

By the Numbers: The Minimal Impact of the 2019 Elections on the Political Orientation of the European Parliament

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Abstract: *Prior to the May 2019 elections for the 2019–2024 session of the European Parliament (EP), some analysts and commentators speculated that the right wing or Eurosceptics would triumph and drastically shift the EP’s political orientation. Relying upon the copious election data provided by the European Union’s website, the article concludes that a minor polarization did occur, but nothing even approaching a politically seismic event.*

Keywords: 2019 European Parliament election, European Parliament, European Union, Political groups of the European Parliament

Introduction: Elections to the European Parliament

Over a four-day period from May 23rd to May 26th 2019, citizens of the then 28-nation European Union voted for a new session of the European Parliament (EP). Methods of voting for a country’s Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) vary from one country to another, but certain rules apply throughout the 28-member bloc (since Brexit, which occurred on 31 January 2020, the number of member countries is 27). Beginning in 1979, MEPs have been elected by direct universal suffrage for a five-year period. The current parliament will sit from 2019 until the next elections in 2024. At the time of the May 2019 elections, the EP had 751 MEPs, and following Brexit it has 704.

“Each country decides on the form its election will take,” says the European Parliament website, “but must guarantee equality of the sexes and a secret ballot. EU elections are by proportional representation. Voting age is 18, aside from Austria, where it is 16.” Moreover, “[s]eats are allocated on the basis of population of each Member State.”¹ Prior to the 2019 EP elections, some analysts and commentators speculated that the right wing or Eurosceptics would triumph and drastically shift the EP’s political orientation.² First, this study identifies the political groups within the European Parliament and categorizes them as belonging to the left, the center, or the right. Then, relying upon the copious election data provided by the European Union’s website, the article examines the outcome of the 2019 elections and concludes that a

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¹ European Parliament. “Members of the European Parliament,” European Parliament. Accessed 11 February 2020. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meps/en/home>.

² Stephanie Burnett. “EU Election Polls: Two Biggest Parliament Groups are Recovering — But Will Still Take Big Hits,” Euronews February 5, 2019, <https://www.euronews.com/2019/04/10/eu-election-polls-two-biggest-parliament-groups-are-recovering-but-will-still-take-big-hit>.

political upheaval did not occur. A very minor polarization did take place, the analysis concludes, as the Left-wing and the Right-wing made slight electoral gains alongside a corresponding minor decrease in the performance of the center. Despite predictions to the contrary, nothing even approaching a political seismic event took place.

Political Groups within the European Parliament

The EP website notes that “MEPs are grouped by political affinity, not nationality.”³ Thus, MEPs set up what are called political groups of politically like-minded members. So, for example, the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (the S&D Group) has members from the British Labour Party (prior to Brexit), the German Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands, and the Spanish Partido Socialista Obrero Español and Partido de los Socialistas de Cataluña, to name only three EU countries. Another EP political group, the Greens / European Free Alliance group, has members belonging to the Irish Green Party, the Dutch GroenLinks, and the Portuguese Pessoas–Animais–Natureza. And one final example of an EP political group is the European People’s Party (Christian Democrats), where MEPs come from the Croatian Hrvatska demokratska zajednica, the Italian Forza Italia and the Südtiroler Volkspartei (Partito popolare sudtirolese), and the Polish Koalicja Europejska.

Current rules for establishing a political group require that it comprises at least 25 MEPs and that it be drawn from at least seven different EU member states. Not every MEP belongs to a political group, but the vast majority do, since adherence affords the opportunity of advancing one’s political agenda by using the strength of numbers. Furthermore, the composition of the European Parliament contains such a wide variety of political leanings from left to right that a place exists for practically everyone. Those who are non-attached members, to use the English-language nomenclature, belong to the NI group, from the French-language *non inscrit*. In the newly elected (2019-2024) Parliament — prior to Brexit — out of the 751 members, 57 (that is, 7.6%) were non-attached and this was an unusually high percentage. In the eight preceding legislative periods beginning with the first EP of 1979-1984, non-attached members most often comprised about 1% to 4% of all MEPs. For the current ninth legislative period (2019-2024) this percentage changed, as a result of Brexit. The total number of seats in the European Parliament went down from 751 to 704, and the total number of non-attached members declined to 29, thus comprising a more typical proportion of 4.1%.⁴ Why did the number of non-attached members decline so precipitously? Because many of the staunch Brexiteers sat in the non-attached group, so when the UK delegation left the European Parliament these non-attached MEPs left as well.

