

## THE WIDER WORLD

### Assessing Right Turns in European Elections

By Diane Chido

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The recent debate was a milestone in the 2024 U.S. presidential election leading to lots of punditry on what will happen next. In four months, we will see who wins and what happens next. We seem always to believe that each election is the “most important in *our* lifetime,” the span of which is different for every person, so this claim is dubious. However, there were surprises in three major European elections this year that demand our attention.

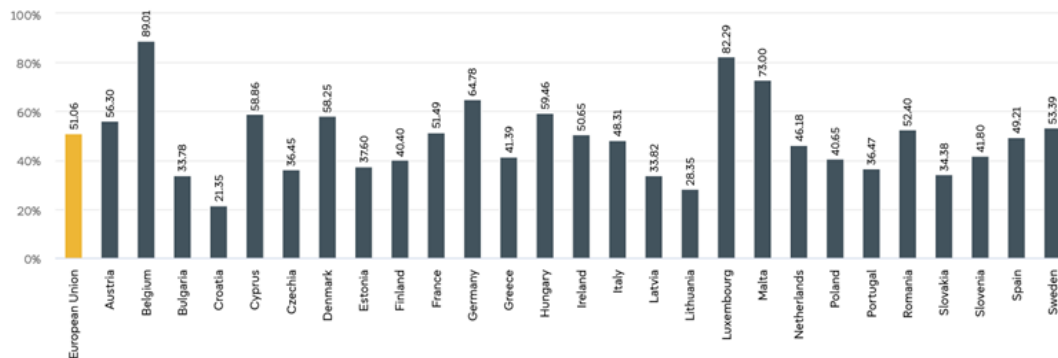
#### **European Parliament Election**

The European Parliament is the only directly elected transnational legislature in the world. Members represent the interests of European Union citizens at the European level. Working in concert with representatives of each of the governments of European Union countries, members of the European Parliament debate and decide on laws that affect all aspects of life across the European Union, issues ranging from the economy and reducing poverty to climate change and shared crimefighting. The European Parliament elects the president of the European Commission, appoints its commissioners and ensures their accountability. The European Parliament also approves the European Union budget and oversees how funds are spent.

European Parliament elections are held over three days every five years. Each country is represented by a number of members of the European Parliament from each country as agreed before each election. The number of representatives is based on population on the principle of “degressive proportionality.” Unlike

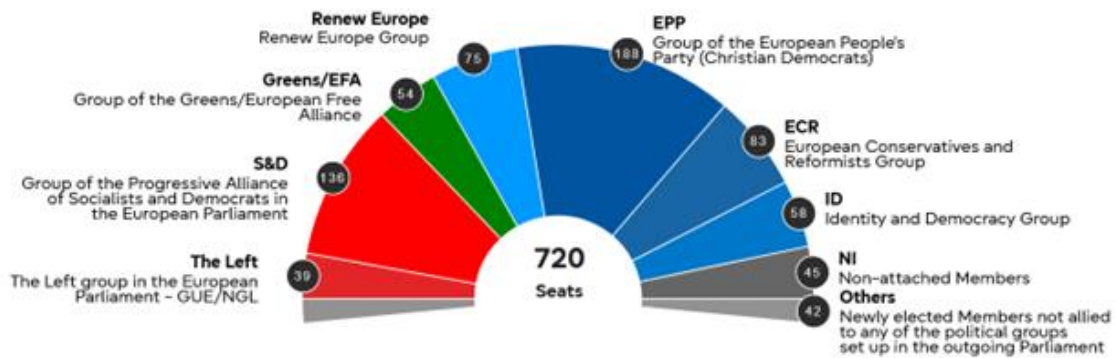
the U.S. Congress, in which each member represents an equal number of people (an average of 700,000 since the 2020 census), members of the European Parliament from larger countries represent more people than members of the European Parliament from smaller countries. The minimum number of members of the European Parliament permitted from one country is six and the maximum is 96. Germany has the largest population and 96 seats and Cyprus, Luxembourg, and Malta each have 6.

On June 6-9, across the 27 European Union member countries, about half of the 400 million European Union citizens eligible to vote (51.6%), went to the polls to select their representatives in the continent’s parliament. They vote for pan-European parties with shared ideals and goals, not individual country parties, although some national and supranational parties may have similar platforms and work together. The proportion of total eligible voters participating in each country varied widely, as shown in the first graphic.<sup>[i]</sup> Turnout was highest in Belgium (89.01%) and Luxembourg (82.29%) and lowest in Croatia (21.35%) and then Lithuania (28.94%). Exploring the reasons for such varied interest could fill a much longer essay, but that is not our purpose here.



*Turnout by percent of eligible voters in each country*

As illustrated by the second graphic,<sup>[ii]</sup> the results surprised almost everyone as right-wing groups gained seats at the expense of left-wing groups in the body of 720. While the center-right European People’s Party won the majority of 188 seats, or 26% further right parties including the European Conservatives and Reformists and the far-right Identity and Democracy group made major gains, with a potential coalition of parties on the right achieving 45.7% of the total.



