



Liberal Parties in Europe Ahead of the 2024 European Elections

Abstract:

Liberal parties are among the oldest European political party groups. They have played a major role in the emergence of many modern democracies, the consolidation of political institutions, and the building of the European Union. This shared legacy conceals the considerable heterogeneity among liberal parties. This paper explores the positions of liberal parties in Europe ahead of the 2024 elections. Based on insights from an international group of scholars, this paper analyses three dimensions of liberal parties in Europe: their policy orientations, stressing commonalities and lines of fracture; their electoral performances and relationships to power and government, emphasising their pivotal roles in national party systems; and their collaboration at the European level. The paper by looking at what lies ahead as the 2024 European elections approach.



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A shared legacy hiding broad diversity

Liberal parties are among the oldest European political party groups. They have played a major role in the emergence of many modern democracies, the consolidation of political institutions, and the building of the European Union. They have been at the forefront of democratisation processes and the promotion of individual freedom and liberal democracy on the continent. At the same time, they have promoted the liberalisation and opening up of national markets.

This shared legacy conceals the considerable heterogeneity among liberal parties, which has its roots in the varying national contexts in which they originated. In the Benelux countries, liberal parties originated as defenders of the secular side of the church-versus-state power struggle, but they also gradually asserted their right-wing stance on socio-economic issues. In Northern Europe, liberal parties were closely associated with agrarian movements, and so espoused the rural side of the rural-urban divide. More recently, a second generation of liberal parties emerged in the 'blue banana' axis,¹ defending post-materialistic, transnational, pro-EU stances (e.g., Democrats 66, or D66, in the Netherlands, the Liberal Forum – which later merged with NEOS – in Austria, and the Liberal Alliance in Denmark). In Iceland, Bright Future and the Reform Party emerged in the 2010s in the aftermath of the financial and political crises. Liberal actors also came to the fore in Southern Europe, where they had been mostly absent since transition to democracy (e.g., Ciudadanos and Unión, Progreso y Democracia in Spain, En Marche – now renamed the Renaissance – in France). Finally, in Central and Eastern European countries (CEE) liberal actors emerged after 1989, positioning themselves as 'anti-communist' (see for instance the Alliance of Free Democrats in Hungary, SZDSZ).

This paper explores the positions of liberal parties in Europe ahead of the 2024 elections. It does this based on the expertise of an international group of scholars who contributed to an edited volume on Liberal parties in Europe,² updated in the light of the upcoming European elections. The paper is divided into three parts: First, it analyses the policy orientations of liberal parties across Member States. It stresses the points of agreement as well as the intrinsic ambivalence of liberalism that is committed to two types of freedom (economic and cultural). It develops a classification of liberal parties based on an analysis of their electoral manifestos and the positions of their electorates on various issues. The second part of the paper traces their electoral fates and their relationships with power and government at the national level. Third, it outlines their collaboration at the European level. The paper concludes with a look at what lies ahead as the 2024 European elections approach.

¹ R. Brunet (2011), *Sustainable Geography* (London: ISTE).

² E. Van Haute, and C. Caroline (eds.) (2019), *Liberal Parties in Europe* (London: Routledge), <https://www.routledge.com/Liberal-Parties-in-Europe/Haute-Close/p/book/9781032093819>.

Intrinsic ambivalence in policy orientations

Compared to other party groups, liberal parties appear more dispersed in their policy orientations. This is due to the diverse origins of these parties as well as the ambivalence of liberal thought itself.