³ European Parliament. “Members of the European Parliament,” February 11th, 2020. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meps/en/home>.

⁴ European Parliament. “Members of the European Parliament,” February 11th, 2020. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meps/en/home>.

Usefulness of Political Groups for purposes of analysis

Since each political group espouses a more or less distinct viewpoint, they provide a useful analytical tool. In the first instance, let us categorize each political group as to whether it is left, center, or right. First, however, a word of caution. The terminology of European politics does not transfer to the United States. Of course, a Right-wing politician by European standards may well assume a virulently anti-immigrant or xenophobic position. For the most part, however, even the most Right-wing European leader favors government intervention in key economic areas, like the provision of healthcare, parental leave, and higher education.

Conversely, so-called liberals in the United States — who often oppose state intervention in such economic sectors — thereby adopt positions to the right of the most Right-wing Europeans. In this article, therefore, we use the terms left, center, and right in a European, not an American, context.

Listing of the EP political groups along with categorizing their political orientation

The following two tables (Table 1 and Table 2) list the political groups along with the data pertaining to them. This information is found on the European Parliament's website.⁵

Before proceeding, why have we categorized the non-attached members as Right-wing? In large measure, in the outgoing and the incoming EPs, a sizable proportion of non-attached members were Brexiteers and thus were Right-wing and Eurosceptic. Moreover, a certain amount of fluidity exists within the grouping of non-attached members, and thus clear categorization becomes difficult to achieve. And finally, since this paper argues that the right did not drastically gain in the 2019 EP elections, then categorizing the non-attached members as Right-wing and possibly inflating their numbers thus strengthens the opposite argument. To the extent that non-attached members were left or center means that the paper's thesis is all the more correct.

⁵ European Parliament. "Members of the European Parliament," February 11th, 2020. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meps/en/home>.

TABLE 1: INFORMATION PERTAINING TO THE POLITICAL GROUPS IN THE OUTGOING EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT (2014-2019)					
FULL NAME	ABBREVIATION	AUTHOR'S CATEGORIZATION OF POLITICAL ORIENTATION	NUMBER OF SEATS	PERCENTAGES FOR EACH GROUP	PERCENTAGES FOR EACH OF THE AUTHOR'S CATEGORIZATIONS
Confederal Group of the European United Left – Nordic Green Left	GUE / NGL	Left	52	6.9%	13.6%
Group of the Greens / European Free Alliance	Greens / EFA	Left	50	6.7%	
Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats	S & D	Center	191	25.4%	63.7%
Group of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe	ALDE	Center	67	8.9%	
Group of the European People's Party (Christian Democrats)	EPP	Center	221	29.4%	
European Conservatives and Reformists Group	ECR	Right	70	9.3%	22.6%
Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy Group	EFDD	Right	48	6.4%	
Non-attached Members	NI	Right	52	6.9%	
Totals			751	99.9% *	99.9%*

* Due to rounding, columns do not sum to exactly 100%.

TABLE 2: INFORMATION PERTAINING TO THE POLITICAL GROUPS IN THE INCOMING EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT (2019-2024, BUT PRIOR TO BREXIT)					
FULL NAME	ABBREVIATION	AUTHOR'S CATEGORIZATION OF POLITICAL ORIENTATION	NUMBER OF SEATS	PERCENTAGES FOR EACH GROUP	PERCENTAGES FOR EACH OF THE AUTHOR'S CATEGORIZATIONS
Confederal Group of the European United Left – Nordic Green Left	GUE / NGL	Left	41	5.5%	15.4%
Group of the Greens / European Free Alliance	Greens / EFA	Left	74	9.9%	
Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats	S & D	Center	154	20.5%	59.1%
Renew Europe Group	Renew Europe	Center	108	14.4%	
Group of the European People's Party (Christian Democrats)	EPP	Center	182	24.2%	
European Conservatives and Reformists Group	ECR	Right	62	8.3%	25.6%
Identity and Democracy	ID	Right	73	9.7%	
Non-attached Members	NI	Right	57	7.6%	
Totals			751	100.1% *	100.1% *

* Due to rounding, columns do not sum to exactly 100%.

