

Eurocepticism in the European Parliament: A Study of the Euroceptic Performance in European Elections (2009-2019)¹

*Euroescepticismo en el Parlamento Europeo:
un estudio de la actuación euroescéptica en las
elecciones europeas (2009-2019)*

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Abstract: This paper analyses the progression of eurosceptic groups within the European Parliament between 2009 and 2019. Through pre-established definitions of Eurocepticism as a political phenomenon, we conduct a quantitative and qualitative analysis, which gathers data from the official results of 3 European legislative elections (2009, 2014 and 2019) and later interprets them with the aid of previous academic production on eurosceptic values and strategies within the European Union's institutions. As a conclusion, we seek to demonstrate that Eurocepticism is a consequence of a greater scenario, which relates to a gradual loss of public trust in the European political establishment.

Keywords: European Parliament, Eurocepticism, elections, political groups, integration, nationalism.

Resumen: Este trabajo analiza la progresión de los grupos euroescépticos en el Parlamento Europeo entre 2009 y 2019. A través de definiciones preestablecidas del Euroescepticismo como fenómeno político, hacemos un análisis cuantitativo y cualitativo que recopila datos de los resultados oficiales de 3 elecciones legislativas europeas (2009, 2014 y 2019) y que luego los interpreta con el auxilio de la producción académica previa sobre los valores y estrategias euroescépticas en las instituciones de la Unión Europea. Como conclusión, buscamos demostrar que el Euroescepticismo es una consecuencia de un contexto mayor, el cual se relaciona a una pérdida gradual de confianza pública en el establecimiento político europeo.

Palabras clave: Parlamento Europeo, Euroescepticismo, elecciones, grupos políticos, integración, nacionalismo.

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1. Introduction

The European Union (EU) is renowned as a unique institutional framework. It was built based on the process of voluntary integration between the nation-states of Europe, evolving from 6 states in the early 1950s to 15 in the 1990s, 27 in the 2000s, and finally its current 28 members since 2013. From a common market for coal and steel goods, the EU has expanded into an economic, social and political union. Subsequently, the European integration has allowed the development of a set of supranational executive, legislative, and judicial institutions with prominent control over many spheres of public policy (Hix & Bjørn, 2011).

That being considered, this paper attempts to understand the internal dynamics of the European Parliament (EP), its legislative body. More specifically, it seeks to evaluate the progression of eurosceptic groups within this legislature, as well as understanding the causes of the eurosceptic phenomenon and measuring its consequences for the political establishment and the European integration project. The concept of Euroscepticism is described as a broader term that “expresses the idea of contingent and qualified, as well as incorporates outright and unqualified opposition to the process of European integration” (Taggart, 1998). Rather, there are variations in the strategies of party-based Euroscepticism, which contribute to this phenomenon’s perception as “the politics of opposition” (Sitter, 2002: 5). Since this is an inconclusive topic, our study aims to analyze how eurosceptic groups could affect the future of the EU within the EP, either by restricting its policies or by opposing further integration attempts.

As far as we know, the EP as a legislative branch has a deeply sophisticated system for the proposal of oral and written questions to the Council of the European Union and the European Commission (Raunio, 1996). Similar to national Parliaments, these questions facilitate members of the European Parliament (MEPs) to obtain information, pressure the European Commission to prepare a formal statement about a specific measure, advocate their constituencies interests and, above all, advise the Commission and Council on issues they may find obscure (Hix & Bjorn, 2011: 40).

Going against the literature that stresses the European dimension as an ideological spectrum between tradeskeptic nationalists and pro-economic cultural cosmopolitans, our investigation tries to explain that this association might be limited or less direct. In reality, the European dimension can be noted as fighting over the budgetary spending supported by the current coalition in the EU and in divergence by the opposition, which then leads to eurosceptic stances (Cheysson & Fraccaroli, 2009).

In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in the eurosceptic phenomenon for a politologic investigation. Although the term “Euroscepticism” is relatively new, its idea as an opposition to European integration is not, and has persevered over the decades due to three different characteristics. Firstly, it is a dynamic phenomenon, capable of evolving along with the integration process. Secondly, it is not exclusive to a single social actor, finding acceptance among citizens, political parties, institutions, communication vehicles, among others. Finally, it is compatible with different ideologies, from the right to the left of the political spectrum. Hence, eurosceptic ideas have been expressed in several ways over the years, which also provides challenges to its full comprehension (Álvarez, 2012: 4-5).

