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A Non-European Germany

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A Non-European Germany

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Introduction

With 96 seats at stake in total, the largest national delegation in the EU-27, the European election results in Germany hugely influence the overall composition of the European Parliament (EP).¹ Putting aside the oddity of the campaign, the implications of the political shifts in the EU's largest member state warrant close examination. While Germany's party system has remained significantly more stable in the past than in other European countries, this election shows that Germany is now on a similar pathway. Much like elsewhere, the election there was shaped by ongoing political polarisation rather than a genuine debate on European issues.

The political context of the European Parliament election in Germany

As in other European countries, the elections in Germany took place in a heated political context, marked by ongoing changes to the country's party system. Aside from the long-term rise of the right-wing populist Alternative for Germany (AfD), a new party emerged early in 2024, led by the former leader of the Left party ("Die Linke") Sahra Wagenknecht, who set up the eponymous 'Bündnis (Alliance) Sahra Wagenknecht', BSW. This political movement combines left-wing populist positions with an anti-immigrant stance and pro-Russian rhetoric. It quickly demonstrated its electoral potential in polls. Given its recent launch, the European election was its first genuine electoral test.

These wider shifts in the party system are taking place in a particularly intense electoral context, with several important regional ("*Länder*") elections scheduled for later this year and in the run-up to the next federal election in autumn 2025.

The current federal three-party "traffic light" coalition government, which embraces the Social Democrats (SPD), the Green Party, and the Liberals (FDP), is widely unpopular. This is mostly due to certain policy decisions, such as a law designed to decarbonise the domestic heating sector by installing heat pumps, pioneered by the Green Economics Minister, and continuous infighting, especially between the Greens and the Liberals. This European election could well have served as a 'test-run' for the federal election due in little more than a year.

At the same time, several *Länder* in Eastern Germany will go to the ballot box to elect new parliamentarians, on 1 September in Saxony and Thuringia, and on 22 September in Brandenburg. Many fear that these elections will further weaken Germany's traditional parties, while significantly strengthening the far-right AfD and establishing the freshly-minuted left-populist BSW as a permanent feature of the party landscape.

This European election was the first in which 16-year-olds could vote across all of Germany. This makes Germany one of three EU member states with such a low voting age for European Parliament elections. The others are Austria and Belgium, while in Greece it is 17. This change in the German electoral law was introduced by the ruling coalition and follows a similar lowering of the voting age for regional elections in many but not all *Länder*. Indeed, many young voters who could vote for the first time in the European election will be barred from voting in this autumn's regional elections in Thuringia and Saxony which maintain a higher voting age. The lowering of the voting age for the European election might also ultimately pave the way for a similar move in federal elections, although this would prove more difficult as it would mean changing the constitution. These efforts to reduce the voting age are particularly relevant in light of Germany's ageing population – the median age is currently 45. Allowing a greater share of young voters to participate in elections could well affect the results, albeit in a counter-intuitive manner (see below).

Lastly, the European election in Germany differs from most other elections there in that there is no electoral threshold, – typically set at 5% for federal and state elections – to enter the EP. While Germany used to set a threshold for European elections, this was ruled unconstitutional by the federal constitutional court in Karlsruhe on multiple occasions. While there are plans being drawn up by most mainstream political parties to reintroduce an electoral threshold compatible with the court's requirements, this did not happen in time for the 2024 election. Hence, unlike in federal elections, voters could give their votes even to relatively small political parties, knowing that they might conceivably win a seat in the European Parliament with Germany's 96 seats up for grabs.

An electoral campaign which discussed Europe only at the margins

The campaign in Germany was perhaps the least Europeanised one in recent history. This was rather surprising as, on paper, there was significant potential for fighting it on European policies and politics, given that many German candidates are bound to play leading roles at the European level.

Many party programmes included potentially revolutionary proposals for the EU. The Greens called for a "Federal European Republic based on a European Constitution".² Unlike their previous campaign

Figure 1: German political parties and affiliations (Source: Politico)