Summarizing the results — only very slight polarization

So now, let us look at the following graph, which is derived from the data provided in Tables 1 and 2.

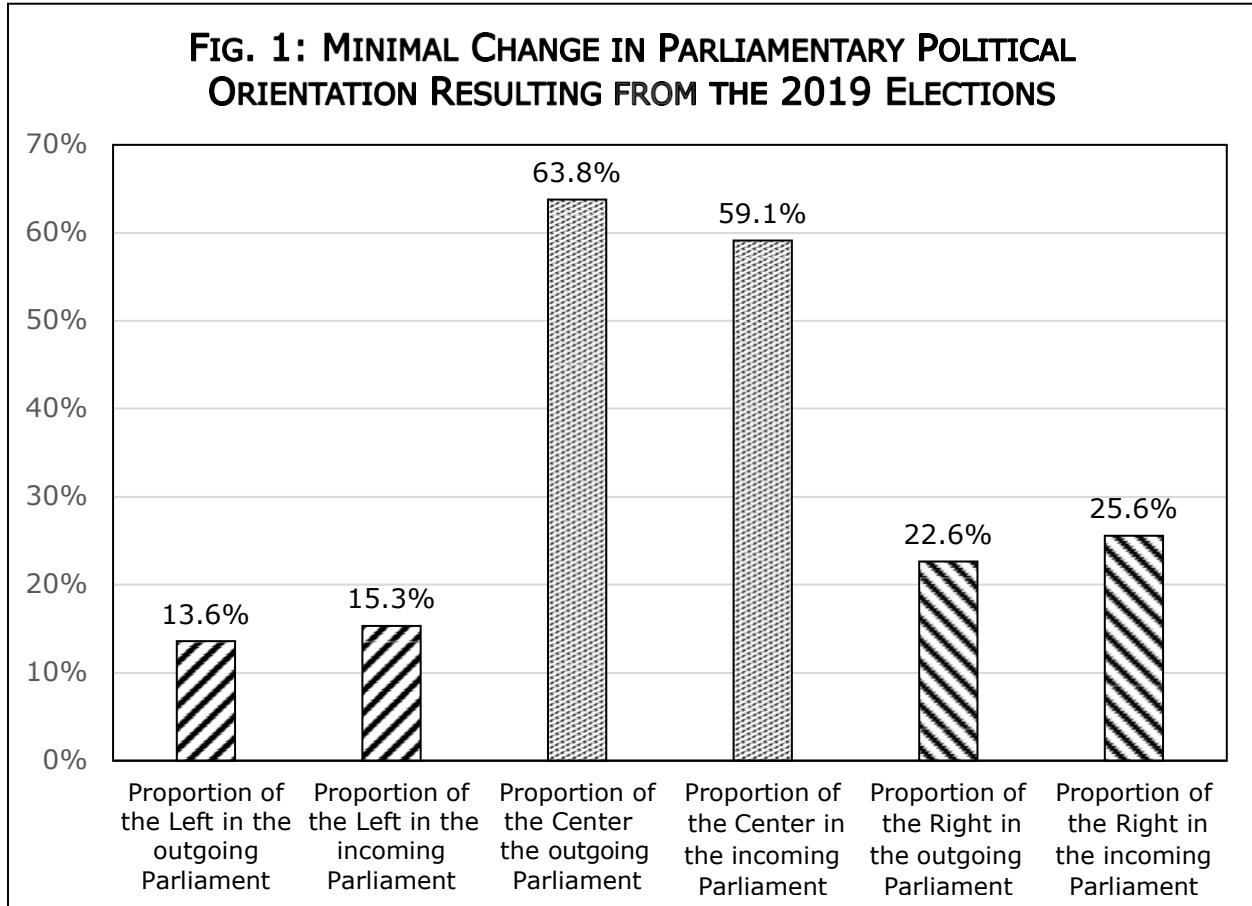


Figure 1 shows that the center's proportion did decrease, but not by much. The bottom did not fall out. Meanwhile, the left's and the right's respective proportions both increased. However, none of the changes were drastic. Yes, the incoming European Parliament became a bit more polarized, but the difference was certainly not like night and day.

