

# A Closer Look at Renew's EP Election Results

*The performance of Renew Europe's member parties in European Parliament elections and its indications for European liberals*

A REPUBLIKON INSTITUTE ANALYSIS

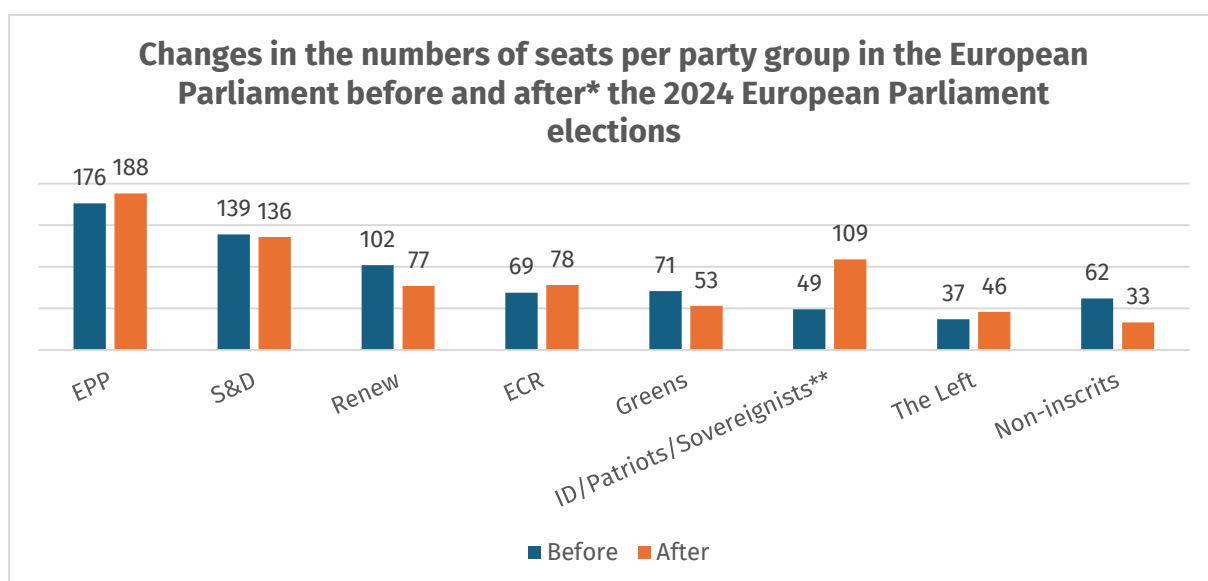


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## SUMMARY

- The 2024 European Parliament elections brought along several changes in the composition of the EP. By the number of seats lost, Renew Europe was the biggest loser of the vote, while parties belonging to the political extreme right managed to increase their number of MEPs.
- There are several differences between the composition of the Renew group after the 2019 EP elections and after this year's vote but examining how Renew member parties performed in the elections in their respective countries we find that the significant decrease in the number of EP seats for Renew comes from only 4 Member States. Within the 17 Member States where the change in the number of seats won by Renew member parties didn't exceed 2, the group actually increased the number of its MEPs by a total of 3.
- The reasons why the Czech, French, Romanian and Spanish member parties of Renew contributed to the EP group's significant loss of seats in 2024 are very different, and they don't indicate the presence of a general electoral fatigue towards liberal politics or political parties in the EU.
- Czech ANO's case is particularly noteworthy: Andrej Babiš's right-wing populist party actually achieved better results this year than in 2019, winning 7 seats in the EP instead of 6, but the party quit Renew, and joined recently founded Patriots for Europe. While ANO's departure means a decrease in the number of Renew seats, it is not necessarily a political loss for the group as Babiš's party had long been a burden for them.
- While there is a rise of the populist far-right in Europe, there is no indication of that rise necessarily taking place in the expense of liberal parties. The case of FPÖ and NEOS in Austria proves that a liberal and a far-right party can improve their election results simultaneously.
- Renew's drastic loss of seats in the European Parliament in 2024 doesn't mean the twilight of liberal politics, and the rising of the populist right should not be regarded as a sign of declining liberalism, but as an opportunity for liberals to stand out as the most relentless defenders of liberal democracy.