Many have tried to conceptualize Euroscepticism, but we still lack studies to fully understand its causes and impacts in the EP. Its most successful classification can be drawn from the typology that separates its soft from its hard version (Taggart & Szczerbiak, 2008). Hard Euroscepticism is described as “principal rejection of the European Integration as embodied in the EU” (Spiering & Harmsen, 2004: 18), while soft Euroscepticism marks “qualified opposition or disagreement with one or more EU policies” (Taggart & Szczerbiak, 2002: 7). The soft version can be further subdivided into “policy” and “national-interest” Euroscepticism. The first one refers to an opposition to measures designed to deepen significantly European political and economic integration, so it is expressed in terms of opposition to specific extensions of EU competencies. In turn, the second one constitutes a rhetoric that defends the “national interest” within EU instances. Therefore, it does not necessarily oppose further integration, but believes in the need for a nationalist behavior to shore up a domestic political support base (Taggart & Szczerbiak, 2000: 6-7). Under this categorization, the position of a political party in domestic politics also influences on its levels of Euroscepticism. “Core” groups, with more presence amongst the electorate and a higher perspective of taking part in the government, would express a more pro-EU position than “peripheric” ones, with a higher tendency to move away from the rhetorics of mainstream politicians (Álvarez, 2012: 9).

Although regularly applied in references to the eurosceptic phenomenon, the hard-soft conceptualization was later criticized for being too inclusive and all-encompassing, in a way any disagreement with a policy decision from the EU could be interpreted as Euroscepticism (Taggart & Szczerbiak, 2003: 3). Others convey alternative categorizations, such as eurosceptics or europhobes, but no final consensus on its conceptualization has been reached. Nevertheless, it is certain that Euroscepticism has become a popular issue for European regional politics (Kaniok & Hloušek, 2016: 3).

Conceptual debates have not only relied on what is regarded as theoretical studies on Euroscepticism, but also on the next “big concern”, which deals with the causes that provoke political parties to build themselves upon Euroscepticism. Accordingly, a more conceivable argument highlights the influence of ideology, particularly parties’ stances on the left-right spectrum, for the correlation between Euroscepticism and extremism/radicalism (notably identified with alt-right⁴ parties), or for a link between this phenomenon and its opposition to the political establishment (Sitter, 2001/2002; Ray, 1999; Marks & Steenbergen, 2004). Hooghe and Marks (2009) state that there are two categories of Euroscepticism. Whereas the left-wing version brings a vision that the EU (frequently characterized as a neo-liberal regime) jeopardizes social benefits and European social infrastructure, the right-wing type claims that the EU endangers both national sovereignty and national identity (Hooghe & Marks, 2009). Sanahuja (2019) goes beyond the continental dimension and discusses the role of Euroscepticism at the global stage, by regarding this phenomenon as part of a wider contestation of liberal values and norms, which have prevailed since the 1980s. In other words, the rise of far-right and nationalist parties in Europe is related to a legitimacy crisis of the current international order, which may lead to a shift towards a new historical cycle (Sanahuja, 2019: 61-63).

⁴ “Alt-right” is an abbreviation of alternative right, which relates further to the right-left backlash than the standard political right, especially in terms of extreme nationalism, xenophobia or authoritarian tendencies (BBC, 2019).

In light of this, the future of the EU is no less challenging than in the previous years, as the results of the latest European elections point to a further reshaping on the distribution of MEPs and the presence of eurosceptic tendencies in this new scenario. When Europe's economy showed recovery signs in 2015, it was expected that it would pave the way for the slashing of eurosceptic movements. However, it turned out to expand public Euroscepticism across the continent due to massive discontent over the political system, and inflamed with the worst moments of the refugee crisis over that same year. Furthermore, the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the EU is still unrolling, which raises additional uncertainties regarding its possible outcomes for the bloc (Lenton, 2015). The Critical Theory offers relevant insights in regards to the dissensus within the UE's integration process in terms of the rise of populist and far-right nationalist parties of member-states since the 2008 financial crisis, as well as its consequences on the liberal order. According to Habermas (1975), there is a trend of modern capitalism to legitimate deficits and, in his perspective, the main problem is caused by continuous economic intervention of states or institutions (in this case, the EU), and how can either affect the society's culture and political spectrum.