 Christian Democratic Union/ Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU) Christlich Demokratische Union/ Christlich-Soziale Union EP Affiliation: EPP	 Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance (BSW) Bündnis Sarah Wagenknecht EP Affiliation: NI
 Alternative for Germany (AfD) Alternative für Deutschland EP Affiliation: NI	 Liberal Democrats (FDP) Freie Demokratische Partei EP Affiliation: Renew
 Social Democrats (SPD) Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands EP Affiliation: S&D	 Left Party (The Left) Die Linke EP Affiliation: Left
 The Greens (The Greens) Bündnis 90/Die Grünen EP Affiliation: G/EFA	 Free Voters (FW) Freie Wähler EP Affiliation: Renew
	 Volt (Volt) Volt Deutschland (Volt) EP Affiliation: G/EFA

manifestos, the AfD reverted to a maximalist position, wanting to abolish the EU and replace it with a novel entity focusing narrowly on the economy and national interest.³ While these represent two of the most extreme positions on the EU in party programmes, different parties also had detailed suggestions on more concrete topics, ranging from the establishment of a European army or switching to qualified majority voting on foreign policy issues to proposals for European unemployment insurance. Many of the issues which were ultimately debated the most heavily during the public campaign had a clear European dimension, such as Russia's war against Ukraine and the EU's support for Kyiv or the new Pact on Migration and Asylum.

Many German politicians also played a key role on behalf of their respective party families in pan-European political campaigns and processes. Firstly, the outgoing Commission President and Christian Democratic Union (CDU) politician Ursula von der Leyen sought re-election as Commission President taking the role of the European Peoples' Party's (EPP) lead candidate for the Commission presidency, albeit without seeking a seat in the European Parliament. The Greens' German lead candidate, Terry Reintke, also served as one of two European Greens' candidates in the pan-European campaign. The liberal politician Marie-Agnes Strack-Zimmermann was one of the several lead candidates fielded by Renew. Lastly, the Christian Social Union's (CSU) lead candidate, Manfred Weber, played and will most likely continue to play a key leadership role in the EPP.

However, in the end, this election's core issues, especially peace and security, were debated mainly through a national lens and in relation to domestic political actors, and this was even more striking than in previous elections. The campaign therefore ultimately served to highlight national political issues which are currently perceived as politically salient. Here, both the AfD and BSW emphasised what they perceived as a dangerous national policy of arming Ukraine.

At the same time, the Social Democrats highlighted Chancellor Olaf Scholz's cautious approach to

weapons shipments for Ukraine, thereby avoiding escalation by Russia and preserving peace in Germany by keeping it out of the ongoing war. However, genuinely European issues related to the war, such as EU sanctions or joint arms procurement, were almost entirely absent from public debates. Even parties such as the Greens, who generally focus on climate change, put the issue of domestic security at the heart of their electoral campaign. The party's main electoral poster showed lead candidate Terry Reintke with the slogan "A strong Europe leads to a secure Germany".

But other parties made little use of the often prominent German lead candidates to support their electoral campaigns. This can be illustrated through the electoral posters of both the Conservatives and the Social Democrats. Instead of mainly portraying their lead candidates for the European Parliament, they put national politicians up front. One widely used set of SPD posters featured both the party list's lead candidate Katarina Barley alongside Scholz. Similarly, the CDU featured both Commission President Ursula von der Leyen as well as party leader Friedrich Merz. Much like Scholz, Merz has no intention of leaving national politics for a role at EU level for now. In a way, these electoral posters highlight the dual relevance of the European Parliament and the European Council. More importantly however, it shows that German parties believe that voters do not sufficiently care about European issues or that the politicians shaping European politics are not really relevant for them.

While neither the absence of European issues nor the lack of focus on EP candidates is an entirely novel development in Germany, the contrast is still striking when compared to previous EP elections in the country. One contributory factor may be the collapse of the Spitzenkandidaten (or lead candidate) process for the European Commission presidency. That process had played at least some role in previous electoral campaigns, especially as German-speaking contenders such as Jean-Claude Juncker, Martin Schulz or Frans Timmermans took part in televised debates within Germany.

Both the AfD and the BSW framed European issues through a national lens, prompting all the other parties to eagerly highlight potential solutions at the national level, rather than trying to explain the complexities of decision-making in the EU. A key example of this is migration, a central issue highlighted by the AfD. Whereas mainstream political parties could easily have pointed to the EU's New Pact on Migration and Asylum to provide policy solutions, discussions focused instead on nationally-inspired moves such as the reintroduction of border controls within the Schengen area.