The 2024 elections brought along significant shifts in the European Parliament: among other changes, the Socialists and Democrats (S&D), Renew Europe (Renew) and the Greens – European Free Alliance (Greens) lost several seats, the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) and The Left in the European Parliament (The Left) strengthened their positions, while a new, extreme right formation, Patriots for Europe (Patriots) became the third largest group in the EP. It is important to note that if we are looking for a proper base for comparison to see how political power has shifted in the European Parliament, we shouldn't rely on the results of the 2019 EP elections. The composition of the Parliament changed during the 2019-2024 term, primarily due to the departure of the United Kingdom from the European Union in 2020, more commonly known as Brexit. 73 seats in the EP had been occupied by representatives of parties from the UK, and once Brexit came into effect, those MEPs left the body, decreasing the number of MEPs from 751 to 678. 27 of those seats were redistributed among the political groups, resulting in 705 seats in the EP, however, in September 2023, the European Council adopted a decision – preliminarily approved by the EP – to increase the number of seats to 720, so in this year's elections, European voters delegated 15 more MEPs to the European Parliament.



\* The 'before' numbers represent the composition of the groups in May 2024; the 'after' numbers represent the composition of the groups at the time of the first plenary assembly on 16-19 July 2024.

\*\* Far-right Identity and Democracy (ID) group dissolved after the 2024 EP elections; its former member parties are found in the newly formed groups Patriots and Europe of Sovereign Nations (Sovereignists). As the groups have former non-inscrit members, too, the comparison is not fully accurate, but politically logical, as the two groups can be regarded as the ideological heirs of ID. Patriots have 84, while the Sovereignists have 25 seats in the European Parliament after the 2024 elections.

The numbers indicate that liberal Renew group was the biggest loser of the 2024 EP elections, having lost 25 seats in the European Parliament. However, it would be incorrect to jump to the conclusion that liberals in general did significantly worse in the European elections than they had done 5 years earlier. In the 2019 EP elections, Renew won 108 seats in the European Parliament. The number of MEPs in the Renew group – similarly to other EP groups – changed over time; first, it lost 17 seats due to Brexit, but then gained 6 back during

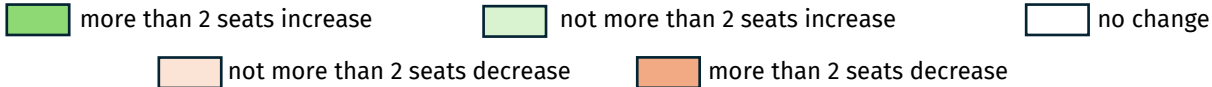
the redistribution of the 27 seats after the UK left the EU. In the following years, due to MEPs changing their affiliations in the EP, the Renew group managed to increase the number of its members, which stood at 102 before the 2024 European Parliament elections.