The EP does not usually have a traditional “government” and “opposition” coalition, as presented in national Parliaments. Its seats are distributed in different political blocs, formed by “common-ground” political movements from different countries, in line to defend a common agenda. Nevertheless, cohesion is relatively steady, as the parties are supposedly capable of disciplining their representatives in the EP. Our findings advance, though, that this occurs mostly via the impact of national parties, which intentionally choose to support their own policy goals and then create a bloc to promote these goals (Hix, Noury, Roland; 2007).

Our core hypothesis is that there was a substantial loss of trust regarding the political establishment in the EP since the beginning of the 2008 financial crisis. As a result, the left and right-wing cleavage, which dominated the 6th (2004-2009) and 7th (2009-2014) Parliaments, was outrun by the European-support importance in 2014 (Hix, Noury, Roland; 2018). Although we focus our analysis on the eurosceptic performance in European elections, we also seek to demonstrate that it is not the only group that benefited from this scenario, as the 2019 results also pointed to a shift of support towards other groups outside the political establishment (Henley, 2019).

We conduct an empirical investigation of the progression of the electorate's support towards Euroscepticism throughout the 2009-2019 decade, a time span that includes events such as the 2008 financial crisis, the European migrant crisis and the British withdrawal process from the EU (“Brexit”). We collect data from the 2009, 2014 and 2019 European elections, in order to evaluate the performance of eurosceptic political groups within the EP, and to determine the vital aspects driving MEP's voting and their expansion throughout the period considered. Regarding sources, we turn to each election official results, national opinion polls and other particular polls in some countries, in order to emphasize any extra unique feature at the national level. Additionally, we rely on research papers, highlighting the eurosceptic approach in the face of the establishment (considering that the EP has a long-standing influence of center-right and center-left wing as a majority) and assess the causes of the rise of eurosceptics, as well as the link between the global financial crisis, the refugee crisis and Euroscepticism.

That being considered, this article is organized as follows. The next section presents the results of MEPs in the respective elections of eurosceptic dimension, highlighting the post-crisis qualitative analysis. And later, section 3 provides a contextualization of each EP election and the eurosceptic strategy within the EP.

2. The electoral performance of Eurosceptic parties in the EP

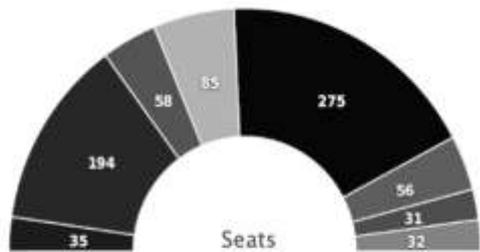
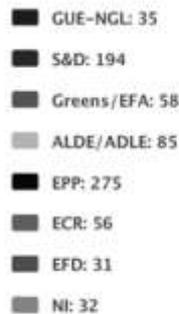
The following section deals with how the presence of eurosceptic parties increased between 2009 and 2019. The charts illustrate the total division of EP party groups or cleavage between center-right and center-left wing which certainly points the expanding loss of EP seats from mostly eurosceptic and conservative parties' group.

Currently, the EP has 751 seats, divided between the Group of the European People's Party (EPP) - center-right; Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D) - social democracy; European Conservatives Group (ECR) - eurosceptic conservative; Renew Europe group (RE) - liberal democracy; Confederal Group of the European United Left - Nordic green left (GUE/NGL); Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA) - green; Identity and Democracy (ID) - eurosceptic radical right-wing; and non-attached members (Politico, 2019). In addition to looking at the group composition and changes in the most recent European elections, we will focus mainly on the ID and ECR groups, as they are presented as openly eurosceptic and managed to remain present in the three elections considered.

I. Results in 2009

Since the first European elections in 1979, the turnout in EP elections has been steadily sinking. The overall turnout in 1979 was 63%, while in 2009 it reached the record-low of 43%. In all 28 EU countries, the turnout in EP elections is generally lower than in national elections (Gagatek, 2009). This clear downward trend in voter engagement is of crucial meaning for the political features of European integration. It also shows that, from 1999 onwards, the absolute majority of Europeans have decided to abandon the polls, further undermining the democratic legitimacy of the European institutions (Maggini, 2014: 32). Regarding this turnout, the European elections strengthened the political power ratio in the EP.