Lastly, this campaign was overshadowed by several political scandals. These mostly affected the AfD's two main candidates, Maximilian Krah and Petr Bystron. Krah's parliamentary assistant, for instance, was arrested on suspicion of spying for China.⁴ In addition, in an interview with an Italian newspaper, Krah refused to acknowledge that all former members of the SS should be considered criminals, which led to important consequences at the European level: the AfD was thrown – mostly due to pressure from the French Rassemblement National – out of the ID group in the European Parliament just before the election. While the party temporarily suspended him from campaigning, he was not officially removed as a candidate. This is probably tied to his success on TikTok, where he targets young voters, in particular. Aside from Krah, there was also a scandal involving the candidate Petr Bystron, who, the Czech Republic alleges, took money from Russian sources.⁵

The campaign was also exceptionally violent this time. A police officer died, following a terrorist knife attack on an Islamophobic rally in Mannheim.⁶ The Social Democratic candidate up for re-election, MEP Matthias Ecke, was also attacked while putting up election posters, leading to his hospitalisation. This and further attacks on campaigners and politicians from various parties affected the public mood ahead of the election in ways that are difficult to map directly onto voting intentions.

The results: A 'midterm election' in disguise?

In terms of voter turnout, this EP election was a success for democracy. At 64.8%, turnout reached an almost historic high, with a higher level achieved only at the first direct European Parliament election in 1979. Turnout was also up 3.4 percentage points on the 2019 election. Although this still pales in comparison with the 76.6% seen at the 2021 federal election, it is a positive sign of voter mobilisation during European elections, as there have never been more voters in Germany choosing their MEPs (given that the 1979 election only took place in what was then West Germany).

In terms of results, there were two clear winners and one main loser amongst the largest political parties when compared to the 2019 election. First, the AfD won 15.9% of the votes, 4.9 percentage points more than in the previous European Parliament election. Second, Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW) received 6.2%, even though the party was only born earlier this year. The biggest losers were the Greens, whose vote share fell by 8.6 percentage points, receiving only 11.9% of the total. It should be noted, however, that their 2019 result of 20.5% represented a historic high at a time when climate change was seen as the most significant political issue by many voters. The Social Democrats suffered small losses, winning 14% of the vote versus 15.8% in 2019, while the Left Party also lost out, mostly because of the BSW decision to split from it.

This picture changes when comparing the results to the 2021 federal election, the focus of most public commentary in Germany. This comparison offers a clear indication that many voters were unhappy with the current traffic light coalition government. From this perspective the opposition parties, namely the centre-right CDU and its Bavarian sister party CSU,⁷ as well as the AfD, made significant gains. 48%⁸ of voters also indicated that they used their vote to voice their dissatisfaction with the current federal government, while 55% stated that domestic politics determined their vote. As such, this Euro-

pean election was largely seen as a midterm federal election - a tendency which could also be observed in other EU member states such as France.

There is one more important aspect that could easily be forgotten amidst the headline results: small and often single-issue political parties also emerged as clear winners. This continues a trend from the 2014 and 2019 elections, which were already fought without an electoral threshold. However, while in 2019 only nine of Germany's seats were occupied by parties which gained less than 5% of the votes, this has now risen to 12 (or 15 if including the Left which has dropped below 5% in 2024). By far the biggest winner of these small parties is the pro-EU political movement VOLT, which now has three seats, up from just one in the previous election.⁹ The successes of small political parties such as VOLT point to the gradual splintering of Germany's party system, as well as to voters' ability to capitalise on the absence of an electoral threshold. Had even an ultra-low threshold of 2% been applied, then only VOLT, The Left and one more political party would have made the cut.

When looking at the issues which influenced voters' choices, then peace, social security and immigration were the most important, relegating the climate emergency to 4th place compared to 2019. This is a likely factor behind the significant losses of the German Greens. It also shows that Russia's war against Ukraine has significantly influenced what voters consider to be the most politically salient issues, all while topics such as healthcare in the context of the Covid pandemic no longer matter for most voters.

The overall results also mask some other electoral shifts which are likely to continue to remain relevant in future. Firstly, these elections are ultimately a sign of broader electoral shifts in Germany. One, there continues to be a clear divide between eastern and western Germany when it comes to the success of populist challenger parties such as the AfD and BSW. The results of the European Parliament elections show that in many parts of eastern Germany, the AfD is now the strongest political party, which

might foreshadow dramatic results in the upcoming Länder elections. At the same time, it is important to highlight that the AfD was still able to make gains across most of western Germany too, although these were smaller than in the East.

Secondly, young voters now exhibit voting behaviour that defies conventional wisdom. Amongst 16-24-year-olds, the AfD succeeded in increasing its vote share by 11 percentage points, while the Greens lost 23 percentage points compared to the 2019 election. What's more, young voters seem much more willing to vote for smaller political parties than the electorate at large. In any case, unlike in 2019 during the height of the Fridays for Future movement, progressive parties such as the Greens could no longer automatically rely on this age group for electoral support and will clearly have to seek out new ways to reach them in future.