*European Parliamentary election results 2024*

While the left-aligned groups retained the overall majority, many individual parties lost a significant number of seats, including the liberal Renew Europe and the Greens/European Free Alliance, which lost 22 and 19 seats, respectively. There are another 87 seats up for grabs in the non-aligned right category that will be strongly lobbied to join or vote with other parties on the right.

Many national leaders were alarmed at the gains by the right. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz's Social Democrats returned their most disappointing results thus far ending up in third place behind the far-right Alternative for Germany, which supports the Identity and Democracy group.

### **Elections for National Parliaments across Europe**

In addition to the results of the latest European Parliament elections, as noted in the previous essay, a number of individual states have seen their own leadership move to the right in the past decade. The concern for those in the center and on the left is that a rising right could undermine the unity and strength of the European Parliament and the European Union overall in favor of national interests, much like the 2016 referendum in Great Britain that led to that country's exit from the European Union, which most Britons now regret. Like NATO in 1949, as discussed in a recent essay, the political and economic unification of Europe was hard-won in 1993, but took 45 years longer than NATO to complete, due to justifiable fears that bigger countries like Germany and France would dominate and that all countries would be subject to their interests to the detriment of their own.

As the big races to watch took place last week and are in two of Europe's largest countries: the United Kingdom and France and had similar outcomes to the positive news from Poland, we will begin with those, and the rest will be in chronological order from the beginning of 2024.

Voters in the **United Kingdom** went to the polls on America's Independence Day to form a new parliament. The UK is composed of England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Ireland is part of Great Britain, but independent of the UK. Under the UK's parliamentary system, voters select local representatives for the House of Commons, the lower house of Parliament, which has 650 seats. The majority party will then select a prime minister. Any party wishing to govern independently must win half the seats, or 326. Current Prime Minister Rishi Sunak called for the scheduled election on May 30 while his ruling Conservative Party held a majority of 345 seats.

The Center-left Labor Party won the election in a historic landslide, ending 14 years in power for the conservative Liberal Party (I know, Brits can be confusing, as if the GB-UK thing isn't enough, what's with that extra *u* in so many words?) A succession of five controversial prime ministers, Brexit, and a host of economic and political scandals and crises led to a public perception of instability.

By July 5, with two seats still not called, Labor had won 412 seats and the Conservatives only 121. The previous worse result for the Conservatives was in 1906 when they took a more robust 156 seats. This is a reversal in one of Europe's most powerful countries amid fears of a right turn across the continent. Several prominent Conservatives lost their seats, including former Prime Minister Liz Truss, author of the 2022 budget that terrified markets and resulted in Britain now having more children in poverty than any other wealthy country, according to the United Nations.

Despite that about 26 British Indians won seats, including Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, he resigned as head of the Conservative Party with an apology to the party and the nation saying: "I am sorry. I have given this job my all, but you have sent a clear signal, that the government of the United Kingdom must change. I have heard your anger, your disappointment, and I take responsibility for this loss."

This is a model statement for a losing candidate, which would be a calming balm after what is expected to be a controversial 2024 presidential election in the U.S. In another prescient note for U.S. politicians in the fall, Labor did lose four formerly "safe" seats to independent candidates running on pro-Palestinian platforms, indicating the Democratic left's frustration and anger over the war in Gaza.

In the face of recent British disillusion with politics, the new British Prime Minister Keir Starmer pledged "My government will fight every day until you believe again. ... The work for change begins immediately. "We will rebuild Britain. Brick by brick we will rebuild the infrastructure of opportunity."<sup>[iii]</sup>

In **Scotland**, the previously growing Scottish National Party pushing for independence from the U.K. was “decimated” in favor of Labor candidates. In **Northern Ireland**, the nationalist Ourselves (*Sinn Fein*) Party, which was once aligned with the violent separatist Irish Republican Army and is now a political party seeking lawful independence from Britain to unite with all of Ireland, won the most seats in the region to become Northern Ireland’s biggest party in the U.K. Parliament.<sup>[iv]</sup>

In **France**, President Emmanuel Macron immediately dissolved his own country’s parliament and called for elections after his Renaissance Party, aligned with Renew Europe in the European Parliament, suffered a heavy defeat to Marine Le Pen’s far-right National Rally, part of Identity and Democracy group. As a result, Macron called for a French parliamentary election to forestall LePen gaining ground once the shock of the European Parliament shift to the right wore off.

In France as in the U.S., legislative elections decide only the makeup of the parliament, but do not affect the presidency, which is a separate vote. They have a prime minister who acts more like our House speaker while the president runs the executive branch. Macron’s term goes until 2027 and he has pledged to see it out no matter what happens in the parliamentary election. The National Assembly has 577 seats with 289 needed for the majority.