Firstly, in the 2009 European elections, the results were as follows:



Source: Pollwatch (2014)

According to the figure, the EPP was the most prominent bloc (275 seats), followed by the S&D - 194 seats; the ALDE - 85 seats; the Greens/EFA - 58 seats; the ECR - 56 seats; and the EFD - 32 seats, mostly occupied by nationalists and right-wing populists. Furthermore, 31 MEPs - among them 3 MEPs of the Hungarian neo-Nazi party *Jobbik* - served as non-attached members (NI). Moreover, the GUE/NGL, which included the MEPs of the European Left (EL), retained 35 seats⁵. Nevertheless, the conservative group was split on the topic of EU integration.

From 1999 to 2009, the EPP joined the European Democrats in the EP dimension. One of the outcomes of the financial crisis spiraling Europe in 2008 was the depart of the conservative Eurosceptic parties from the EPP, which allowed the creation of the ECR in 2009. Despite this friction, the EPP remained a comprehensive and varied party, with members ranging from Viktor Orbán's *Fidesz* to Nicolas Sarkozy's *Union pour un Mouvement Populaire*, Silvio Berlusconi's *Popolo della Libertà* and Fredrik Rheinfeldt's Swedish Moderate Party (Steiner, Striethorst, Baier; 2014).

II. Results in 2014

The EP elections took place between the 22nd and 25th May, 2014 (depending on the country), with a more prominent image than past editions. This can be perceived by looking at how many European citizens changed their voting patterns for the EP. In comparison with the 2009 elections, the 2014 turnout reached 43,1 % (Maggini, Emanuele & Sio, 2014: 279). This small rise may be explained by two combined factors: the economic-political crisis that affected most of the EU, and the leadership of the six *Spitzenkandidaten*⁶. Thus, the EP elected in 2014 is outlined in the figure below:

⁵ Member parties of GUE/NGL (* indicates members of the Party of the European Left - EL): AKEL - Progressive Party of the Working People of Cyprus*, Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia*, Croatian Labourists - Labour Party, Red-Green Alliance Denmark*, French Communist Party*, Left Party of France*, Communist Party of *Réunion*, LINKE Germany*, KKE - Communist Party of Greece, SYRIZA - Coalition of the Radical Left of Greece*, Socialist Party of Ireland, Socialist Party of Latvia, Socialist Party of the Netherlands, Independent Party of the Netherlands, Left Bloc of Portugal*, Portuguese Communist Party, Communist Party of Spain*, Left Party of Sweden, *Sinn Féin* of Northern Ireland (Steiner, Striethorst, Baier; 2013).

⁶ The German term *spitzenkandidat* – plural *spitzenkandidaten* – typically refers to the leading candidate of a party. With the signing of the Lisbon Treaty in 2009, 6 pan-European groups of parties struggling in the European elections chose leading candidates to campaign for them across the continent and to participate in debates. One of those candidates — most likely the nominee from the group that obtains the most valid seats after the election — should then be appointed by the Council as the Commission president (Herszenhorn & Maia, 2018).



Source: European Parliament (2014)

Given the chart above, the 2014 European elections headed to a sharp growth in the electoral consensus of parties and independent MEPs marked as eurosceptic. The EPP remained the largest group, with 221 seats. The S&D also remained the second largest, with 191 seats. The ECR performed considerably higher than initial projections (40 seats) and came third, with 70 seats (European Parliament, 2014) (Kirk, 2014). ALDE came fourth, with 67 seats. The radical-left GUE/NGL was fifth, with 52 seats. The Greens/EFA came sixth, with 50 seats. It was just a little higher than the anti-EU EFDD, which occupied 48 seats. Finally, 52 seats were occupied by “non-attached” MEPs (European Parliament, 2014).

