

# Will Ursula von der Leyen's weak start matter?

Blog post by Senior Associate Ana Martínez, 18 July 2019

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Ursula von der Leyen's narrow win on Tuesday - just nine seats above the required majority - has widely been interpreted as a sign of trouble ahead for her commission and its ability to push through legislation. But is this right? There are some reasons to think it might not be.

To be sure, von der Leyen has some tests immediately ahead. Von der Leyen's task of getting her College of Commissioners approved by MEPs will prove more challenging than for Juncker in 2014. Parliament is in a combative mood and the approval process is one of the real opportunities it has to flex its muscles. It now does this as a matter of course and would probably reject at least one commissioner from any team. In this case parliament will be especially wary of endorsing commissioners from Eurosceptic governments in Hungary, Poland and Italy.

But the question is whether this hostility translates into a legislative obstacle for von der Leyen. This will depend much more on how she evolves her high level policy guidelines into detailed policy over the months ahead. She is not leading an ideological government, with an established parliamentary base and rigid opposition. It is much more fluid than that. She is steering an institution whose strongest instincts are consensual in the context of the other European institutions and whose focus will always be on maintaining a clear legislative base in parliament. She is facing MEPs who will choose whether to support her initiatives on a case by case basis - and who have much more freedom to do this than a conventionally whipped parliament.

So, she will have to build that consensus on a case by case basis, but this is not new. It will potentially be harder in this parliament due to a political atmosphere where the centre-right European People's Party (EPP) and the centre-left Social Democrats (S&D) no longer have a combined majority. But 60 extra S&D or Green votes this week would not have changed that.

Von der Leyen's every signal this week is that she understands this. Her speech and policy priorities suggested that she is flexible and will work hard to find consensus across member states and ideological lines - or sidestep these lines altogether if needed. She is signalling a less political European Commission. This is not everyone's preference, but it is smart management in this context. Von der Leyen managed to win the consensus of most of the members of the three main centrist parties - the liberal Renew Europe, EPP and S&D. She failed to win the Greens, but her commission will do much of what the Greens will want to back, even if they inevitably think it is not going far enough.

Von der Leyen's ratification was a battle in a struggle between the council and the parliament for the life of the Spitzenkandidaten system and prerogative in choosing the President of the European Commission. Commissioner hearings will be another showdown in this vein. European politics is no different than national politics in that politicians and institutions have rivalries with each other and pride is always a factor. Some of that may carry over into the business of her commission, but this

business is much more likely to be dominated by questions of detail and emphasis. Many of those who voted against von der Leyen did not only - or even largely - base their decision on her policy priorities. For most of the next five years, the issue will be her policies, not her background or how she came to be nominated in the first place.