

# Election Analysis

## The European Elections in Germany 26<sup>th</sup> May 2019

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### Provisional Election Results

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## The European Elections in Germany<sup>1</sup>

### 1. The Election Results in Germany<sup>2</sup>

In the run-up to the elections it had already become apparent that **voter turnout** was set to rise. The European elections have lost their significance as a second order election, an aspect which has played a decisive role in electoral behaviour since 1979. Voter turnout rose from 48.1 percent to 61.4 percent, a result which was only exceeded in the first European elections in 1979 (65.7) and in 1989 (62.3). This increase might possibly be due to the increased turnout of younger voters, but this will only be answered by reference to the corresponding results of the Federal Returning Officer.

Nevertheless, there are certain trends in European elections: People's parties (Volksparteien) are having a harder time than smaller and protest parties. This is particularly true for the Union and the SPD which both recorded historically low election results.

The **Union** (Christian Democratic Union + Christian Social Union) reaches 28.9 percent. While this result reaffirms its position as the strongest party in Germany, it also represents its weakest result in European elections. The Union loses 6.5 points in total and will send 29 members to the parliament (-5). The Union has suffered double-digit losses in Brandenburg and Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania.

The **SPD** (The Social Democratic Party) also experiences its worst result in a nationwide election. At 15.8 percent, it has lost 11.4 points. The SPD obtains 16 seats (-11); its losses are above average in Schleswig-Holstein, North Rhine-Westphalia and Hamburg.

Die **Grünen** (Alliance '90/The Greens) wins 9.8 points and accumulates 20.5 percent of the electorate. This is the best result the party has ever achieved in a nationwide election. It obtains 10 additional seats and will be represented by 21 MEPs. The strongest gains are recorded in Schleswig-Holstein and Hamburg.

The **AfD** (Alternative for Germany) increases by 3.9 points and wins 11.0 percent in total, a result that is less than that of the 2017 federal elections (12.6 percent). The AfD obtains 11 seats (+4). Its gains are very significant in Saxony, Thuringia and Saxony-Anhalt and even those in Berlin and Brandenburg are well above average. At 19.6 percent, the AfD is more than twice as strong in the new federal states as in the old ones (8.8 percent).

Die **Linke** (the Left) loses 1.9 points and reaches 5.5 percent. 5 members of parliament (-2) will represent Die Linke in the new parliament. The losses of Die Linke are above average in Thuringia, Saxony-Anhalt and Brandenburg. Comparable to the AfD, the party is much stronger in the new federal states (12.7 percent) than in the old ones (3.7 percent). Thus, these differences have increased significantly since the 2017 federal elections.

The **FDP** (Free Democratic Party) wins 2.1 points and enjoys the support of 5.4 percent of voters. The FDP obtains 2 additional seats and will be represented by 5 members in total.

Since the electoral threshold had already been abolished at the last European elections (with the respective calculated threshold now being at about 0.5 percent), **other parties** have seen increased

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<sup>1</sup> We would like to thank Forschungsgruppe Wahlen (Institute for Election Research) and Infratest dimap (Polling company) which made the exit poll results available to us in advance.

<sup>2</sup> On the basis of the provisional results, there are still differences between in the reports of Forschungsgruppe Wahlen and Infratest dimap with regard to the calculation of the election results in the old and new federal states. Here, Infratest dimap is cited as source.

support in this election. These "other parties" reach 12.9 percent (+4.0 points) and 9 seats. The successful candidates come from very different backgrounds; they range from the "Family Party", which traditionally has been successful among those smaller parties, the Freie Wähler (Free Voters), a party that currently participates in the state government in Bavaria, the Piraten (Pirates), a party that had entered some state parliaments, the ÖDP, which was successful in referenda in Bavaria, the Tierschutzpartei (Animal Protection), the new Volt Party and the satirical party, DIE PARTEI. The NPD, which had won a seat in the last European elections, will no longer be represented in the European Parliament. The party DIE PARTEI will be represented by two members (2.4 percent) in the European Parliament, as will the Freien Wähler (2.2 percent). All other parties get one seat. The "other" parties achieve their largest gains in Hamburg and Berlin, where smaller parties traditionally perform well.

## 2. Major Factors impacting the Election Results in Germany

Citizens meet the European Union, the activities of its institutions, but also the European elections with polite disinterest. At the same time, a significant share of public media focuses on discussing negative EU-related issues. Still, the attitudes of Europeans and Germans towards the EU are generally positive, as the Eurobarometer surveys of autumn 2018 and spring 2019 show.