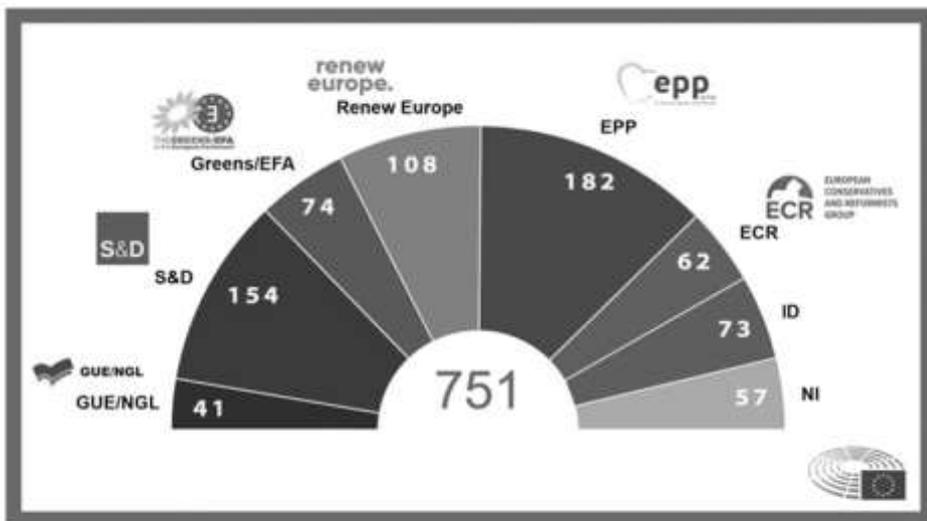
With this landscape of political forces, various possible “majority winning” coalitions were conceivable. For instance, the EPP and S&D could seek a coalition with ALDE, retaining 62% of the seats, whilst a “grand coalition” of EPP and S&D would only reach 54%. In case the two largest groups did not vote along, a center-right coalition of EPP, ECR, and ALDE would make a majority (with 46%). On the other hand, a center-left coalition of S&D, EUL-NGL, G/EFA, and ALDE would nearly form a majority (45%). As a result, the balance of power would tend to be more center-right rather than the center-left wing. Though the center-left has been able to overcome some important votes when the bloc “union” has torn (Hix, 2013).

All in all, it is worth highlighting that we are looking at a more fragmented and disoriented EP that was still a predominantly pro-European one. While the “eurosceptical coalition” (EUL/ENG, ECR, EFD) achieved big gains in 2014, their combined results with 15 percent was not enough to thwart the pro-European continuity.

III. Results in 2019

Previous results have demonstrated an increasing electoral instability in European elections. They significantly take into account the expanding fleeing of votes from parties composing the main EP groups, such as the EPP and the S&D, against anti-establishment and eurosceptic parties (both older and newer ones), which consist of the ENF, EFDD, NGL/GUE and, in part, the ECR (Bosco & Werney, 2012; Hobolt & Tilley, 2016; Hooghe & Marks, 2017; Morolino & Raniolo, 2017). These trends may occur not only because of electoral realignment but also because of the resurgence of a new ideological basis within a political force. Similarly, Kriest et al. (2006), clarifies that globalization (or de-nationalization) has unraveled as the new ideological division, opposing those defending cultural liberalism (Cosmopolitans) and those securing a national culture (Nationalists).

This mixed nationalist ideology may polarize the public political debate, also comprehending the pro-European and anti-EU on opposing sides. In 2019, it might have been critical in impacting inter-group dispute at the EP elections. The 2019 EP elections have shown unprecedented results related to gains/losses of the Eurosceptic EP groups (ENF, EFDD, NGL-GUE, and ECR) versus the Europhile ones (EPP, S&D), encouraging a single European constituency (De Sio, Franklin & Russo, 2019: 18). Thereby, the figure below illustrates the formation in 2019 results of EP:



Source: European Parliament (2019)

As it is observed in the chart, seven groups have composed the new EP, namely: the EPP - 182 seats; the S&D - 154 seats; Renew Europe (Former ALDE) - 108 seats; the Greens/EFA - 74 seats; Identity and Democracy (ID), which replaced the EFDD (Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy) - 73 seats; the ECR - 62 seats, whose rise (6th to 3rd biggest group) was due to poor results of the Tories in the UK; and the GUE/NGL - 41 seats (European Parliament, 2019).

The first of two big national parties without an EP group is the British Brexit Party, with 29 MEPs, which ran in the UK to pinch about the country's exit from the EU. Following the

Italian Five Star Movement (M5S), which holds 14 MEPS. Both of them are the core of the soon deserted EFDD group. Most of the EFD members have decided to join the ID group or were not able to be re-elected (Kaczynski, 2019).