The first round took place on June 30 with LePen’s Nationalist Rally as the clear winner with exactly that majority number of 289 seats. Macron’s centrist Together party came in a dismal third place at 20%, behind the left-wing New Popular Front with 28%. As a result, 201 candidates aligned with the center and left parties withdrew their candidacy for the second-round runoff in order for their members to block additional gains by the National Rally.<sup>[v]</sup>

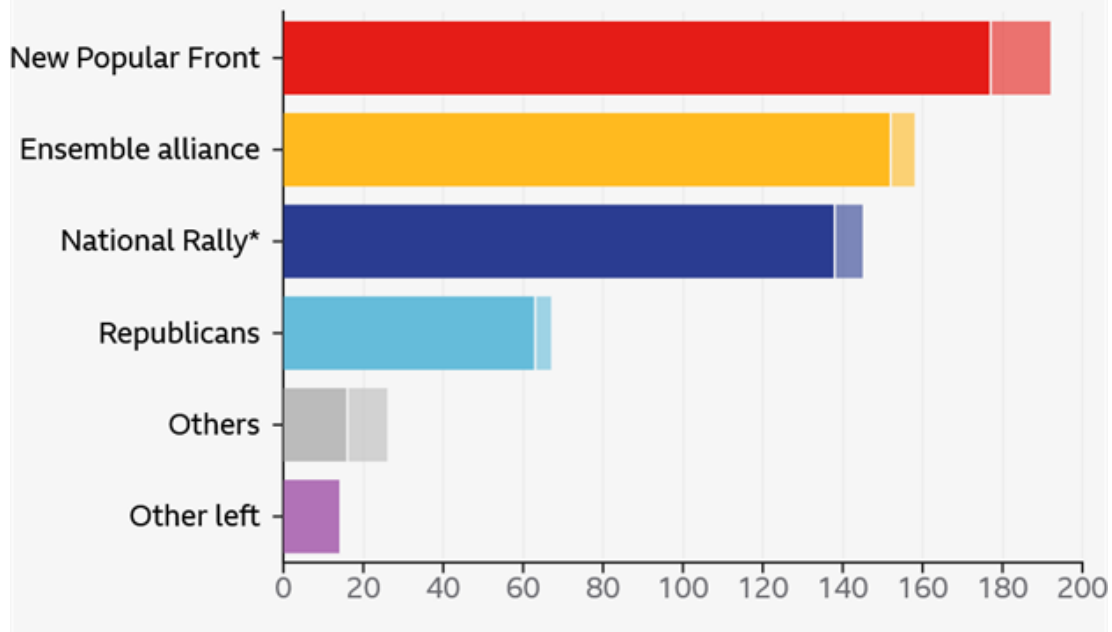
In the runoff on July 7, at least 59.7% of eligible French voters cast ballots, most analysts say to stop the anticipated rightward shift. If so, they were somewhat successful. The New Popular Front gained the lead but not the majority in winning seats. This is a coalition of left-leaning groups pulled together just before the election, which agree on some issues including a cap on prices of essential goods like fuel and food, raising the minimum wage to a net 1,600 euros (1,732 U.S. dollars) per month, wage raises for public sector workers, and the imposition of a wealth tax. They include Greens, socialists, communists, and liberals, and are likely to become a fractious bunch without the fear of a LePen victory to keep them together.

Macron’s centrist Ensemble Alliance bloc had a much better showing than in the first round and better than early polling predicted but came in second amid

complaints about his government’s role in the current cost of living crisis and failing public services, and other issues including security and immigration.<sup>[vi]</sup> LePen’s National Rally effectively tapped into those grievances, leading to what is called a “hung parliament” with no full majority party as in the graphic of initial returns.<sup>[vii]</sup> Final seat tallies will be available later.

## Projected range of seats in National Assembly

Based on projections after second round - white line shows minimum



Source Ipsos-Talan for France Télévisions and Radio France

\*Includes allies from Republicans



*July 7 projection of French Parliamentary membership following run-off election*

Thus far in 2024, the European Parliament’s turn to the right mirrored gains in much of the rest of Europe but the hard turn to the right anticipated did not materialize. In the U.K. and France, the populations rallied to the polls to halt the forecasted outright wins for conservatives. The U.K. gave Labor a clear governing mandate, but deadlock even messier than in the U.S. Congress may be on the horizon in France. As in most things, only time will tell.

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Diane Chido is an Erie native who spent her early career in Washington, D.C, returning to found DC Analytics, a research and analysis firm. She has taught Intelligence Studies at Mercyhurst University, Political Science at Gannon University, and Cultural Analysis at the US Army War College and has conducted research for numerous US defense agencies. She holds an MS in Applied Intelligence Analysis, an MA in Russian Language, and a BA in International Relations and Soviet Studies.



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