Lastly, while the ongoing rise of the AfD is worrying, it should be noted that while their result of 15.9% represents a significant increase over 2019 as well as over the 2021 federal elections, it is still significantly lower than some polls had predicted. Whether this indicates a genuine peak in their support or has been lowered by the set-up of the BSW and the AfD's issues with key candidates remains to be seen.

Just as during the campaign, the election results were mainly debated in the context of German domestic politics. While it did not lead to a political earthquake as in France, conservative politicians such as the Bavarian Prime Minister Markus Söder did call for early federal elections after the obvious defeat of parties forming the current ruling traffic light coalition. The already strained collaboration between the Social Democrats, Greens and Liberals will not have been made easier by the outcome, with each of the trio drawing very different lessons from this election.

In terms of implications for the wider EU, these German elections will undoubtedly bring some change to Brussels. In the European Parliament itself these results ultimately matter when it comes to political

group formation and the wider balance of power. Here, the AfD ultimately decided to exclude Krah from their official EP delegation, yet kept Bystron on the list. While there was an initial belief that this might lead to an eventual return of the party to a reconfigured ID, the AfD instead swiftly tried to form a completely novel political group. Where the new BSW MEPs will find a permanent home also remains to be seen as they are understandably antagonised by the German Left, which is part of the European Left (GUE/NGL). At the same time, the decision by the newly elected VOLT MEPs in Germany and the Netherlands to join the Greens/EFA will at least partially compensate for the reduced numbers of the German delegation within this political group.

Beyond the European Parliament the results will also likely affect Germany's position writ-large. With the current coalition government weakened domestically, this will also affect its power-mongering and positioning in the different Council formations. With the three ruling parties having to position themselves ahead of the regional and federal elections, one can also expect further erratic voting behaviour by Germany in the Council, as we saw with the vote on phasing out internal combustion engine cars, for instance. This means that these European Parliament elections have ultimately weakened the hand of Germany's government within the EU, in stark contrast to some other players such as the current head of the Italian government, Georgia Meloni.

Figure 2: Voting intentions in the EP election in Germany (29 May 2024, data from Euronews)

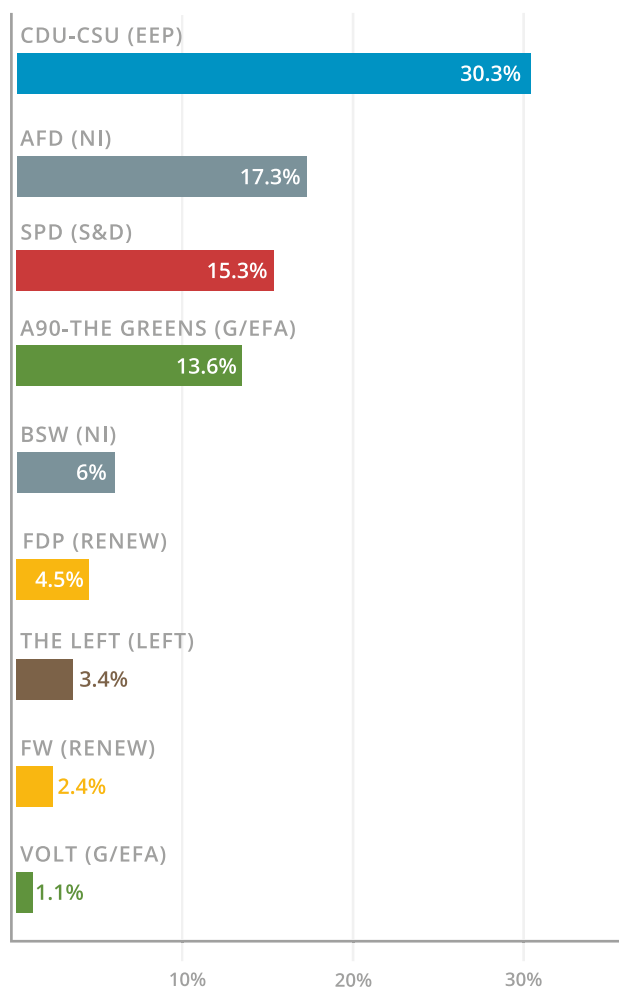
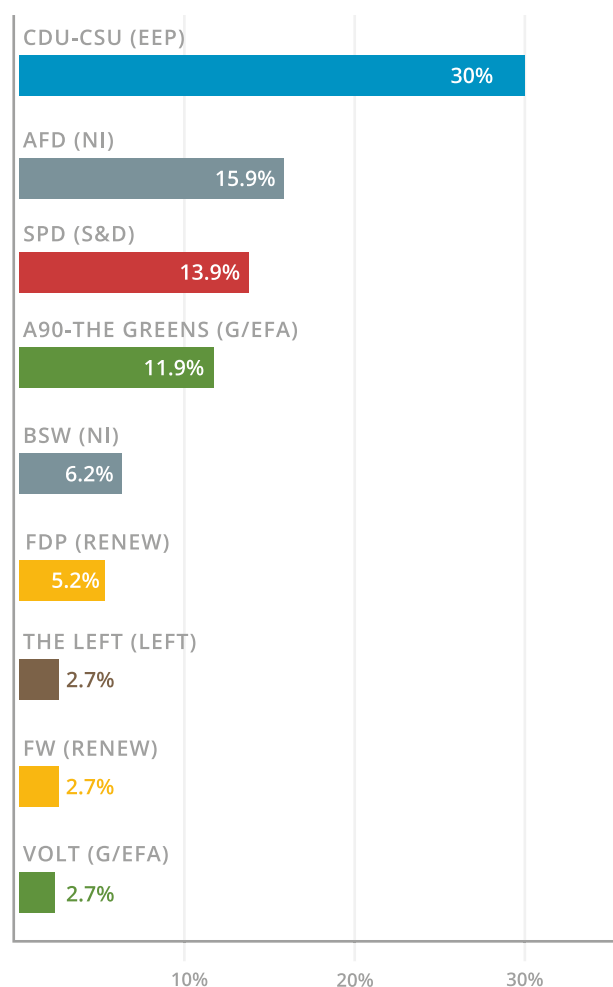