<b>Member parties and party coalitions of the Renew group after the 2019 and the 2024 European Parliament elections, and their number of seats in the EP</b>		
	<b>2019</b>	<b>2024</b>
Austria	NEOS (1)	NEOS (2)
Belgium	Open VLD (2) Reformist Movement (2)	Open VLD (3) Reformist Movement (1) Les Engagés (1)
Bulgaria	DPS (3)	DPS (3) We Continue the Change – Democratic Bulgaria (2)
Croatia	AMS-IDS (1)	-
Czechia	ANO (6)	-
Denmark	Venstre (3) Radikale Venstre (2)	Venstre (2) Radikale Venstre (1) Moderates (1)
Estonia	Reform Party (2) Centre Party (1)	Reform Party (1) Centre Party (1)
Finland	Centre Party (2) SFP (1)	Centre Party (2) SFP (1)
France	Renaissance-MoDem-Agir-MR (21)	Ensemble (13)
Germany	Free Democratic Party (5) Free Voters (2)	Free Democratic Party (5) Free Voters (3)
Hungary	Momentum (2)	-
Ireland	Fianna Fáil (1)	Fianna Fáil (4) Independent Ireland (1)
Latvia	Development/For! (1)	For Latvia's Development (1)
Lithuania	Labour Party (1) Liberals' Movement (1)	Freedom Party (1) Liberals' Movement (1)
Luxembourg	Democratic Party (2)	Democratic Party (1)
Netherlands	D66 (2) VVD (4)	D66 (3) VVD (4)
Poland	-	Third Way-Poland 2050 (1)
Portugal	-	Liberal Initiative (2)
Romania	USR-PLUS (8)	United Right Alliance (3)
Slovakia	PS+SPOLU (2)	Progressive Slovakia (6)
Slovenia	List of Marjan Šarec (2)	Freedom Movement (2)
Spain	Citizens (7) Coalition for a Solidary Europe, Basque National Party (1)	Coalition for a Solidary Europe (1)
Sweden	Centre Party (2) Liberals (1)	Centre Party (2) Liberals (1)
United Kingdom	Liberal Democrats (16) Alliance (1)	-

When the Renew group formed in 2019, it had 32 member parties (including party coalitions running jointly in their respective Member States) from 22 Member States (including the then-member UK). After this year’s EP elections, Renew still has 32 member parties but only from 20 Member States, and there have been a number of changes in the group’s composition. The table above shows the differences between Renew’s composition in 2019 and in 2024, and the number of seats each member party won in the two elections<sup>1</sup>.

If we compare the data Member State by Member State, we can see that in the vast majority of the countries the number of seats in the Renew group won by the group’s member parties either didn’t change or had little (not more than 2 seats) variation.

<b>Changes in the number of seats of member parties in the Renew group by country 2019-2024</b>					
Austria	+1	France	-8	Poland	+1
Belgium	+1	Germany	+1	Portugal	+2
Bulgaria	+2	Hungary	-2	Romania	-5
Croatia	-1	Ireland	+4	Slovakia	+4
Czechia	-6	Latvia	0	Slovenia	0
Denmark	-1	Lithuania	0	Spain	-7
Estonia	-1	Luxembourg	-1	Sweden	0
Finland	0	Netherlands	+1	United Kingdom	-17



As stated above, due to Brexit, and to MEPs changing their affiliations, the number of seats belonging to the Renew group (similarly to that of other EP groups) changed over the 2019-2024 term. Therefore, the current analysis, which compares the composition of the Renew group after the 2019 and the 2024 EP elections is not representative of the changes in the strength of the group from before and after the 2024 elections, but examines whether a significant shift can be registered among the voters with regard to their willingness of voting for parties that would eventually join the Renew group. It would be easy to categorise all these voters as ‘liberals’, however, as we will elaborate later, it is not self-evident that Renew’s member parties and, consequently, their supporters are liberal.

Of course, the gaining or losing of 1 or 2 seats can be signs of major political shifts in the respective Member States; in Hungary’s case, for instance, with liberal party Momentum losing its 2 seats, the country lost its representation in the Renew group, and Momentum’s underachievement is at least partly a result of the fundamental restructuring of the domestic political scene. However, it would be premature to draw conclusions from these changes regarding the state of liberal parties or liberalism itself in Europe in general, particularly because the small decreases in the number of seats from certain countries are compensated for by small increases in the number of seats from others. Not taking major changes (>2 seats) into account, in the remaining 17 countries, voters elected 3 more Renew MEPs in 2024 than in 2019. Major changes happened only in 7 countries, and only 5 those

<sup>1</sup> The table doesn’t include independent MEPs

changes are primarily responsible for Renew winning so much fewer seats in the EP in 2024 than in 2019. While in Ireland and in Slovakia combined, the number of Renew MEPs elected increased by 8 (4+4), in Czechia, France, Romania, Spain and the UK together it decreased by 43 (-6, -8, -5, -7, and -17 respectively). As it is quite self-explanatory why Renew had to give up on its 17 MEPs from the UK after Brexit, there are 4 remaining Member States to look at if one's looking for the main reasons behind the loss of overall support.