The most important common denominators in liberal parties' policy orientations are their defence of individual rights and freedom against any form of tyranny, and their promotion of constitutionalism and of the rule of law. The next point of agreement, with a few exceptions, is their promotion of transnationalism, which translates at the European level into support for European integration. Finally, they are distinguished by their centre-right placement. Indeed, liberal parties and their voters have been found to be more right-wing than the left (socialists, greens, radical left) and more left-wing than the right (conservatives, Christian democrats, radical right).³

This general placement relates to a commitment to two 'types' of freedoms: economic and cultural.⁴ Liberal parties and their voters across Member States of the European Union are divided along these two main axes (economic and cultural). They vary in the way they combine positions on these two axes, which leads to a greater diversity of policy orientations than among other party groups.⁵

An analysis of expert and voter surveys and a comparison of electoral manifestos reveal three types of liberal orientations:⁶

1. Classical liberals: they believe in a firm right-wing economic liberalism and a centre-left position on cultural issues (e.g., the German Free Democratic Party).
2. Progressive liberals: they adopt a more centrist position on economic issues and a left-wing position on cultural issues (e.g., D66 in the Netherlands and Radikale Venstre in Denmark).
3. Conservative liberals: they take a centre-right position on both economic and cultural issues (e.g., the Centre Party in Finland and the Dutch Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie or VVD). In doing so, they are closer to conservative parties. It is also among these parties that we find exceptions to the general transnational, pro-EU stance.

The weight of these traditions has changed over time within each liberal party and within the liberal party group as a whole. For instance, Belgian liberals (Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten or OpenVLD, and Mouvement Réformateur or MR) have oscillated between classical to progressive liberal positions, and the

³ C. Close, and T. Legein (2023), 'Liberal Parties', in N. Carter, D. Keith, G.M. Sindre, and S. Vasilopoulou (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook on Political Parties* (London: Routledge), pp.149-160.

⁴ L. Hooghe, G. Marks, and C. J. Wilson (2002), 'Does Left/Right Structure Party Positions on European Integration?', *Comparative Political Studies*, 35(8), pp.965-989.

⁵ C. Close (2019), 'The Liberal Party Family Ideology: Distinct, but Diverse', in E. Van Haute and C. Close (eds.), *Liberal Parties in Europe* (London: Routledge).

⁶ <http://chesdata.eu/>; <https://manifestoproject.wzb.eu/information/documents/information>.

MR has moved closer to conservative liberals in recent years. Overall, classical liberalism has increasingly lost ground over time, to the benefit of the other two types.

On other issues, such as migration and the environment, the positions of the liberal parties and their voters are less clear. On environmental issues, liberal parties struggle to articulate environmental concerns because of their liberal views on the economy, although some liberal parties and voters with an agrarian heritage take up conservative environmental concerns. On migration issues, liberals tend to be more divided between the more open positions of progressive liberals (aligned with transnationalism and cultural left-wing positions) and the more closed positions of the conservative liberals.

The shrinking of classical liberalism over time has left a visible gap within the liberal group. Especially at a time when cultural and migration issues are more salient than socio-economic issues, the distance between the conservative and progressive liberal positions becomes more visible, which can become problematic when they need to cooperate at the European level (the implications for European collaboration are addressed below).

This diversity in policy orientations is reflected in the profiles of the electorates of liberal parties.⁷ Compared to other party groups, liberal voters lack distinctiveness. Socio-demographically, few traits are consistent among liberal voters across Europe. On average, they have higher education levels and socio-economic status, and have a higher probability of being skilled workers, self-employed, or employers. They tend to be less religious, but there are many exceptions to this. They tend to be older, except in CEE countries. They also tend to be more urban, except in countries where they emerged from the agrarian movement. Estonia's Eesti Keskerakond, Ireland's Fianna Fáil, and Finland's Suomen Keskusta appear to be outliers in the liberal group, with their voters being older, more religious, displaying lower levels of education and more rural residents.

More likely to secure spots in government than in parliament

On average, liberal parties tend to get 5–15 per cent of the vote. This average share hides large disparities across Member States. Liberal parties have been quite unequal regarding their electoral appeal and success. Some are well established and successful, especially in the 'blue banana' countries, while others have been volatile, especially in CEE countries. Still others have been almost nonexistent, especially in Southern Europe.

Analysing the fate of liberal parties in Europe between 1945 and 2017, one can identify some favourable conditions.⁸ From an institutional perspective, liberal

⁷ C. Close and P. Delwit (2019), 'Liberal Parties and Elections: Electoral Performances and Voters' Profiles', in E. Van Haute and C. Close (eds.), *Liberal Parties in Europe* (London: Routledge).

