

Europe on the Ballot: How the EPP Turned Against Climate Politics

Article by Filipe Henriques

June 16, 2023

Once an opportunistic supporter of the European Green Deal, the EPP is now leading a backlash against climate politics, as its opposition to a nature restoration law most recently shows. Throughout Europe, former centre-right parties have thrown the doors of government wide open to the far right.

In 2019 the Greens had a major victory. Representing around 10 per cent of the European electorate, the new Green Group in the European Parliament was the biggest ever – going from 50 to 74 MEPs election-to-election. In the years that followed, Greens entered most of the governments in North-Western Europe, including Germany, Belgium, Ireland and Austria in addition to Finland, Luxembourg and Sweden.

However, their biggest victory was not measurable by electoral results: the general public debate had firmly turned onto topics championed by the Greens in the past decade. The immense, mostly youth-led climate movement had managed to put the climate crisis on the political agenda, and most parties in the democratic spectrum wanted to claim political ownership of the topic.

In 2020, the new European Commission led by Ursula von der Leyen – and supported by the grand coalition of the EPP, Socialists and Liberals – introduced the European Green Deal. This broad range of policy initiatives became the flagship policy for the 2019 to 2024 mandate, with the goal to make the EU climate neutral by 2050. The Green Deal defeated objections from Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic, and passed in the Parliament with 67 per cent in favour.

But while the climate movement and the Greens managed to make the European Green Deal a needed reality, the political strength hasn't been there to make it actually Green. The Common Agricultural Policy, a key part of the EU's action, was not made compatible with the European Green Deal goals, and gas was labelled as a "green" energy source. In the European Parliament the Greens, Socialists and Left have led a progressive front defending climate action. However, as they are a minority in the chamber, they need the unreliable centrists in the Renew Group to pass Green policies.

Though the European Green Deal has brought some hard-won advances on climate policy, it has lacked in scope. Not only has it not been ambitious enough, but it has clearly fallen short of guaranteeing a socially just transition. While the European Green Deal has brought some hard-won advances on climate policy, it has lacked in scope. Not only has it not been ambitious enough, but it has clearly fallen short of guaranteeing a socially just transition.

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The EPP has used the EU Green Deal to green its image when the issue was popular, reaping the benefits without fully committing to the fight against climate change. However, with the campaign for the 2024 elections underway, the party is leading a backlash even against the more moderate policies of its own Commission President. Lately, the party has been arguing that increasing nature restoration efforts is an anti-farming policy and would “lead to less food production”. So it has left negotiations in the European Parliament on the Commission’s nature restoration proposal. The recent success of the Dutch agrarian BoerBurgerBeweging party (the Farmer-Citizen Movement) clearly had an impact on the EPP’s political strategy.

This has put the Greens in an awkward place. While they did not support the von der Leyen Commission, they have backed some of its key policies regarding environmental protection. With the EPP now turning against those same key policies, the Greens are forced to defend what they see as positive but moderate steps forward. As the party of climate politics, and as the pressure of the political and mediatic centre against climate action grows, the question will again be if small advances are worth the political capital invested in it. Climate breakdown is not getting any more distant, and every day the action needed is bigger.

This change in the EPP’s position is another episode of its radicalisation. While President von der Leyen still shows the pragmatic centrism of Angela Merkel, Manfred Weber pushes for Bavarian-style conservatism. The EPP is increasingly copying the style and narratives of nativists in order to defeat them – while in reality it only makes them stronger.

The once centre-right EPP Group has aligned its policy position in the European Parliament with the national-conservative ECR and the far-right ID. Across Europe it has firmly turned to the right, while bringing the far-right into power in countries such as Italy and Sweden. While this was in the past an internal conflict within the EPP, it is now its mainstream, with just a few members (primarily the Polish and francophone Belgian parties) showing resistance.

The EPP has lost track of reality and has embraced denialism and radicalism as an ideology. The historical role of Christian-democracy is long gone. And this poses a major problem for the future of EU.

As it is designed today, the EU makes it impossible to ignore the EPP. The current balance in the Council between EPP, Socialists and Liberals will inevitably make the next Commission a grand coalition. Only a strong defeat of a radicalised EPP in the 2024 European elections and a more progressive European Parliament can put the EU back on track for a more social and climate-friendly future.



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Published June 16, 2023

Article in English

Published in the *Green European Journal*

Downloaded from <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/europe-on-the-ballot-how-the-epp-turned-against-climate-politics/>

GREEN EUROPEAN JOURNAL

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