Another angle — Pro-European Union versus Eurosceptic

Now let us consider how the 2019 elections affected the orientation of the European Parliament regarding its Pro-European versus its Eurosceptic orientation. To do this, we should first realize that these are not binary categories, where one is either Pro-European or else Eurosceptic. On the contrary, these two positions represent opposite ends of a continuum in between which exist numerous gradations, a phenomenon that the following graphic and table illustrate:

Centralization	Individual states
“Ever closer union”	Intergovernmental relations of independent states
Federalism	Trading bloc
Supranationalism	Intergovernmentalism
Emphasis on a political entity, as well as on economic relations	Emphasis just on economic relations

The expression of these concepts comes from two historians of the European Union, John Pinder and Simon Usherwood, who wrote of “two main ways of explaining the phenomenon of” the European Union. “Adherents to one emphasize the role of the member states and their intergovernmental dealings; adherents to the other give greater weight to the European institution.”⁶ In the extreme, therefore, the pro-EU position is to advance politically towards one single United States of Europe, and in the other extreme, the Eurosceptic goal is to keep the European Union a bloc of independent trading countries.

The phrase “ever closer union” — an objective for the most pro-EU forces and anathema to Eurosceptics — comes from the “Solemn Declaration on European Union,” promulgated by the European Council in 1983. This declaration is worth citing in greater detail. It calls for “further[ing] European integration,” and it discusses continuing the work “to create a united Europe.” It states, moreover, that the EU leadership, “on the basis of an awareness of a common destiny and the wish to affirm the European identity, confirm[s] their commitment to progress towards an ever closer union among the peoples and member states of the European Community.”⁷ This epitomizes the kind of message that so rankles Eurosceptics, such as Brexiteers and others on the European continent.

Keeping in mind that the categories of Pro-EU and Eurosceptic can be brought to the extreme, examining the 2019 EP elections against the backdrop of this categorization provides useful insight. We have done so in this paper using two different hypotheses — first, that the extreme left is Pro-EU and the other that the extreme left is Eurosceptic. And which political group in the European Parliament represents the extreme left? Indisputably, the Confederal Group of the European United Left – Nordic Green Left (GUE / NGL) does.

Why might the extreme left be considered Pro-EU? If we take the position that the unity of the working class requires peace between nations, then the European Union plays a progressive role. After all, this argument goes, proletarian unity cannot be achieved if the working classes of France and Germany, or of Slovenia and Italy, or of Rumania and Hungary —

⁶ John Pinder and Simon Usherwood, *The European Union: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 6–8.

⁷ European Council, “Solemn Declaration on European Union,” (Stuttgart, 19 June 1983), reproduced from the Bulletin of European Communities, No. 6/1983. Downloaded from the Archive of European Integration (AEI), accessed 13 February 2020, <http://aei.pitt.edu/1788/>.

to name only a few two-way combinations of historical rivalries — are slaughtering each other on European battlefields. Thus, having a vital European Union provides a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for working-class solidarity. And why might the extreme left be considered Eurosceptic? Some on the extreme left consider the EU to be a capitalist club, that does not lend enough support to the goal of working-class unity and in particular is too wedded to the economics of austerity. In this paper, we examine the issue both ways. First, consider the tabular data in Tables 3 and 4, and then the graphical display of that data in Fig 2 and Fig. 3.

TABLE 3: PRO-EUROPEAN UNION VERSUS EUROSCEPTIC ORIENTATION OF THE OUTGOING AND THE INCOMING EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT IF THE EXTREME LEFT IS COUNTED AS PRO-EU

ABBREVIATION	AUTHOR’S CATEGORIZATION AS PRO-EU OR EUROSCEPTIC	PERCENTAGES FOR EACH GROUP IN THE OUTGOING PARLIAMENT	PERCENTAGES FOR EACH OF THE AUTHOR’S CATEGORIZATIONS	PERCENTAGES FOR EACH GROUP IN THE INCOMING PARLIAMENT	PERCENTAGES FOR EACH OF THE AUTHOR’S CATEGORIZATIONS
GUE / NGL	Pro-EU	6.9%	77.3%	5.5%	74.5%
Greens / EFA	Pro-EU	6.7%		9.9%	
S & D	Pro-EU	25.4%		20.5%	
ALDE, then RE	Pro-EU	8.9%		14.4%	
EPP	Pro-EU	29.4%		24.2%	
ECR	Eurosceptic	9.3%	22.6%	8.3%	25.6%
EFDD, then ID	Eurosceptic	6.4%		9.7%	
NI	Eurosceptic	6.9%		7.6%	
Totals		99.9% *	99.9% *	100.1% *	100.1% *

* Due to rounding, columns do not sum to exactly 100%.