⁸ J. Hellström and D. Walther (2019), 'Governmental Participation and Alliance of Liberal Parties in Europe', in E. Van Haute and C. Close (eds.), *Liberal Parties in Europe* (London: Routledge).

parties fare better in systems with proportional representation. As they are often not the dominant political actors in their respective systems, proportional representation offers better chances of securing seats in parliament. Politically, they tend to do better in the absence of strong conservative or Christian democratic competitors to the right as that provides liberal parties more leeway to choose how to combine their positions on the economic and cultural axes. They also tend to perform better when voters are dissatisfied with left–right bloc politics (e.g., France and Spain) and when the political agenda is centred on socio-economic issues.

Despite having relatively modest vote and seat shares, liberal parties have been very successful at accessing government and at getting large shares of (central) portfolios. Some have even managed to win prime ministerships despite not being the strongest party. This success is owed to at least two factors.

First, liberal parties are part of the system. Many liberal parties were born in parliament, among elected representatives. Many have participated in the processes of state-building and liberal democratisation. They are, therefore, perceived as central by other parties. They have built experience in government, which gives them the advantage of credibility and competence in the eyes of potential partners.

Second, liberal parties often enjoy a pivotal position in their national party systems. Ideologically, they are closer to the centre. This allows more flexibility to compromise with parties on either side of the political spectrum. Their ideological ambivalence allows them to partner either with the left, based on proximity on the cultural axis, or with the right, based on proximity on the economic axis. This flexibility has given them the image of pragmatic decision-makers, which may be valued by potential partners but not necessarily by voters, especially in times of polarisation (see below).

When liberals enter government, it is mostly through coalitions. The number and nature of coalition partners that liberal parties work with depend on national party system dynamics (some being more or less fragmented), the political

culture (more or less consensual), and the type of liberal tradition of the party.

In government, liberals tend to occupy portfolios in line with their policy orientations and their commitment to defend the rule of law, individual rights, free-market economy, and international cooperation: typically justice, finance, and foreign or European affairs.

Overall, the way liberal parties access and exercise power constitutes an important distinctive dimension of the liberal party group, reflecting their pragmatism, adaptability, and ideological fluidity.

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Liberals and Europe

At the European level,⁹ liberal parties operate through the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats in Europe Party (ALDE)¹⁰ and the Renew Europe Group in the European Parliament (EP).¹¹ The transnational cooperation of liberal parties is unavoidable linked to the fate of liberal parties in their national systems. Membership in the party and the group cannot be understood independently from the problems of fragmentation at the national level and national rivalries.

The ideological diversity observed across national liberal parties in Member States affects their capacity to define a common policy orientation at the European level. They converge on the defence of freedom and liberties and on European integration, which mirrors the common denominators among national parties. But the tensions on the economic and cultural axes described across national parties appear at the European level as well, as do the divisions on environmental issues, enlargement, and on migration/security.

Like all groups in the EP, the liberals have always sought a balance between maintaining ideological coherence and maximising group size.¹² Since 1979, the group has held 7–15 per cent of the seats in the EP, which is very close to its average vote and seat shares at the national level. Proportional representation at the European level has helped maintain this. Consequently, liberals have been the third- to fifth-largest group in the EP. The group displays a high cohesion rate in its votes (85–90%), which is similar to the other major groups in the EP.

While smaller in size than the European People's Party (EPP) to their right and the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D) to their left, the liberals have played the role of 'kingmaker' in the EP, just as they have at the national level. They were on the winning side of votes 86.4 per cent of the time in the 2009–14 term, second only to the EPP.