Germans are traditionally regarded as being Europe-friendly. Although this attitude deteriorated during the refugee crisis, Germans have now regained a positive image of the EU. While only 29 percent had a positive image of the EU in spring 2016, this figure rose to 47 percent in autumn 2018. 70 percent of Germans believe that their vote counts within the EU, a percentage that is very high especially in comparison to the European average of 49 percent. A further 63 percent of Germans are optimistic about the future of the EU (EU average: 58 percent) (Eurobarometer survey autumn 2018). In spring 2019, the most positive rating in a long time has been measured throughout Europe and in Germany. 61 percent of all Europeans view their country's membership of the EU as being positive; in Germany, this share is at 76 percent. An equal number of Germans believe that Germany is benefiting from EU membership. Germans feel particularly motivated to vote because they perceive themselves as being Europeans and support the EU as such (both statements supported by 34 percent of Germans and, on average, by one quarter of the EU-citizens; Eurobarometer spring 2019).

There surely are many reasons for these levels, but the deep attachment to the EU that Germans express in these attitudes can only be properly understood against the backdrop of the ongoing changes on the international scene. The perpetual Brexit chaos, the unpredictable nature of many geopolitical crises and the habitus of the American President, which is not appreciated in Germany, have an impact on the increasingly positive view of the EU.

In this context, Germans clearly differentiate political areas which they would like to be addressed at national level and those that should be addressed at European level. 82 percent would like to see climate protection and 77 percent policies on refugees to be primarily treated at the European level. With regard to social policies, they convey greater responsibility to the respective national governments (67 percent, Forschungsgruppe Wahlen).

For all these reasons, the elections to the European Parliament 2019 are no longer dominated by a Groundhog Day-attitude, which stipulates that European elections are used as a surrogate for national elections which provide room for political protest and experimentation. Furthermore, indifference and disinterest have subsided significantly. Still, there is a greater tendency to elect small parties, which, with the removal of the electoral threshold, now offers the genuine possibility to them of gaining one or more seats in the European Parliament. In reversion, one of the persistent trends in the European elections therefore is that People's parties tend to perform worse than in national elections.

### The European Elections are no Second Order Election

Several indicators show that, for the first time since 1979, the European elections can no longer be rated as a second order election. On the one hand, there is a very high interest in the European elections. 64 percent express their interest shortly before the elections. In 2009, the comparable figure was 30 percent; in 2014 it was 40 percent. In addition, federal politics do not have a more important impact on the voting behaviour for the European Parliament. (Presumably) for the first time<sup>3</sup>, there has been a turnaround. In the elections from 2004 to 2014, a majority of 57 to 54 percent declared that federal politics were more important for their voting decision. The year 2019 represents a reversal of trend: 57 percent say that European politics are more important for their voting decisions (38 percent opt for federal politics). A clear increase of the European Parliament's competence also becomes visible. In 2019, 71 percent consider the decisions of the European Parliament to be important, compared to 56 percent in 2014. Anti-European sentiments have also declined. In 2014, 40 percent still said that the EU's influence on decisions within the EU was "too much", and this figure has dropped to 30 percent. 48 percent rate the EU's influence as "just right" and another 16 percent as "too little". This is closely linked to the general perception of EU membership, where its advantages by far outweigh its disadvantages (55:10 percent) (Forschungsgruppe Wahlen).

### The Current Climate of Opinion is dominated by Environmental and Climate Politics

The EU's increased power to solve political problems and a major change of the political agenda in recent weeks explain the election results to a large extent. "Environmental and climate protection" played a major role in the voting decision for the European elections and particularly impacted the results of Die Grünen. Three key factors come together: Environmental and climate protection currently dominate the political agenda in Germany and in Europe, and this is where the party Die Grünen traditionally makes proof of its problem-solving competence and its credibility. Moreover, many citizens believe that the solution to this problem has a distinct European dimension.

At the beginning of the year, environmental, climate and energy issues were not considered to be very important, with only 10 percent of respondents citing them. At that time, the refugee issue was still far ahead at 39 percent of the mentions. Gradually, however, the political agenda has shifted, and this is certainly also due to the discussion on climate protection, which was co-initiated by the "Fridays for Future" movement. In May, this topic has reached the top of the list of most important problems with 30 percent of the respondents mentioning it, thus overtaking the refugee topic which received 29 percent. This development has been supported by the impression that too little is being done to address this topic (68 percent) (Forschungsgruppe Wahlen).

Immediately before the European elections, 48 percent of respondents say that this issue is important for their voting decision. This represents an increase of 28 points in comparison to 2014. Similarly, a majority of 88 percent says that this topic should be dealt with at the European rather than at the national level (Infratest dimap).

