

The European elections that were held in May 2019 constitute a fundamental event for framing the future developments in the European social dimension. On the basis of the outcome of the election a new political balance between political groups will be outlined, which will rely on the re-positioning of political parties across issues and policies. The increase in the votes for nationalist or Eurosceptic parties and a reduction in seats for the parties that have constituted the European governance so far (the European People's Party and the Party of European Socialists) will likely lead to new political arrangements between European political groups, the consequences of which will be crucial to determine the future path of the European integration in the social domain.

This study focuses on the analysis of the social dimension of EU integration as it emerges in the electoral programs published by the European political groups at the time of the 2014 and 2019 European elections.

## The electoral programs of the European Party Groups

In political science, elections constitute a unique occasion to observe in a condensed fashion what political parties state and propose. This is even more true when it comes to the election of the European Parliament, since **every European political group (EPG) functions as an “ideological umbrella”**, harmonizing and reconciling claims and priorities from different affiliated national parties. In this perspective, electoral programs – the so called “party manifestos” – are of primary importance as sources of data and information. In fact, manifesto analysis is an essential tool to understand the dynamics of parties' placements, their policy intentions and the mechanisms of party competition. To understand the evolution and scope of the social dimension of European integration, **we collected and analyzed all electoral manifestos that EPGs issued during the campaigns of 2014 and 2019**. Following a well-established practice in the textual analysis of electoral programs, we undertook a quantitative *content analysis* of the documents, considered as text corpora. We broke down every text in “quasi-sentences”, and labelled them according to our categories of interest, with the aim of identifying the core of EPGs' proposals in the social field.

*Figure 1 – The salience of the social dimension in EPG's manifestos (2014-2019)*

## The social dimension in the electoral programs of the European political groups

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A very first glance at the aggregate comparison between the elections of 2014 and 2019 (see Figure 1) shows an increase in the overall salience of the social dimension in EPG's electoral programs. This is mostly due to the greater attention that both the Green/EFA and the European Socialists pay to the themes of welfare and social protection. In fact **all EPGs either confirm or increase their interest in the social domain**. This is an encouraging signal, especially if we consider that the most acute phase of the recession is over, and in most EU member states the consequences of the economic crisis are probably perceived as less urgent.

It is necessary to underline however – as it is evident from Figure 1 – that not all parties presented a proper “manifesto”, and therefore could not be included in our study. This is the case for example for the European Conservatives and Reformists group (ECR). Even if their website provided a series of thematic pages and dossiers, we could not find a document comparable to a manifesto or an electoral program (and no material at all for the 2014 EP elections), hence we excluded them from the analysis for comparability reasons. In the case of the ENF (Europe of Nations and Freedoms) on the other hand – to which Salvini's League and Le Pen's Rassemblement National belong – we could not find any proper document to analyze. In the concise indications found on their website, **the ENF states the right of national parties and MEPs to safeguard the “specificities of national social, cultural and territorial models”**, which is telling per se, and perhaps helps explain the lack of a detailed political platform.

A second set of observations can be made about the nature of the political claims contained in the manifestos. As it can be expected, party manifestos are meant to reach the general public in the broadest sense: as such, they are not necessarily concerned with the detailed technical description of specific policy measures. In our analysis, we distinguished between normative statements – ie. generic calls to effort or statements of values – from detailed policy proposals and references to policies already in effect. The results are plotted in Figure 2. **In 2014, as far as the social domain is concerned, we observe a general prevalence of normative statements**. Both ALDE and EPP for example report in their electoral programmes topics related to the social dimension, however they do so without providing detailed measures nor making any reference to specific EU policy proposals. **In 2019, this picture changes**. If we focus on the four groups that are more likely to constitute the new majority – Socialist and Democrats (PES), European People's Party (EPP), Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) and the Greens (EG) – we can clearly

see that parties do rely more on specific proposals and detailed policies in 2019 than they did in 2014. A different pattern is followed by the European Left, whose 2019 manifesto is more concerned with the expression of ideas and values – without detailed references to policies in the social area – than it was the case in 2014.

*Figure 2 – Policy proposals vs. Normative statements (2014-2019)*

## A closer look at the policies

But what about the substance of the proposals in the social domain? One fundamental step of our content analysis has been to “code” all normative statements or policies by attributing a “policy area” label. In this way we can observe how the political manifestos in 2014 and 2019 (Figure 3) tell very different kinds of tales, in very different ways.