Figure 3: EP election result in Germany (10 June 2024, data from Euronews)



Conclusion

While more voters than ever took part in the 2024 European Parliament election in Germany, the outcome cannot be seen as a wholehearted success for European democracy. Compared to previous election campaigns, there was much less debate around European political issues, with most of it playing out at the national level. Even the results were interpreted solely through a German lens as a "midterm election" judgment on the traffic-light coalition. The EP election result also underlined the further fragmentation of Germany's party political landscape. This, in turn, is bound to affect the EU in ways going way beyond the mere composition of the European Parliament in future, as it points to political shifts which will affect Germany's positioning in a host of different Council of the EU formations where a host of policies are decided.

References

- 1 Given that seats in the European Parliament are assigned to EU member states according to a principle of regressive proportionality, Germany still remains the most under-represented country in the European Parliament when compared to the size of its population.
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- 3 Alternative für Deutschland (2023), Programm der Alternative für Deutschland für die Wahl zum 10. Europäischen Parlament, Berlin, S. 10.
- 4 Christian Fuchs, Astrid Geisler, Holger Stark, Martin Steinghagen, Sascha Venohr: "Mitarbeiter des AfD-Spitzenkandidaten Maximilian Krah festgenommen", Die Zeit, 23.4.2024.
- 5 Andrea Becker, Georg Heil, Markus Pohl: "Russische Einflussooperation: Geldübergabe an Bystrom im Auto?", Tagesschau.de, 19.4.2024.
- 6 Tagesschau.de: "Polizist nach Messerattacke in Mannheim gestorben", 2.6.2024.
- 7 The CDU and CSU are usually listed as a single electoral bloc given that the CDU competes in 15 of Germany's länder, while the CSU competes in Bavaria.
- 8 All data on voter behaviour such as on key issues or voting by age group is taken from the exit poll conducted for Germany's public Broadcaster ARD by Infratest Dimap.
- 9 Other small parties which again receive seats in the European Parliament are the conservative Free Voters, the satirical Die Partei, the conservative Family Party, the Human Animal Protection party, as well as the Ecological Democratic Party. At the same time, the Pirate Party no longer receives a seat in the European Parliament, while the so-called Party of Progress (a political movement emphasizing the core values of Germany's constitution) gained one seat.

About the author



Daniel Schade is an Assistant Professor at Leiden University and a Policy Fellow at Das Progressive Zentrum. He focuses on questions of European policy-making and the future of parliamentarism. After completing his doctorate at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), he worked at the Vienna School of International Studies, Otto-von-Guericke University, as well as Cornell University.



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