3. Results analysis

Considering the data presented so far, we may sum up the performance of openly eurosceptic groups – namely, the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) and the former Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD), now Identity and Democracy (ID) – in the EP, between 2009 and 2019, as follows:

Year	Number of seats in the EP	Percentage of MEPS
2009	88	11.71%
2014	118	15.71%
2019	135	17.97%

Sources: European Parliament (2009); European Parliament (2014); EuropeanParliament (2019).

Interpreting the aforementioned results is a task that must consider the social, economic and political contexts where each election was held, in order to understand which factors could have contributed to diminishing the citizens’ confidence in the EU and its institutions. Consequently, this level of trust translates into the performance of eurosceptic groups in the EP.

Firstly, in 2009, the European elections were held in a moment when the continent was beginning to feel the most severe effects of the 2008 financial crisis. Although the socio-economic scenario is frequently pointed as the main explanatory factor for the rise of the eurosceptic feeling, it proves to be limited in the analytical leverage. The election results of 2009 effectively point to an exacerbation of tendencies that already existed since the Maastricht Treaty (1992), according to which national identities and political institutions played an increasingly important role in explaining Euroscepticism in the public opinion. In other words, the election of anti-EU MEPs was not regarded as a completely new phenomenon within the EP (Serricchio, Tsakatika & Quaglia, 2012: 61).

Spanje and De Vreese (2014) have also observed a key role from the media in shifting the voting towards eurosceptic parties in 2009. Visibility, tone, and framing⁷ are pointed as the three main aspects of coverage for influencing the performance of political actors (Spanje & De Vreese, 2014: 326-327). Data from the countries where eurosceptics gained the most ground – Sweden, Denmark, the UK and the Netherlands – point that visibility was not the most important factor for those particular parties, but benefit framing, not only on socioeconomic, but also on socio-cultural issues, mostly related to a sense of European identity (Spanje & De Vreese, 2014: 341-342). The socioeconomic background also fuelled older

⁷ Here, “framing” is understood as “the process by which people develop a particular conceptualization of an issue or reorient their thinking about an issue” (Spanje & De Vreese, 2014: 327).

criticisms towards the EU and its true democratic role, but eurosceptic votes were more closely related to the bloc's general perception as a useful and democratic tool (Spanje & De Vreese, 2015: 423-425).

Furthermore, in 2009, the EP was not considered as relevant as national legislatures. Hence, in the early stages of the crisis, Euroscepticism was not widely regarded as a viable alternative to mainstream groups. On the other hand, Hix (2009) observed an early rise in the vote for populist, libertarian, and social conservative parties in Poland, Belgium, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, and the Netherlands. It happened at the expense of social democratic parties, which presented a dismal performance. Being part of national governments or oppositions, they were outvoted in several EU countries, notably the ones that would feel the harshest effects of the financial crisis, such as Portugal, Spain, Ireland, and Greece. The power voids, however, were mostly occupied by center-right counterparts, not by anti-establishment parties (Hix, 2009: 2-3).

Therefore, despite the gains and losses, the EPP and the S&D remained the main political groups in the EP, combining a total of 62.58% of the seats, while eurosceptic MEPs occupied in total 11.71% (Hix, 2009: 1). Still, a "grand coalition" would be necessary between the biggest groups, as none held an absolute majority alone. Thus, for the 2009-2014 term, a certain cohesiveness in the main groups' voting was expected, while dealing with an early rise in the number of anti-establishment MEPs. Fragmentation, therefore, was showing its first signs (Hix, 2009: 8).

By 2014, the severe effects of the Eurozone crisis have reached an unprecedented level of public panic, media hysteria and political tension, which generated a particularly intense focus of the media on European Integration (FitzGibbon, 2014: 31). Consequently, Euroscepticism gained real public attention, as the European elections saw an unprecedented level of votes for anti-EU parties, with its MEPs gaining seats in 23 of the 28 member states (Treib, 2014: 1542).