The third factor is the inherent problem-solving competence that Die **Grünen** traditionally demonstrates. 59 percent refer to Die Grünen when it comes to climate protection (Forschungsgruppe Wahlen), and for the supporters of Die Grünen, who have been slowly growing in numbers since the end of 2017, and significantly since autumn 2018, this has been also the crucial issue for the elections. Thus, 88 percent of respondents cite climate and environmental protection as the most important

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<sup>3</sup> Comparative data are available for a period up to 2004.

topics for their voting decisions. But the issue is also of some importance to other sections of the electorate. Almost half of the supporters of Die Linke and of the SPD mention these topics as do 41 percent of those supporting the Union. For AfD and FDP supporters, however, only about one fifth mention them (Infratest dimap).

Due to the current shift of the **political agenda**, the Union and the SPD had problems mobilising voters, but the reasons behind these problems vary. The Union benefits from the fact that it is generally considered to have a high level of problem-solving competence at European level. 28 percent refer to the Union as the party that pursues European policies in their interest. With regard to this question, the SPD reaches 14 percent and Die Grünen 13 percent. Although the Union has its undisputed competence in the field of economic policies (37 percent for the Union; 9 percent for SPD; 4 percent for Die Grünen; Forschungsgruppe Wahlen), this topic does not play a role in the European elections. Only 19 percent (-5 points compared to 2014) mention this topic, and even among Union voters the proportion remains roughly the same at 20 percent. This is the main interest area of Liberal voters and for 64 percent of them it is by far the most important (Infratest dimap). All these results are not surprising, given the still positive assessment of the overall and the individual economic situation. Thus, 73 percent of Germans believe that Germany is doing better economically than its Western European neighbours (Forschungsgruppe Wahlen).

In contrast to supporters of other political parties, the Union's supporters and the SPD's supporters have a less distinct focus on specific political issues in these elections. For both, environmental and climate protection, social security (slightly more often mentioned by SPD supporters, particularly important for supporters of Die Linke) and peacekeeping (slightly more often mentioned by supporters of the Union) are particularly important. On the other hand, immigration (the AfD supporters' main topic) and economic growth (the FDP supporters' main topic) hardly play any role at all (Infratest dimap). Since social politics are seen as a national matter, the SPD cannot profit from its continuing (albeit weaker than previously established) competence.

When being asked which party represents modern civil policies, 20 percent mention Die Grünen and 19 percent the Union. This opinion is approved by 53 percent of Union supporters and almost all supporters of Die Grünen (97 percent). Even in the absence of comparative data, such approval rates in both groups of supporters would have been unlikely ten years ago. Another area impacting the parties' images which is criticised by all voters, but also a large proportion of Union supporters, is the question regarding traditional conservative positions. 66 percent of all respondents and 56 percent of Union supporters say that these have played an overly important role in recent months. Conversely, only 40 percent of all respondents and 36 percent of the SPD supporters state that left-wing positions have played too large a role in the SPD in recent months (Forschungsgruppe Wahlen).

The impact of national **Spitzenkandidaten** (top candidates) as well as European top candidates had little influence on the election results (which, in the case of the Union party, come together in the same person, i.e. Manfred Weber). For example, 64 percent cannot rate the two European Spitzenkandidaten (top candidates) Manfred Weber and Frans Timmermans (Infratest dimap). This is nothing new. Citizens generally do not take notice of European high-level politicians who are doing politics in a scandal-free manner. It is still unclear whether the complex question of who will become the next President of the Commission played a role, but this seems rather unlikely. Towards the end of the election campaign, Manfred Weber manages to significantly improve his rating and achieved a good score of 1.4 (on a scale ranging from +5 to -5). In addition, the CSU achieves gains in Bavaria, which can be interpreted as a Bavarian candidate effect, although no data for the evaluation of the top candidate are available from Bavaria. Katarina Barley, on the other hand, improves her rating from 1.0 to 1.1. In view of her position as federal minister and top candidate, this does not indicate that the election campaign itself has had a greater impact.

Changes in preferences among **age groups** might have had an influence on the election results. Although this point is still of speculative nature, it could indicate significant long-term changes in the political parties' landscape (the results of the representative election statistics are expected to be published by the Federal Returning Officer in September 2019). So far, voter turnout corresponds to an inverted pyramid: the younger the voters, the lower the turnout. This was also true in 2014<sup>4</sup>. In these European elections, the interest in the elections is very high in all age groups. Among the 18-34-year-olds, 65 percent express interest, and this is the same result as in the group of respondents older than 65 years of age (Infratest dimap). Since interest in an election is a good predictor for voter turnout, which itself rose by 13.3 points, one could assume that this is in part due to a change in the voting behaviour of younger voters.