The only Renew group member from Czechia was ANO, the party of former Czech prime minister, party founder/leader Andrej Babiš. ANO is a right-wing populist party, and as a member of Renew, it regularly caused problems to the group as Babiš's commitment to European liberal democratic values is at least questionable. His attendance as a keynote speaker in 2023's Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in Budapest, for instance, was seriously frowned upon by fellow Renew members. It was also rather telling of Babiš's true affiliation that he openly supported Robert Fico's left-wing populist SMER party in the Slovakian parliamentary elections of 2023 instead of fellow Renew member, liberal Progressive Slovakia. Following the 2024 European Parliament elections ANO quit Renew, and joined the new extreme right formation Patriots, hallmarked by names like Viktor Orbán or Jordan Bardella. While ANO's departure from Renew resulted in the loss of seats for the group, it is not a sign of withdrawing liberalism: it only means that ANO found its true political home at the extreme right.

One of the most resounding results in the 2024 EP elections was the success of Marine Le Pen's far-right National Rally winning the popular vote in France by 31,5%, a success after which President Macron dissolved the French parliament and called for national elections. Macron's Ensemble coalition managed to win 8 seats fewer than in 2019 (Macron's group ran under a different name 5 years before, but the results are comparable). It is undeniable that Le Pen's far-right is on the rise in France, and that is a very serious problem not only for the country, but also for the entirety of the European Union. However, it is also very likely that Macron's personal unpopularity among French voters largely contributed to his Ensemble's failure in the elections, and he doesn't seem to have successfully transformed his political movement into a well-functioning political party.

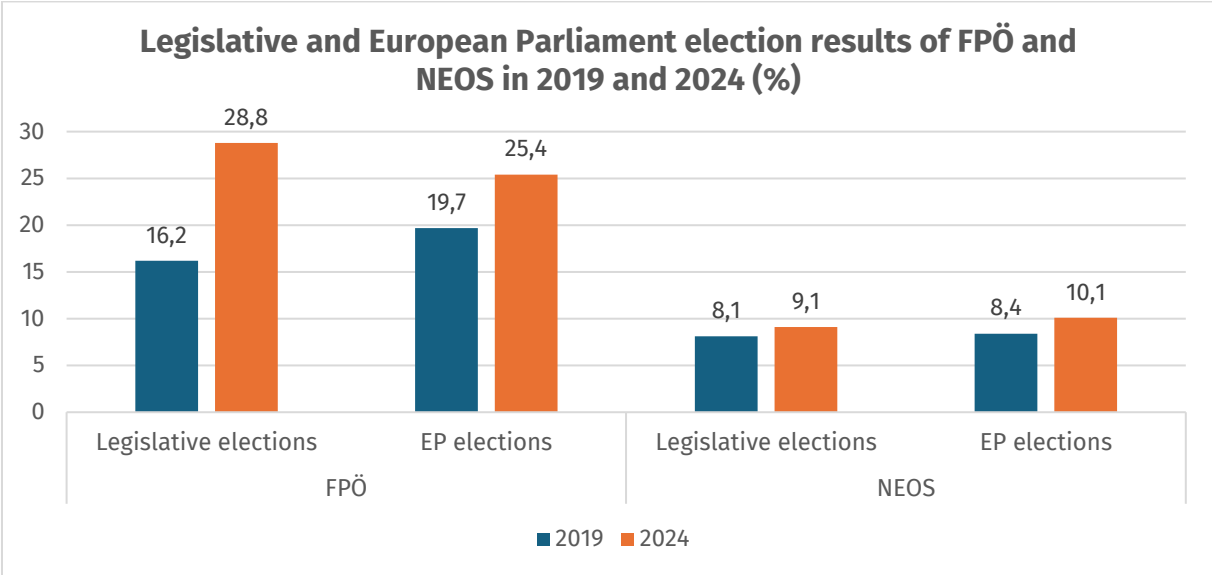
In Romania, the USR-PLUS coalition had won 8 seats in the European Parliament in 2019, but the United Right Alliance (ADU), which is an electoral alliance consisting of three parties, including USR, managed to get only 3 in 2024. USR and PLUS merged in 2020, and in 2023, USR formed the United Right Alliance with parties Force of the Right (FD) and People's Movement (PMP). The Romanian centre-right's poor performance is rather worrying by its own right, but it is particularly so if we take into account that extreme nationalist far-right Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) came in 2<sup>nd</sup> in the vote and sent 6 MEPs to Strasbourg. USR is still polling behind AUR not long before Romania's next parliamentary elections, to be held on 1 December 2024.