Treib (2014) argues that part of these results are a consequence of the second-order character of European elections, according to which they are not about the EU as a whole, but a response to national issues. Therefore, they are expected to have lower turnout rates, and voters frequently use them to express opinions about their countries' ruling parties. Based on this idea, the eurosceptic vote would be a form of protest against an unpopular national government. It proved to be the case, for example, in France and in the UK, where Marine Le Pen's National Front and Nigel Farage's United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) were the winners of the European Elections nationally, both by raising highly anti-EU agendas, in opposition to their countries' ruling parties. Therefore, dissatisfaction with EU policies at the domestic level played a key-part in the results (Treib, 2014: 1547-1549).

However, protests against national political elites do not solely explain the rise of euroscepticism in the bloc. Growing populist agendas and more coordination among them have also proven to be a major influence. They were expressed through highly anti-establishment ideals, radically departing from traditional major groups and aiming to speak directly to those who felt most affected by the EU policies and institutions over the years (Treib, 2014: 1550).

Therefore, the 2014 election results demonstrated that voters were concerned with the effects of EU membership at the domestic level. Hence, groups with coincident ideals were able to coordinate campaigns and public support from both sides of the political spectrum. On the left, it was fuelled by harsh austerity measures imposed in the context of the Eurozone crisis. On the right, it came from concerns over the financial risks of bailing out the most affected countries, as well as over increasing immigration from Eastern Europe (Treib, 2014: 1551).

Consequently, after the release of the official results, eurosceptic MEPs have gained more ground than in 2009, rising from 11.71% to 15.71% of the seats. The EPP and the S&D retained their majority (54.86%), although both presented losses. The S&D lost 3 seats, and the EPP, 54 (European Parliament, 2014). As a result, the EU would have to deal with a more fragmented Parliament for the 2014-2019 term (FitzGibbon, 2014: 38).

Although the levels of unpopularity have never been higher towards the EU, the rise in the number of eurosceptic MEPs in 2014 was still not expressive enough to represent a return to nationalist ideals at the expense of European integration. The Eurozone crisis may be considered the main influence over rising support for eurosceptic groups, but the results in the European elections indicate remaining residual support for europhile groups as well (FitzGibbon, 2014: 41).

Therefore, it is understood that, in 2014, voters made two specific points. Firstly, they were unsatisfied with the set of policies at the EU level. Secondly, they were unhappy with domestic political elites with whom they bracketed the EU as part of the political establishment. Consequently, the European elections represented a vote against domestic and continental policies, but the eurosceptic wave was expected to vanish after economic recovery started (FitzGibbon, 2014: 41-42).

Finally, in 2019, the European elections presented a turn-out of over 50% of the voters, the highest level in 25 years, and campaigns focused heavily on the different perceptions of how the bloc should be, which also led to calls for more or less integration. Nevertheless, Euroscepticism was not the only ideology gaining ground, but alternative antiestablishment groups as well (Fipra, 2019: 4).

Although remaining the biggest political groups in the EP, the EPP and the S&D no longer hold a clear majority, combining 336 seats (44.74%). Concerning the eurosceptics, the former EFDD has rearranged into the Identity and Democracy group (ID), under the leadership of Italian MEP Marco Zanni (League Party). With a total of 73 seats, the ID became the EP's 5th largest group. Combined with the ECR, the eurosceptic front currently occupies 135 seats (Rankin, 2019). The retreat of establishment parties was also fuelled by the rise of the Greens/EFA, which won 74 seats, and the liberals from former ALDE, rebranded as the Renew Europe group (RE), occupying 108 seats (Leandro & Sartorato, 2019) (ALDE, 2019).

Once again, support for Euroscepticism rooted from left and right-wing voters. The financial crisis was a strong platform to draw its support, but in 2019, disapproval of the EU also came from its response to the 2015 refugees crisis, heavily criticized in countries that served as the main entrance points (such as Italy and Greece) and in the most popular final destinations (for example, Germany) (Barendregt & Verbruggen, 2019). It is also necessary to point out the Brexit process, as it began in 2016. The struggles of the British government

to draft a withdrawal agreement with Brussels and approve it in its own Parliament, as well as the political and economic instability resulting from that, led voters all over Europe to believe that leaving the EU could not be the solution expected to domestic problems. Therefore, eurosceptic parties are reshaping their manifestos, in order to oppose further integration while not radically defending a departure from the EU, as it does not seem as attractive to voters as it was before Brexit (Adler, 2019).