Since 2019, the liberals have followed a strategy of expansion in the EP. They have appealed to independents from parties reluctant to use the term 'liberal' in their name (such as France's Renaissance), and to centrists from the European Democratic Party. This appeal to reluctant liberals should not come as a surprise, as many members of the liberal family share that reluctance to refer to liberalism as a common value in their party labels, opting to instead use value-based terms such as 'freedom', 'democracy', 'civic', 'citizenship', and 'reform'. This expansionist strategy has yielded a higher seat share, making them the third-largest group in

⁹ On European political parties in general, see K.M. Johansson, and T. Raunio (2019), 'Political Parties in the European Union', in *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of Politics*, as well as S. Van Hecke, A. Andrione-Moylan, N. Brack, S. Day, W. Gagatsek, and E. van Haute (2018), 'Reconnecting European Political Parties with European Union Citizens', *International IDEA Discussion Paper*, 6, <https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/publications/reconnecting-european-political-parties-with-european-union-citizens.pdf>.

¹⁰ Founded in 1976 as the 'Federation of Liberal and Democrat Parties in Europe'; renamed 'European Liberals and Democrats' (ELD) in 1977; renamed 'European Liberal Democrats and Reformists' (ELDR) in 1986; transformed into a European party in 2004; renamed Alliance of Liberals and Democrats (ALDE) Party in 2012.

¹¹ Renew Europe Group was founded for the ninth European Parliament term (2019-2024).

¹² W. Wolfs, and S. Van Hecke (2019), 'The Liberals in Europe: The Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe', in E. van Haute, and C. Close (eds.), *Liberal Parties in Europe* (London: Routledge), pp.259-278.

the EP, strengthening their position as the pivot between the EPP and S&D.

Liberals Ahead of the 2024 European Elections

Liberal parties are operating in a changing political landscape. Financial and economic crises have politicised issues linked to globalisation. Particularly, cultural issues such as migration and diversity have been pushed to the forefront of the political agenda. The climate crisis has brought environmental concerns to the forefront of the agenda as well.

The increasing salience of these cultural and environmental cleavages is a challenge for liberal parties. Liberals are getting squeezed between two polarised blocs. The rise of populist radical right parties has strained liberal democracies and the rule of law.¹³ Under pressure from these parties, conservative parties have shifted further to the right. They tend to draw a right-wing electorate that shares some commonalities with liberal voters, and that is concerned about national identity and conservative cultural values. On the left, green parties have emerged as important challengers to the radical right along the new cleavages. Green parties tend to capture a segment of the electorate that is similar to the liberal parties' base: those who have higher education levels and socio-economic status, are less religious, and are more urban; see above). While the pivotal role of liberal parties is an asset in centripetal systems, it is less comfortable in polarised systems.

These new issues fall outside the core ideological corpus of liberal parties. They are not well-equipped or fully able to respond to them. As mentioned above, on the environment and climate issues, national liberal parties struggle to combine economic liberalism with pro-environmental concerns.

On the cultural axis, liberal parties have adopted two opposing strategies, leading to increased divergence in policy orientations and subsequent tensions in the group. This has led to the shrinking of the classical liberal faction, and has made the gap between the other two larger sets of liberals more visible.

One strategy could be to embrace clear progressive stances, pushing some classical liberal parties closer to the progressive liberals. Progressive liberals offer two winning positions in support of globalisation: market freedom and the acceptance of a globalised economy; and cultural freedom and the acceptance of open borders and cosmopolitanism. This strategy helped the European liberals expand and establish Renew Europe. It is the strategy Emmanuel Macron adopted in the 2017 French presidential elections, which facilitated the rapprochement between liberals and independents. The approach also keeps liberals in their pivotal position in the EP as trusted and competent partners of the larger groups. In the 2024 elections, the liberals should be able to keep their pivotal advantage

¹³ H.-P. Kriesi and J. Schulte-Cloos (2020), 'Support for Radical Parties in Western Europe: Structural Conflicts and Political Dynamics', *Electoral Studies*, 65; M. A. Vachudova (2019), 'From Competition to Polarization in Central Europe: How Populists Change Party Systems and the European Union', *Polity*, 51(4), 689–706.

and seal majorities with either the EPP or S&D. The downside of this strategy is that it associates liberal parties with the political and economic elites. Paradoxically, broadening the scope of their alliances at the European level may narrow their electoral base. Electorally, this strategy speaks more directly to a smaller number of voters, those with greater cultural and socio-economic resources. Politically, the pivotal role of liberal parties may show them as pragmatists in search of compromises to maintain access to power. This elite stamp makes them easy targets for populist parties. Especially, in CEE countries, populist radical right parties have focused their rhetoric on the neoliberal elite, feeding their attacks on liberal democracy.