2019 was the Citizens' year in Spain: the party, whose ideological affiliation is not perfectly clear, but is mostly described as conservative-liberal, populist and pro-European, and which is primarily characterised by the opposition of Catalan independence, achieved its best election results both in Spain and in Europe that year, and sent 7 MEPs to the European Parliament. However, the party's popularity quickly started to decrease due to domestic political reasons, and by 2024, the party, which didn't even compete in the 2023 Spanish

general elections, virtually collapsed, and lost all its seats in the EP. While in certain regards, Citizens could be categorised as a liberal party, it is rather telling of its constituency that a large number of former Citizens voters became supporters of national-conservative far-right VOX.

The paragraphs above do not intend to give an in-depth analysis of why Renew member parties in Czechia, France, Romania and Spain achieved worse results in the 2024 European Parliament elections than they had in the 2019 ones. (It wouldn't even be true for ANO, which, in fact, achieved a better result in 2024 than in 2019, and has 7 instead of 6 seats in the new European Parliament – just not in the Renew group.) Their aim is to demonstrate that very different and country-specific domestic political tendencies and shifting power dynamics are behind the parties' results, and although they all contribute to a worse combined result for Renew, they don't necessarily represent an EU-level electoral fatigue for liberal politics and parties. What the examples of these 4 Member States' EP election results underpin – along with the increase of the number of seats in the EP occupied by the MEPs of extreme right parties – is that the rise of right-wing populism is an imminent threat to European liberal democracies. This threat, however, doesn't necessarily entail the weakening of liberal parties, or the decrease of their voter bases.

In Austria, far-right Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) achieved its best ever European Parliament election result in June, and its best ever legislative election result in September, winning the popular vote in both elections with 25,4% and 28,8% respectively. But FPÖ's success didn't take place at the expense of the liberals: NEOS also managed to improve its results in both the European Parliament and the national elections compared to its previous outcomes. Although NEOS' level of support is lower than that of FPÖ's, and its election results hadn't improved as sharply as those of the far-right, the Austrian example shows that there is no necessary connection between a rise of the far-right and a fall of liberals.



The 2024 June elections resulted in Renew Europe losing many seats in the European Parliament and indicated that the support for the far-right had increased in Europe. However, if we take a look at the results of Renew's member parties, and compare them to their election results from 2019, we can see that the overall loss of support for the group is

primarily coming from only 4 countries (not counting the United Kingdom). The reasons why the Renew member parties of these countries couldn't contribute as much to the group's success as they had been able to 5 years earlier are very different in each case, and nothing indicates that the parties had fallen victim of an EU-wide crisis of liberal parties and politics. ANO's case in Czechia is particularly noteworthy: although the departure of Babiš's formation from Renew meant a direct loss of 7 seats for the group, politically it's not necessarily a loss for the liberal group as right-wing populist ANO had long been a burden for its fellow Renew members. While the rise of the populist right is certainly a threat to the future of liberal democracy and its values in Europe, Austria's example – among others – proves that increasing support for right-wing populists doesn't necessarily mean decreasing support for liberals. The conclusion for European liberals should be that Renew's drastic loss of seats in the European Parliament in 2024 doesn't mean the twilight of liberal politics, and that the rising of the populist right should not be regarded as a sign of declining liberalism, but as an opportunity for them to stand out as the most relentless defenders of liberal democracy.

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