Therefore, it is still early to evaluate the behavior of the EP elected in 2019. However, the results follow a tendency that comes from previous elections, which points to a stronger eurosceptic front among the MEPs (Fipra, 2019: 5). Nevertheless, considering these results, we argue that, although the lack of faith in traditional center-right and center-left parties is rising, Euroscepticism is not the only force to inherit the votes previously destined to the two major groups, as the Greens and ALDE also made gains (Henley, 2019). This scenario translates into a more fragmented legislature, where the EPP and the S&D will have to negotiate with more groups, and will likely struggle to approve big legislative packages (Fipra, 2019: 5).

In conclusion, the increase of Euroscepticism in the EP over the last decade may be described as steady, but not strong enough to represent a reversion of the EU project in the long term. It reflects, therefore, a renewal of the voters' perception of the bloc, as well as of the demands its legislative body must attend to in order to regain and maintain the population's trust (Fipra, 2019: 4-6).

4. Closing remarks

As previously expressed, Euroscepticism has varied causes, which allows it to remain present in different stages of the European integration project. It may be argued that it is a cumulative phenomenon, initially directed to authorities and to the regime, before assembling and developing into an opposition to the community (Serricchio, Tsakatika & Quaglia, 2012: 52). On the global stage, it is part of a wider contestation of the liberal values that prevailed since the 1980s, which also fuel a legitimacy and trust crisis of the current international order (Sanahuja, 2019: 61-64). Hence, if the citizens fail to believe in the efficiency of the EU, its *raison d'être* as a whole is undermined. Therefore, the eurosceptic strength is connected to the bloc's capacity of delivering results that satisfy a wide range of interests (Serricchio, Tsakatika & Quaglia, 2012: 52).

Our analysis has shown that Euroscepticism in the 2009-2019 decade was fuelled greatly by changing perceptions of the EU and its role as a representative agent of the European electorate. Its institutions have gained unprecedented attention of the public eye and, in socioeconomic and humanitarian crisis scenarios, its limitations have also become more apparent. Hence, trust in the EU has diminished, which helped to draw electoral support towards growing populist agendas, where Euroscepticism ideals are more frequently inserted (FitzGibbon, 2014: 31).

However, considering the data collected from the last three European elections, we may conclude that the biggest outcome was not a eurosceptic take-over of the EP, but a retreat of the political establishment's legislative presence at a continental level. The EP's

traditionally major groups, center-right EPP and center-left S&D, went through a constant decay of support over the considered decade, moving from nearly 62% of the EP seats in 2009 to a little more than 44% in 2019 (European Parliament, n.d.). Therefore, its strongest forces have lost a long-term majority, which will require a reshaping of the legislature's internal dynamics to accommodate new political actors.

Euroscepticism was one of the groups that benefited from it, going from nearly 11% to approximately 18% of the EP seats over the three last elections (European Parliament, 2019). However, its performance ended up being worse than predicted by the most pessimistic analysis, which have warned about a possible nationalist dominance of the EP. In other words, as of 2019, the tendency of a bigger influence of eurosceptic MEPs in the decision-making process remains, but it does not lead to an absolute control on the legislative agenda. The wider coordination of its parties within the newly-created ID may aid in this task, but programmatic divergences and persistent nationalism (which refrains long-term international alliances between parties) may still offer obstacles to the eurosceptic front (Halikiopoulou & Vasilopoulou, 2014: 288).

Furthermore, as expressed in the 2019 results, Euroscepticism was not the only force that inherited support from the decay of the political establishment. Greens and liberals have also made considerable gains. Consequently, instead of a nationalist or a radical surge in the EP, we are most likely facing an unprecedented fragmentation of this legislature, which will make bigger political decisions more difficult. Once again, this roots from a loss of faith in traditional groups, but it does not necessarily represent a eurosceptic dominance in the 2019-2024 term (Fipra, 2019: 5).

In summary, political and economic events over the past decade have reshaped perceptions on the EU for its electorate, which also raised doubts on the bloc's capacity to attend to popular interests. These uncertainties led to criticism, which helped to fuel support for populist, nationalist and eurosceptic agendas. However, other movements outside the political establishment have also benefited from it, which refrained the rise of more radical groups in the European elections (Fipra, 2019). Therefore, a rise in the number of eurosceptics MEPs is a result of the changes in the EP's composition and role before society, but not the only one. Hence, it is soon to affirm that it is the new main protagonist in European politics.

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