

LUISS 

Institute for European
Analysis and Policy

Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence
on EU Inclusive Open Strategic Autonomy

The paradox of the European vote

Carlo Bastasin

Policy Brief 7/2024

June 5, 2024

The paradox of the European vote

Carlo Bastasin

In a few days, we will know the outcome of the elections for the European Parliament. The results will be carefully analyzed and measured based on the parliamentary representation. However, even before the polls open, we already know what the most significant outcome of the upcoming European vote could be, although we do not yet know its exact meaning.

We already know that the European People's Party will emerge from the vote as the strongest parliamentary group. According to practice, it will be up to this group to present its candidacy for the presidency of the European Commission. It is already known that the party's top candidate will be the current president Ursula von der Leyen, who was elected in 2019 on the initiative of Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron.

The problem is that today the parties that make up the People's Party are not currently in power in any of the major EU member states. They are in opposition in Germany, France, and Spain, while Forza Italia is only the smallest of the parties in the governing coalition in Italy. This unprecedented misalignment raises the question of how a Commission led by a president from the People's Party will be able to work effectively with governments that might be skeptical or even hostile towards the political agenda of the president's party. What influence will von der Leyen have if Macron, Scholz, and Sanchez do not share her political priorities, and if Meloni leads a competing European political group? To avoid being too weak and having ineffective interaction with the new Parliament, the Commission must represent a parliamentary coalition acceptable to a larger majority of the Parliament, inevitably including the parties behind the governments of France, Germany, and Spain. So far, von der Leyen's stance on this crucial matter has been ambiguous, oscillating between a replica of the current coalition and a shift to the right in consideration of the support offered by Italy's Giorgia Meloni. Perhaps von der Leyen has shown openness to the Italian government to broaden the range of governments - not so much of the parties - with which to find common ground once re-elected at the helm of the Commission. This distinction is likely to be decisive for the nature of the new legislature.

It is precisely the relationship between the Commission and the European Parliament that sets the European Union apart from any other international organization and makes it, through the representation of the popular will, a unique supranational system in the history of humanity. It is an institution whose participants accept, in most shared competencies, to be in the minority as long as the broader common will prevails.

If this democratic channel between the Commission and Parliament is not effective because it clashes with the interests of governments, the role of the Council of the European Union ends up prevailing,

limiting itself to coordinating community policies at the impulse of the European Council, i.e. the heads of State and government. In this case, the European Union ends up looking more like an international organization based, as far as possible, on the coordination of national interests.

By putting the Commission in the background, this would also set back the safeguarding of the EU Treaties and the fact that EU policies are inspired by the values enshrined in them - the rule of law, the principle of equality and respect for human rights, including those of minorities - which give special dignity to liberal democracies. If these values are not central, it is difficult for the Union to take a position on the defense of rights and democracies, even within its own borders, as happened with the illiberal Hungarian democracy. In terms of principles (but also of interests), it also becomes difficult to recognize the right to territorial integrity of peoples and therefore to condemn Russian military aggression in Ukraine or elsewhere.

The paradox of a partisan coalition (in this case between popular and right-wing conservatives), even if led by the current president of the Commission, is that it would not represent the continuity of European policies, but its opposite. The clash with the policies of the major governments (incidentally, those most inclined to share the sovereignty of decisions - Germany, France, and Spain) would lead to the Union's constitutional regression towards a non-cooperative intergovernmental system.

From this perspective, the hypothetical candidacy of Mario Draghi, whose pronouncements in recent months have had strong federalist tones, would go exactly in the opposite direction. However, for this very reason, the candidacy has little chance of prevailing from the start. It should be up to Macron and Scholz to propose a parliamentary coalition that can collaborate with a Commission president from the People's Party or advance a non-partisan candidate that breaks the mold. However, the final paradox of the vote in the next few days is that the governments that do not identify with the parliamentary majority, thus weakening the role of the Commission, will themselves emerge from the vote weakened.