TABLE 4: PRO-EUROPEAN UNION VERSUS EUROSCEPTIC ORIENTATION OF THE OUTGOING AND THE INCOMING EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT IF THE EXTREME LEFT IS COUNTED AS EUROSCEPTIC

ABBREVIATION	AUTHOR'S CATEGORIZATION AS PRO-EU OR EUROSCEPTIC	PERCENTAGES FOR EACH GROUP IN THE OUTGOING PARLIAMENT	PERCENTAGES FOR EACH OF THE AUTHOR'S CATEGORIZATIONS	PERCENTAGES FOR EACH GROUP IN THE INCOMING PARLIAMENT	PERCENTAGES FOR EACH OF THE AUTHOR'S CATEGORIZATIONS
Greens / EFA	Pro-EU	6.7%	70.4%	9.9%	69.0%
S & D	Pro-EU	25.4%		20.5%	
ALDE, then RE	Pro-EU	8.9%		14.4%	
EPP	Pro-EU	29.4%		24.2%	
GUE / NGL	Eurosceptic	6.9%	29.5%	5.5%	31.1%
ECR	Eurosceptic	9.3%		8.3%	
EFDD, then ID	Eurosceptic	6.4%		9.7%	
NI	Eurosceptic	6.9%		7.6%	
Totals		99.9% *	99.9% *	100.1% *	100.1% *

* Due to rounding, columns do not sum to exactly 100%.

Fig. 2 graphically displays the data which is derived from Table 3.

