

Party-Based Hard Euroscepticism in the 2019 European Parliament Elections

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Brexit has made many, particularly in the UK, equate Euroscepticism with wanting to leave the EU. But across the EU most political parties holding Eurosceptic positions do not want to leave it. Although they have fundamental issues about what the EU is doing or becoming, most party-based Euroscepticism stops short of advocating exit. Being clear about what sort of Euroscepticism we observe and seeing how the different forms performed in the 2019 European Parliament elections allows us to paint a picture of Euroscepticism. And if we look at those advocating exit from the EU we find they performed extremely poorly and Brexit looks like, perhaps unsurprisingly, a peculiarly UK issue.

We can differentiate between 'hard' and 'soft' Euroscepticism. 'Hard' Euroscepticism is where opposition to the EU is so strong that exit from the EU is the preferred course of action. 'Soft' Euroscepticism is where there are fundamental and deep-seated objections to the EU but where this stops short of wanting to leave.

The 2019 European Parliament elections took place after and during various moments of turmoil in the EU. From the after effects of the economic crisis and austerity politics, the migration crisis and the on-going omnishambles of Brexit, the EU seemed braced for a backlash. A rise in support for parties expressing Euroscepticism was widely predicted. And in the event political parties expressing Euroscepticism did well in many EU member states. But a close look at the results overall shows that this was mainly soft Eurosceptics.

Table 1 below summarises research conducted on political parties in each member state and shows the performance of all the parties that held this position. It reports their national vote share the number of MEPs that that were elected from these parties. We need to be a little careful about reading too much into the vote shares as most of the parties were not *only* hard Eurosceptic parties and may have gained support for their other positions. Only two parties were single issue hard Eurosceptic parties - the Danish People's Movement Against the EU which only exists to contest European Parliament elections and the UK's Brexit Party. Nonetheless the size of the vote for these parties tells us something about their relative size and importance.

Table 1: Political Parties Holding Hard Eurosceptic Positions and their Performance in the 2019 European Parliament Elections*

| Country | Party | Vote | MEPs |
|-------------------------------|------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|
| Czech Republic | Freedom and Direct Democracy | 9.1 | 2 |
| | Party of Free Citizens | 0.7 | 0 |
| Denmark | Peoples Movement Against the EU | 3.7 | 0 |
| France | Workers Struggle | 0.8 | 0 |
| | Patriots | 0.7 | 0 |
| | Together Patriots and Yellow Vests | 0.6 | 0 |
| | Together for Frexit | 1.2 | 0 |
| Greece | Communist Party of Greece | 5.3 | 1 |
| | Golden Dawn | 4.9 | 1 |
| Ireland | Independents (various) | 1.6 | 0 |
| Luxembourg | Communist Party | 1.1 | 0 |
| Netherlands | Party for Freedom | 3.5 | 0 |
| | Forum for Democracy | 10.9 | 3 |
| Poland | Freedom Party** | - | - |
| Slovakia | People's Party | 12.1 | 2 |
| Average (excluding UK) | | 4.0 | |
| Total (excluding UK) | | | 9 |
| UK*** | UKIP | 3.6 | 0 |
| | Brexit | 31.7 | 29 |
| | Conservatives | 8.7 | 4 |
| | Democratic Unionist Party | 0.6 | 1 |
| Average (including UK) | | 5.6 | |
| Total (including UK) | | | 43 |

Source: The data is based on an expert by the author and Aleks Szczerbiak conducted in 2018, and supplement with the author's own research and expert input generously given by Aleks Szczerbiak (Sussex), Vainius Bartasevicius (Sussex), Sue Collard (Sussex), Neil Dooley (Sussex), Tim Haughton (Birmingham), Dan Hough (Sussex), Alenka Krasovec (Ljubliana), Ivan Llamares (Salamanca), Francis McGowan (Sussex) Roxana Mihaila (Sussex), Kai Oppermann (Chemnitz), Andrea Pirro (Florence) Tena Prelec (Sussex), Allan Sikk (UCL), Dragomir Stoyanov (Bulgaria), Ingrida Unikaitė-Jakuntavičienė (Vytautas Magnus)

*Some of the data is based on preliminary results.

**The party stood as part of a coalition with other parties which were soft Eurosceptics

***There is a case for also including Labour as a hard Eurosceptic party as it is currently committed to carrying out Brexit but is not included here as it is fundamentally divided on this issue both between and within members and MPs.

Looking at the parties and countries we can note that party-based Euroscepticism is only present in 10 of the 28 member states, but it is in larger and smaller member states, across East and West and in richer and poorer member states. The parties are varied and they are mainly parties on the extreme right and left of their respective party systems. It is a very patchy and inconsistent picture.

Looking at the performance we can see is that hard Euroscepticism is a very marginal force in European politics. Only nineteen parties (including some independents) holding hard

Eurosceptic positions contested the EP election. Looking at all the hard Eurosceptic parties and what levels of support each of them garners we can see that it is an average national vote share of 5.6%. And most of that comes from one member state, the UK. Stripping the UK out of the EU picture, (as the UK hard Eurosceptics would wish), shows how the figure is even smaller at 4.0%.

If we take a different approach and treat member states as the unit of analysis (rather than the individual parties), aggregate the vote shares and take account of member states with no hard Eurosceptics, then across the EU hard Eurosceptic parties gain 2.4% of the vote. But if we take the UK out they get an average of 0.8%. With or without the UK, hard Euroscepticism is currently a highly marginal position in EU politics.

By way of comparison, there are 71 parties holding soft Eurosceptic positions that contested the EP elections in all member states bar one. The average national vote share for each of these parties was 9.0%. Included in that group are parties of government in Hungary, Poland, Italy and Greece. And this group makes up 185 MEPs. The parties representing soft Euroscepticism are a much more significant force and with so many MEPs represent a much more substantial presence in the European Parliament.

The most extreme form of Euroscepticism, hard Euroscepticism, is currently a marginal and inchoate force across EU member states. Only in the UK does it represent a position held by a major party of government. In all other EU member states hard Euroscepticism is confined to the margins of politics and is largely the preserve of the extreme right and extreme left. Brexit may be very British phenomenon and, on the basis of this data, not the harbinger of a larger force across the EU. Or it may be that the observation of the experience of the Brexit process from outside the UK has forced hard Euroscepticism to the margins of EU politics elsewhere.