**A far-right swing in European Parliament**

As 51.1% of nearly 400 million Europeans voted in marathon polls held across 27 member states of the European Union (EU) from June 6 to 9, the conservative centre-right bloc of European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen managed to retain its status as the biggest political group in the European Parliament (EP). However, right-wing and far-right parties clocked their best performance in the legislative body’s history with liberals and Greens being delivered humbling blows. The result caused French President Emanuel Macron to call for snap elections in his country on June 30, with the move being seen as a political gamble to stop in its tracks the rise of the far-right firebrand Marine Le Pen’s party, with the latter eying a Presidential term in the 2027 elections.

Which countries led the far-right gains?

While the far-right wave predicted by exit polls did not materialise, far-right parties managed to make significant and historic gains in key member states — France, Germany, and Italy. In France, Ms. Le Pen’s nationalist, anti-immigration Rassemblement National (RN) became the biggest party nationally winning 31.5% of the vote and 30 of France’s 81 seats in the EP, more than double the vote captured by Mr. Macron’s centrist Renaissance party, which finished a distant second.

In Germany, the results directly brought the ruling coalition’s legitimacy into question with just 30% of German voters still supporting it. Chancellor Olaf Schulz, whose own disapproval ratings are as high as 70%, however, ruled out early national elections. The extreme right Alternative for Deutschland (AfD) party, despite being marred by a string of scandals involving espionage and bribery allegations and facing nationwide protests, came in second with a record 16% of the vote, winning more seats than Mr. Schulz’s Social Democrats (SPD), part of the ruling coalition with the Greens and the Free Democratic Party, who were also left behind by the AfD in terms of vote share numbers. Former Chancellor Angela Merkel’s centre-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and its sister party Christian Social Union in Bavaria (CSU), finished first securing 30% of the vote.

Italy also saw Prime Minister Georgia Meloni’s Brothers of Italy Party with neo-fascist roots consolidating its grip by capturing a quarter of the vote, while far-right parties also made gains in Austria, Hungary, and Spain.

While national political parties contest elections to the 720-seat EU body every five years, they join the transnational political groups of the EP after the polls. As of 9:00 pm, June 12, provisional results indicate a fairly strong showing of centre-right parties across Europe, with the European People’s Party group, including the CDU/CSU, emerging as the leading bloc with 189 seats. While the Socialists and Democrats (S&D), having Germany’s SPD among others, managed a narrow consolidation with 135 seats, the Renew Europe (RE) group with Mr. Macron’s Rennaissance, suffered huge losses finishing at 79 seats compared to last time’s 102. The pro-climate action Greens saw their seats reduced to 53 down from 71, becoming the sixth largest block instead of fourth. The hard and far-right European Conservatives and Reformists Group (ECR) and the Identity and Democracy Group (ID), including Ms. Meloni and Ms. Le Pen’s parties, respectively, now collectively hold 131 seats in the chamber, up from 118. The other far-right lawmakers are in the non-attached (NI) group including AfD (which was expelled from the ID in May) with 15 seats and Hungarian PM Viktor Orban’s Fidesz with 10 seats.

What can the right’s gains be attributed to?

In 2019, with youth protests across Europe calling for climate action, the EP elections delivered a Green wave, which shaped Brussels’ five-year agenda and brought about the ambitious ‘Green Deal’, laying a roadmap for the EU’s 2040 and 2050 net-zero targets. But that was before the COVID-19 pandemic; before pan-continent farmers protests; and the Russian attack on Ukraine sending energy prices skyrocketing, leading to the worst cost-of-living crisis Europe has faced in years. Besides, the steady rise of Eurosceptic, populist, and anti-immigrant parties, some of whom deny climate change, across Europe also contributed to this year’s rightward shift.

In Germany, for instance, which sends 96 seats to the EP, national surveys saw voter priorities shift significantly with peace, social security, and immigration issues bagging the top spots and climate change dropping from first to fourth place. The far-right AfD capitalised on voter anxieties related to a spike in migration numbers in 2023, as migrants and asylum seekers from war-hit Ukraine, Africa, and West Asia were at Germany’s doorsteps. While West Germany saw anti-extremist protests against the AfD, East Germany emerged as its natural voter base where many voters have felt left behind by the establishment after the 1990 reunification. Another area where the party seems to have tapped into the voter discontent was the ruling coalition’s 2023 clean energy law asking homeowners to replace fossil fuel boilers with expensive heat pumps, with Afd promising to stop the transition.

The EU’s climate policy became another bone of contention for a section of voters: European farmers, who have held a record 4,000 different protests so far this year. The EU’s Common Agriculture Policy (CAP), which provides subsidies and protects farmers from foreign competition, is a decisive voting issue with large farmer lobby groups. But farming emissions, which haven’t gone down since 2005, account for 10% of the EU’s total emissions with its farm sector accounting for a quarter of global pesticide use. Farming only contributes 1.3% to Europe’s GDP.

Protesting farmers have balked at the policies in the Green Deal which call for redesigning the EU’s emission-heavy food systems and carving out land for biodiversity restoration. Right-wing parties like RN, have termed such measures as ‘punitive ecology’.

Has the balance of power in the European Parliament shifted?

In the outgoing Parliament, Ms. von der Leyen’s EPP, the Socialists and Democrats, and Mr. Macron’s Renew Euro groups often termed the ‘Grand Coalition’, which together held 417 seats, managed to make and push amongst themselves often with support from the Greens. While the EPP and S&D will still largely maintain their old numbers, weakened RE and Greens blocs mean the European Commission President may collaborate with the right-wing ECR and possibly even the ID on issues like migration, restrictions on climate policy and defence issues.

However, nationalist right-wing parties who have made gains this election hold different positions on a spectrum of issues and are unlikely to become a strong and collective decisive force.

The immediate playout of the election results could be seen in the deals Ms. von der Leyen strikes with the blocs to get re-elected as the European Commission President in a secret ballot vote in July. While she could gather enough number of votes from the Grand Coalition, there has historically been a 10% defection margin, which means she could be courting the right’s MPs for votes.

How will the results affect EU policy?

While political analysts don’t anticipate an immediate drastic shift in EU policy, an overtime rightward pivot of the EU agenda, which was already manifesting before the election, remains of concern. Centre-right parties in some member states have been turning to a strategy of integrating the right’s agenda into their own to counter the far-right’s popularity. Ms. von der Leyen had already declared that she would be open to working with Italy’s Ms. Meloni in the EP.

The strengthened centre-right, as reiterated by EPP President Manfred Weber, is already aiming to overturn the 2035 EU ban on the sale of combustion engine cars.

Earlier this year, the EU parliament also voted to remodel its immigration and asylum policy, which has clauses for expedited deportations and the contentious issue of relocation of asylum seekers. In fact, the European Commission President last year, along with Ms. Meloni signed a pact with Tunisia to receive financial aid for stopping asylum seekers at its borders from entering Europe.