysing the change of its name.

From 1979 until 1985 within the European Parliament, there was the Liberal and Democratic Group, in which there were different parties, such as the French UDF, the Italian PRI and PLI, or the German FDP. From 1985 until the mid-1990s, the liberal democratic group changed its name, becoming the Liberal and Democratic Reformist Group. In this period, parties coming from different countries (like the Portuguese Social Democratic Party) joined the group. In 1994, there was another change; the Group of the European Liberal

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² I will use this term in a very broad way, referring to all the groups formed within European parliamentary institutions in the last decades—therefore, both to the groups that were the predecessors of the ALDE group and to the ALDE group itself. I will also use this term to refer to the parties that have been connected to the ALDE (group).

Democrat and Reform Party was born. The group kept this denomination until 2009, and in these years, the British Liberal Democrats joined the group.³ In 2004, there was the last change. After the inclusion of the MEPs coming from the European Democratic Party, the ALDE group was created.

These name-related changes have also been influenced by the inclusion of different parties, which can be all considered as “liberal” ones. It is well known that this adjective can have different meanings (see, for example, the difference between social liberalism and liberal conservatism) and can be used in different ways by parties coming from different areas of the political continuum. Think about Mr. Berlusconi’s promises to foster a “liberal revolution” in Italy in the 1990s and 2000s or about the attempt by sectors of the Italian Left to be recognised as “liberal” in order to put away their communist heritage.

Quoting Ladrech (2006, p. 494) on the European Liberal Democrat and Reform Party, in the ALDE group there is a bigger heterogeneity than in the PES or in the PPE groups. The flexibility of the word “liberal” can help us understand this phenomenon. It is interesting to notice the extremely diverse parties that are or were part of the liberal democratic group (therefore implicitly admitting they are or were “liberal”): the moderate PRI and the right-wing PLI (which, despite its name, on some political stances, was more right-wing than the Christian democrats), the British Liberal Democrats and the Basque Nationalist Party, the post-Christian-democratic Italian party “Daisy-Democracy is Freedom,”⁴ and the anticlerical Italian Radicals.

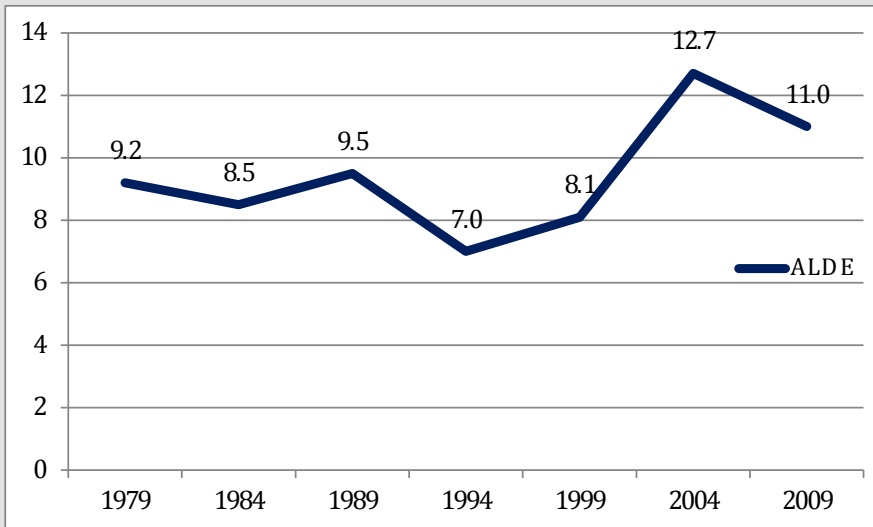
Despite the above-quoted differences and transformations, liberal democratic MEPs have always had a noticeable strength within the European Parliament. At the last European election, they got more than 80 seats (with an important contribution from the British Liberal Democrats and the German FDP, which obtained 24 seats in total, approximately 30% of the liberal democratic seats). This was an interesting result for a group that aims at being an alternative to both the socialists and the populars.

Analysing Figure 1, we can see that electoral performances of liberal democratic parties in European elections follow a fluctuating pattern. A decrease

³ In the last years, this party has had an interesting development, having formed a coalition government with the British Conservative Party. The Liberal Democrats were created at the end of 1980s, after two parties (the Liberal Party and the Social Democratic Party) merged. See also Webb (2000).

⁴ Which was formed in the 2000s by the merging of several parties that had stemmed in the 1990s from the Christian-Democratic breakup. Notice that, basically, no big liberal democratic party was involved in the creation of this party. For further information, see the useful contribution by Baccetti (2007).

Figure 1 – Electoral results of liberal democratic parties. Percentage of seats in the European Parliament (1979–2009)



Data source: <http://www.parties-and-elections.eu/eu2.html>

in the percentage of seats in 1984 is followed by an increase in 1989. To add more, in 1994, the liberal democratic parties suffer from a weakening while, on the contrary, 1999 and 2004 European elections are very positive. Indeed, after 2004 European election, the liberal democratic group gets the highest percentage of seats in the European Parliament since 1979. This positive trend is stopped by the results of 2009 European election, after which the ALDE group loses several MEPs. Looking at the results from 1979 until 2009, it can be said that liberal democratic parties have been able to survive many transformations (like European Union enlargement), maintaining a noticeable electoral support along many years. This is even clearer if we analyse electoral performances of liberal democratic parties at national level.