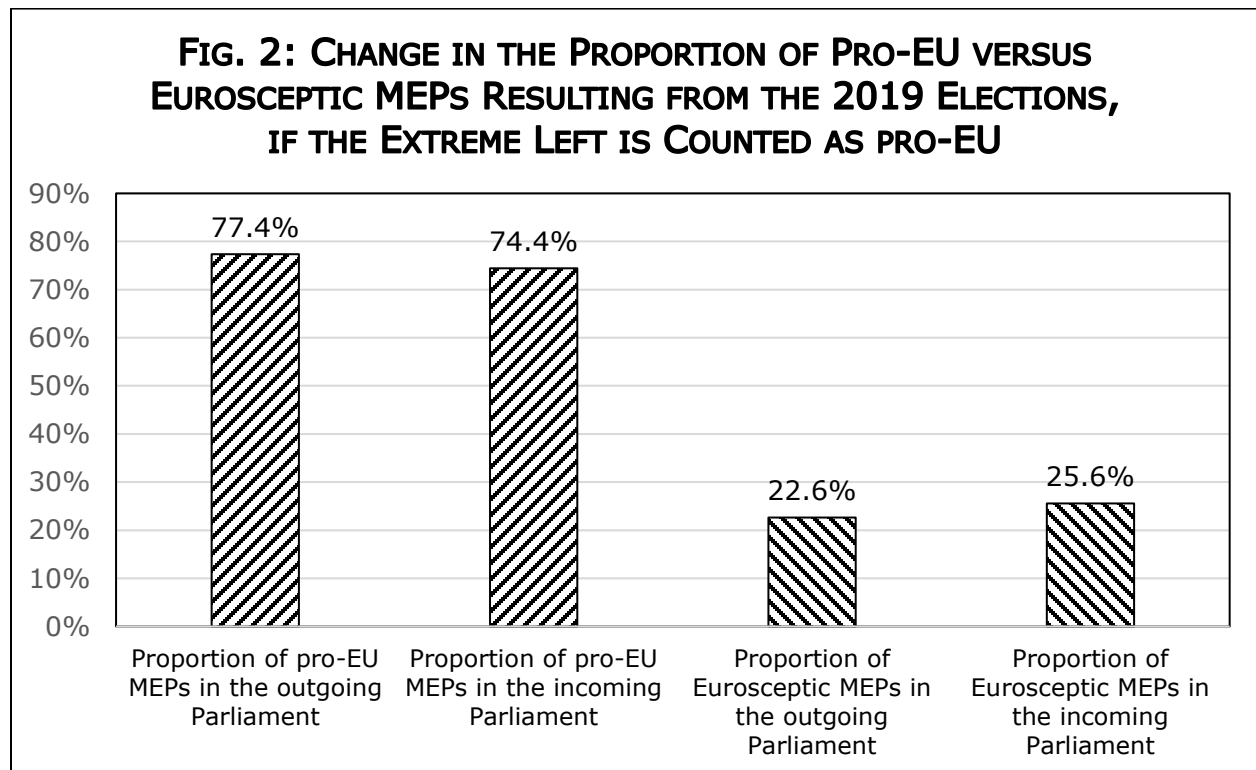
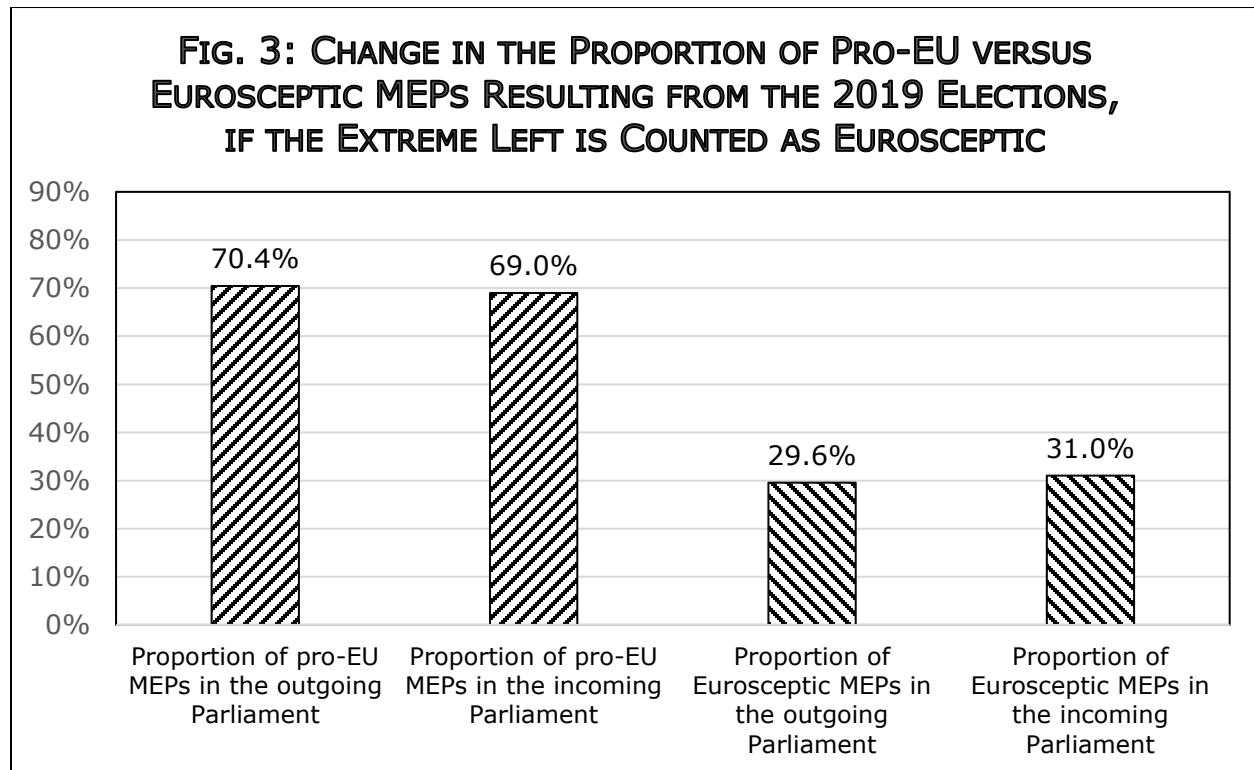


Fig. 3 graphically displays the data which is derived from Table 4.



