

Influence and politics in the new European Parliament

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Where does the real balance of power lie in the European Parliament elected in June last year? More specifically, who wields the most influence?

Superficially, of course, it is the Centre-Right European People's Party as the largest grouping but it does lose 16% of its seats compared to the previous legislature.

The gap now between the second largest grouping, the Socialists and Democrats group, is only 30 seats compared to 81 in the last Parliament.

The S&D group attracted 7 more seats in the 2014 elections but many expected it to come out on top so their improved performance is somewhat qualified. The Liberal group (ALDE) lost almost 20% of its seats and even the Greens lost 9% compared to the 2009 elections.

The big collective winners, of course, were the variety of "anti-EU/anti-establishment" groupings of the extreme left and right accounting, depending on your definition, for 25-30% of

the total membership.

But here again, their weight has been mitigated as the mainstream groupings have successfully kept them out of any real positions of influence in the Parliament and many of these parties remain fragmented.

But enough about basic statistics. An obvious measure of influence is the frequency with which majorities are assembled and key votes won. Another, admittedly more subjective, gauge is visibility in the media - and here I mean particularly the media outside the "Brussels bubble".

Three of the highest profile matters that the European Parliament is now handling - data privacy, the conduct of the financial sector and "Luxleaks" - have Green MEPs taking the lead (Jan Albrecht, Sven Giegold and Philippe Lamberts).

Anglo-Saxon media at least regularly refer to and quote these parliamentarians in their news stories. This does not necessarily translate, of course, into the Green group being able to assemble majorities in their favour on these matters but it is a pretty clear example of a group representing less than 6% of the total EP membership punching way above its weight.

I may be being too simplistic in this assessment. The two largest groups still hold key positions.

The EPP-S&D arrangement of sharing the EP's presidency every two and a half years shows no sign of overhaul and many respected figures from these groups hold the chairmanships of important committees, such as Claude Moraes on Civil Liberties and Bernd Lange on Trade from the S&D and Elmar Brok on Foreign Affairs and Jerzy Buzek on Industry, Research and Energy from the EPP.

Whatever the size of the group members belong to, however, all MEPs face a new challenge in their role as "co-legislators".

The new European Commission led by Jean-Claude Juncker and masterminded by his first Vice-President Frans Timmermans, seems determined to reduce significantly the number of proposals where the Parliament's opinion and approval are to be sought.

In its first annual work programme for 2015, the Commission has announced just 23 new proposals and the removal of 80 more languishing on the negotiating table.

This compares with 316 proposals in the first annual programme of the last Commission headed by Jose-Manuel Barroso and on average 100 new proposals in the subsequent four years of "Barroso II".

This does not automatically mean that MEPs will have less to get their teeth into from now on but it does suggest a keener rivalry between groups and between members to secure positions of prominence such as rapporteurships and chairing committees of enquiry in those areas where the Commission will be focusing its attention.

After the stunning combined victory of the extreme groups in last June's poll the understandable reaction of the main political groupings was to close ranks in an attempt to preserve some sense of "business as usual". That strategy has worked well until now.

It remains to be seen whether this self-imposed cohesion will survive as the business of politics, as much as legislation, takes its natural course.