Taking a look at Table 1, it is clear that support for liberal democratic parties is more or less stable and relevant in some countries (such as Belgium, Bulgaria, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, the Netherlands, Slovenia, and Sweden) and very fluctuating in other countries (such as Hungary, Luxembourg, Slovakia, and the United Kingdom). Italy, as explained in the footnote, is a very specific country regarding liberal democratic parties, since very different parties have been part of the liberal democratic groups in the European Parliament along more than 30 years, and this can explain the highly variable performances of liberal democratic parties in Italian European elections.

Table 1 – Electoral performances of liberal democratic parties in European Parliament elections at national level (1979–2009)

	1979	1984	1989	1994	1999	2004	2009
Austria				4.3*	2.7		
Belgium	9.4	18.1	17.8	20.6	23.6	23.9	22.5
Bulgaria						26.5*	22.1
Croatia							
Cyprus						17.1	
Czech Republic							
Denmark	14.4	12.4	16.6	27.4	33.1	25.8	20.2
Estonia						29.7	41.4
Finland				30.1*	28.1	29.1	25.1
France	27.6	43	28.9	25.6		12	8.5
Germany	6	4.8	5.6	4.1	3	6.1	11
Greece							
Hungary						7.7	2.2
Ireland			12				24.1
Italy	6.2	6.1	4.4	7.3	8.3	35.5	8
Latvia						6.5	7.5
Lithuania						41.4	19.7
Luxembourg	28.1	22.1	19.9	18.8	20.5	14.9	18.7
Malta							
Netherlands	16.1	18.9	19.6	29.6	25.5	17.4	22.7
Poland						7.3	
Portugal		37.4*	32.7				
Romania						16.4*	14.5
Slovakia						3.2	9
Slovenia						21.9	21.2
Spain		4.4*	11.3	4.7	7.6	5.1	5.2
Sweden				12*	19.8	16.1	19
United Kingdom	12.6	19	6.2	17	12.7	14.9	13.8

*Elections held in the year when the country entered the EEC or the EU.

Note: As for Ireland, the percentages in the table are the ones obtained by parties which took (take) part in the liberal democratic groups in the European Parliament after 1989, 2009, and 2014 European elections; from 1984 until 1994, the French UDF formed an electoral list with Gaullist parties; in 1999, the Belgian Liberal Reformist Party formed an electoral list with the Democratic Front of the Francophones; in 1999, the Spanish Convergence and Union formed an electoral list with the European Coalition; and finally, regarding the percentage of votes obtained by liberal democratic lists in 2004 Italian European election, I have added together the votes of the United in the Olive Tree list (which included Daisy-Democracy is Freedom and the European Republicans Movement), the votes of the Bonino list, and the votes of the Civil Society of Di Pietro-Occhetto list.

Data source: <http://www.parties-and-elections.eu/eu2.html>

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Table 2 – ALDE member parties before 2014 European election

Country	Parties
Austria	/
Belgium	Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten (VLD); Mouvement Réformateur (MR)
Bulgaria	Dvizheniezapravaisvobodi (DPS); Nacionalnodvizheniezastabilnosti-vazhod (NDSV)
Croatia	/
Cyprus	/
Czech Republic	/
Denmark	Venstre, Danmarks Liberale Parti (V)
Estonia	Eesti Keskerakond (KESK); Eesti Reformierakond (RE)
Finland	Suomen Keskusta (KESK); Svenska folkpartiet i Finland (SFP)
France	Mouvement démocrate (MoDem); Citoyenneté Action Participation pour le 21ème siècle (Cap21)
Germany	Freie Demokratische Partei (FDP)
Greece	/
Hungary	/
Ireland	Fianna Fáil
Italy	Italia dei Valori (IDV)
Latvia	Latvijas Pirmā Partija/Latvijas Ceļš (LPP/LC)
Lithuania	Darbo Partija (DP); Lietuvos Respublikos Liberalų sąjūdis (LRLS)
Luxembourg	Parti démocratique (DP)
Malta	/
Netherlands	Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie (VVD); Democraten 66 (D66)
Poland	/
Portugal	/
Romania	Partidul Național Liberal (PNL)
Slovakia	Ľudová strana-Hnutie za demokratické Slovensko (ĽS-HZDS)
Slovenia	Liberalnademokracija Slovenije (LDS); Zares-socialno-liberalni (Zares)
Spain	Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya (CDC); Partido Nacionalista Vasco (PNV)
Sweden	Folkpartiet liberalerna (FP); Centerpartiet (C)
United Kingdom	Liberal Democrats (LD)

Parties in bold are the ones from which the head of a national government comes from; the Latvian party LPP/LC has disappeared at national level.

The ALDE group has published on its website⁵ the five priorities that will inspire its future actions: a fight against discriminations and a stronger civil rights protection; a push towards a greener economy, in order to deal with climate change; a more effective European Union influence in the world, especially regarding democracy promotion; a reform of the European Union budget and a strong support for “fiscal rectitude” (for example, by defending the stability and growth pact); and a strong and clear regulation of European financial markets, paired with the implementation of a new economic governance by the European Commission.

The next European election is a fundamental challenge for European liberal democratic parties. On the one hand, the widespread opposition to European and German austerity policies could favour extremist parties in many European countries. On the other hand, pre-electoral surveys seem to show that some ALDE parties (such as the Liberal Democrats in the United Kingdom or the Italy of Values) could lose many seats compared to 2009 European election. In May, we will see whether this is just a pessimistic idea or a more realist forecast.

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⁵ <http://www.alde.eu/>