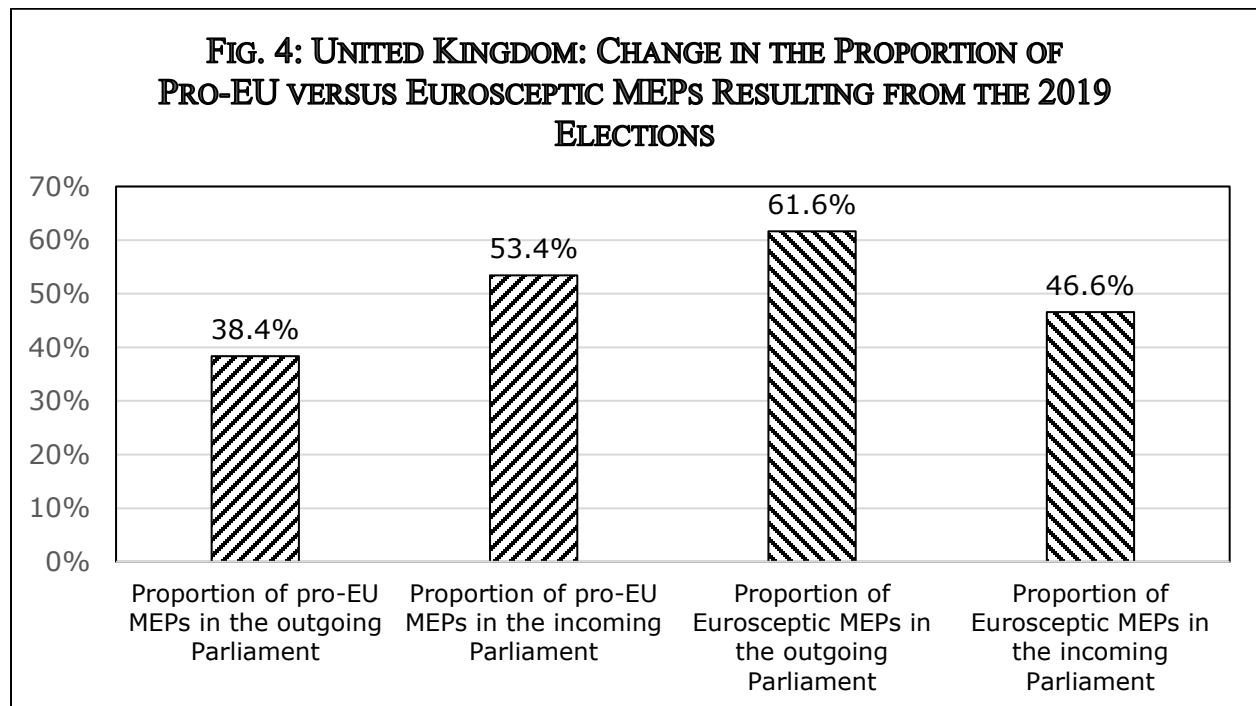
So, what conclusion should be drawn? If the extreme left is counted as pro-European Union, then comparing the outgoing parliament to the incoming parliament, the proportion of pro-EU MEPs to Eurosceptic MEPs somewhat decreased. And if the extreme left is counted as Eurosceptic, then comparing the outgoing parliament to the incoming parliament, the proportion of pro-EU MEPs to Eurosceptic MEPs slightly decreased. Bottom line — in neither case did the 2019 elections greatly affected the Pro-EU versus Eurosceptic orientation of the European Parliament.

A Surprising result: The 2019 EP elections led to a more pro-EU UK contingent

This paper has not sought to discuss Brexit. Still, the topic could not be utterly disregarded, nor should it because the departure of the United Kingdom led to a significant reduction in the number of MEPs. Given the Brexit atmosphere seemingly sweeping a sizable segment of the UK population, one might have thought that the incoming UK contingent to the European Parliament would be as Eurosceptic as the outgoing UK contingent, and perhaps even more so. Remarkably, however, the incoming UK MEPs were significantly more Pro-EU than the outgoing ones. Thus, while a consistent theme of this paper has been that the 2019 elections did not greatly change the overall composition of the parliament, for the United Kingdom in particular, the elections did change things. Fig. 4, taken from the data in Table 5, illustrates this surprising result — the UK contingent of the incoming European Parliament was decidedly more pro-European Union than was the UK contingent of the outgoing European Parliament. The proportion of Pro-EU UK MEPs increased from 38% to 53%.