The positive attitude towards the EU is not shared in any respect by AfD supporters, regardless of the specific questions put forward. Thus, 63 percent of all respondents see some advantages in Germany's EU membership (Infratest dimap, slightly different results from Forschungsgruppe Wahlen); the corresponding proportion of AfD voters is at 15 percent. The AfD electorate therefore assembles all those who share one of the many "antis". In this case, anti-European supporters.

### 3. Voters' Mobility and Social Strata<sup>5</sup>

Voters' mobility results in European elections are not calculated in comparison to the previous European elections, but always in comparison to the last Bundestag (federal parliament) elections. This is because part of the calculation is based upon voters' recall, which is weak with regard to the last decision taken in the 2014 European elections.

Since the voter turnout of 61.4 percent is significantly lower than that of the 2017 federal elections (76.2 percent), all parties significantly lost votes due to abstentions, with the exception of Die Grünen, which derives a minimal benefit from the non-voter camp, and of the so-called "other" parties, whose results are lower in federal elections (if they run for office).

2.4 million voters of the Union, 2.0 million of the SPD, 1.9 million of the AfD, 1.6 million of the FDP and nearly 1.0 million of Die Linke stayed at home.

**Voters' mobility does not follow alleged ideological camps.** This is particularly clear with regard to the gains of Die Grünen, who only ceded a few votes (240,000) to "other" parties. 1,250,000 voters switched from the SPD to Die Grünen, closely followed by the CDU/CSU, which conceded 1,110,000 voters. 610,000 former voters of Die Linke opted for Die Grünen and the FDP added 480,000 voters to the election success of Die Grünen. 70,000 voters even migrated from the AfD.

Excluding the "losses" due to abstainers, Die Grünen is therefore the party to which the greatest movements from all other parties are recorded (with the exception of the AfD). Therefore, this willingness to switch parties in the European elections has a clear winner. Such a trend is unusual, as profits and losses usually balance each other out/offset each other in a more heterogeneous form.

In detail: The **Union** loses 1,110,000 voters to Die Grünen, 590,000 to the "others" and 230,000 to the AfD. It can mobilize 210,000 voters from the FDP.

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<sup>4</sup> It decreases slightly in the group of voters who are above 70-years of age and it was lowest in the group of voters aged 21-24 years.

<sup>5</sup> The voters' mobility outcome is based on calculations performed by Infratest dimap. With regard to social stratas, data provided by Forschungsgruppe Wahlen and Infratest dimap are used.

From the **SPD**, 1,250,000 voters switch to Die Grünen, 360,000 to the "other" parties, and 20,000 to the AfD. But it can also win voters: 100,000 from Die Linke, 80,000 from the FDP and 20,000 from the Union.

Die **Linke** loses about a similar number of voters to Die Grünen (610,000) and to the "other" parties (570,000). The SPD is chosen by 100,000 former voters of Die Linke and the AfD by 70,000. It wins 20,000 votes from the Union.

The **FDP** suffers its biggest losses against Die Grünen (480,000 votes) and the "other" parties (420,000). It concedes 210,000 voters to the CDU and 110,000 of its voters opt for the AfD.

The **AfD** concedes 230,000 votes to the "others" and 70,000 to Die Grünen. 220,000 voters come from the Union, 110,000 from the FDP, 70,000 from Die Linke, and 20,000 from the SPD.

The **other** parties are of a politically heterogeneous group and seven of these have succeeded in winning one or two seats. This is why they attract support from all electorates: 590,000 from the Union, 570,000 from Die Linke, 420,000 from the FDP, 360,000 from the SPD, 240,000 from Die Grünen and 220,000 from the AfD.

With regard to the **socio-structural** composition of voters, some old patterns manifest themselves in a new way. Other typical behaviour patterns, however, remain constant (e.g. denominational voting behaviour or voting behaviour according to educational level).

Union and SPD supporters are dominated by older voters. Both are the more successful the older the voters are. This connection is not new, but their performance among the youngest age groups is extremely poor. Although the Union has usually less support among supporters of the youngest age groups in comparison to older supporters, it often turned out as strongest party in election results, even in the youngest age groups. Die Grünen, too, shows this well-known connection between age and electoral decision. However, at 30.7 percent, they are by far the strongest party in the youngest age group (under 30-year-olds). Furthermore, Die Grünen benefits from a particularly strong support among women under the age of 29. In this group, the party achieves 37.9 percent which is the greatest support it has in any group of voters. Die Grünen is also the strongest party in large cities (over 100,000 inhabitants) where it reaches 26.1 percent, while the Union is particularly strong in smaller municipalities (up to 5,000 inhabitants) at 35.9 percent. For other parties, the urban-rural divide is less significant (Forschungsgruppe Wahlen).

While the Union has been particularly severely affected by the decline in the youngest age groups, the SPD's losses are spread far more evenly across all social strata.

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