*Figure 3 – The salience of social dimension by social policy area (2014-2019)*

As it can be seen, **in both elections the focus on employment (E) is predominant for most parties**. In 2014 the economic crisis was the focus of concern in many member States. This helps explain the central role of the social dimension in the Socialists’ manifesto, in which the creation of a social Europe is set as a priority. High unemployment rates as well as high poverty levels led several groups – Socialist and Greens above all – to advocate for greater social protection for the most vulnerable citizens. In the case of the PES and LEFT manifestos, such proposals revolved around the introduction of a European minimum wage, while the Greens called for a Green New Deal against unemployment, poverty and social injustice and linked their proposals to the introduction of a European social card to guarantee the portability of social rights. These parties were also concerned with the introduction of norms aimed at achieving equal pay for the same work and the fight against youth unemployment through better financing of the Youth Guarantee Programme. On a similar note, the EFA promoted concrete measures to solve youth unemployment, such as more investments in the quality of education, and the reinforcement of the Youth Guarantee Programme. The concern for the social dimension of European integration was framed very differently if we look at the electoral programs of EPP or ALDE. Both parties in fact highlighted

the need to create new jobs through economic growth and investment in research and innovation. If in the case of ALDE the focus is on competitiveness, the EPP referred also to education and to the fight against poverty as important factors for the development of a European market.

If we now turn to look at 2019 electoral programs, we can highlight a certain degree of similarity as well as important differences. What strikes immediately in the comparison is that – unlike in 2014 – all manifestos feature measures that address the gender equality issue (G), as well as the protection of the environment. It appears that **social movements – as in the case of climate-change protests led by Greta Thunberg – have managed to exert a certain influence in the construction of the political agenda of EPGs**. A general increase in attention can be observed for employment (E) policies and for policies tackling poverty and social exclusion (PEX), which gained salience in most manifestos.

Moreover, as shown in Figure 2, EPGs in 2019 make a greater effort in detailing their proposals, rather than stating general principles. This is true when parties put forward new and innovative proposals, as well as when they refer to actual European policies – be they already active (the Youth Guarantee Programme or the European Fund of Transition) or still *in fieri*, such as the European Pillar of Social Rights. While **Greens advance the idea of a minimum European income adjusted to the national purchasing power, the Socialist & Democrats call for a European minimum wage**, although it is not clear from the manifesto whether such minimum level should differ across European countries. The EPP places great emphasis on the defence of a European social model “*in which everyone enjoys health insurance and high quality public services, where workers have their rights and where social interests and market forces are balanced.*” In order to tackle unemployment they propose to strengthen the European Fund for Transition with greater funding, in order to support workers dismissed due to globalisation or technological changes. The ALDE manifesto on the other hand stresses the link between job creation and economic growth, rather than putting forward specific measures aimed at tackling unemployment or poverty. In fact the issues of employment and that of education and training (ET) are strictly intertwined, and they are both linked to the need for greater investment in innovation. More investments – especially in education and R&D – should lead to greater job creation: an education based on critical thinking, interdisciplinarity and flexibility would better “*match the real needs of the labour market*”.

## Which direction for social policies?

As we have seen so far, there are substantial differences in the way EPGs frame their proposals in the social domain. To account for such differences, we tried to establish – whenever possible – whether each proposed measure goes in the direction of strengthening the market logic of integration, or conversely whether it calls for corrections of the market or protection against market failures. Hence, we classified normative statements or policy proposals on the basis of the direction along the market-making vs. market-correcting axis. In 2014 we can observe a clear-cut positioning of the European Left, EFA and Greens on the one side, and those of EPP and ALDE on the other, at least as far as social policies are concerned. If we look at the 2019 manifestos however an overall shift of the EPGs towards the market-correcting dimension emerges. Above all, **this shift is visible among the Socialist and Democrats, who showed an intermediate position in 2014, while in 2019 they seem to be more consistently in favour of market-correcting policies.**

*Figure 4 – Distribution of Market Making vs. Market correcting positions (2014-2019)*

## Conclusions

From our exploratory analysis we can tentatively conclude that there is an increase in the level of interest concerning the European social dimension, not only in terms of salience of the social policies in the electoral programs but also in terms of quality of the proposals, which are generally less vague and more accountable than they were in 2014.

One last observation can be made with regard to the 2017 **European Pillar of Social Rights**, which is the object of direct reference in the electoral programs of two families, namely the Socialists and the Greens. The former advocate for translating the principles stated in the Pillar in actual binding norms for member states, through the adoption of a “Social Action Plan”. The latter instead refer to it explicitly in their main social proposals. That makes fair to say that the need to take into account the social dimension of integration appears to have made its way, at least in electoral programs. However, the recomposition of forces that came out of the ballot boxes has still to be translated into a new institutional framework. How the future path of EU social policies will develop remains to be seen.

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