TABLE 5: UNITED KINGDOM: CHANGE IN THE PROPORTION OF PRO-EUROPEAN UNION VERSUS EUROSCeptIC MEPS RESULTING FROM THE 2019 ELECTIONS					
ABBREVIATION	AUTHOR'S CATEGORIZATION AS PRO-EU OR EUROSCeptIC	SEATS AND PERCENTAGES FOR EACH GROUP IN THE OUTGOING PARLIAMENT	PERCENTAGES FOR EACH OF THE AUTHOR'S CATEGORIZATIONS	SEATS AND PERCENTAGES FOR EACH GROUP IN THE INCOMING PARLIAMENT	PERCENTAGES FOR EACH OF THE AUTHOR'S CATEGORIZATIONS
GUE / NGL	Pro-EU	(1 seat) 1.4%	38.5%	(1 seat) 1.4%	53.5%
Greens / EFA	Pro-EU	(6 seats) 8.3%		(11 seats) 15.1%	
S & D	Pro-EU	(20 seats) 27.4%		(10 seats) 13.7%	
ALDE, then RE	Pro-EU	(1 seat) 1.4%		(17 seat) 23.3%	
EPP	Pro-EU	(0 seats) --		(0 seats) --	
ECR	Euroscaptic	(20 seats) 27.4%	61.7%	(4 seats) 5.5%-	46.6%
EFDD, then ID	Euroscaptic	(24 seats) 32.9%		(0 seats) --	
NI	Euroscaptic	(1 seat) 1.4%		(30 seats) 41.1%	
Totals		(73 seats) 100.2% *	100.2% *	(73 seats) 100.1% *	100.1% *

* Due to rounding, columns do not sum to exactly 100%.



Conclusion: The Continued stability of the European Union in the face of Euroscepticism

Although the UK contingent of the outgoing and incoming European Parliaments was large — 73 out of the 751 seats — it was after all only one delegation. Yes, that delegation surprisingly shifted towards the Pro-EU position as a result of the 2019 elections. Overall, however, for the parliament as a whole, we have demonstrated that the Eurosceptic position made only slight gains, and how those gains should be quantified depends upon whether the Extreme Left should be considered Pro-EU or Eurosceptic. All in all, however, not much changed. This is the same looking at the situation as left, center, or right. The center declined a bit while the left and the right made minor gains. The watchword was stability. Eurosceptics hoping for widespread disruption had cause for disappointment.

Due to Brexit, the size of the European Parliament has decreased from 751 to 704 seats. Not all the UK's 73 seats vanished, which of course would have brought the EP's size down to 678 seats. Instead, 26 seats formerly held by the UK were distributed to the remaining 27 EU member countries. The remaining 47 seats are being held in reserve for possible new members eager to join the European Union, most of which lie in the Western Balkans. The next two members — if their accession is approved — would be Montenegro and Northern Macedonia. The other Western Balkans countries would be Albania, Bosnia Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Serbia. If they eventually do join the European Union, their populations will be represented in a strong and stable European Parliament.

APPENDIX: POLITICAL GROUPS OF THE 9TH EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT (2019 – 2024)		
FULL NAME	ABBREVIATION	IDEOLOGY
Group of the European United Left – Nordic Green Left	GUE / NGL	Pro-EU or Eurosceptic (debatable) Extreme leftwing
Group of the Greens / European Free Alliance	Greens / EFA	Pro-EU Green politics Leftwing
Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament	S & D	Pro-EU Leftwing
Renew Europe [successor to the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe]	RE [successor to ALDE]	Pro-EU Centrist
Group of the European People’s Party (Christian Democrats)	EPP	Pro-EU Centrist
European Conservative and Reformists Group	ECR	Eurosceptic Rightwing
Identity and Democracy Group [successor to Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy]	ID [successor to EFDD]	Eurosceptic Rightwing
Non-Attached Members	NI	Eurosceptic (usually) Rightwing (usually)

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