The other strategy would be to embrace more conservative cultural stances, pushing liberal parties closer to their conservative competitors. In the 2024 elections, this could lead to a possible alternative majority on the right of the political spectrum (with the EPP and the European Conservatives and Reformists Party). The downside of this strategy is that it pushes the liberals away from their pivotal position in the EP. Electorally, the liberals would lose part of what distinguishes them from other right-wing competitors. Research has shown that the accommodation of radical right issue positions tends to lead to more defections to the radical right.¹⁴ Politically, this could put the EP expansion strategy at risk.

This raises the issue of collaboration at the European level. Given its pivotal position in the EP, the group tends to have ascendancy over the Europarty. It coordinates, federates, and initiates political actions and positions. Ahead of the 2024 elections, liberals will have to choose between a loose association and a more unified organisation. While a unified organisation might give more power back to the Europarty, it would go against the liberals' DNA. Liberal parties have historically shown a preference for labels that do not refer to strict partisan organisation, such as 'union', 'alliance', and 'movement'. This is rooted in their emphasis on individual freedom and their aversion to excessive state or political authority. It results in a certain reluctance to implement highly institutionalised structures, a preference for light, 'cadre party' structures, and a focus on individuals' rights and participation rather than the representation of subgroups or collective bodies.¹⁵

Their parliamentary origins have also resulted in liberal parties giving proportionally more space to parliamentary groups than other parties do, and more space for individual representatives and party elites, to the detriment of organisational discipline. These features, rooted in liberal values, may push the group towards more loose and flexible forms of associations to keep their options open in the EP.

In sum, this paper has highlighted that liberal parties share common orientations and traits. They align on the defence of rights and freedom, a general socio-economic right-wing placement, and support for EU integration. Their

¹⁴ K. Werner, D. Cohen, and T. Abou-Chadi (2022), 'Does Accommodation Work? Mainstream Party Strategies and the Success of Radical Right Parties', *Political Science Research & Methods*, 11(1), 172–79.

¹⁵ S. Beyens, E. van Haute, and T. Verthé (2019), 'How Liberal Parties Organise', in E. Van Haute and C. Close (eds.), *Liberal Parties in Europe* (London: Routledge).

electorates share a general high level of resources. Organisationally, liberal parties have adopted fluid and adaptable structures. However, these commonalities mask considerable diversity. In terms of policy orientations, liberal parties vary along the socio-economic and cultural dimensions, leading to the coexistence of three types of liberal parties: classical, progressive, and conservative. While these characteristics resulted in the parties not being the largest in terms of vote or seat shares, they have been assets in other ways, especially in terms of coalition formation and impact on policies. Liberal parties have historically often held a pivotal position in their national party systems and at the European level. However, they have been challenged by new issues on the political agenda that they have raised great difficulties. This has generated tensions and diverging strategies within the liberal group. The questions of which policy orientation to adopt and the future of collaborations at the European level are not fully settled. The choices that liberal parties will make on these issues ahead of the 2024 elections will determine their fate. ■

Author bio

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The European Liberal Forum (ELF) is the official political foundation of the European Liberal Party, the ALDE Party. Together with 51 member organisations, we work all over Europe to bring new ideas into the political debate, to provide a platform for discussion, and to empower citizens to make their voices heard. Our work is guided by liberal ideals and a belief in the principle of freedom. We stand for a future-oriented Europe that offers opportunities for every citizen. ELF is engaged on all political levels, from the local to the European. We bring together a diverse network of national foundations, think tanks and other experts. In this role, our forum serves as a space for an open and informed exchange of views between a wide range of different EU stakeholders.

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